

*I'm here to help you.
I want you to know that you're
not owned by anyone.*

You can still be wild when you want to be.

The last thing that twelve-year-old Misko wants to do is to move away from the city to spend time on the rez with her grandmother. And yet she feels strangely compelled to go, drawn by a pull she feels in her dreams. Maybe she can finally find out what happened to her mother, who mysteriously disappeared when Misko was four years old.

Misko's relationship to the rez shifts when she encounters a spirited horse named Mishtadim. But Mishtadim is being violently broken by the rancher next door and his son Thomas. Misko and Thomas clash at first, only to find themselves drawn together by the wild horse. As Misko slowly discovers her unique bond with Mishtadim, she feels a sense of belonging and comes to understand the beauty of the world all around her.

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LARONDE
She Holds Up the Stars

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Sandra Laronde



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*To my mother Barbara
and my father Willis Laronde.
First and foremost.*

Chapter One



The last thing Misko wanted was to move away from the city. But her dreams, those strange visions, were rooted here and kept tugging at her to come home. Now that she was standing at Kokum's door, she wasn't sure she had made the right decision. But there was no turning back.

She remembered the door was never locked, so she gently pushed it open and pulled her bags inside. "Kokum?" she whispered. "Kokum?" she repeated a bit louder. An elderly woman shuffled toward her. "Kokum? It's me, Miskobimizh," she said, peering into her grandmother's face. Kokum hadn't looked this old six years ago. Her cheeks still pushed up against her eyes when she smiled. She did seem a bit shorter though, or maybe it was because

Misko was now 12 and had grown so much. The woman reached out her wrinkled hands, first placing them on Misko's shoulders and then gently touching her cheek.

It was the same cheek that still seemed to sting from the months-old slap. After it had happened, Misko was surprised there was no red hand imprinted on her face. Right now, in front of her grandmother, she instinctively sucked in the air between her teeth. She had developed this strange habit since the slap, her breath getting caught in her throat whenever she thought of that troubling time—or anything stressful for that matter.

“Here you are. Little Chickadee, you're such a big girl now,” her grandmother murmured. And Misko relaxed a little, recognizing her childhood nickname and Kokum's soft voice. A pot was on the stove with a stew waiting to be heated. She saw two bowls and a loaf of bread on the counter. “Thank you, Kokum. I didn't feel like eating on the bus.”

Misko liked that she was now old enough to take this trip alone—but the night of the slap was still very much in her memory. She was feeling a little nervous but had said nothing to Auntie Madeleine.

Of course, I'm sure, Misko had said. I'm not a baby.

Definitely not a baby anymore. Auntie Madeleine had sighed.

Still, baby or not, Auntie Madeleine arranged for the bus driver to watch over Misko and to make sure that she sat

close to him, up front on the bus. He was the same bus driver who used to drive a young Madeleine between Winnipeg and Caribou Lake for holidays for many years.

Starting to feel hungry now, Misko turned on the burner and stirred. Every time she turned around, her grandmother was watching her. “We usually make this stew with moose meat, but we got none right now,” said Kokum. Misko filled the bowls and carried them to the table.

“Maddy still like to cook?” asked Kokum as they sat down at the table.

“Yes, but she doesn’t let me help.” Misko sighed. “She said she can do it faster if she does it herself.”

Kokum huffed. “Always bossy, that one.”

Auntie Madeleine had said nothing to Kokum about starting a new job with longer hours. The kitchen looked like something staged for a catalog, not a place where you prepared food. Likewise, Misko said nothing about how Auntie had cut her own long hair short, gotten a whole new wardrobe of silk blouses and stylish pantsuits, or started coming home long past suppertime. They began ordering a lot of takeout back in Winnipeg, which was exciting at first, but Misko missed homemade meals. On the weekends, when her aunt would sometimes use the kitchen, she would shoo Misko away whenever she asked to help.

Kokum looked directly into her eyes. “And how about you, dear? Are you still a fast runner?”

“Pretty fast,” replied Misko with a shrug.

Kokum nodded, motioning to a wall unit in the corner. Misko went to look and there she was: young Maddy, her hair long and loose. Her self-assured smile was familiar but her face was softer somehow, more open. There were many other framed photos—in sepia, black and white, and color—but most were frameless snapshots. There were pictures of great grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, siblings, children, babies, and pets.

“Wow, you have . . . I mean, *we* have such a big family, Kokum.” Misko could see a familiar glint in her relatives’ dark brown eyes. It was like looking at many versions of her own face, staring back at her across generations of time.

Then she came across a photo of two people who did not fit in at all. They were a fancy couple tossing a striped beach ball on a white sandy beach.

“Kokum, who’s this?”

Kokum looked at the photo blankly for a moment, blinking as she tried to remember. “Oh, those white people, they came *with* the frame.”

“You have a picture of people you don’t even know?” asked Misko.

Kokum chuckled. “Not sure who goes in that frame yet,” she replied.

Misko moved to the next photo. “Is this one here a picture of you, Kokum?”

“How do I look?”

“It’s hard to tell because you look blurry.”

“Must’ve been when I was young,” Kokum said with a grin.

There was another photo that stood out to Misko. She picked it up. It was a picture of a young girl.

“That’s your mom,” said Kokum.

The girl was holding the reins of a brown and beige pony. A quiver ran up Misko’s spine, but she didn’t know why. “She . . . my mother had a horse?”

“Ah-hey.”

The girl in the picture seemed about her age, but her hair was cut short and tucked behind her ears. Her eyes were bright and stared at whoever held the camera, and they seemed to look directly into Misko’s at that exact moment. She felt a strange collapsing of time as if she and Mother were here together now, in this same room. Two 12-year-old girls, looking at each other across time.

