

"A family coming-of-age story of fierce females, at once broad and intimate in scope." —*Kirkus Reviews*

WISHBONE



ANNA GARCIA SCHAPER

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Piñata Books are full of surprises!

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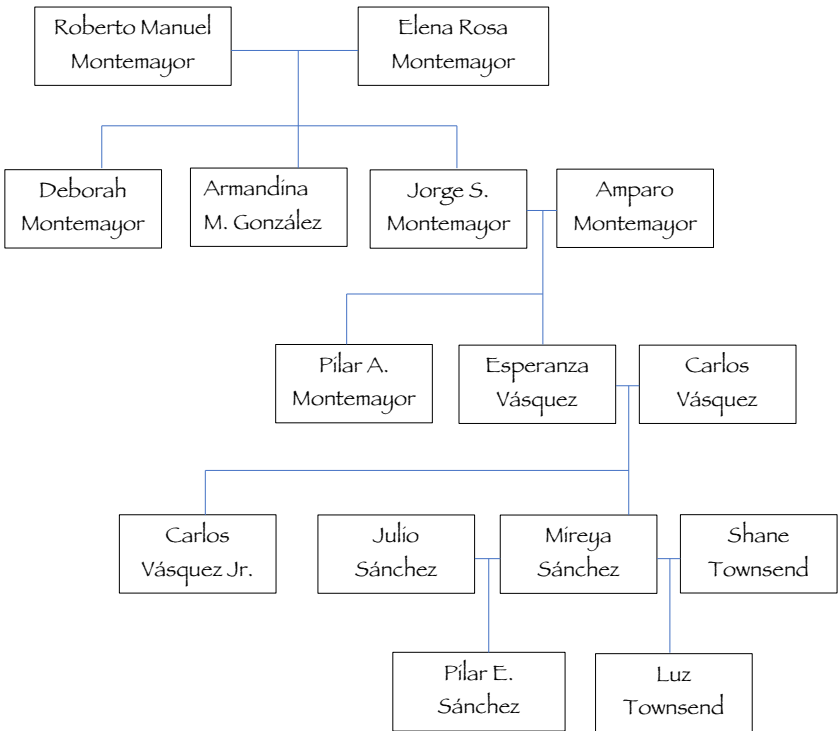
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*For Bones, who pleaded, pushed and prodded.
And who always believed.*

Montemayor Family Tree



“Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take’m out and look at’m very often. We all know that something is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.”

—Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*

Pili

LAREDO, 1976

Pera had fed her hunger hope, and the more she did, the sharper it grew, an unrelenting jab in her side, rebuking her for her inadequacy.

Getting pregnant that first time six years ago was not easy for her. Pera'd been trying for years and felt she was failing as a woman, letting her husband down. Of course, he didn't help matters any, but was always reminding her of how important it was for a man to have a son to pass down his family name, his legacy, and he wouldn't shut up about his brother's two boys. Checho was only ten and had already shot his first nine-pointer. And the older one, Rodi, had made all-county in football. Pera'd seen the small army of trophies stretched across the mantel, each brassy boy with one knee lifted as if running from the menacing deer head above.

She was desperate. So she went to see Xochi, the woman with the answers. People had been flocking to her tiny house with its corrugated metal roof for close to a hundred years. She'd sit in the patchy dirt yard under the shade of a guajillo tree, the smell of honey emanating from the buttery blossoms dotting the ground around her, and dole out antidotes for var-

ious ailments of mind, body and spirit. A person could obtain the cure for a broken heart, for bankruptcy and for arthritis all in one stop. A mystical convenience store.

Xochi had an answer for Pera too. She was afflicted with a *ventre frío*. A cold uterus. She said it could happen if a woman had suffered a deep loss in life. Her body had suffered a harrowing blow and was now rebelling against itself, reluctant to create another life and subject it to the same heartache. She instructed Pera to drink a tea of garlic and tree bark every night for three weeks. But with the pungent odor she was emitting, Carlos wouldn't go near her. For that reason alone I considered the remedy a resounding success, but of course, my sister did not.

She decided to turn to another woman for help, one whom she believed had the very ear of God. She snatched the small wooden figure of San Antonio from beneath her pillow, buried it in the folds of a knitted shawl in her leather bag and set off on a long pilgrimage to the sinking basilica in Mexico City. Sinking, she said, because it had grown heavy with the many burdens people had been bringing to the mother of God for more than four centuries. It didn't help that the entire city had been built atop a lake. But Pera always had her own ideas about things.

I drove her across the river to catch the bus to Mexico City early one morning. On our way to the international bridge, I circled around San Agustín Plaza, Pera's favorite spot in Laredo. Our grandparents used to walk around the square arm-in-arm during their courtship's first bloom, their shadows merging into one elongated veil on the reddish bricks of the street. Pera tilted her head back and peered up at the large, round face of the clock tower high above the trees. I smiled at her and circled once more before heading to Nuevo Laredo.

We inched our way across the congested bridge, backed up with cars waiting to show their ID to border control, the smell of diesel exhaust and fried tortillas filling our nostrils. Barefoot children with grimy faces weaved between the cars selling packets of gum and polyester roses, their petals dotted with dew drops of glue. A girl, aged eight or nine, her hair as shiny as the patent leather shoes on her small feet, scurried up to the passenger side and held out a pink rose. Pera took it from her outstretched hand and pressed two coins into her palm. We finally made it across the murky water of the Rio Grande and through Mexican customs to arrive at the bus depot. I set the car in park, reached behind me for Pera's bag on the back seat and placed it on her lap. She stepped out of the Impala and onto the crowded, dusty bus, a Saint Christopher medal swinging from the wide rearview mirror. The bus driver wiped his bloodshot eyes with the heel of his palm and waved her up the aisle.

Passengers propped their feet on cages crammed between the seats while chickens pecked at the soles of their shoes through the wire mesh, and a large rooster watched her from its hutch against the rear door. She squeezed past an old man in a torn coat, his weathered skin like the ripe, fleshy fruit of a tamarind tree, and took a seat near the window. She drew her rosary from the pouch in her pocket and fingered each bead on the loop three times, praying that the seven-hundred-mile journey would not be in vain.

It was well past midnight when the bus reached the city, too late to catch a shuttle to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Pera would have to wait until morning. She lay down on a wooden bench outside the bus station and tucked her feet under her shawl and her leather bag beneath her head. She woke the next morning to a blazing sun and the hubbub of the busy station. Too eager to wait for the next

shuttle, she gathered her things and took a short cab ride to the basilica. She was tired and hungry by the time she reached the massive shrine, the sunlight glimmering off its gilded dome, but she got down on her knees in supplication and crawled across the vast stone floor through the large metal doors and down the long aisle to where the *tilma* of Juan Diego hung behind the altar. She laid the rose, now wet with real tears, on the floor before it and gazed up at the miraculous image of the woman from heaven imprinted on the fabric of cactus fibers, never once taking her eyes from it. La Virgen looked down at her with pity from under her veil of stars, and Pera knew that her prayer would be answered.

When she finally stood up, her knees were marked with a grid of crosses from the uneven tiles. She walked back out into the bright sunlight, bought a corn cob dripping with butter and chili powder from a street vendor and hailed a taxi to take her back to the bus station for her journey home.

A month later, she was pregnant.

I don't know what did it; whether it was the garlicky tea, all those rosaries or the trip to the basilica—if La Virgen had heard her and interceded on her behalf. If it was all or none of it.

Pera believed it all, and that's what mattered.