

CELIA C. PÉREZ

award-winning author of *The First Rule of Punk*



Wrestling with the past is never easy.

**ATTENTION, READER:
PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS IS NOT A FINISHED BOOK.**

An advance readers copy is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to changes, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this advance readers copy, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text.

Thank you.

.....
TUMBLE
.....

CELIA C. PÉREZ

ISBN: 978-0-593-32517-9

Trim: 5 ½" x 8 ¼"

On sale: August 2022

Ages: 9-12 / Grades: 4-7

368 pages

\$17.99 USA / \$23.99 CAN



Kokila

.....
TUMBLE
.....

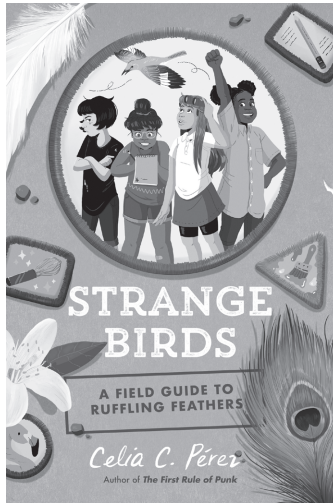
TUMBLE



CÉLIA C. PÉREZ



Readers love *Strange Birds*!



“*Strange Birds* respects its readers’ intelligence and sophistication. Pérez’s charming story explores what it means to belong to a community while being willing to stage small but significant revolutions, all the while reveling in the joy of childhood.”

—Erika L. Sánchez, *New York Times* bestselling author of the National Book Award finalist *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*

“An inspiring story about the power of truth, and of true friends.”

—Rebecca Stead, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Newbery Medal winner *When You Reach Me*

“Thought-provoking, timely, and laugh-out-loud funny.”

—Aisha Saeed, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Amal Unbound*

- ★ “Writing with wry restraint that’s reminiscent of Kate DiCamillo . . . a beautiful tale.”
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ “[An] engaging, well-plotted second novel from Pérez.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)
- ★ “A perfect title for school and public libraries.”
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)
- ★ “Perfect for preteens becoming aware that friendships can be complicated, and that the world is more so.”
—*The Horn Book* (starred review)

A *Washington Post* Best Children’s Book of 2019

An ALSC 2020 Notable Children’s Book

A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Middle Grade Book of 2019

A Chicago Public Library’s Best of the Best Book of 2019

A Center for the Study of Multicultural Children’s
Literature Best Children’s Book of 2019

A 2020 Rise: A Feminist Book Project List Selection

A 2019 Middle Grade Fiction Nerdies Selection

A *CCBC Choices* 2020 Selection

A Bank Street College of Education Best Children’s Book
of the Year, 2020 Edition

Cheers for *The First Rule of Punk!*



“Malú rocks!” —Victoria Jamieson, *New York Times* bestselling author and illustrator of the Newbery Honor winner *Roller Girl*

★ “Charming.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

★ “Vivacious.” —*School Library Journal* (starred review)

★ “Exuberant.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

A 2018 Pura Belpré Author Honor Book • A 2018 ALSC
Notable Children’s Book • A 2018 Tomás Rivera Mexican
American Children’s Book Award Winner •
A 2017 ABA Indies Introduce Title • A Kids’ Indie Next

List Pick • An E. B. White Read-Aloud Middle Reader
Award Honor Book • A 2018 *Boston Globe-Horn Book*
Fiction and Poetry Honor Book • An Amelia Bloomer
List Book • A *CCBC Choices* 2018 • A 2017 Nerdy Book
Award Winner • A 2018 Judy Lopez Memorial Award
for Children's Literature Honor Book • A *Publishers*
Weekly Flying Start • A 2018 Américas Award Honorable
Mention Title • An NPR Best Book of 2017 • A *Kirkus*
Reviews Best Middle Grade Book of 2017 •
A *School Library Journal* Best Book of 2017 • A *Horn*
Book Fanfare Selection • A Center for the Study of
Multicultural Children's Literature Best Book of 2017
• A NYPL Best Book for Kids 2017 • A Chicago Public
Library's Best of the Best Book 2017 • An Evanston Public
Library 101 Great Book for Kids 2017 • A Seattle Public
Library Top 10 Children's Chapter Book of 2017 • A UPenn
Graduate School of Education Best Book of 2017 • A 2018-
2019 Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award
Nominee • A 2018-2019 Sunshine State Young Readers
Award Nominee • A 2018 Great Lakes,
Great Reads Award Winner

KOKILA

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Kokila,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2022

Copyright © 2022 by Celia C. Perez

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices,
promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an
authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing,
scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission.

