



THE



CHISMOSAS



ONLY



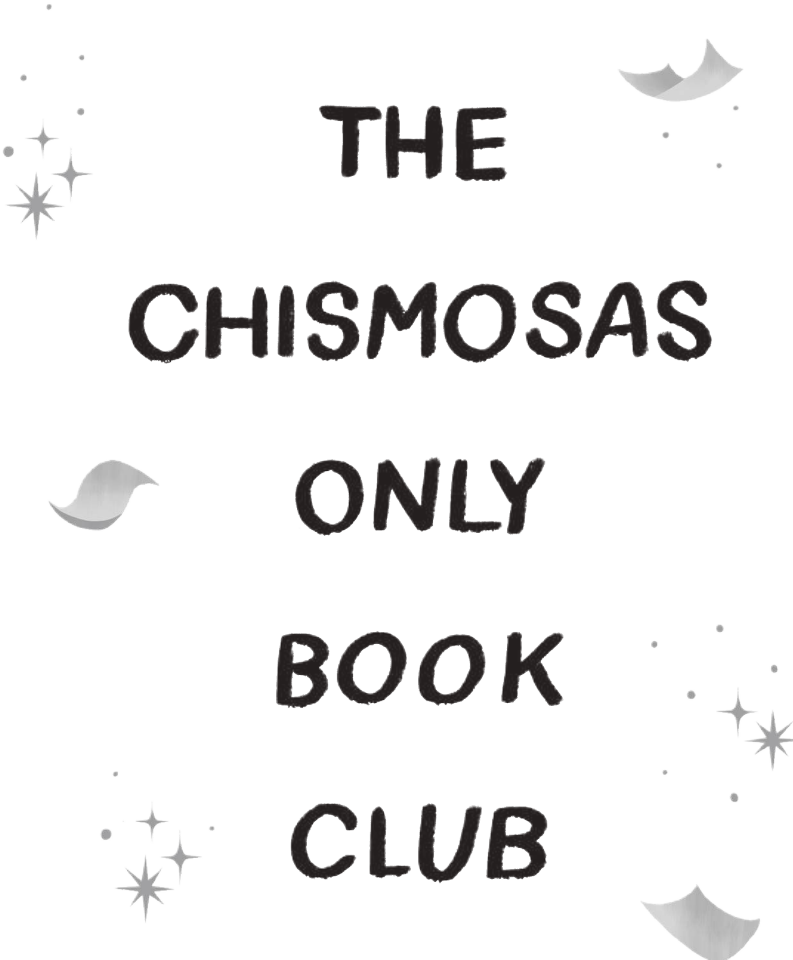
BOOK



CLUB

Four friends. One bookstore.  
And a little magic to survive high school.

LAEKAN ZEA KEMP



**THE  
CHISMOSAS  
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CLUB**

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# Milagro

Tucked into the fiery pink mountains of Nueva Rosita, New Mexico, sat a cozy little bookstore named for the woman who hammered the first post into the dirt, giving birth to the small town that would be raided and renamed more times than she could count. Until she was erased from every sign except this one.

Milagro's Books was a miracle, one that had been passed down from generation to generation. Once just a makeshift bookshelf in the back of Milagro's closet full of leaflets and bound family histories, now a modern storefront serving coffee and conchas and carrying books from all around the world.

*A humble monument to the kind of magic only books can summon.* Or at least, that's how the *New Rose Newspaper* referred to the shop after Milagro's great-great-granddaughter replaced its plumbing and dressed it in a dazzling mural to hide its cracks. She, her husband, and her daughters were Milagro's caretakers now.

But what they hadn't yet realized was that she was taking care of them too, the same way she had cared for every one of her grandchildren who had taken up Milagro's mantle. The same way she took care of every person who crossed her threshold looking for answers. For a story to help them realize their own.

And Milagro's great-great-granddaughter Cat? Well, hers was only getting started. But she wasn't the only one searching. Which is why she, her cousin Sofia, and their best friends, Mari and Ana, were currently picking the lock to Milagro's side door and sneaking inside after hours. Because tomorrow was their first day of high school, and few beginnings are scarier than that.

## CHAPTER 1

# Cat

Cat had been picking locks since she was just a year old. Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration. But the first time she broke into Milagro's Books, she had barely learned to walk.