“You remind me of her,” said Kokum.

“I do?”

“Ah-hey.”

“She looks happy. I didn’t know she had a pony!”

Misko stared at the photo a little longer, then put it down and picked up another that had fallen sideways. Her mother was holding a baby and squinting into the sun. The shadow of whoever took the picture lay across the foreground, hovering over their bodies. “Is the baby me?”

Her grandmother contemplated the photograph.

Misko stood still, waiting impatiently for her to respond.

“Too small. So cute,” Kokum finally said softly. Misko held her breath to hear. “A baby bird. Bineshiiwens. Nothing but a little chickadee. I love their song,” she cooed.

So that’s where my nickname comes from.

“I wonder how they fly south for the winter with such little wings?” Misko wondered aloud.

“Kawin, those birds don’t fly south, m’girl. Them people build birdhouses in their backyards.” Kokum drew the outline of a tiny box with her hands. “Them birds go right inside and what do they do? They build a nest. They build *round* inside. I don’t know why the white man wants to put everything in a box. Even cut up our land into boxes. No, those birds don’t leave. Not like people.”

When her grandmother spoke again, the words seemed to float on the air as she exhaled. “Anna. Gone eight years.”

“What’s that, Kokum?”

But Kokum didn’t answer, and Misko could feel the energy shift in the room. Kokum stood up slowly, turned, and wiped an invisible tear from her cheek. “Well, dear, I have to get some rest now.” Misko’s throat tightened as she watched Kokum amble down the hallway and into her room. She didn’t remember her grandmother being sad like this the last time she was here.

It had been eight years since Misko’s mom disappeared. Eight years of longing for her mother. Eight years of

Kokum waiting for good news of her daughter Anna. Eight years of people saying to let it go, to forget about it, and to move on. “But it’s our loss, and it’s still unsolved,” said Auntie Madeleine.

Chapter Two



Misko sat up in bed. She wondered why so much light was streaming into her room before she remembered where she was. She *never* got this kind of sunlight in her room back in Winnipeg. Tiny specks of dust danced in a shaft of sunlight, and she could hear birds chirping and singing outside.

She went into the kitchen and let the water run from the faucet for a minute. Once it was warm, she splashed a bit on her face to wake up more. She sipped some water and wondered whether the boil water alert was a thing here. Just in case, she boiled the water longer than usual before making tea for Kokum.

She moved into the living room and ran a wide-toothed comb through her hair; dividing it into three sections, she

whispered the prayer she learned from Auntie Madeleine, who had learned it from Kokum. One section of the braid was Spirit, the second was Mind, and the third was Body—“Manitou, nendamowin, wiiyiw.” She repeated the words over and over until her braid was done.

She pulled the braid over her left shoulder so it lay on her heart and she could fiddle with its end. Auntie Madeleine wasn't here after all to get cross at her for chewing on the end of it.

When the tea was brewed, Misko knocked on her grandmother's door, pushed the door open a smidge, and peered inside. “Kokum, I've made tea,” she said. She paused for a moment and asked, “Whatcha listening to?” Kokum was sitting on the side of the bed listening to the lyrics of a familiar song. It was something about walking the line for someone you love.

The song was recognizable yet Misko couldn't place it. Something from her childhood that her mother had listened to? As the song ended, Kokum tapped twice on the edge of the ceramic mug with her spoon. *Clink, clink.* “Did Shoshana come home last night?”

“Shoshana?”

Kokum stood up and walked to the window. “The rain came down hard last night. Big wind, too. Everything got so charged up. The thunder beings rolled in and lit up the sky. Flash! Flash! Flash! ‘Animikii,’ that's what we call that happening. Did I ever tell you when your mom was little

she used to go outside and laugh while the sky was lighting up—hee hee, that girl! Well, better get to my garden now and see how the wee ones are doing after the big storm.”

Misko stood there blinking at her grandmother’s story. She could almost see her mother’s fresh young face and rosy cheeks and hear her laughing as each flash lit up the sky, rocks, and trees. Her breath caught a little and she remembered to exhale deeply.

She looked at the CD cover on the bedside table. Johnny Cash. Auntie Madeleine used to listen to him, too, and she knew her mother did as well—that was one of the few precious shards of knowledge she had of her mother from the small stories shared so hesitantly. *Why does everyone only tell me bits and pieces of the puzzle about my mom?*

She trailed behind her grandmother as she hobbled outside and wondered yet again if she’d made a mistake coming here. Before going outside, she grabbed the photo of her mom and herself as a baby. *Why did you leave me? Why haven’t you come back?* No answer, of course. “We simply don’t know,” Auntie Madeleine had told her. “If she’s one of the missing . . .” Her eyes fixed, unblinking, on some faraway point.

Misko had heard a bit about the Indigenous women and girls who had gone missing. Auntie Madeleine said that thousands of women and girls “never returned home,” and that when Misko got older she should “never go on *that* highway out west in British Columbia.” Misko’s throat

tightened. She remembered the stranger who tried to abduct her, coaxing her to come see the cute kittens in his car. The man had slapped her cheek hard to stop her from screaming for help. Now rubbing her cheek, Misko remembered her auntie forbidding her to walk around by herself after dark, stating that she didn't want Misko "to become *another statistic* like Anna." It was the main reason why Auntie sent her here for the summer.

Coming back to the reserve brought up a lot of memories of her missing mother. It felt so remote here—so isolated, and what could she possibly do on this rez? *Why do I even have to be here in the first place? I don't want to be here.*