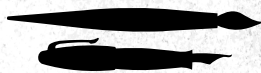


ME. FRIDA,
and the Secret of the
PEACOCK
RING

ANGELA CERVANTES



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Chapter 1

Adiós, Kansas

Whether she liked it or not, Paloma Marquez was in Mexico City for a whole month. She lifted her purple sleep mask and raised the plane's small window shade, letting a stream of sunlight pour in and light up the two books balanced on her lap. One was the newest book in her favorite mystery series featuring the superb teen sleuth Lulu Pennywhistle. Paloma finished it during the two-hour flight from Kansas City to Houston, where she and her mom made their connection flight to Mexico. Now Paloma had only the other book to entertain her during the rest of her time in Mexico. The small Spanish vocabulary book she had bought for the trip featured a yellow cartoon cat wearing a black Zorro mask and hat on the cover. Somewhere up in the sky between

Houston and Mexico City, she had opened it and studied a bunch of unfamiliar Spanish words until they blurred together like the passing clouds and put her to sleep like a Spanish lullaby.

“We’re here!” her mom said. Seated next to her, she playfully tugged Paloma’s arm. “Are you excited to be on your first trip out of the country? And in Mexico, no less! Did you ever think we would be traveling for the summer? Isn’t it awesome?”

Paloma wasn’t sure which question she should answer first, so she shut the window blind and tried out some Spanish. “*No quiero México. Tengo miedo de camarón.*”

Her mother gave her a puzzled look. “I got the ‘you don’t want Mexico’ part, but why are you scared of shrimp?”

Paloma frowned. “I meant ‘change.’ I don’t like change.”

“That would be ‘*cambio*’ not ‘*camarón*,’ but you get an A for effort.” Her mom smiled. “C’mon, Paloma. Think of the adventure!”

“*Aventura* is overrated,” Paloma answered. Her mom shook her head, and Paloma felt a shot of guilt straight through her heart.

Paloma wanted to be as pumped up as her mom was about this trip. She really did. After all, her mom had worked hard for this opportunity. It wasn’t every day that a literature professor received a four-week fellowship to study abroad. For as long as Paloma could remember, her mom had been applying for fellowships in Mexico with no success. Still,

after traveling almost seven hours to get to Mexico City, Paloma couldn't muster the energy for fake excitement. Did it make her a bad daughter to just want to spend a normal summer at home in Kansas reading her favorite mystery series at the pool and going to the mall with her friends Kate and Isha?

"Seriously, Paloma," her mom said. "You're the only one I know who complains about a free trip to Mexico." Her mom stood in the aisle to remove her backpack from the overhead compartment. "I thought that *at least* visiting your dad's old stomping grounds would fire you up."

She has a point, Paloma thought. But four weeks? Paloma's stomach twisted. She was losing most of her summer. What about the Fourth of July? Paloma, Kate, and Isha had been plotting a massive fireworks display at the lake. Every *boom, pop, pow* would be synchronized to their favorite songs, and they were going to come up with a sparkler routine. But because of this trip to Mexico, Paloma's summer plans had fizzled out.

The passengers began grabbing their bags and making their way into the aisle to exit the plane. Her mom stood aside to let Paloma slip ahead of her.

"Let's go, or as they say here in Mexico, *Vámonos*."

Paloma tucked the books and eye mask into her bag and stepped off the plane with her mom into the crowded Jetway. She practiced a few Spanish phrases she thought would be useful during the four-week trip.

“No, gracias. No me gusta. No hablo español.”

As she and her mom got into a long line behind the other passengers to show their passports, she continued. *“No quiero. No puedo. No me gusta.”*

“Your Spanish sounds good, Paloma. You’re a quick learner, but I think it’s interesting that you’ve picked up all the negative expressions.”

“I’m not negative.” Paloma scowled.

“C’mon, Paloma. *‘No me gusta.’ ‘No quiero.’* You don’t like it. You don’t want it. Tell me that’s not all *negativo*.” Her mom put her arm around Paloma’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I want you to have a positive experience here in Mexico. Try saying *‘Me gusta’* instead.”

Paloma let out a long sigh. “Fine. I don’t know how to say ‘I will try’ in Spanish yet, but I will *try* to see this as one super-mega-positive experience that will forever change my life! I also want world peace, fluffy kittens, and unicorns!” Paloma forced a wide Miss America smile that showed all her teeth and lasted so long she felt like her cheeks would explode.

“Much better.”

“Mom, why didn’t you and Dad just raise me speaking Spanish? This whole trip would be so much easier, you know?” Paloma asked. “I mean, Dad was from Mexico, so he spoke Spanish like a pro, right? Did he ever try to teach me to speak it?”

“He did have a couple of cute Spanish nicknames for you,” Paloma’s mom said. A soft smile curved her lips as they

took a few more steps in line. “Sometimes, he’d hold you and call you ‘little bird’ in Spanish. I don’t remember the exact word anymore, but if I heard it, I’d know it.”

“Lucky for you, I have a Spanish dictionary with a silly Zorro cat on the cover,” Paloma quipped. “Surely *el gato* will know the answer.” She opened the book and looked up the translation of “bird.” Looking up the right word made Paloma feel like a detective searching for clues. But that was nothing new. She often hunted clues about her own life. Clues that proved, once upon a time, she had a dad.

A dad who was originally from Mexico. A dad whose name was Juan Carlos. A dad who studied architecture. A dad who her mom fell in love with at first sight when she met him at the university. A dad who stopped to help someone on the highway and never came home again.

Those were the cold, hard facts. Paloma had been only three years old when he died, and she depended on her mom to fill in the memory blanks. Luckily, her mom had plenty of memories to share: Halloween parties, college days, birthdays, Christmas . . . Every time her mom shared a memory, Paloma wrote it down on a note card and added it to her “memory box,” a gift from her mom. It was just a regular craft box made of thick cardboard, no bigger than a pencil case. Paloma painted it purple and decorated it with butterflies. Along with the note cards, she filled it with photographs of her father and other small, sentimental trinkets. Separately, each item was a clue that told her something about her father.

Paloma hoped that if she could gather enough of them, she'd be able to finally understand the man he had been.

She always kept the box by her bedside, and sometimes before falling asleep, she'd stare at the photographs of her



handsome, dark-haired dad holding her in front of her birthday cake or pushing her in a stroller. She often hoped that if she stared long enough at a photograph, maybe the memory of that exact moment would rise up above all the others in her head the way their plane had risen high above the clouds. Then she'd have something real to hold. But it never happened. She always ended up right where she started, with no memories of her own. Perhaps she'd find a clue in Mexico that would finally reveal a real memory of her father that was all her own.

In the meantime, Paloma found the word she'd been looking for.

"Pájaro," she said. "Is that the word he used to call me? Little bird?"

Her mom tilted her head. "Yes, that sounds about right."

Paloma pulled out a note card from her bag, wrote down "pájaro." An immigration officer called them forward to review their passports. Her mom gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "Let's go, my little bird."

When they had gotten through customs, Paloma studied the stamp on her passport: *Migración. La República de México.*

In the mystery books she read at home, Lulu Pennywhistle had already filled her passport with stamps from Dubai, London, and Berlin several times, but Paloma was pretty sure Lulu had never traveled to Mexico. Paloma liked that Mexico, the place where her dad was born, was her first out-of-the-USA trip. She glided her hand over the page with the fresh stamp.

"*Me gusta mucho,*" Paloma said quietly.