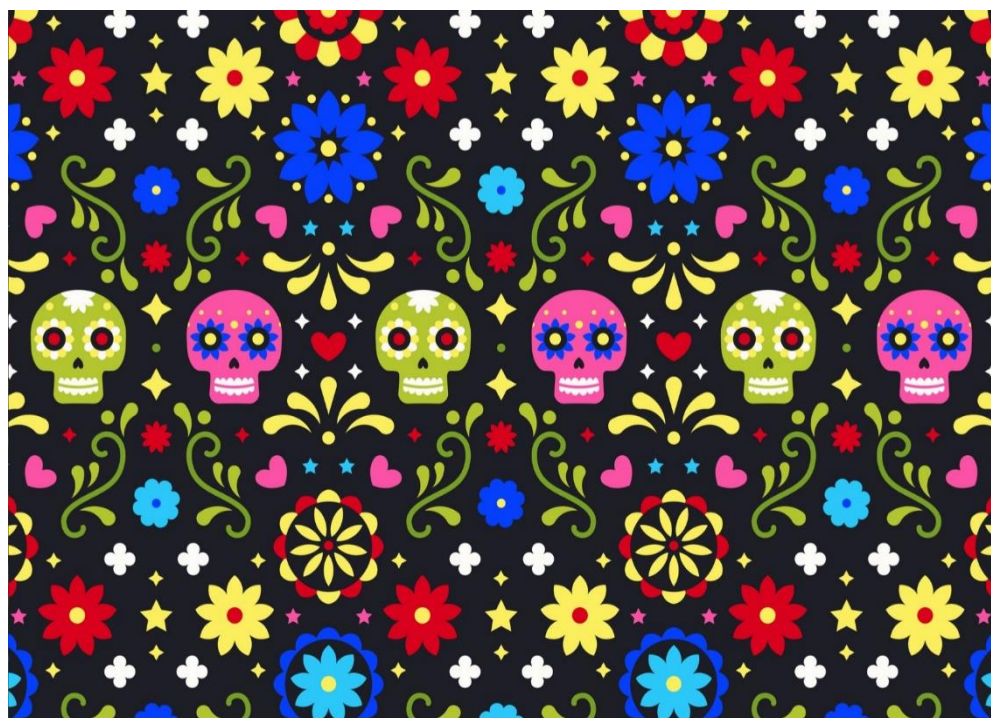




Janiece Anjali

Illusions of More

A Story out of Shadow

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by

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Prologue

*Stay away from the river.
The old ones say
the diamond on top is really the tear
drop
of La Llorona.*

Stay away from the river.

*Do not dip a toe.
The depths
seize
whatever you reach with.*

*The ghost of the mother who
drowned
her own
binds
with a black shawl.
Stay far away.*

*Too many forget.
Sometimes, the river
will
rise.*

Chapter One

"My reading is dead!" Pilar gasped. The little girl held the fourth grade reading book, rigid as a stillborn, across her open palms as if pleading with the pretty *gringa* teacher to take the burden away. Wrenched from her mother's tongue, she was reeling from an abrupt entry into the United States. I was right there with her when Ms. O'Mara took the textbook away, shrouding its disposal with a typewritten page. I'd been smuggled in with Pilar, buried just below her memory. In old countries, folktales tell of ghosts. Sometimes in new countries, the dead can tell tales of folks. It's possible in places like Purewater.

"Oh honey!" In English, the sweetness of the hive is a term of endearment and Sienna O'Mara's voice was as soothing as *meil* on a raw throat. She looked into Pilar's eyes and assured her, "You can read this. *Tú puedes leerlo. Esta es tu cuenta.*"

The auburn streaks in the teacher's long hair glinted like summer night lightning illuminating desert sky. Sienna knelt, tilting her head close to Pilar's as if she didn't know or didn't care that the girl's aunt had been picking

nits just days before. Her breath smelled of cinnamon—of celebrations in Mexico. As she pointed to Pilar's words, gun shots exploded in the distance.

A disembodied voice, lanced with panic, flooded the room. "This is a lockdown!"

The jarring squeal of sirens racing down First Street echoed through the thinly insulated walls of the modular classroom. Eyes widened as children clasped hands.

"This is a lockdown!" Principal Hayes repeated through the intercom. "Teachers, you know what to do."

Sienna strode toward the heavy metal door and used the hex key on top of the fire extinguisher to lock it from the inside. She pulled a yellow plastic flashlight from a backpack hanging nearby. The expired batteries gave barely enough light to guide everyone toward the middle of the portable where bookcases created a hallway of sorts. "Come over here!" she commanded. Her voice was calm and filled with authority.

"*Venga!*" a girl named Cassandra grabbed Pilar's hand and pulled. Abuzz with terror, children burrowed like bees into the deepest cells of a hive. Sienna gestured for them to sink onto the floor with their backs against the shelves.

The sirens grew louder. "Are the bad guys here?" Javier tensed. "Are they going to get us?"

"We are safe," Sienna replied.

He glanced from side to side. "What if they break in?"

"I'll fight them," she promised.

"Do you do karate?"

She shook her head. "No. Yoga."

Kids looked at each other, questioningly.

Javier drew a ragged breath. "I'll help you," he promised.

"Yo tambien," Miguel said.

"That's very nice of both of you," Sienna replied, "but I can handle the bad guys all by myself."

Que machisma! The children relaxed. Huddled together, they managed grim smiles, all except Pilar. She was terrified, as rigid as a skeleton buried in Sonoran sand. A wailing squad car skidded into the school parking lot. It shut off its siren, but the officer's radio spouted terse jumbled codes. After weeks of skirting the law, Pilar was surrounded, certain *la policia* were coming to get her now. Her story lay forgotten, on the edge of a battered student desk.

Pilar was a newcomer in a small town in one of the northernmost parts of the United States. She'd been sent from a village that hadn't made it onto any map of Mexico that could be found in *Los Estados Unidos*. Pilar and her older brother, Esteban, lived with their godparents, Lucia and Ramon Vega, in a tiny riverside apartment perched over *Casita Rio*, the only Mexican restaurant in Purewater. *Casita Rio* was thriving in Purewater, but Pilar was not. When she was in her homeroom class, she spent a lot of time looking at pictures in the *Reading Fare* textbook and failing to "follow along" as her *gringo* classmates read paragraphs aloud. Tracking words she had never heard spoken, let alone seen in print, was impossible. Her classroom teacher frowned as if Pilar continually lost her place on purpose.

Sienna O'Mara worked with small groups of kids who didn't know very much English. The children told Pilar that although *la maestra de inglés* wore no ring, she was in love with a man whose picture was on the back of a teacher book. This seemed like a perfectly feasible romance. After all, someone's older sister kept a crinkled tabloid image of *El Fuego's* lead singer taped to the inside of the kitchen

cabinet to reward herself for putting dishes away.

The children told Pilar that Sienna had a son named Matt and that he already knew how to drive. They discussed the teacher's dangling earrings and the jeans she wore with petite rhinestones embroidered on the back pockets. They told Pilar that she was smart and that she'd gone to college. "So, she can sit on desks whenever she wants." Sienna had promised them all that if they grew up and went to college, they could come back to Moore Elementary School and sit on any desk, including hers, if they wanted to.

She never told the English learners that very special opportunity was a long shot on two levels. Not many English learners finished high school in Purewater, let alone went onto the university. And if they did, she might not be around when they came back. Funding for her position was always precarious, granted more or less begrudgingly, depending on which of the Hadley sisters was on the school board.

