CHAPTER SAMPLER

# WEIRD RULES TO FOLLOW

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**Summary:** In this novel for middle readers told in vignettes, Mia and her best friend, Lara, have very different experiences growing up in a northern fishing community in the 1980s.

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For my grandmother, mother and daughter.

# Salmon Season, 1985

Prince Rupert is well known for rain and fishing. I've never known anything but. Like rain, salmon has always been a part of my life—in the ocean, on the stove, in the refrigerator or in my belly.

Most people say they like summer for the sun, but for coastal Natives, summer means one thing—salmon. The sockeye salmon season. It's an important time of year because that is how most Native people earn their living. It's also when we preserve our food for the winter.

Our small town begins stirring with excitement as Native people from surrounding villages arrive. Third Avenue bustles with cars and people. The adults seem happier when they are busy and there's work to do. The men go out commercial fishing, and the women (my mom and aunties included) put in long, hard hours at the fish cannery, which runs shifts around the clock.

It's the middle of summer. I go to visit my mom at the cannery on her lunch break, and even though we are

outside, the smell of raw fish is everywhere. I wrinkle my nose. "Ewww, it smells."

My mom corrects me. "That's the smell of money."

And there is money to be made, all right.

Last payday, half the cannery workers got paid for overtime work, and there was a closure for fishing after an exceptionally good run, which meant fishermen received advances as well—the banks in Prince Rupert *ran out of money.* All of them. Everyone in town was talking about it.

When my mom and I were walking down Third Avenue that day, we bumped into someone she knew.

"Did you hear about the banks?" they asked. "Were you able to cash your check?"

Thankfully, she had cashed it.

I notice adults often carry fifty- or hundred-dollar bills during the summer months, and you can tell it makes them feel good. Those rich brown and vibrant red bills are commonplace.

We preserve our salmon in the summer. Food fish, the adults call it. It's a staple item that sustains us throughout the long winter months. Grandma always prepares ahead, well before she even gets fish. She gathers jars together to clean and then counts how many empty cases she has. If she happens to be short, she goes searching in our basement for more jars.

This is an adventure in itself, as you have to go outside, and the stairs leading down to our unfinished basement are overgrown with grass and a buildup of slippery moss.

Grandma is older and a bit heavier, and it shows in her movements. None of that deters her. Housedress and slippers on, she makes her way down there.

I follow along, as I know she needs the help. This time, the trek is worth it. "Ooh," Grandma says, as her eyes shimmer at all the jars she finds. That's mostly how she communicates—through her eyes.

Several of my cousins are at our house at any given time in the summer, while their parents are at work at the cannery. They've followed us to the basement and have gathered at the door. This pleases Grandma, as extra hands are always welcome. She starts to pass the Mason jars over to us grandkids one by one, and like an assembly line of little ants, we make our way back upstairs.

When someone from our reserve drops off a catch of sockeye salmon, Grandma is ready. She turns the kitchen table into a makeshift workstation by covering it with a flattened cardboard box.

Grandma is strong and has big arms and hands, but I can see removing the fish heads, then gutting and cleaning the fish isn't an easy job.

I stand quietly observing, being sure not to get in the way.

The fish heads go to one pile, and if there are eggs inside, they go to another. Then she cuts the fish into even smaller sections, holding up a slab of salmon against a pint or quart jar, making sure the cut is the right size.

This time she lets me measure and pour the salt into jars. This is an important job, as the amounts have to be exact.

Then she wipes down the mouth of the jars, fastens the lids, and into the boiler they go.

Grandma keeps the fish heads for baking—she never throws them out. "Don't waste seafood," she often says to me.

I'm used to her saying things like that. There are so many rules around not misusing or wasting our traditional foods.

The two of us eat the fish heads as an afternoon snack. My cousins would sooner play outside than eat fish heads. We don't mind, more for us!

I sit at the kitchen table watching closely as Grandma pulls the baking pan out of the oven and carefully places it on the table. There are almost a dozen salmon heads on the thin pan. I stare at them curiously. Their eyes slightly bulged from the heat, their tiny little sharp teeth still intact. I reach out to try and touch one of them.