You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to
publish books for every reader.

Kokila & colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Book manufactured in Canada

ISBN 9780593325179

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FRI

Design by Jasmin Rubero

Text set in [font name]

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people,
or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events
are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or
persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility
for author or third-party websites or their content.

For Brett

★ CHAPTER 1 ★

.....

I bit into a french fry, one of those tiny crunchy pieces that always make their way to the bottom of the pile, just as Apollo slammed a folding chair across The Eagle's back. The small TV on the shelf behind the counter was muted, and while I couldn't hear the whack of metal against muscle, it startled me anyway. I flinched and jabbed myself with a shard of potato so hard that my eyes watered.

"Uyyyy," Alex said. He peered up at the TV from the flat-top grill and let out a slow whistle. "El Águila is getting his butt kicked again, eh, Adelita?"

"Yeah," I said. I ran my tongue over the fresh cut on the roof of my mouth. "*Again.*"

"Maybe he'll win this one, right?" Alex winked at me and cracked an egg into a bowl.

I watched as he attacked the egg with a fork. Alex said the key to making a good scrambled egg was to keep the heat low and to beat the egg before pouring it into the pan. In general, I found the idea of eating eggs gross, but even I had to admit that Alex made a fine scrambled egg. Still, when he caught my eye and motioned to the runny glob he was cooking, I shook my head.

Bacon grease popped and snapped on the grill as Apollo smacked the palm of his hand across The Eagle's chest. A sizzle and the scrape of a spatula accompanied The Eagle bouncing off the ropes, zipping across the ring, and attempting a failed clothesline. My insides jumped as if the mat, which vibrated with each impact, were sitting in the middle of my stomach.

On-screen, The Eagle showed no signs of winning this one. He struggled to get up, only to be met with the toe of Apollo's golden boot. He didn't stand a chance.

"Why does The Eagle always have to lose?" I asked.

"Because he's a jobber," Alex said, not looking up from the grill.

"What's a 'jobber'?"

"A jobber puts over the other wrestler," Alex explained as The Eagle tried to untangle himself from the ropes.

"Plain English, please."

"It means his job is to lose and make the other guy look good," Alex said. "He's not a heel nor a face. Not a bad guy and not a good guy. Just—"

"—a jobber," I finished.

Unlike Apollo, who was definitely the good guy. He's the one you're supposed to want to win. But Apollo had enough people cheering for him already, so I found myself going for the masked luchador. Mom says someone has to root for the underdog. That someone is me.

While The Eagle slowly got up and rolled back into the ring, Apollo climbed to the top turnbuckle and waited like *he* was the bird of prey. I knew what was coming next. Wrestling might look like chaos, just a couple of people brawling, but it's a ballet. And anyone who was a fan would know that the final curtain was about to drop.

Sure enough, when The Eagle stood and turned, Apollo pushed off like his boots had springs, flying through the air in his signature closing move, the Sunset.

"And that's liiiiights OUT!" Alex yelled, just like the ringside announcer did every time Apollo finished off an opponent. He slashed his spatula through the air for dramatic effect.

"Hey," I said with a frown. "Whose side are you on anyway?"

"Yours, Adelita." He pointed at me with the spatula. "Always."

I rolled my eyes. Alex was my stepfather. He was supposed to say mushy stuff like that.

Alex lifted his Albuquerque Isotopes baseball cap, revealing the shiny bald spot that had expanded over the years, the area of hair on his head shrinking like a polar glacier. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand before pulling the cap on.

"Order up!" he yelled, smashing the bell on the counter.

On the TV screen, The Eagle lay motionless in the ring. *Get up get up get up.* I thought the words so hard, I was giving myself a headache.

The referee dropped down next to the wrestlers and started the count.

“One!” He slapped his hand against the mat.

Get up.

“Two!” The crowd was counting along with him now.

Get. Up.

“Three!”

The bell rang, signaling the end of the match. Apollo stood and pumped his fists in victory while the audience cheered and whistled in appreciation.