When standardized achievement test scores become the primary measure of a student or a teacher, readers are taught they need to know who did what to whom and why right away, but Sienna O'Mara was patient. She held the tension of not knowing long enough to do the story Pilar dropped into her lap justice. The living may say she was a teacher who went too far, but for the dead, for *Los Muertos*, the jury is still out.

Chapter Two

The crime that led to the lockdown started early in the day. While a *gringo* going by the name B.J. Baldwin posted a help wanted ad on the Internet, Pilar cried over her breakfast.

"She can't understand the teacher," Lucia said. "*No entiende la maestra.*"

Ramon frowned at the tears rippling on the *leche* in the child's glass cereal bowl. He seemed on the verge of tears himself. "Five days a week is hard to get used to, isn't it, *mija*?" In Mexico, Pilar had gone to school a few times a month. "Do you want to stay home?" he asked. "Do you want a job making *mole*?"

It was early autumn and already cold outside. Working with her godparents in *Casita Rio's* snug kitchen sounded far more appealing to Pilar than shuffling through the dense fog rising off the river to face the incessant English and bewildering worksheets piling up in her desk at Moore Elementary. There were more students in her new school than there had been people of all ages back home in Redención and the only Spanish her harried American teacher, Mrs. Nancy Albright, seemed to know

was “*Apurate!*” Hurry up!” Pilar gazed at Lucia through weary eyes and wet lashes. Couldn’t her *madrina* see how much happier she’d be if she quit going to school and just stayed home?

“Ah!” Lucia sighed as if she fully understood the allure of grating cocoa, but she scolded her husband. “Ramon, she didn’t come to this country to study *mole*. Here, school is regular. She can go through all the grades.” With the hem of her apron, Lucia dabbed at Pilar’s cheek. “Stop this, *mija*! Your banana will be too salty.”

Esteban burst through the curtain between the kitchen and dining area of the restaurant. He stopped short in dismay. His little sister’s tears frightened him in ways the border patrol did not.

Pilar drew back from Lucia’s makeshift hanky. She did not want to trouble Esteban. She knew he was dismayed to be confined to a kitchen, chopping vegetables and washing dishes almost every day since they’d arrived. At seventeen, he was working full-time at *Casita Rio*, although Ramon and Lucia were not actually able to pay him for his labor. It was enough that they’d taken the undocumented children in at all and the four of them were doing their best to adjust to the situation. And Esteban was making progress. After only three weeks in Purewater, he had already found his true love. Now, he wanted to buy new clothes without frayed edges and frying stains to wear to Dulce Gantala’s *quinceanera*.

Ramon glanced at the paper, still quivering in Esteban’s grip. “*Qué es esto?*”

“*Trabajo!*” Esteban exclaimed. Someone had brought a print-out of Baldwin’s Internet ad to post on *Casita Rio*’s community bulletin board. They did this because few new immigrants had access to online technology.

By the time Pilar lugged her faded Goodwill backpack from the apartment to Moore Elementary School, Baldwin had thirty-one applicants for the landscaping job he'd posted. The same number of men had applied as there were kids in Nancy Albright's fourth grade class and Esteban was one of them. He'd used the restaurant's telephone to call. When Baldwin answered, he asked if Esteban was able to hack thorny blackberry vines for ten hours straight. Imagine asking a young man from a village teeming with *machismo* if he were strong or skilled enough to do anything.

Esteban didn't say that he had practically been born brandishing a machete. He simply replied, "I can work hard all day."

"*Bueno!*" Baldwin said. "You must come in uniform, a black sweatshirt, jeans, and work boots." He told Esteban all of this in poorly articulated Spanish lifted from what he'd typed into Google translator at the public library. He was clever, leaving no record of his plot on his personal computer. "Oh," Baldwin added casually as if he hadn't also planned this bit, "Don't forget a ski cap, black. It's colder than a *bruja's* tit out there."

Although Baldwin knew nothing about witches, he seemed like *un jefe bueno* to Esteban. He seemed like a boss who could help him get what he wanted, a dance with Dulce at her fifteenth birthday party. The event was still months away. He'd have time to save up his earnings. He nodded with the receiver still to his ear, grinning, giving Ramon what he'd already learned was an American affirmative, a thumbs-up.

When the call ended, Esteban swept through the empty dining area of the restaurant, checking the creases of the booths where what was in patron's pockets sometimes fell

out. And with the combination of coins he found there jingling in his pocket, Esteban dashed to Bonny Deals, covering the five blocks and crossing the busy highway quickly to buy a hat. Work boots cost more money than Pilar's grandma in Mexico had ever had at one time in her whole life. He didn't have enough for them. He hoped *el jefe* would not notice he was wearing the battered athletic shoes that Ramon had given him upon their arrival in Purewater, he and Pilar still wearing cheap flip-flops the coyote picked up for them at Wal-Mart somewhere in Arizona.

Esteban followed older men desperately casting their caps down on the checkout counter, each rationalizing the purchase whether he got the job or not. They moved through the express lane, paying cash while, one aisle over, a manicured stay-at-home mom from up on Teagan Hill, who owned one of the gardens the men wanted to work in, chatted with her toddler. As she placed and labeled diapers, juice boxes, coloring books, and other luxuries, like new towels on the conveyer belt, she effortlessly taught her child close to a hundred English words. And while this woman slid her debit card through the machine, Pilar sat in the classroom painstakingly copying the directions from a *Reading Fare* worksheet onto the lines meant for the answers to the questions because she did not know what else to do.

After lunch recess, Pilar hurried to her English Learner's class, while thirty-one men waited in thirty-one different locations within a ten-block radius of the school. Esteban stood where Baldwin had told him to, just outside the front door of the public library right by the book drop. And Baldwin, wearing the exact same uniform he had prescribed for all of his applicants, strode into the Bank of U.S.

to hand a note to the teller. She went to the vault and returned with two large canvas bags. Only when she handed them to him did anyone in the building realize the institution was being robbed. A teenager in the next line met her eyes.

"Robbery?" he mouthed.

The teller nodded, pressing the panic button under the till. As Baldwin sprinted out of the building through double glass doors, Matt O'Mara tossed his deposit onto the counter. "I'm going after him."

He darted after the thief the very instant Chief Goodwin got the call, spurring Purewater police to action. Chief Goodwin's secretary called the school district's central office and the operator there called Moore's principal because the bank was only a block away from the elementary school and there was no telling what the crook would do next. Within two minutes of the holdup, Deedee Hayes came on the intercom, announcing, "This is a lockdown!"

As Pilar cowered in the eerie shadows of bookcases, her ELL teacher's son dashed after Baldwin. Matt stopped momentarily, suddenly remembering he'd parked in a fifteen-minute-only stall. Would they tow his car?

He heard his Tae Kwon Do instructor's voice in his head, telling him he was overthinking.

Matt's split second of indecision gave Baldwin enough of a head start to dash across First Street and into an alley between the liquor store and laundromat. Baldwin tossed the money bags into a waiting SUV, pulled his black sweatshirt off over his head, and jumped behind the wheel. The vehicle backfired twice as he gunned the engine and sped behind Purewater businesses. Matt sprinted after Baldwin so he could report which side street the crook turned up on his way to the highway. He was sur-

prised when the vehicle veered toward the river instead. Matt ran faster, never thinking about the possibility of getting shot until a flying pebble from the gravel road struck his upper lip. Stung, he realized that if the bandit were armed, it would be wise to act as if he were giving up. He stopped. but after the SUV swerved into a copse of alders, Matt slipped into the intervening woods.

He picked through red-fringed cedar trees and bushes drooping with over-ripe blackberries until he came upon the SUV. The driver's side door hung open. Matt was stunned to catch a glimpse of Baldwin riding an inner tube down the frothy Purewater River. Nearly gaping with incredulity, he reached for his cell phone.

