





# The Boy Who Believed

DANNY MONTEVERDE BELIEVED.

He believed in making wishes, and in lucky four-leaf clovers, and in underground tunnels that lead to wondrous places. He knew if he could reach the second star to the right and go straight on till morning, he'd be well on his way to Neverland, just like the kids in *Peter Pan*. And if he stood in the right place, at the right time, he could travel through a moon portal. Danny knew that just because some things couldn't be seen or explained, it didn't mean they couldn't be real. Magic was everywhere, if you just paid attention.



He'd learned to believe from his sister, Pili, and she'd learned from her favorite book of fairy tales, *The Way to Rio Luna* by Ella St. Clay. For as long as Danny could remember, it'd been just the two of them. While their foster homes and orphanages and schools always changed, Danny could count on two things: his sister and their book. Pili had bought the copy with her own money at a yard sale. It was the only thing she'd ever owned, paid for with the few dollars she'd been given for doing other kids' chores. The paper was frayed and nearly falling apart because every night, without fail, Pili would read to her little brother.

They hid under alcoves, in tiny rooms under the stairs, inside closets—anywhere two small kids could fit and not be noticed. Even when it was cold, or they could hear their foster parents fighting, or when their new guardian forgot to feed them, Danny and Pili could always escape into a world of magical forests, enchanted gardens, and shooting stars. Each story took them to a new part of their favorite fairyland. Danny particularly loved the ones set at the heart of the world, the place called Rio Luna. There a great river was home to fairies, silver trees, and extraordinary magic.

"I promise, Danny," Pili told him. It was his ninth birthday, and she'd found enough change to buy him a

chocolate-peanut butter cupcake with sprinkles. “One day, we’re going to find a place that’s better than here.”

“Like how Heidi from Mrs. Murphy’s class and her family go to Hawaii?” he asked, licking frosting off his fingertips.

Pili laugh-snorted. “Even better.” She took his pinky finger with hers. “When we get to Rio Luna, we can have our own rooms. We can eat whatever we want. No one will hurt us or try to separate us. We’ll be able to fly with shooting stars and have tea with witches. We’ll be free. I promise.”

But a few days after making that promise, Danny was placed in the care of a family called the Finnegans while Pili stayed at the group home. Before Danny left, Pili let him take *The Way to Rio Luna*.

“This is only temporary. We’ll be together again soon,” she told him, and Danny took her pinky in his and didn’t let go until his social worker, Mrs. Contreras, beeped the car horn.

A few days later, Danny received the news that Pili was gone. There was no trace of her. Not her backpack or clothes or toothbrush or her favorite hair ribbon. It was as if she vanished into thin air. The police and social workers told Danny that Pili was a runaway, but he knew his sister wouldn’t leave him behind. They had pinky sworn, and that

kind of promise was unbreakable. There had to be some sort of explanation. Pili was out there somewhere, searching for the place they'd talked about together. He would find her.

That's how Danny Monteverde became one of the world's strongest believers in magic.