In the grainy image, I could see The Eagle’s belly rise and fall with each heavy breath, like a ball of unbaked dough. He rolled over on his side, and the camera zoomed in on him. His spotted gold-and-brown mask was slightly twisted. Something about the way the mouth and eye holes didn’t line up with his face made me feel sad for him. He looked like a helpless little kid who needed an adult to fix his costume. I wanted to reach through the TV and straighten him out.

I slumped in my stool, feeling like I’d lost too. I looked away from the screen and pushed my fries around on the plate, making a french fry face on what was left of my pancake syrup.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Mom came

out of the back, pulling her curly dark hair up into a messy ponytail. Her T-shirt rose a bit, exposing her stomach, the tight skin like a big brown balloon ready to pop.

“Mom,” I whispered.

“What?” she whispered back.

I widened my eyes in the direction of her midsection.

“Oh.” She laughed and pulled down on her shirt. “I thought I felt a draft.”

“Not funny,” I said.

“Ay ay ay,” Mom groaned, and made a face at the TV, where *The Pounding Fathers* rode in on horseback while “The Star-Spangled Banner” played. “They could at least be historically accurate,” she said. “The Founding Fathers came before ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”

“It’s not supposed to be historically accurate,” I said. “They’re *zombies*.”

“And the zombies come *after* the apocalypse,” Alex added. “Everyone knows that.”

Mom and I looked at each other and shook our heads.

“Does this have to be on all the time?” Mom asked, reaching across the counter and switching off the TV.

“It does,” Alex said. “This is wrasslin’ country, lady.”

And it was. Roswell had its aliens. Albuquerque had its hot-air balloons. We had wrestling. Lots of people came into Esperanza, one town over, for Cactus Wrestling League matches at the arena. The diner stayed open later on the weekends to feed hungry fans after the matches.

The menu was even separated into two sections: The Undercard—breakfast and lunch—and The Main Event, which was dinner, of course.

Alex had grown up a wrestling fan. The wall across from the counter was decorated with lucha libre masks he picked up at events in Esperanza and on trips to Mexico. His old wrestling action figures sat on the shelves behind the counter, flexing their muscles between big jars of homemade salsa and pickled peppers and plastic tubs of spices. His most prized possession was a signed and framed black-and-white photo of André the Giant that was propped up on a shelf above the flat top. Next to it was a color photo of Alex as a little boy standing next to the seven-foot-four wrestler, who had visited the diner after an event in Esperanza. On the other side of the signed photo was an André the Giant action figure. The whole thing was a shrine to his favorite wrestler.

It was hard not to be a wrestling fan in the Dos Pueblos area—the neighboring towns of Thorne, where we live, and Esperanza, where Cactus Wrestling happens. I wasn't a fanatic like Alex, but I liked the characters and the costumes and the stories. Wrestling was a lot like mythology, and I loved mythology.

"It's too early for body slams," Mom said. Mom was definitely *not* a fan. "And it's giving me indigestion."

"You sure it isn't you-know-who?" I pointed to her pregnant belly.

“That’s possible,” Mom said. She looked at my plate. “Speaking of indigestion, the last time I checked, french fries were not a breakfast food.”

“Says who?” I asked.

“I tried to give her some hope,” Marlene called over from the table she was wiping off. She laughed at her own joke.

There were a lot of things about the Four Sisters Diner that hadn’t changed since Alex’s grandfather opened it in 1963. Marlene Rosado was one of them. Marlene was the closest thing I had to a grandma. She was tiny and ancient, with a cap of tight black curls that made her look like she wore a blackberry on her head. Despite her age, she moved around quicker than most of the younger servers. She always said that when she stopped moving, she’d know it was time for her to go. “And by go, I mean *GO*,” she’d say, and look down toward the ground in case people weren’t sure what she meant.

Marlene liked to holler out orders in diner lingo. She said things like “moo and wrap” for beef enchiladas and “don’t cry over it” for no onions. She says diner lingo is a dying language.

“These young people today speak in mojitos,” she said one day.

I told her the word was *emojis*.

“Mojitos, emojis, whatever it is, there’s no poetry in it,” Marlene complained.

Anyway, “hope” is diner lingo for oatmeal, which is funny because oatmeal seems about as hopeless a breakfast as I can imagine.