It wasn't in his pocket. He'd left it on the seat in his car back at the bank. Ignoring the blackberry thorns that sliced his hands and ears, Matt sprinted out of the wooded zone back toward First Street. He saw police lights flashing in front of the public library. As he reached the parking lot, he recognized Officer Stroup with his gun pointed at a familiar kid.

Matt shouted, "That's not the crook!" He pointed a bloodied finger toward the Purewater, gasping, "He's...he's on the river."

Keeping his weapon drawn, Stroup tried to make sense of Matt's report.

"He didn't do it," Matt tried to catch his breath. "I was at the bank, and I saw the robbery." He gestured at Esteban whose eyes were wide with terror. "I know him."

Esteban was so frightened it took him several heartbeats to realize that Matt was the kid he'd sat next to in chemistry for the three days he'd tried American high school. Esteban had no idea how to read English and there had been no such thing as science in Redención.

"Hey, professor," the teacher had said, looking at Matt as if he were somehow more able than she to facilitate a newcomer's understanding, "help him. The unit test is in two weeks." Matt had tried really hard, but just because his mom was an ELL teacher didn't mean he could say much more than "*Me llamo Matt*" and "*Buenas dias.*" He certainly didn't know how to explain molecular chemistry in a foreign language. Esteban dropped out before the high school ELL teacher even found the block of time she needed to test him to verify that he needed help learning English.

Since then, the two young men had seen each other in the alley behind the dojang a few times. *Casita Rio* was right next to Master In-Su's. Sometimes, when Matt walked by the open back door of the restaurant before or after class, he glanced in to see Esteban and Pilar enshrouded in steam, unloading the dishwasher together. Sometimes, when Esteban took the trash out, he glanced in the open back door of the dojang to see Matt doing push-ups. They never talked when they crossed paths, like the time they both took recycling out one Saturday morning. They simply nodded in recognition of each other's humanity. Now Esteban looked from Matt to the police officer. Could *el gringo* help him? Would he? And why would he bother if it meant getting involved with the police?

"Matt!" Officer Stroup exclaimed. "Are you the kid from the bank?" Stroup, a few local police officers including Chief Goodwin, and the fire chief studied with Master In-Su. Matt sparred regularly with all of them.

"I chased the crook to the river," Matt explained. "And the guy jumped in an inner tube and floated away. His SUV is still down there."

Stroup was even more incredulous than Matt had

been. Nevertheless, he lowered his gun and radioed the information in. As sirens heading south filled the air, Stroup questioned Esteban about his clothing. Esteban was silent, panicking about what would happen to his little sister if he was taken away.

"He doesn't know much English, sir," Matt said.

"Ask him why he's wearing that outfit. Same as the robber."

Matt looked down at his own clothes. "Uh, sir, I'm wearing the same as the robber, 'cept for the ski cap and shoes."

Stroup glanced at Matt's always grungy sneakers, now made more so, caked as they were with bits of mud and woodsy debris. From his radio, they heard "Confirmation. Suspect under South Side Bridge on a black inner tube."

"Sorry, kid." With a curt nod to Esteban, Stroup leapt into his car and sped off with the siren blaring. Two blocks south, in front of the dentist's office, he saw another man dressed in jeans, a black sweatshirt, and ski cap. By the end of the day, the seven policemen in Purewater had apprehended twenty-seven, identically dressed men standing in different locations all around town. They were all hauled down to the station for questioning. The ones who had no legal documentation were sent to a detention center, marked for deportation. Luckily, Esteban was not one of them.

He did not know what to say to Matt except an awkward, "*Gracias.*" Before Matt could reply, "*De nada,*" Esteban turned away and bolted back to *Casita Rio*. He spent an hour trembling on his knees, praying in a closet with broomstick bristles poking his exposed skin. Then, under self-imposed house arrest, he imprisoned himself in

the kitchen, dicing chiles for the rest of the day. Lucia gave him red onions to chop as well, an excuse to provoke the warm tears she knew the tightly drawn skin on his thin face needed to remind him he was still alive.

Matt returned to the bank, worried his car had been towed. Of course, the bank manager was not concerned about a parking violation. Instead, Mr. Penn thrust anti-septic hand wipes, Band-Aids, and the plate of chocolate chip cookies from the drive-up window into Matt's sweaty palms. By the time Matt had eaten a cookie, Moore Elementary had been given the all-clear.

Sienna O'Mara only got to see each of her groups for thirty minutes a day and so by then, it was already time for her fourth graders to leave. The robbery cost the kids in Sienna's class precious learning time.

"*Venga!*" Cassandra pulled on Pilar's hand to no avail. Pilar was still petrified. Back up against binders full of standardized test preparatory material, she could do nothing except sit like a brittle bush, desiccating at the foot of a giant saguaro.

Sienna looked every child in the eye to see if any of them were still even a little bit scared before she let them burst out into the fresh air where the yard duty whistles seemed engaged in a vigorous call and response with the sirens receding in the south as law enforcement raced downriver. Then, she returned to sit on the floor beside Pilar, taking the stainless-steel commuter mug from the corner of her desk with her. Star anise and licorice wafted in the air as Sienna took the lid off her cup. The tea she'd made during lunch was still warm, but not nearly as hot as she liked it. She wanted to reheat her drink in the staff room and find out why there had been a lockdown, yet she just sat with a frightened little girl. She just sat, silent,

strong, sipping lukewarm tea.

Ten minutes later, the bell rang. Sienna said, "I'm going to call Mrs. Albright to ask if you can stay here until you are ready to go back to class. Okay?" Pilar did not, could not, answer. She watched Sienna look up the extension and dial.

"Nancy, this is Sienna. I've got Pilar out in the portable. The lockdown was scary for her, so I'm going to let her stay with me for a while." Sienna frowned. "*Reading Fare* test? Seriously?" She paused and said, "No administrator is going to expect you to make her take it. She's a newcomer. It's not appropriate. No! I'm not saying we should dumb anything down, but she just got here." As the voice on the line continued, Sienna bit her upper lip hard and raised her eyes to the ceiling. Finally, she interrupted saying, "She's scared. I'll send her back when she's ready." She hung up and returned to Pilar's side to sit some more.

After a while, Sienna said, "Those sirens were so loud. *Muy ruido!*" She touched her ears and grimaced. "*Me duele el ojeas.*" She put her hand on her heart. "*Y mi corazon? Y tu?*" She searched Pilar's face and, as if finding what she was after, declared, "*Pilar es fuerte!* Pilar is strong." The teacher's proclamation seemed to be a form of fibrillation. Pilar was released from the rigidity of terror with a jolt. As if she were able to raise the dead, Sienna said, "*Venga!*" and the girl stood.

Sienna led Pilar to a small table near the larger kidney-shaped one where she usually met with groups and gave her a piece of plain paper and two plastic boxes. The first was filled with *un arco de iris*, a rainbow of colored pencils. The second was filled with crayons in a wide range of human skin and hair colors. "*Hacer que necesitas,*" she whispered softly. "Make what you need."

Pilar hesitated. She never colored at school. The only kids who had time to draw in class were the ones who finished their work early and, of course, Pilar could never even start. But, during the grueling trip to America, she had been allowed to color. She had been given two coloring books—one of classic nursery rhymes and one of *las sirenas*, mermaids. On the hot black rubber floor of a rust-coated van, she filled in the black lines that had already been drawn, taking care that the cooler centers of the softening crayons did not snap as the bright wax bled through her fingers.