Grandma reprimands me. "Don't play with the fish."

I think the fish heads are the best part of the salmon, very different from the rest. The meat inside is oily, and the texture silky-smooth. The only thing they need is a bit of salt. Grandma and I sit in our small kitchen not saying a word, eating our tasty fish heads until the meat of every last one of them is gone.

Grandma sets fish steaks aside to cook for dinner as well. I often hear adults say, "Fried fish is best when

it's fresh!" She coats the fish in flour and then fries the steaks in a cast-iron pan and serves it with white rice and store-bought sweet pickles on the side.

When my mom and aunties walk in the door, they can tell by the smell that they're in for a delicious meal. Work uniform and kerchief still on, my mom digs in. "Luk'wil ts'imaatk," she says.

It *is* very tasty. I don't like the skin, though. I peel mine off with my fork, hold it up and ask, "Who wants my skin?"

My mom holds her plate toward me. I drop the piece of skin on it and she says, "That's the best part."

Grandma often shares fish with our non-Native neighbors as well. It's probably her way of saying thank you to them for mowing our lawn. They don't offer or ask to mow it—they just do it. After dinner, she asks me to go see if our neighbor could meet her at the fence between our houses.

My grandma mostly speaks in our Sm'algyax language, so when the father of the family next door reaches what's remaining of our fence, they don't say much. Grandma smiles with her eyes, he smiles and nods in return, and reaches over the fence to accept the big silvery sockeye from her.

Words aren't necessary. The language of sharing salmon is simple.

# Pepto-Bismol

My name is Amelia Douglas. But everyone calls me Mia. My younger cousin Carmen couldn't pronounce my name when she was little; that's where Mia came in. I'm mostly called Amelia when I'm trouble. Grandma will say, "You're a bad girl, Amelia."

My mom and I live with my grandmother in her home. My grandfather bought the house before he passed away from cancer. I was only two when he died, so I have no memory of him. My mom's younger brother, Dan, and a foster girl named Mary live here as well.

Mary is five years older than I am and mostly thinks I'm a brat. I guess most of the time I am. Uncle Dan isn't that friendly, but we don't see him much. He's always in his room drinking beer and listening to music.

Our home is a hub for our large extended family. Different family members are always coming and going—aunts, uncles and cousins—like a continually revolving door. At least, that's how my mom refers to it. They move

in if they happen to fall on hard times, then move out once they're able to get back on their feet.

Our door is never locked to anyone—literally. We don't have a key. We've never had one that I've known of. No one seems too concerned about it, though, or is in a hurry to get a new one.

I don't have a dad. No one talks about that, not ever. My mom has never said a word about him, and I don't ask.

Once, in a teasing way, Grandma asked me who my dad was. It hurt my feelings that she asked that. Like she was making fun of me.

I know she didn't mean anything by it, because she never upsets me like that. If something makes me sad, my tummy will start to ache. I don't know why this happens, but Grandma's the one who usually makes me feel better. I go and sit on her lap or lean into her and it goes away.

When she isn't around, I usually reach for the Pepto-Bismol. Well, that was until my cousin Tonya laughed at me when I asked for some the other day. She said she'd never heard a kid ask for Pepto-Bismol before.

# Summer Fish and Chips

It's Saturday, and the sun is out. My best friend and I make the most of the day by playing on the street in front of my home.

Lara is Mexican Hungarian. I'm mostly Native Indian. I say "mostly" because my skin is lighter brown. Some people think that we look alike. I guess we have similarities, like dark brown hair. But I'm a slimmer build and a bit darker-skinned than she is.

We've both recently turned ten years old and have lived on the same cul-de-sac, four houses apart, to be exact, for as long as we can remember. Lara lives in a large white house at the end of the street. They have a view of the mountains and the ocean and they overlook town. Her family has two cars in the driveway, two living rooms, two fireplaces, two bathrooms and a laundry room. It's one of the nicest houses on our street, and the kind of home people like me can only dream about. Our home is an old wartime house, our view is a retaining wall, and there is no car

parked out front. It has original everything, at a time when original has no value. Our bathroom has an old claw-foot tub. We have no washer and dryer or dishwasher, and the kitchen appliances are all mismatched. Lara lives with her parents and little brother, Owen. Her mom is strict, so she isn't usually allowed to go to other people's houses. But I'm always welcome at their place, to play after school, for meals or for weekend sleepovers. One of the first times I remember going to Lara's house was when I was around six years old. Lara and I were taking our shoes off at the door. Her mom was sitting on the living room sofa, and without taking her eyes off the television she said, "Your friend's not going to say hello?"