“Oatmeal is cringe,” I said. Even more than eggs. “Besides, french fries are practically hash browns. *And* I had a piece of French toast too.”

“Ooh la la.” Alex twisted an imaginary mustache. “French fries *and* French toast. Oui, oui, mademoiselle.”

“You are reaching dangerous levels of corniness,” Mom said, but she laughed anyway as she bent down to pull something from behind the counter.

“Look what I remembered.” She placed a white poster board in front of me. “What are you doing with this again?”

“I told you already,” I said. “Like, three times.”

“Fourth time?” Mom gave me an apologetic look. “Please?”

“It’s for the mythology assignment,” Alex said, walking to our end of the counter while Carlos took over the flat top.

“See? *He* remembers.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Alex pouted.

I didn’t say anything, but what it meant was that step-fathers don’t have to remember.

“I knew that.” Mom tapped her forehead.

Between getting ready for the baby and helping with the diner and her real job at the museum, Mom said she didn’t have room for one more thing in her brain. That

one more thing was me, I guess. She said it was good that I'm old enough to take care of a lot on my own. I thought it was pretty convenient how I was old enough to handle the stuff she couldn't remember or make time for but not old enough for everything else.

"Your mom has a lot on her plate right now," Alex said. He looked at his watch. "Don't leave. Let me grab your lunches."

Mom came out from behind the counter and put an arm around my shoulder. She gave me a little squeeze. Mom wasn't a hugger, and awkward hugs from Mom usually meant one thing.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Mom wasn't very good at showing her feelings. I think expressing herself made her uncomfortable, like I feel when I see people kiss in movies.

"I'm fine," I said, shimmying out from under her arm.

Alex came out of the kitchen with two brown paper bags that he set on the counter in front of us.

"Sardine-and-horseradish sandwiches." He let out a maniacal laugh and went back to the flat top.

Mom and I both scrunched up our faces.

"You're always fine," Mom said with a sigh. "I wish you would tell me how you're feeling. You're just like me."

"Why do you always do that?" I asked, opening my lunch bag and sniffing. Just in case.

“Do what?”

“Just like me,” I mimicked and sighed. “Who else would I be like?”

The question wedged itself between us like when we have to squeeze three people into one seat on the school bus for field trips.

“We haven’t really talked about the adoption,” Mom said. She looked at me and then over at Alex.

We have these old ornaments that we put up on the diner’s Christmas tree every year. The glass is so thin that they shatter easily, and then they’re impossible to clean up—little flecks everywhere. Sometimes, talking with Mom felt like putting up those decorations. Each word, each feeling, was a delicate glass ornament that could break if it wasn’t handled carefully. The adoption was one glass ornament. My biological father was another. Sometimes it was just easier to not talk.

“I’m fine,” I said again. I took a sip of milk. The raw spot on the roof of my mouth hurt. “And I have to go to school. Unless . . .”

“No unless,” Mom said. “We’ll talk later.” But she seemed relieved to not have to continue her attempt at a conversation. “Don’t forget this.”

She nudged the poster board toward me, then tugged on her shirt again before collecting my plate. When she turned away to scrape the french fry face into the trash,

I grabbed my lunch bag and the poster board and hopped off the stool so fast, I almost tripped on my own feet.

I pushed open the diner door with my sneaker, ignoring Alex's *Enjoy your sardines and horseradish*, ignoring Mom's *Have a good day*, ignoring Marlene's wave at the window. I threw the brown bag in my bike basket and pedaled away.

★ CHAPTER 2 ★



There's a poster of the pantheon from *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* hanging in Mrs. Murry's classroom. It looks like an outtake from a family photo session. Hera is smiling, and Zeus looks like the serious patriarch. They stare at the camera. They're ready to have their photo taken, but the rest of the family isn't. Aphrodite looks down, her eyes closed. Poseidon looks to his left, like someone outside the frame called to him. Hermes appears to be up to no good. By the way Ares stares at him, he knows this too. Demeter fusses with baby Persephone on her lap. Hades couldn't even be bothered to show up. He's too much of a rebel for something like a family portrait.

I imagined the Greek gods and goddesses wearing matching funky Christmas sweaters and standing in front of the tumbleweed snowman on Route 13 just like Mom and I do every year. One year, we wore gray sweaters that had reindeer with bright red plastic noses that squeaked when you squeezed them. Another year, we wore chunky green sweaters with sparkly silver tinsel. One of my favorites was the sweater with the fireplace pattern and real stockings hanging off the front.