Pilar had always understood that the journey to America was both necessary and forbidden. She obeyed instructions to dive under stacks of brightly woven *frazadas* if she ever felt even the slightest downshifting of speed. There was no danger of her missing that. The 1982 Dodge brakes squeaked with any pressure so the instant she heard them applied to the van, Pilar burrowed under a sea of blankets, imagining that each one represented another league below the surface of the ocean. She pretended to be a mermaid, safe in a clamshell *cama* while men with big guns opened all the doors, drank up all the water, took the coyote's cash, and kicked his tires.

Make what you need? Pilar pulled the box of multicultural people colors toward her. As she selected a crayon, she began to forget the sirens, the police, and her ELL teacher poised to yoga-fight bad guys.

After a few moments, Sienna's cell phone vibrated. Pilar glanced up. Sienna smiled at her reassuringly as she took the device from her purse and answered. "Yes." If Pilar hadn't been in such need of soothing herself, she might have noticed the teacher paling two shades lighter than her normal tone. Instead, the girl found a crayon that

generally matched her teacher's complexion. As she drew an oval face and the outline of a woman's torso, she didn't register that Sienna's smile had disappeared, that she asked, "He did what?" and then, "Has anyone seen him since?" Sienna cut the call short. Her hands shook as she speed-dialed and listened.

She paced the portable, a *puma* trapped on a plateau by a flash flood in the surrounding canyon. The tic in her tight jaw mirrored the agitated twitch of a wildcat's tail. Cords of tension rose in her neck.

Meanwhile, Pilar picked up a green crayon to give her figure the tail of a mermaid. She selected burnt sienna and made her mermaid's hair long and wavy, letting the rich color undulate all the way down to the end of the mermaid's glittery jade fins.

As if her anxiety set her on autopilot, Sienna set her phone down and took a *Reading Fare* textbook, identical to the one she had relieved Pilar of, from the ledge of the whiteboard. She moved a piece of red construction paper sticking up out of it to a new place so that it looked as if they'd read the day's designated pages, despite having a lockdown.

Matt strolled into the portable. Sienna lunged toward him. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," he said. "Why wouldn't I be?"

The *puma* soothed; Sienna stopped her frantic approach. Her emerald eyes grew moist with affection as she took in his lean frame, familiar black sweatshirt, jeans, and beat-up old shoes.

Pilar glanced up. Her brown eyes widened as she saw pink hearts alight from her teacher's breastbone and flutter, like butterflies, toward the young man. Pilar picked up a pink crayon.

Sienna grasped her hair at the nape of her neck as if she would gather it into a ponytail, even though she didn't have a rubber band. "Mr. Penn called and told me you went after a robber."

"I did," Matt said, "The fool escaped down river on an inner tube. I think they must have caught him by now." He ran his hand through his short, spiky hair. "I was freaking out about getting a parking fine."

"That wouldn't happen." Sienna said. "You were trying to help." She tilted her head back, releasing her hair and the tension in her jaw. Then, unable to stop herself, she blurted, "By doing something insane!"

Matt stiffened.

"And dangerous! Did he have a gun?"

Matt shrugged.

"You could have been killed," she insisted, imagining a horrific scenario. "You should have let the police handle it. They have training."

"What training do you need to run?" Matt snorted. "He would have made a clean getaway if I hadn't chased him."

"I'm not talking about running!" Sienna snapped. "I'm talking about the approach!"

Matt rolled his eyes. "You're the one who says I move like a ninja when we're hiking."

"Matt, you are infinitely more precious than money. I hate that you put yourself in danger for it."

"I didn't put myself in danger for money, Mom. I just did the right thing. Someone has to step in when something bad goes down. People can't just sit around and wait for the officials to show up to take care of everything." Impatient with her worry, he nonetheless softened. "It's a crime to rob a bank, Mom."

"I know." She sighed.

"It's a federal offense."

"Why weren't you in class?"

"My Civics teacher is sick, and they couldn't find a sub. The aide said I could go to work early. I went to the bank on my way."

"Did anyone go after the robber with you?"

"Nope. No one could have kept up." He grinned. "The guy drove to the river."

"While you ran?" Sienna shook her head.

First graders spilled into the portable, interrupting the interrogation, disrupting her angst. As if the sight of her students' happy faces worked some magic, Sienna smiled at her son. "All's well that ends well and I'm proud of you. Can I hug you?"

Pilar looked up again. This time, to see Matt take a tiny step sideways and back, dodging the next onslaught of erupting pink hearts.

Sienna crossed her arms over her chest to quell them.

"Do you need anything?" she asked and then bit her lip. *Que necesitas?*

He shook his head. "Just milk. I can get some on my way home if you'll pay me back."

As she nodded, a little boy threw his arms around her waist and squeezed. Matt smiled approvingly at the kid embracing his mom. Pilar grinned. Pink hearts were floating throughout the portable and all around the mermaid on her page. She had done exactly what her teacher had told her to do. *Hacer que necesitas*. She'd made what she needed.

Chapter Three

Baldwin was caught on film by a group of teenagers from one of Purewater's alternative high schools. For all his careful planning, for all his calculations about the ferocity of the current, it had never occurred to Baldwin that a dozen students would be near the South Bridge collecting water samples during his getaway. Their vans had been parked and unloaded in two different locations along the Purewater, so the northernmost kids saw the guy with two bulging bags on his lap first and texted their observations to the group farther south. They'd all been taught to document what they saw out in the field so by the time Baldwin floated past the second group, their cameras were ready.

After police requisitioned all the smart phones containing images of Baldwin, they discovered something odd. Two large black neoprene bags had been on his thighs while he passed the first group. When he spun by the second, only one remained. Analysis showed the remaining sack was no larger than either of the original bags taken from the vault. Baldwin had definitely not shoved one bag inside of the other to consolidate. Thus, the report surmised that Baldwin had lost half his loot but managed

to vanish with three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

With a group of teenagers tweeting that three hundred and fifty thousand dollars had fallen into the river somewhere between the public library and the South Bridge, it wasn't long before crowds of people gathered along the Purewater. Many met behind *Casita Rio* and Master In Su's studio. Once the immigrants among them realized local, state, and federal officials would be canvassing the town searching for Baldwin, they hurried home to get their papers and to warn family members and friends without the precious documents to lie low.

When Pilar got home from school, Esteban, with red-rimmed eyes and the wide blade of a glistening knife in his trembling hand, had just finished scraping a mountain of onions and *chiles* into a pot. Lucia was slicing cheese into smaller, more manageable blocks so he could move on to grating. The mermaid Ms. O'Mara had allowed her to create had reminded Pilar of the coloring books their coyote had given her during the journey to America, so she took them, a blanket, and the hot quesadilla Lucia gave her for her after-school snack under the table. With one of Esteban's sour-smelling shoelaces snaking along the floor beside her, Pilar colored the lamb, that followed the Mary of English nursery rhymes to school.

In Redención, their village in the Mexican state of Clemencia, there had been no sheep, but Pilar's *abuela* had kept goats. The billy, *Diablo*, stalked the children on the days school was open. On the mornings that they got to attend, the teacher clapped her hands briskly and the students filed inside the low concrete building where classes were held. *Diablo* scrambled up onto the flat roof. When the first lessons were over and Pilar's friends and cousins gleefully raced outdoors to play, he leapt off the structure

to head-butt them from behind.

When he did that, Pilar would hit him on the head as hard as she could with the *béisball* stick. Unfortunately, Diablo delighted in this, repeating his naughty behavior with a gleam in his dilating eyes. Pilar had spent a good many recesses beating her grandmother's goat. She had been strong, in her own eyes and in the eyes of the other children.