Her parents were scanning the exterior of the building, calculating how much it was going to cost to revitalize the place—Milagro's great-granddaughter Hilda was turning eighty that year and was no longer able to care for it—and while they were loudly discussing (not arguing about) the possibility of becoming the owners of an ancient (and allegedly haunted) bookstore, Cat waddled around the side of the building via the wrap-around porch, slipped in through a cracked door, and disappeared from sight.

What none of them knew was that not only did the bookstore need a new (very expensive) roof, but a kitchen fire started by one of Hilda's grandsons had irreparably damaged one of the load-bearing walls, which meant that the entire thing could collapse at any moment.

What they also didn't know was that that moment would come while their precious toddler was alone inside. Cat also had no clue of the danger she was in. Instead, she toddled from one bookshelf to the next, touching spine after spine, until she spotted the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. A copy of *Rainbow Weaver*, the tapestry on the cover striped just like her father's favorite bubble gum up against a cool blue mountain range, all centered around a girl with eyes almost as big and bright as her mother's. It lay on



the floor in the center of the store like a stray jewel spilled from a sunken treasure chest.

Cat fell to her butt and scooted her way across the floor until she reached the book. She couldn't read the words, of course, but the words were only half the story. So she picked it up and opened it in her lap, her eyes widening over the multicolored yarn and intricate patterns. She was so enchanted that she didn't hear her parents calling or the crack of the roof pitch. In fact, as the entire thing came down, she barely felt the whoosh of the debris as it hit the ground just a few feet away.

It wasn't until her mother, Camila, scooped her up and out of the swirling dust that she finally registered what had happened. But her mother was trembling for another reason. Not just because her daughter had gotten lost or because the bookstore was now in ruins, but because she was standing in the only spot that hadn't been touched, the destruction forming a perfect circle around them both.

Suddenly, Cat's father, Gabino, noticed something fluttering down from the rafters.

"What is it?" Camila asked.

Gabino snatched it out of the air. His eyes widened. "An insurance policy?"

"What?" Camila stared over his shoulder at the piece of paper, tears welling up in her eyes. "I can't believe this."

Gabino hugged Cat and Camila close. "Do you think it's still good?"

It turned out, the insurance policy was, in fact, still good. Which is why they were able to rebuild the bookstore into something even more magical than it was before and why Cat and her friends were currently sneaking inside, as they had been doing since the day they officially become a foursome.

That was the other thing about Cat. She loved traditions, rituals, and anything to do with ceremoniously marking the passage of time. Things that allowed her to press pause so she could savor the good moments and better brace herself for the hard ones. Like staying up late to linger over the last few pages of a love story that made her feel like she was flying. Like hiding under the covers with that same book while her parents yelled at each other in the next room.

Her favorite tradition was the top-secret meeting of the Chismosas Only Book Club. They started it on the summer solstice after Sofia read *How Moon Fuentes Fell in Love with the Universe*, and she loved it so much that she had to annotate every page. Then she passed it on to Cat, who also put her favorite highlighters to good use before passing it on to Mari, who couldn't help but doodle every kiss and swoon-worthy quote in the margins before passing it on to Ana, who sobbed so hard at the ending that the entire thing was drenched in her snot by the time they finally met up at Milagro's to discuss.

They sat in the alcove right next to the pastry display case, acting out their favorite scenes, repeating their favorite lines, hearts racing as if they were reliving it all again. Until Cat's mother finally kicked them out for being too loud.

She shooed them out with the rag she used to wipe down the counters. "You chismosas are scaring away my customers!"

That summer night, Cat sent a text that would change everything.

CAT:

I think we should do that again.

MARI:

Get kicked out of Milagro's?

ANA:

I don't think getting on Mrs. Rubio's bad side is a good idea.

SOFIA:

Agreed. Tía doesn't mess around.

CAT:

UGH NO! I'm talking about the book. Reading it together. It was fun. Right?

MARI:

I don't know. I liked Moon but I really only read it for you.

CAT:

We've only got a few more months together before high school chews us up and spits us all in different directions.

MARI:

Nice visual.