Mom hung each year's photo on the same wall in the living room. She used a ruler to make sure the photos were even and then had me stand back with her to check that nothing needed adjusting. We had a tumbleweed snowman photo on the wall for every Christmas. Or at least that's what I'd always assumed.

Until one day, a few years ago, when I was in the third grade. I was working on a math assignment where we had to count groups of things in our home. I counted the snowman photos, and then I counted the age I was in each one. That's when I realized that my first Christmas was missing from the wall.

"There was never a photo for that year," Mom said when I asked her about it.

The next time I asked, she said it must have gotten lost. That's when I learned that adults sometimes lie.

When I lied, it was usually because I was afraid of getting in trouble. Because I knew I'd done something I shouldn't have done. Like the time I ate half the lemon buttercream frosting Alex had made for Marlene's birthday cake. But what reason did Mom have for not telling the truth? I didn't know. What I *did* know was that the wall suddenly felt . . . incomplete. Just like the pantheon illustration without Hades. Just like I did. I also knew the truth usually had a way of coming out. Like it did when I threw up the lemon buttercream all over the diner floor.

Mrs. Murry started each class by reading from the big

mythology book. Even though we were in the seventh grade, no one complained about being read to. She let us spread out and get comfortable. It was the one time in the school day when it almost felt like we weren't in school, and we could just be. It was the one time when everyone paid attention—even Brandon Rivera.

Today Mrs. Murry read to us about Cronus swallowing his sons because he was afraid one of them would grow up to be more powerful than him. When she finished, she let us spend the rest of class brainstorming for our mythology projects.

Cy dragged her desk over so that it touched mine.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, plopping down in her seat.

“Your hair!” I glanced at Mrs. Murry, afraid I'd been too loud. I unrolled my poster board, but my eyes were back on Cy's new hairdo.

“Do you like it?” she said, posing. “I asked the lady who does my mom's hair to make me look like Cleopatra in that old movie.”

Cy's head was covered in tiny braids that hung to her shoulders and ended in gold beads that made little clicking sounds when she moved. Her bangs were straightened and cut bluntly across her forehead as if someone had trimmed along the edge of a bowl. Cy shook her head, and the beads grazed her brown cheeks.

“It looks very you.” I smiled at my best friend.

A lot of people found it hard to believe that Cyaandi Fernández and I were best friends, because we seemed like opposites. She was the kind of kid who would come to school wearing mismatched high-tops—one purple and one black—green tights, a shiny gold dress, and a totally new hairstyle without feeling awkward at all. Which was admirable because sometimes seventh grade was nothing but awkward.

I had never cut my hair shorter than the middle of my back. Today, I wore one of Mom's button-down shirts over a T-shirt, rolled jeans, and checkered slip-on sneakers. Cy said I dressed like I wanted a cloak of invisibility, which was exactly the point. My style was *please don't notice me* chic.

But Cy wasn't just my best friend. She was more like a sister. We'd known each other since kindergarten, and while we were different in a lot of ways, at our core we were the same. We looked out for each other. That's what made us best friends.

"So"—Cy nudged her head toward my poster board—"what's the plan?"

"There is no plan yet." I shrugged. "This isn't due for a while anyway. Why is she having us work on it already?"

"I'm making oracle cards," Cy said, holding up a stack of purple index cards. "I'm going to draw the gods and goddesses and characters from mythology on them. Maybe

I'll do readings. I'll be like the oracle at Delphi without the wacky gases."

"That's a good idea," I said, wishing I had a plan too.

"Brandon gets the Medusa card." Cy frowned at the boy who was shooting balls of paper into the garbage can, the spell from Mrs. Murry's read aloud broken.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, staring at my blank poster board. It was like an oversized oracle card that revealed nothing.

"Listening." Cy leaned over an unlined index card and began drawing.

"If you were an adult and you wanted to hide something from your kid, where would you hide it?"

"Interesting question," Cy said. I waited while she drew. She was quiet for so long that I thought she might've forgotten I asked her a question. Finally, she spoke. "It depends."

"On what?"

"Well, if it's a boy, I would definitely put whatever I was hiding in a place I knew he wouldn't look," she said.

"Obviously," I said. "But like where?"