It seemed like an order rather than a suggestion.

I didn't know you were supposed to greet your friend's parents when you entered their home.

"Hi," I said shyly, like I'd just forgotten to say it. After that, I made sure to say hello every time I entered their place.

I know there will be no one home at my place this afternoon, which is why I decide to ask Lara if she'd like to come over for lunch. This is unusual, as we rarely hang out together at my house.

My friend eagerly accepts the invitation, and we make our way toward my place. When we go inside, I don't bother

looking around to see if it's tidy. And I don't look to see Lara's reaction either. If she thinks my house is strange compared to her place, where the furniture all matches and there are actual doorknobs on the doors, she doesn't mention it.

For lunch I decide to make us fish and chips. I often watch my older cousin Al fry dollar chips. I guess I must have been paying close attention because even though I have never made them before, I know exactly what to do.

I grab a couple of russet potatoes, wash them and start slicing them into dollar chips. I place the cast-iron pan on the stove and heat the oil. I cautiously place the potato pieces into the pan, let them fry and then carefully turn them over, just like I've seen Al do. Once they're the perfect golden color, I remove them from the pan.

All the while, Lara stands there with a look of wonder. I don't know if it's because of my newfound cooking skills or seeing my home for the first time. Lara tends to do this thing where she averts her eyes from me if something's awkward or embarrassing so I don't feel uncomfortable. I think she's doing it now in not looking around our messy kitchen.

I know our house is different. Our cupboard doors no longer close properly after Al painted them yellow. But now isn't the time to worry about that.

When the dollar chips are done, I set them aside and go to open a quart jar of salmon. I spoon some out onto

our plates and then add the potatoes. "Fish and chips," I proudly exclaim.

We eat our lunch at the kitchen table. We lightly salt our chips and add some ketchup on the side. We barely speak, but that isn't important. What matters is, I'm hosting lunch and for the first time ever my best friend is a welcomed guest in my home. We've forgotten the other kids we left playing on the street and that the sun is still shining. Visiting at my home is new to us and feels long overdue. The freedom we feel is everything.

That freedom doesn't last. Lara's little brother, Owen, must have felt left out and tattled on us. When the telephone rings, we're surprised it's Lara's mother. The very thought of her daughter being at my home must have made her uneasy. However, she says she's calling to invite us to join her and Owen at a popular fish and chips place. "No thanks," Lara says matter-of-factly. "Mia just made us fish and chips."

But her mother insists we join them. We find ourselves standing at the Green Apple counter. Lara objects again. "We're not hungry, *we just ate fish and chips*, remember?" To satisfy her mom and the person patiently waiting to take our order, we both ask for chocolate milk.

The restaurant is nearly empty, so we choose a seat by the window. We settle in. No one says anything and it feels awkward. Lara's mom looks across the table at us and forces a half smile to her face that fades just as quickly. I'm uncomfortable around her most of the time, but today,

even more so. I can't tell if she's upset that I cooked for her daughter or that I had the nerve to have her in my home. I do my best to avoid her gaze.

Her mom eventually breaks the silence by asking me how I made my fish and chips.

In a shy yet proud way, I start to share my recipe with her, explaining the intricate methods of frying like I'd been doing it for years.

She interrupts me. "What kind of fish did you use?"

I vaguely describe the fish to her—I mean, it's fish. What more can I say?

She continues to prod. "Was it halibut or salmon?"

Now I know what she's getting at.

I want her to know that it wasn't just any kind of canned fish I'd served. "It was a jar of sockeye salmon my grandma made."

Lara's mom suddenly loses interest. She turns away muttering, "That's not real fish and chips."

The table goes back to silence.