Sienna was right; the ELL teacher uncannily correct. Pilar was strong. She was *muy fuerte*, yet after the day's events at Moore, she felt fragile. She wanted her mother with an overwhelming intensity. She missed her grandmother, her whole village, even that nasty *chivo*. And so, even though Mary's little lamb looked a lot cuddlier in the coloring book than grandma's *estúpido* buck had ever been in the flesh, Pilar shaded Mary's sheep black just like him.

She'd been under the table so long that by the time Ramon rushed into the kitchen, Esteban and Lucia had both forgotten she was there. Ramon steered Lucia by the shoulders to the back door, opening it in time to see Officer Stroup staking a bright yellow police barrier along the riverbank.

A breeze blew in through the back door. A strand of Lucia's long, black hair escaped the single braid cascading along her spine as her husband told her the news. Wearily, worrying, and wondering what had happened to Esteban, she leaned into her husband's chest, letting him support her for a while. Her navy canvas shoes pinched her feet. She'd bought them because they'd been pleasingly cheap and her chafed ankles and aching soles never let her forget the bargain they'd been. She did her best to keep the unglued linoleum that masked the concrete floor of the kitchen clean, but it never could reciprocate her care with a

cushioning response. Bouncing on the balls of her feet to stretch her spasming calves, Lucia watched divers from the county search and rescue team suit up. In disbelief, she repeated what Ramon told her. "The money could be right outside our back door?"

In her hiding place, Pilar dreamed of finding a lot of *dinero*. First, she would buy Lucia and Ramon a washing machine and dryer so Lucia wouldn't have to miss a single episode of her favorite *novella*, hauling dirty clothes and cleaning rags to the laundromat where the defunct T.V. was missing an essential electrical cable. Then, she'd ask Ramon to help her send to Mexico for a basalt stone table and rolling pin so Lucia could roast, peel, and roll her own cocoa beans instead of buying bricks of wholesale chocolate, which while easier, just didn't make her *mole* as fine as what she'd made in Redención. After that, Pilar would buy Esteban two new American outfits. And, for herself, she'd maybe get some bright flowers in clay pots like the ones she'd seen at Bonny Deals to put all around the apartment. That would remind her of home. Oh! And she'd splurge on some American jasmine shampoo like Ms. O'Mara's. Pilar smiled at the thought of smelling like her teacher. Of being her teacher's twin. Of being *gemelas*.

Ramon said, "With that much money, we could hire *un abogado* to get Raul out of the detention center and send him to Redención with armed guards."

Lucia shook her head. "With that much *dinero* we could bring the rest of the *familia aqui*." Awash in the steam from the mole simmering on the stove as it wafted out of the open door to assimilate with the mist rising off the river, she drew in a deep breath and sighed, "And we could find *una curandera* for the children."

Ramon slid his hands down her arms and squeezed

gently as if to make his point sink into her skin. "*La chica* did not see what happened. She was hiding in the chicken coop."

"*Ella tiene susto.*" Lucia insisted. "Her soul is somewhere else. *Pilar necesita una limpia.*"

Pilar had caught her name but nothing else. She poked her head from beneath the table. "*Qué?*" Her godparents spun around. Lucia's shushing fingers already upon Ramon's lips.

"*Qué? Queso.*" Esteban teased, sprinkling cheese onto his little sister's head.

The *cotija añejo* fell, spackling her dark hair like white stars against Redención's night sky. There was no light pollution in the country. Pilar flopped over onto her back, letting Esteban drop bits of heaven and nutrition into her mouth. Ramon picked some out of the bowl and fed it to Lucia. She did the same for him. With a taste of family after a horrifying day among strangers, Pilar laughed somewhere between happy and hysterical. She did not know Esteban had spent most of the afternoon in the closet. She did not know her big brother had *susto* too.

Chapter Four

A few days later, Pilar awoke in her makeshift bed — a chaise lounge cushion Ramon had found in the summer clearance bin at Bonny Deals. Sage smoke. Spicy carnation. The scents of feast day wafted into her corner of the apartment's main room. Pilar rolled to her side to see Lucia kneeling before the window overlooking First Street. White paint bubbled and crackled upon its splintered casing, but a candle and an old beer bottle holding red and white flowers turned the sill into a sacred altar. With a fine-tipped permanent black marker, Lucia had drawn a diminutive image of *La Sirena*, Redención's patron saint of protection, on the glass. *La Sirena*? Pilar had forgotten all about her or had she? Pilar remembered the mermaid she'd drawn and given to Sienna. Sienna immediately, pinned the gift to the corkboard over her desk in the ELL classroom.

As Lucia bowed her head in prayer, appealing to *La Sirena* in a mixture of dialect and Spanish, Pilar could see her godmother cradled a small object in the joined palms of her hands. Of course, Pilar thought, there is no petition clay in America. With salt, water and flour, Lucia had done

exactly what Ms. O'Mara had told Pilar to do. *Hacer que necesistas.*

Pilar sat up. If she went to school, she could see the ELL teacher again! Crawling from beneath the heavy woven blanket the coyote had given her, she joined Lucia at the altar, noticing the fallen head of a scarlet carnation splayed upon the floor. In Mexico, they'd all gone together on Feast Day—sisters, cousins, and aunts, to trade coins for the ample bunches of calla lilies and red carnations that vendors hawked along the trail to *La Sirena's* shrine. Now, in the United States, with treasure-seekers trolling the banks of the Purewater behind them, Lucia and Pilar longed for the relief that lit up the faces of those who laid their blooms, their worries, and small clay figures representing their deepest desires before the little statue of *La Sirena*, at the temple in Redención.

Pilar stood beside the entrance to the cafeteria, watching Sienna take her spot for bus duty. Longing to go to her English teacher for a warm "*Hola!*" and a friendly hug, the girl clutched the red flower that she'd found on the floor after it had fallen from Lucia's altar. She'd brought it for Sienna but now found herself confounded. Walkers weren't allowed in the buses' designated unloading zone. She couldn't cross the yellow line painted on concrete to get to Sienna, so she watched her closely, waiting for the teacher to notice her. Of course, Sienna had already noticed Pilar and wished she could call the girl over to chat while she waited for the buses, but she couldn't start a precedent like that. It would be chaos if every walker were allowed in the unloading zone.

It was the Feast Day of *La Sirena* in Redención, but in Purewater, it was the day to redistribute teaching staff based on a complex formula involving student count and budget codes. And so it was that Jolie Fox, Purewater District's most recently hired school librarian, was unceremoniously re-assigned and sent to Moore Elementary School. Pilar and Sienna both watched the elegant woman approach the building from the staff parking lot.

With her dark hair pulled into a simple knot at the nape of her neck, Jolie looked like a librarian. Still, Sienna quickly glanced at her ID badge, matching the stranger wearing a simple green sweater dress, black leggings, and boots with the photo on the lanyard around her neck. When Matt was little, Sienna had loved being Moore's part-time school librarian. Back then the district hadn't funded a full-time, full-benefits library position. Sienna had been happy with part-time work when she was still married, when her salary was simply supplemental. She loved ELL. Still, a tiny twinge of jealousy thrummed below the warm welcome she gave Jolie.

Anxiety flickered across Jolie's face. She was still reeling from the shocking directive to abandon the library she had just set up to start the new school year, pack up her personal belongings, and report to an entirely different building all the way across town. "What exactly," she blurted, "does it mean to say we are a school in improvement?"

"It's a euphemism," Sienna explained. "For failing."

Jolie's uneasy gaze alighted on the pillar behind Sienna where a swipe of gray paint arced over her head. The ugly splotch might be meant to conceal profanity or gang graffiti. It was definitely blotting out once sunny saffron paint. Jolie was alarmed by the personnel director's un-

willingness to describe her new assignment to her. Now that someone actually seemed ready to answer her questions about Moore Elementary's issues, she felt the odd urge to slow down the revelations." Failing? At renovation?"