"Like in a box of maxi pads," Cy said. She laughed but didn't look up from her drawing.

"Yeah," I said, thinking. "That's a good spot. But what if it's a girl?"

"If it's a girl," Cy said, "that's trickier."

"Why?"

“Because girls are way more curious and wouldn’t be scared off by something like maxi pads,” she said.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” I said.

Until recently, *I’d* never even been curious enough to look for anything about my biological father.

She looked up at me. “Is this about the adoption?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“You’re looking for something.” Cy put down her pencil and eyed at me suspiciously. “What is it? I want to know.”

“I’m not sure . . .” I hesitated.

“Well, in that case, you’re never going to find it,” Cy said and turned back to her index cards, her braids sliding off her shoulders.

I stared at my blank poster board. What if Mom had been telling the truth? What if there never was a first photo? But then why would she lie and say it was lost? Deep down, I knew exactly what I was looking for.

“You’re right,” I said with certainty. “I am looking for something, and I think I know what it is. Wanna help?”

★ ★ ★

Mom and Alex sprung the adoption surprise on my birthday. I should’ve known something was up, because they seemed distracted all day. Even during dinner at my favorite Korean BBQ restaurant, Mom didn’t talk about fossils or say something weird, like how the baby was

sitting on her bladder. And Alex wasn't workshopping new diner menu ideas. They seemed to be only half listening to anything I said.

After I'd opened gifts and we'd had the best homemade tres leches cake, while I played around with the little powder-blue instant camera I'd gotten, Mom announced that Alex had one more gift.

"Adopt me?" I asked after Alex told me that he loved me and would be honored to be my dad and wanted to know what I thought about him adopting me. It seemed that our definitions of "gift" were not the same.

"I know it's probably confusing and a little strange, maybe," he said.

"A little," I agreed.

"Do you have any questions?" Mom asked. "We know it's a lot to think about."

"A lot," I repeated.

Questions exploded inside my head like balls in a bingo blower. Finally, one rose to the surface.

"Why now?" I asked. "I mean, we live together. And you're married to Mom, and you're already my stepdad."

"That's a great one to start with." Alex laughed nervously.

I looked over at Mom, who was chewing on a nail. Her other hand rested on her stomach. She looked back at me and smiled.

"Well, it's kind of like why I married your mom," Alex

said. “Because I love you, of course. I feel like I am your dad, but I’m not *legally* your dad. And like marriage, adoption makes our relationship legally binding. You know what that means?”

“Like a contract?” I said.

“Yeah, like a contract.” Alex nodded. “It means that in the eyes of the law, we have a relationship that makes me responsible for you.”

“Aren’t you responsible for me anyway?” I said, confused. “Why does it have to be legal?”

“Well, yes, and it’d be nice if it was as simple as saying that because I love you and think of you as my daughter, that it should be enough,” Alex said. He furrowed his brow. “And it is. In some ways. The emotional piece has been there for a long time and is always going to be there. I’m committed to you and your mom, with or without a contract. But other pieces—financial, medical, things like that—those get a little trickier without a legal document.”

“So without a piece of paper you wouldn’t be responsible for me?” I said. Sometimes the world of adults made no sense.

“Of course I would,” Alex said quickly. “A piece of paper doesn’t change how I feel about you or my responsibility to you.”

“But?”

“Well, this would make everything legal, official,” Alex said. “I can make decisions on your behalf while you’re a

minor. And it's just something I've felt like I wanted to do for a long time."

Alex glanced at Mom. I tried to read the look between them, but Alex turned back to me quickly.

"Think about it, okay? It doesn't have to be something you decide right away," he said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. "Or at all. My feelings won't be hurt."

I hadn't even considered the possibility of hurting Alex's feelings. I liked to imagine that having hurt feelings was one of those things you outgrew, like a pair of shoes or playing with toys. The idea that you could be a full-grown adult and someone could still hurt your feelings was just too much.

I did think of Alex as my dad. And maybe that should have been enough for me to say yes right then. But I knew there was something missing, even if Mom and Alex didn't acknowledge it: my father. My biological father.

Mom looked like an unassuming science nerd on the outside, but she was full of secrets. My father was one of them. Mom said there was no point in dwelling on the past. Which was ironic because her job was all about the past. Maybe my father was her past, something she was done with. But he wasn't *my* past. He wasn't anything. The past, my father, they didn't matter to her, but they mattered to me.