I want to defend my recipe, but I don't know how or what I would even say. Lara regularly defends herself to others, but I don't. Native kids aren't like that. I try to sit as tall as I can in my chair, though, so it's clear I am standing by my version of fish and chips despite being told it's not "real."

When the food finally arrives, Lara's mom examines her meal and looks pleased with the golden stack of fries

and crispy pieces of fish in front of her. She offers to share some of her fish and chips with us.

Lara refuses. "Mia's was better."

I don't know if she means it, as she'd hardly touched any of the food I'd made earlier. Either way, I appreciate the support.

Her mom looks at me, waiting for a reply.

Still sitting tall, I shake my head. "No, thank you."

The enjoyment from our earlier lunch is long gone, seeped like air from a balloon. I look out the restaurant window. I try to ignore the mouthwatering smells of deep-fried food while struggling to make sense of things. I knew my recipe was different. I've had this kind before too. I just don't understand why my first attempt at cooking fish and chips was turned into a competition.

# The Tooth Fairy

Owen lost his front tooth last night. He's so cute—he makes a whistling sound when he speaks now.

His parents put a one-dollar bill under his pillow. He's been dangling it in our faces, showing off, while Lara and I play Barbies.

Lara acknowledges his presence by squeezing Owen's cheeks together and saying, "Look at that cute face!"

She's rarely that nice to him.

If he only knew how much I got for a tooth once, he certainly wouldn't be bragging.

We were on a weekend getaway to Terrace with my family. I was the only kid with them that time, which wasn't unusual. Most of my cousins are older than me and often have the option to stay home. I was only eight.

We had grabbed dinner at Shan-Yan's, the local Chinese food place, and then headed back to the Slumber Lodge Motel, where we'd already checked in.

My mom, Aunt Lorraine, Uncle Jerry and I shared a room. My cousin Al, his wife Yolanda and Uncle Dan were staying in an adjoining room. We left the doors between the rooms open while we visited.

They settled in and opened beers that had been chilling in the bathtub they'd filled with ice from the vending machine.

"Why didn't we stay at the Sandman?" I asked. "I could've gone swimming. Now what am I supposed to do all night?"

"It was sold out," Uncle Jerry answered.

"Where are the books you brought?" my mom asked.

I sighed, hung my shoulders and walked to the other room to get them out of my overnight bag. My front tooth was loose and had been bugging me for a few days. I worked at loosening it further with my tongue as I searched through my bag. Suddenly, the tooth fell out.

No matter how much you're expecting it, even when you're trying to loosen it, having your tooth fall out is a surprise.

"I lost my tooth!" I yelled, as I walked back to the other room.

"Let me see," my mom said.

"Hoh jeh," Al said, examining the tooth in my hand carefully. "A front tooth. I bet you'll get lots of money for that one."

I flashed him a grin and walked around the room, palm open, proudly showing everyone. Then I put it in my jean pocket for safekeeping.

"Will the tooth fairy be able to find you at a hotel?" Uncle Jerry asked with a serious face, even though he was only teasing. "How will she know what room you're in?"

Aunt Lorraine waved at him with a dismissive hand. "Let me look," she said. She meant the gap in my mouth.

I went and stood in front of her and opened my mouth wide.

"K̲'a̲s'waan," she teased, tickling my tummy. That means "toothless" in our language.

I spent the evening rereading *Frog and Toad*, my tongue unable to resist playing with the new space in my mouth. I had picked the book up at our school's book fair and had read it so many times already. " 'Blah,' said Toad." Bored, I closed the book and went and asked the adults for change for the vending machine to get snacks.

Everyone started digging around in their pockets for loose change. They're always generous when they're drinking.

I walked to the vending machine at the end of the hall. I had enough money for a pop, a bag of chips and a chocolate bar. I put the exact change in, chose my item and stood staring at the machine as it slowly turned and dropped the bag of chips. I did the same for my chocolate bar. There's always a chance they'll get stuck in the machine, so you can't take your eyes off them for a second.

When I couldn't stay awake a minute longer, I said good night to everyone. They were all in a good mood and laughing.