Sienna laughed. She understood it was easier to acclimate to cosmetic flaws first. "Say goodbye to the light," she said. "The facilities improvement committee has decided it's time to take things more seriously around here. It's time to upgrade—to Drainpipe Gray."

"It's a little dreary."

Sienna nodded and shrugged. Jolie would learn her opinions on such matters would not count. She would meet the custodian, Captain Swabby, soon enough. Mic Schwab had gotten his nickname from telling students that the skull and crossbones tattooed on his bicep were left over from his pirate days when he ordered anyone who misbehaved to swab the deck. He often threatened the naughty boys with this same discipline plan. The mop tattooed on his opposite bicep came after he'd retired from piracy and the Navy, found the Lord, and got clean. Now, somewhere in his late fifties, he was a muscular man, squat with long arms and an even longer grey ponytail.

Captain Swabby would have been willing to climb a ladder, would have liked to paint a whole pole at once, the whole school, for that matter, but school districts weren't like Spanish galleons filled with gold, nor were they run like military ships. The budget was tight. And there were other restrictions. He could only paint for a limited amount of time per day, otherwise, the district would have to contract out and collect bids from professional painters. This was not feasible, especially for Moore.

Although he didn't get his way when it came to the repainting process, Captain Swabby was a powerful man. He kept all repair and cleaning supplies locked away. His key ring, with the circumference of a handcuff, was always looped around his belt. Banging against his thigh, it made him sound like a warden as he strode up and down the halls. When they heard him coming, teachers would dash to the doorways of their classrooms and beg him for rolls of flimsy brown paper towels and refill bottles of approved disinfectant so they could wipe down their sinks and clean the surfaces children sneezed upon. His job description might make most people think so, but he didn't have time for that degree of cleaning. The teachers had to do it.

Sienna told Jolie, "We're a failing school because our reading scores are so low."

"Why are they so low?"

"Because in the past three years, the percentage of our kids who qualify for ELL because they speak another language at home has drastically increased."

"What do they speak? Spanish?"

"Mostly. A little Hmong, some Chinese, Indian, Arabic, and Ukrainian."

Jolie's realtor had advised her to avoid the Moore area if she decided to buy a home in the Purewater School District because of Moore's failing status. She'd tried to tell him that a neighborhood school's state standardized test scores didn't matter to her now that her daughter was in college, but he'd urged her to think about resale value. She'd actually laughed when he'd first mentioned the high-stakes WASTE. The realtor hadn't seemed to notice anything funny about the acronym for the Warranted Assessment of Student Testing Exam. "Do ELL kids take the

WASTE?"

Sienna nodded.

"In English?"

"Yes. And the WASTE is challenging even for the kids up at Teagan Hill who have been speaking English their whole lives."

"How long does it take for kids to learn English?"

"Every kid is different," Sienna explained. "For most of them, it takes a few months to a year before they can get by on the playground, at the store, or the doctor's office." Her eyes roved over to Pilar, and she sighed. "The truth is that it really takes several, maybe four to seven, years of intentional English development to acquire the language needed to perform like a native speaker on the WASTE."

"That long?" Jolie's surprise was evident. "So... close to half of the kids here just don't have the language proficiency they need to keep the whole school from being labeled failing."

"That's right." Sienna said grimly.

Jolie thought of the comments Chase Haight, a media mogul, had made on national television about the incompetency of public-school teachers. She scoffed, "Why don't Chase Haight and his GOTCHA reporters get that?"

And as if a venomous six-eyed, brown recluse spider on an invisible drop line, had suddenly leapt from the facade overhead, both women froze. Purewater's school board president, Brenda Hadley, quoted Haight's rhetoric extensively during her campaign and at school board meetings. Both of them seemed determined to make public school teachers public enemy number one. Brenda had been elected to the school board because she'd convinced the community that there was no excuse for Moore's low test scores.

Sienna shuddered. There was a lot she could say about the subject, but school buses were pulling into the lot. There would be very little time to talk to another adult again until the end of the day.

"Well, thanks for telling me," Jolie said. "I asked around at Teagan Hill. No one could explain why this school is so bad." She blushed, adding "You know, what I mean."

"Hi, Ms. Fox!" a blonde girl rushed toward them. "I've got all my library books!" Rebalancing herself beneath the weight of her Hello Kitty backpack, school board president Brenda Hadley's granddaughter beamed broadly, ready to bask in praise for the luck of being born to a mother who remembered library day.

But, instead of praising her, Jolie appeared confused. "What are you doing down here? This isn't your school."

"I ride the shuttle up to Teagan Hill," Laurali announced proudly. "Grandma told Daddy Moore Elementary sucks. She made him sign the papers so I could go to the best school in town. I only come here to catch the bus. Grandma wanted my uncle to make my cousin come with me too, but," Laurali paused, rolling her eyes, clearly repeating what her grandmother had said many times. "My aunt is alternative. Plus, she's willful."

Sienna and Jolie exchanged an empathic glance. The words *alternative* and *willful* fluttered between them, like a moth, trying to avoid the recluse's web. Jolie went to meet the principal. Laurali got in line to depart.

Sienna greeted the children who were arriving, "Good morning! Welcome to school!"

Javier, doused in man's aftershave stepped close. Furtive hope shone in his brown eyes. "Do we have ELL today?" he asked in a whisper. He worried that if his teacher

got wind of how much he loved ELL, she might keep him from going. She might hold him back in class to “finish” her assignment first. Miguel leaned in, “And can we read our stories?” Cassandra stopped in front of Sienna, whipped a poem out of her pocket and read it on the spot. Lupe pulled a miniature dollar store notebook out of her backpack. “See, Ms. O’Mara! I got this in case I get an idea on the bus.”

Still standing alone by the cafeteria, Pilar watched as the enthusiasm for storytelling swirled around Sienna. Then, the girls begged Sienna to show them the picture of the man she’d once told them was her favorite author—Doctor Andy Dalhstrom. The boys walked away, but the girls jostled to stare at the screen of Sienna’s cell phone. They batted their eyelashes, giggling at the publicity photo from his publisher’s website. The silver flecks in his blonde hair were barely noticeable, but he was obviously much older than the Latino heartthrobs they searched for on the public library computers.

“He’s smart. Right, Teacher?” Lupe asked.

“Yes. He’s very smart.”

“Is he ever gonna do a concert?”

“Probably not,” Sienna said. Her eyebrows arched in amusement. “He gives talks. People call them lectures.”

Nodding sagely, the girls hurried toward Pilar. Stepping out of the designated unloading zone, they swept her into the cafeteria for a free breakfast and inducted her into a fascinating code-switching discussion about the distinctions between Miss, Ms., and Mrs. that seemed so important when dealing with teachers. That Sienna O’Mara was a Ms. in a building where all the other teachers were Mrs. was such a mystery to them. Pilar felt the carnation in her pocket. Her fingers would smell spicy all morning.

Sadly, the flower would shrivel before she had access to Sienna to present it.

As Sienna greeted poor children disembarking from public school buses, she thought of the Statue of Liberty and suddenly, on the Feast Day of *La Sirena*, the *New Colossus* scrolled through her mind. *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

Air brakes hissed. The golden door of Bus 27 opened. A hungry child hurrying to a federally subsidized breakfast jostled her arm. Sienna lifted her stainless-steel mug high.

A voice at her elbow quipped. "I just don't get it."

Sienna looked down at the waist-high *gringo* barging into her beatific vision of herself hailing yet another wave of children onto hallowed ground. "You just don't get what?"