At that moment, while Mom and Alex looked at me with

hope, all I could think about was the missing Christmas photo. Was it a coincidence that there was no tumbleweed snowman photo for my first Christmas? I didn't know. But I was sure there had to be a connection between my father and the photo, and I intended to figure it out.

★ CHAPTER 3 ★

.....

“Where do we start?” Cy asked.

We biked to my house after school. Usually, Cy and I would eat a snack, do our homework, and watch our favorite telenovela, *Mundo raro*, before she had to go. But today we had other plans. With Mom at the museum and Alex still at the diner, we had at least an hour before anyone came home.

“And what exactly are we looking for anyway?” Cy looked around, hands on her hips and gold beads clicking, as if whatever we were looking for might be in view. “A birth certificate?”

“A birth certificate,” I repeated. I hadn’t even thought of that. And now, as we stood in the living room, I had cold feet. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

I grabbed the remote control and turned on the TV.

“What are you talking about?” Cy took the remote out of my hand and clicked off the television.

I sat down on the couch and pressed a pillow to my face.

“I don’t want Mom to get mad,” I said into the pillow. “And I’m probably wrong anyway. And . . .” I tossed the pillow.

“And what?” Cy said, sitting down next to me.

“I guess I’m a little scared,” I said. “I never really thought about finding him. But now it feels like I have to.”

“You mean because of the adoption,” Cy said.

“Of course,” I said. “How do Mom and Alex think they can just throw this at me and not talk about him at all? What if I don’t ever find out the truth about him? What if I find him and he’s awful?”

“Well, you’re never going to know anything if you don’t at least try,” Cy said, standing up. “Come on. Let’s find . . .” She grabbed my hand and pulled me off the couch.

“We’re looking for photos,” I said. “A photo.”

“Does your mom keep any photo albums?” Cy asked. She walked over to the bookshelves.

“Yeah,” I said. “But that would be too obvious if she were hiding photos, don’t you think?”

“Maxi pad box?” Cy asked and raised her eyebrows.

I shrugged, and we headed to the bathroom Mom and Alex shared. I hardly ever went into Mom’s bedroom. Adult spaces seemed boring. When we stepped into the room, I felt like I was the disobedient Pandora. But unlike her, I wasn’t just being nosy. This was important.

“I feel weird poking around in my mom’s things,” I said.

“Want me to do it?” Cy asked, following me into the bathroom.

“Thanks.” I kneeled in front of the vanity. “But I can do it.”

I opened the bottom cabinet and peered. Everything was neatly organized, medicines and a first aid kit, bars of soap, a few extra rolls of toilet paper. I reached in and pulled out a small blue box.

“Tampons,” I said, shaking it. I opened the box, just in case, and found nothing but a few paper-wrapped tubes. “What now?”

“Closet? Under the bed? In the dresser?” Cy rattled off possible hiding locations. “I once watched this show where someone hid stuff inside a plastic bag in the toilet tank.”

We both looked at the toilet.

“I’ll check the closet,” I said, walking back into the bedroom.

I could hear the porcelain lid of the toilet tank rattle.

“Ouch,” Cy yelped. She came out of the bathroom holding her thumb. “That thing weighs a ton. Nothing but water in there.”

She tapped on the trunk at the foot of the bed.

“How about this thing?” The top was piled with clothes, a stack of magazines that threatened to topple over, and an empty coffee-stained mug.

“Sure,” I said.

While Cy checked the trunk, I looked in the closet, being careful to place everything back where I found it. Someone who used a ruler to line up picture frames would probably notice if things had been moved around.

I pushed hangers from one end of the rod to the other, checking the space at either end.

“Look at this tiny dress,” Cy cooed from where she knelt over the trunk. She held up a blue corduroy dress with yellow flowers. “Is this all your baby stuff in here?”

“I guess,” I said, shoving an empty suitcase back into a corner of the closet.

“Ha! Look at this,” Cy said. She held up a small red-and-black box of toddler-sized sneakers. There was a 50 percent off sticker on its side. “Can you believe you ever fit in shoes this small?” She looked at the baby shoes and then at my current size-eight feet.

“Let me see those,” I said. It was the same brand of shoes I still wore. Maybe I *did* need a wardrobe update.

