

CHAPTER 1

A Creature in the Woods

I'm Minty Fresh. My best friend is Pax A. Punch.

Minty Fresh and Pax A. Punch are not famous yet. But when we're older and rule roller derby, our names will bring fear to skaters all over the world.

Not that Minty Fresh is a very scary name.

Paz and I have been derby fans since we were eight, when our local roller rink started its own team, the Catonsville Nine. We cheered for them all winter — tough young women in helmets and knee pads, skating hard in competition against the Arbutus Cuties and the powerhouse Baltimore Bombers. We got our own roller skates and practiced tricks and skills.

I struggled to come up with my roller derby name. Minty Fresh didn't pack a punch like Pax A. Punch. It sounds like a toothpaste. But I hadn't been able to think of anything better.

"What about *Cleopaintra*?" Paz suggested. We were skating in front of her house, in the loop that dead-ends our street. "Or Carrie A. Chainsaw?"

I tried them out. “Minty Mortimer, also known as *Cleopaintra*. No. Sorry. It just isn’t me. It has nothing to do with my real name.”

“So?”

She didn’t get it. I wanted to turn myself into a roller derby superstar. My real self, not a made-up person.

She’s lucky: Paz Anita Calderon is great material for a roller derby name. *Paz* means “peace” in Spanish, and *pax* means “peace” in Latin. They’re basically the same word. And *A* is Paz’s real middle initial! It’s like her parents were thinking of roller derby when they named her. Though, knowing her parents, they probably weren’t.

Lennie, Paz’s younger sister, sat on the curb, keeping an eye on their little brothers, Hugo and Robbie, as they tumbled across the Calderons’ front yard like puppies. “I’ve got one for you,” Lennie said. “I. Minty Structable!” Lennie could sit around thinking up roller derby names all day.

“Too awkward,” I said.

“Sheila Beecherbutt?” Lennie tried.

“It’s getting dark,” Paz said. “Let’s do one more leg whip.”

The leg whip is a trick we saw Lemon E. Kickit and Willa Steele do at the last Catonsville Nine bout. Willa stuck out one leg behind her, Lemon grabbed her foot, and Willa kicked it forward, whipping Lemon up the track to score a point. Lemon E. Kickit is a jammer, which means she scores points for her team by passing the other

team's skaters. The other skaters on the track are blockers, who try to keep the opposing jammer from scoring. The trick is for the jammer to get past the enemy team's blockers, and the leg whip worked great.

Paz skated ahead of me and stuck out her leg. I grabbed her foot. She kicked me forward. Her long, black braid whipped around her head, but I didn't whip anywhere. I fell on my butt. Again.

"Great trick," Lennie said. "What's it called, the butt bouncer? You should totally do it in the parade."

"The parade's two weeks away," I said. "We'll have it down by then." I wasn't so sure. But I figured if I kept saying it, it might come true.

Paz and I planned to skate in the neighborhood's annual Fourth of July Parade. We used to decorate our bikes and ride around the block like all the other kids, but this year we were going to blow everyone's minds with our roller derby routine. If we could ever get it right.

"Let's go to the rink tomorrow for some real practice," I said, changing out of my skates.

"Can I skate with you?" Lennie pleaded. "I'm a million times better than either one of you."

I knew what Paz would say. Lennie was right — she was at least as good a skater as me or Paz. But she was only nine. Ever since Paz turned eleven, she tried to leave Lennie out of everything. Paz said Lennie was too young, which made steam shoot out Lennie's ears.