He gestured up toward her steaming cup, held aloft as the masses milled around them. "Why you need that." He shook his blonde head accusingly. "Every single morning!"

Who was this kid to question her caffeine habit? Sienna thought of a few questions she might ask him. Is that grape jelly matting your hair? Is that spaghetti sauce smeared across your cheek? Instead, she replied, "How else do they light up the Statue of Liberty?"

He chuckled fondly. Second grade patriotism is so pure. Every day they say the Pledge of Allegiance. Every day they sing, *This Land is Your Land*. *Gringo* studied her face shrewdly for a moment and then announced, "I went to the dollar store." Solemnly, he quickly cast her as a customs officer and compelled to declare, pulled the flap of

his jacket aside, revealing a handful of red, white, and blue marbles hidden in his inner coat pocket. Contraband! It was not Toys from Home Day. He forged on, playing the odds she'd excuse his transgression if he had an educational purpose for committing it. "What's the chance of me picking a white one?"

"Is this a probability question?" Sienna raised her eyebrows, clearly impressed. The kid had her pegged.

He nodded, waiting for her answer.

"I'd say about half."

He looked surprised. Obviously, he hadn't worked it out for himself yet. "You know," he cautioned. "You gotta be careful. Not to lose your marbles." He zipped up his coat, telling her the school rule, as if she didn't already know it. "You aren't supposed to have them here."

Sienna nodded, considering his words. Somewhere along the line, maybe in the staff lounge, she'd heard gossip that this child's difficulties stemmed from being born addicted to a mind-altering drug. He was very small for his age. His mom had made great strides in life and was in recovery. And, at least today, he wasn't carrying his lunch from home in the usual bag, emblazoned with a sex toy shop's logo.

Gringo was, however, still wearing fleece footed pajamas under his coat and a pair of rubber boots acquired from St. Vincent de Paul. Both were at least two sizes too large. And it was not Pajama Day. This was not appropriate for a fourth grader. With a sticky cowlick spiraling above his scalp, he looked rather like a Doctor Seuss character. Yes! Sienna thought, like Cindy Lou in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. She wondered if *Gringo* had ever read about the Grinch. "Jonathan," she said, attempting to

broach the dress code gently, "I see you are wearing jammies to school."

"It's my uniform," he told her. In response to her inquiring expression, he went on. "I'm a sleepwalker or," he shrugged, "a dreamer. I can't decide." He saluted, flashing wide gaps between his crooked front teeth. Trying not to sprain an ankle swimming in sloppy, oversized boots, he clomped to the cafeteria.

Chapter Five

Soon after the Feast Day of *La Sirena*, Pilar listened to Lupe, read the final draft of a story to Sienna. The crinkled newsprint between her fingers was dog-eared from erasures, but Lupe brought her text to life. She delivered her personal narrative with pride.

"*Fantástico!*" Sienna declared. "*Muy Bueno!*" Lupe beamed proudly. Sienna gave her a moment in bask in the praise, and then creating a small space between her thumb and index finger, asked, "May I ask the author just one little question?"

Lupe nodded graciously. Dual images of the Virgin of Guadalupe shimmered on the silver-lined earrings her brother had just brought her from Mexico City.

"Did you check with your mom about the name of that store? Are you sure it is called the Swami?" Beneath a handmade banner emblazoned with the words, *The Writers' Lair*, the small group of students looked up from the stories they were working on and nodded, certain and in perfect solidarity with Lupe over the name of everyone's favorite place to shop.

"Sorry, kiddos," Sienna said. "I just want to be sure."

Her voice grew hushed as if they were in church speaking of *los milagros*, of miracles. "Lupe is about to publish."

As Sienna went on to describe all the things Lupe had done well. Cassandra leaned in close to Pilar's ear. With pepperoni from the cafeteria's pizza still on her breath, Cassandra tried to help Pilar make sense of Sienna's compliments, but she didn't know the Spanish words for *sequence*, *events*, or for any of the punctuation marks. Cassandra simply repeated Sienna's English, not even recognizing that she wasn't interpreting. When Sienna paused, Cassandra smiled encouragingly as if she were Pilar's big sister teaching the baby of the family an important skill. Pilar was impressed by Cassandra's silver tooth and found herself wondering how the mermaid she had drawn would look with one. Pilar looked up at her drawing, still hanging over the teacher's desk. *La sirena* smiled back at her.

Sienna said, "Lupe has a very good story here. I just don't want her to do all the hard work of copying her story onto our fancy paper if something isn't quite right."

In America, schools have special paper, not silver, but as bright and white as American teeth. Sienna insisted upon rewarding her young authors with specially designated "publishing" paper that she created by copying black lines on Xerox 98 to guide the formation of her students' letters. Parents of students up at Teagan Hill Elementary groaned about orthodontist bills. Administrators of students at Moore Elementary groaned because teachers used supplies. They were repeatedly chided at staff meetings for using too much toner. Sienna copied the lines on paper late at night, after the office closed.

"I've been to Bonny Deals, but I've never heard of Swami," Sienna persisted. "Of course, I'm not much of a

shopper." She thought of telling her students that Matt used to tell people his clothes came from UPS, but she thought that would be too confusing. "Do they really sell nachos at a store called the Swami?"

Ignorant of what she agreed with, Pilar nodded with her classmates. She just wanted Sienna to hurry and finish with Lupe and come kneel beside her. Instead, Sienna gestured for all the kids to crowd around her computer. Pilar rushed the open spaces between moving children, wiggling her way up to Sienna until she was close enough to catch a whiff of that glorious jasmine shampoo. Once, she'd spent an hour sniffing hair products at the discount store trying to match it until Lucia explained. "You won't find it here. *Las maestras no compran aqui*. Teachers don't shop in places like this. They are rich. *Son ricas*."

Selecting images, Sienna typed *Swami* into the search bar. Photographs of an angry punk band with spiky purple hair and pictures of peaceful Yogis sustaining various mudras appeared. She typed the words *Swap Meet* into the search bar and one of the first hits was a white wooden sign stenciled with bold red block letters. SWAP MEET TODAY.

"That's it!" Lupe exclaimed.

"Yes! Yes!" the other children chorused, breaking into rapid Spanish. None of them had enough vocabulary to say it all in English. They examined the other pictures the search produced, people strolling among card tables and booths, looking at car parts, jewelry, and toys. Sienna nodded encouragingly, noting her students' inconsistent pronouns and the going back and forth between languages. A girl spoke of her mother buying a hairbrush. One boy told how his uncle got a grill to make *carne asada*.

With a twinkle in her eyes, Sienna said, "In English,

we call a place like this a swap meet.” She emphasized the final sounds in the two words so they could hear she wasn’t saying Swami.

Alondra rolled her eyes. Javier slapped his forehead and they all giggled. It was just another mistake, like so many they were accustomed to making and it was okay in ELL. But they all knew, outside *The Writers’ Lair*, in the regular classroom, it could have been another instance in which it was wiser to limit what one said to the few words one really knew.

Sienna appealed to Lupe. “May we change Swami to swap meet?”

Lupe shrugged.

“If you use swap meet all your readers will know what you mean.”

Lupe shrugged again. The other kids had already known what she’d meant. She tossed her glossy black braids behind her shoulder and zipped her hot pink jacket over the Blessed Mother pendant her brother had bought to match her shimmering earrings. Her eyes roved to the clock. “I fix tomorrow,” she promised. Sienna grinned well aware that Lupe was giving in to the teacher’s crazy request so that she wouldn’t miss a single second of recess.