Cy placed the box on the floor and pushed it toward me. I pulled open the lid.

Inside the box, I peeled away layers of brown tissue paper and found that instead of the checkered shoes with Velcro straps pictured on the label, there were photos underneath. I picked up the top one. It was of a younger Mom with Nana, her grandmother who raised her. I knew that Nana came from a small town just across the border with Mexico, and that she raised Mom when her parents died. I had no memory of her—my bisabuela died when I was still a baby—but she was the only person from Mom’s past that Mom *did* talk about.

“Just a bunch of old baby stuff and *a lot* of Christmas

sweaters,” Cy said, rifling through the contents of the trunk once more before closing the top. “Your mom could open her own Christmas sweater shop.”

She crawled over to me. I pulled the photos out of the box and spread them out on the floor.

“Photos?” Cy said, excited. “Is this what you were looking for?” She knelt over the photographs, her braids dangling so that she looked like a chandelier.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Maybe.”

Whoever had taken the photos was a terrible photographer. Some of them were off-center or unfocused. Definitely not the stuff you’d put on social media for your friends to see. I knew they hadn’t been taken recently. I was born when Mom had just turned twenty, and I wasn’t in any of them, so she had to be younger than that. Alex wasn’t in any of them, either, and I didn’t recognize the places.

Mom didn’t have a lot of friends. To be honest, she really didn’t hang out with anyone who wasn’t Alex or the folks from the diner or the people at the museum. But these looked like friends. Maybe even family. Whoever they were, I could tell they were important to her, or at least had been. I wondered if my father was one of the faces that stared back at me.

It felt strange not knowing what Mom’s life was like before I was born. Even if she didn’t mention my father, you’d think she would at least have a back-in-my-day story

like all adults do. Mom had always guarded the information about her life before me. I imagined that maybe she was an undercover government spy, or a secret agent, or even someone in a witness protection program. But the old photos scattered in front of me seemed, well, normal.

I pulled a Polaroid from the stack. It looked like it had been taken through a filter of spun sugar or tulle, everything in the frame soft and dreamy. In it was a teenage Mom—the same Mom as in the other photos—with a boy about her age. She wore jeans, and he wore dark sweatpants. They both had on matching ugly shaggy green sweaters with ornaments embroidered all over the front. Behind them was a curtain of desert oranges and browns. And the tumbleweed snowman.

I almost missed something in the photo because it was so tiny. But there, bundled up in an ugly shaggy green sweater, too, one that blends in with the boy's sweater, was a little face peeking out from the crook of his right elbow.

I jumped to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Cy asked, scrambling up after me. “What’d you find?”

I hurried into the living room, my legs trembling like flan, to the wall where our annual tumbleweed snowman photos hung. In the space just to the left of the first frame, I held the white plastic-like border of the photo against the wall with my thumb and forefinger. I had found it. I

was the baby wrapped up in the sweater. It was our first tumbleweed snowman photo—the missing photo.

Cy looked from me to the wall. She moved in to get a closer look at the photo.

“Is that him?”

“I think so,” I said. “I’m pretty sure.”

“Wow.” Cy’s eyes widened. “He looks familiar, right?”

“It would be a little strange if he didn’t, don’t you think?” I said, pointing to my face.

“I guess. What are you going to do? Are you going to tell your mom?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I walked back to the bedroom, Cy following. We sat down next to the pile of photos. I looked through to see if I could find any others with the same boy.

“Why do you think she never talks about him?” Cy studied the photo.

“All she ever says about my father is that he was someone she’d once known and then she didn’t,” I said. “Who knows what goes on in my mom’s brain.”

“She’s a complicated lady with a mysterious past,” Cy said.

I rolled my eyes. “We need to put all of this away before Mom and Alex get home.”

We collected the photographs, and I stacked them neatly into the shoebox and covered them with the tissue paper. The small container suddenly felt heavier than it

looked as I placed it back where Cy had found it.

“Don’t forget this,” Cy said, holding out the tumbleweed snowman photo.

I took the little square and looked at the three faces one more time, focusing on the teenage boy. He had a look on his face that I couldn’t make out. A half smile and something else. I opened the trunk and started to tuck the photo inside the box with the others. But then instead of putting it back, I closed the lid of the trunk and slid the photo into the pocket of my hoodie. If Mom could keep secrets, so could I.