CAT:

9-17

ANA:

Cat's right. Mari's going to be in Art. Sofia's joining every club known to man. Cat, you'll be in Theater.

CAT:

And Ana will be with all of the smart kids who want to be doctors and lawyers.

**SOFIA:**

We'll be apart more but reading your notes made it feel like you were sitting right next to me.

**MARI:**

Close enough to feel Ana blushing.

**ANA:**

☹ Was not!

**MARI:**

I'm in but only if you pick another banger.  
I'm not doing homework for fun.

**SOFIA:**

Cat will pick something you'll love.  
Promise!

**CAT:**

Why do I have to pick?

**SOFIA:**

Because it was your idea. Duh.

**CAT:**

Fine. But we should each take a turn.

**MARI:**

Ugh.

**ANA:**

Fair.

CAT:

And we need a name.

MARI:

OMG! Chismosas! That's what your mom called us.

SOFIA:

Except instead of gossiping about real people we're gossiping about fictional characters.

ANA:

The Chismosas Only Book Club because no one else is allowed.

CAT:

No annoying little sisters.

SOFIA:

No new friends.

MARI:

Just us.

ANA:



CAT:



SOFIA:



MARI:





The next day, Cat was pretending to dust the shelves at Milagro's while also scanning the spines, trying to pick the perfect book for their next book-club read. She flipped through one of the new releases, the pages still smelling like freshly cut paper. She pulled a book from the bottom shelf and traced the embossed cover.

She read over a dozen jacket-flap summaries, searching for something that would satisfy Mari's sense of humor and Ana's sentimental side and Sofia's witchy sensibilities. But she kept second-guessing herself, worrying that this new tradition was so fragile that it could implode at the first major mishap. Like picking a book one of them would hate.

With so much change looming in the distance, her friendships felt more fragile than ever too. She'd seen breakups happen before. Girl gangs that ruled the halls of their middle school imploding on social media for all the world to see because one of them got invited to a high school party and the rest of them didn't.

Cat's little sister, Lia, was born, and their father got his own apartment. Cat's grandmother passed away, and he moved back home. A few months ago, Cat's father got a new job, and now he and her mother were hardly speaking to each other.

Change was scary, and Cat had all the proof she needed that it was dangerous too.

Cat plucked a short-story collection off one of the endcaps, wondering if Mari might like the illustrations, if the spooky titles listed in the table of contents might pique Sofia's interest.

But it still didn't feel right, and Cat was starting to panic.

She put the book back and turned down the next aisle, and in

that width of a single blink, a book suddenly flew off the shelves and landed right at her feet.

*Sinner's Isle* by Angela Montoya.

She scanned the synopsis, eyes widening at the mention of pirates and ancient curses and a romance for the ages. Then she hugged the book to her chest like she was meeting a long-lost tía who had arrived just in time, and in the quiet of the bookstore right before closing, as the bell chimed over the door one last time, she swore it hugged her back.

A month later the girls had all taken their turns devouring the story from cover to cover, and now they were ready to chismear and comer all their favorite snacks and reír like a bunch of hyenas until their voices were hoarse.

But first.

“You have to say it or it doesn’t work.” Cat placed her hands on her hips, annoyed that she had to cajole the other chismosas every single time. As if they expected to receive the magic of Milagro’s for free.

Mari stuck out her tongue. “Why do we have to ask for permission if you have a key? Also, why don’t you ever just use your key?”

“Because my key is still back on the hook by the refrigerator so that my parents won’t know we’re sneaking out.” Cat furrowed her brow. “And we ask permission because it’s respectful, that’s why.”

Ana leaned against the door, fighting a yawn. “And because I have to wake up way earlier than the rest of you to walk the Littles to school, and Cat won’t let us inside until we do her spell.”

Cat huffed. “It’s not a spell.”

Sofia yawned. “Technically, it *is* a spell.”

“Yeah,” Ana said, “so let’s just do the spell the way we always do.”

“Fine,” Mari growled.

“On three . . .” Sofia held up two fingers. Then one.

In unison (some more enthusiastically than others), they said, “Milagro, may we enter?”

And even though Cat still wasn’t convinced it was an actual spell, the lights of the store flickered hello, reminding Cat why rituals matter. Because they unlock the magic of the world. Because they remind us that we are magic too.