I went to lie on our hotel bed. I was so tired I didn't bother changing into my pyjamas. I started thinking about things.

When adults drink too much they tend to get clumsy and forget things or don't make any sense when they speak. I'd lost my tooth a few hours ago. That was many beers ago. There was no way any of them would remember.

I took my tooth out of my pocket, examined it and then carefully placed it under the hotel pillow. If there's really such a thing as a tooth fairy, I thought to myself, she'll find me at the hotel. If there is money under my pillow tomorrow, I'll know for sure she's real.

I woke late the next morning. Everyone else was already awake. I sat up, taking a moment to remember where we were, and then wondered what time it was.

The smell of stale beer and leftover Chinese food lingered in the room. The orange-and-brown curtains were slightly opened, and the sun was peeking through, which made me glad. It didn't rain in Terrace as much as it did in Rupert.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Aunty Lorraine said, smiling.

"Morning," I mumbled while stretching.

Then I remembered my tooth. I turned and slowly lifted my pillow. My tooth was gone and staring back at me was a twenty-dollar bill!

I stared, stunned. I'd never gotten that much money for a tooth before. I reached for the crisp bill.

"Whoa, look who's rich! The tooth fairy left you lots of money!" Uncle Jerry exclaimed.

Beaming, I flashed him a big grin and continued examining the sheen on the green bill.

"I guess you're buying breakfast?" he added with a laugh.

Aunt Lorraine waved him away again.

He always likes to kid around like that.

That's right. I got a *twenty-dollar bill* for my lost tooth. I'd never tell Owen that, of course.

# Must Have Been the Indians

Our cul-de-sac sits above a hill. Cars or people that aren't supposed to be there are rare.

When we are playing on the road and cars we don't recognize drive through, we clear off to the side. Our eyes stay on the vehicle the whole time. It's more out of curiosity, but we must look like neighborhood watchdogs.

Lara has the best bike. It's teal green, with a sparkly white banana seat. It has chopper-style handlebars, with green and white tassels hanging from them. The most fun feature is that not only can two people fit on the seat, but a third person fits on the handlebars!

When we're bored and feel like being nice to Owen, we invite him to join us. The three of us race to the end of the street, Lara steering, her little brother settled in front of her, and me on the handlebars. Then we make our way back, happily coasting until the bike comes to a stop.

We've enjoyed many fun-filled summers doubling up and down our street on her bike. Where my friend goes, I go.

This afternoon, though, for no apparent reason, Lara suddenly steers out of control and we crash.

"I farted!" Lara shrieks. She starts laughing uncontrollably. "When we fell, I farted!"

Since I was the one thrown from the handlebars, I feel a bit shaken. I get up, brush myself off and check my knees and elbows for any scrapes. Relieved there are none.

I glare at Lara. How could she be so careless?

She doesn't even notice. She's still laughing, pinned beneath the bike.

I lean over and lift the bike off her, and in my sternest voice say, "From now on, I'm driving."

She laughs even more.

The next week, when Lara, Owen and I get back to Lara's place after swimming at the pool, her father tells us that both Lara's and Owen's bikes have been stolen.

None of us say a word.

Who would do such a thing?

Even though I have my own bike, Lara's banana-seat bike feels like my bike—I feel the loss as much as she does.

I wonder if one of the kids on our street borrowed the bikes but forgot to return them.

As if reading my mind, her father says, "I walked the entire street, looking into people's yards for the bikes. They are nowhere to be found."

It starts to sink in—the bikes are gone. We stand in the driveway stunned, backpacks hanging.

Lara's father stares out into nothing, distant-like. "Someone stole the kids' bikes…" he says, maybe to himself.

Then he turns his attention back to us and adds, "It must have been the Indians."

He looks at me and gives me a wink.

I don't react. And I don't look to see what Lara's reaction is either.

I am too ashamed.

I know I am Indian, but Lara and I have never talked about that kind of stuff before.

And I also know stealing is wrong. And that Lara's dad has just accused Indians, us, of stealing the bikes, even though he has no way of knowing for sure.

His words hang in the air.

Suddenly I am the one staring out into nothing, distant-like. Except I am only pretending, pretending I didn't hear those words.