Sienna took the slick *Reading Fare* student book off the ledge of the whiteboard and moved the red bookmark a few pages while the kids slid their writing projects into their ELL folders and dropped them into the assigned basket on their way out the door. Only Pilar stayed behind, standing by Sienna’s desk. Sienna knew Pilar needed a lot more help with English than she was getting. She could also see the girl needed help with her shoelaces. Lucia hadn’t let her get Velcro, insisting she learn to tie her first pair of closed-toe shoes, so Pilar was forced to struggle

with English syntax and shoestrings all at the same time. She bent to untangle a knot.

Sienna clicked to close the Internet images. Instead of disappearing, a large Swami from her first hit ballooned to fill the screen. Swathed in pure white silk, the holy man winked at the teacher, as if he were teleconferencing from a remote temple in a faraway land. "What?" Sienna was startled. Ever alert for danger, Pilar stood suddenly, letting her attempted loop unravel.

Flummoxed, Sienna read the caption scrolling beneath the image aloud, as if hearing her own voice would help her make sense of the technological irregularity. "*Swami* means one with the Self. A Swami is dedicated to the pursuit of the divine inner Self."

Sienna pointed to the image and then the word on the screen. This a Swami." She gave Pilar an encouraging smile. "Read it." Pilar put her finger right where Sienna's had been. "Swami," she mumbled. She wasn't really reading yet, but she laughed in delight because even a taste of the task was sweet.

"You're doing it," Sienna said. Pilar relaxed for a moment, luxuriating in the warmth of her teacher's voice and the twinkle in her eye.

In an English nursesey rhyme a girl named Mary had a little lamb that followed her to school and made the children laugh and play. In her coloring book, Pilar had colored Mary's lamb black in honor of the diabolical goat who'd followed her to school. Lambs and goats and giggles were against the rules and, so were Swamis.

But, slipping in through unvoiced spaces, through a back door left open by two fortuitously dropped final consonants, the Swami showed up in *The Writers' Lair*. He came to Moore Elementary to a shore up a dedicated

JANIECE ANJALI

teacher who knew all children have divine inner selves
that ought to be met and stories that need to be heard in
the swap meet of learning a new language and creating a
new community.

Chapter Six

On the last day of October, Sienna took her place for bus duty dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Jonathan, the marble-smuggling *gringo*, who had dared question her caffeine habit had given her the idea for her Halloween costume. Weak autumn sunlight radiated from the seven spikes of her tin foil crown as she welcomed the teeming masses. One superhero after another burst through the doors of the school buses like Superman exiting Clark Kent's obsolete telephone booth, ready to save the world. Fairies floated past, their green tulle wings sparkling with incandescent glitter. Princesses, clad in pink satin gowns and topped with diamond tiaras wandered by. Friendly witches waggled long black fingernails waving hello. Alondra, one of Pilar's new friends, disguised as Dorothy on her way to Oz, stopped to let Sienna peek at the plush pup stuffed in an old Easter basket. "I'm off to meet the wizard," she sang with a heavy accent. She skipped away, her ruby red shoes slapping gray slabs of concrete. Iron Man flexed his muscles, confessing, "I wanted to be Mario from the video game, but that costume cost forty bucks!"

"I like Iron Man," Sienna said. "You look great."

He gave her a thumbs up. "So do you, Liberty." And then he was off, chasing a trio of powdered-faced vam-

pires, gleefully undaunted by the polymer fangs cutting into their artificially bloodied lips.

Even though it was Halloween, there was no denying the end-of-the-month appetite of the school system's mandated data monster. Test scores in the name of progress monitoring were required. Ignoring the holiday hum and the sugar high among them, fourth grade teacher, Nancy Albright, gave the children in her class the Unit Two *Reading Fare* test. The students were to read two full pages of small print and answer eight multiple choice comprehension questions. Twice! A second story of equal length with the same number of questions followed the first one. The test also included six skills pages, two each about phonics, grammar, and vocabulary. When they finished all that, the kids were supposed to write an essay comparing how the characters in the two separate stories at the beginning of the exam were alike and how they were different. Pilar was expected to do this, too. But she didn't even understand the instructions telling her so.

She swallowed hard, her eyes darting around the classroom. Kids moved their lips silently, ostensibly reading. Some feigned ease, too zealously marking answers. The only sounds in the room were the clack of the teacher's keyboard as Nancy typed an email and the nervous clicking together of Alondra's ruby shoes. The English Learners weren't familiar with the magical land of Oz. They didn't know the secret wisdom Glinda the Good Witch had given Dorothy Gale but as they skipped the words they didn't know, sentence after sentence, the clacking of Alondra's heels kept time with the despair of displacement. *There is no place like home.*

Nancy must have felt Pilar's desperate eyes upon her. She met them momentarily, hit the send button with an

indignant flourish, and screwed her lips together in a disapproving kiss. Mortified, Pilar stared back down at her test and found herself lip synching gibberish. After a few seconds, she turned the page and began the pantomime all over again.

Soon, Nancy was peering over her shoulder, hissing, "You have to finish." Like a *Federale* ordering a villager to empty his pockets, the teacher's face remained impassive as she commenced a humiliating shakedown, pushing Pilar's desk out into the hall, leaving a trail of spilled pencil stubs and paper scraps in its wake. She said, "Bring your chair." Pilar complied. Nancy said, "Get it done out here," went back into the classroom and closed the door.

Pilar's intestines twisted violently, bloating with confusion. Her cheeks smarted as if the shame and rage smoldering within her body was about to blast through her skin.

The steel door of the self-contained Special Education classroom was directly across from where Nancy had deposited her desk. Behind the door, another anguished child screamed the very English words that expressed how Pilar felt. "I WANT TO GO HOME!" The other child was clearly in great distress. What were they doing to them in there? Would she be next? Pilar's heart skipped staccato, pumping like a machine gun. She crouched over her vital internal organs, her legs trembling. Glancing toward the exit, she saw Sienna outside the next classroom. Seeing her ELL teacher, dressed as the Statue of Liberty, sitting on a hard, child-sized chair at a small table with Jesus, a second grader who lived next door to *Casita Rio* in the apartment over Master In-Su's allowed Pilar to draw a ragged breath. She laid her head down on the desk, exhausted, as the words "I WANT TO GO HOME!" ricocheted around the

hallway.

Miguel's teacher, Mrs. Tammy Lewis, stepped outside of her classroom. "What's happening in Special Day?" Clearly annoyed by the screaming, she loomed over Sienna, scanning Jesus' blank paper. She wrinkled her pink snub nose as if smelling something foul. The odd, oversized mouse ears on her head cast a strange shadow over their failure to produce. The kid across the hall screamed again. "I WANT TO GO HOME!" Pilar imagined running all the way to her grandmother's crooked house in Mexico although, at the moment, she'd gladly settle for *Casita Rio* and the comfort of godparents.

"Jesus is doing great," Sienna told Tammy, adding "*Muy bien*" for the boy's benefit.

Tammy narrowed her eyes. "But will he be done in five minutes?"

"Tammy!" Sienna cajoled. "We're dabbling in poetry here."

"Oh, come on, Sienna!" Tammy snapped. "He doesn't have to win *a prize*."

"A boy needs time to capture the essence of his mom." Sienna said.

"Oh brother! I just want to know what he's thankful for so I can get the November bulletin board up. You know how Deedee is." Tammy spun around, rushing back into the classroom yelling "Hey! Batman! Stop that!"

For a moment Jesus wondered if Mrs. Lewis wanted him to write about his brother even though he was still struggling to find and understand English words about his mother. Another wail filled the air. "I WANT TO GO HOME!" Sienna ignored the screams, focusing on Jesus' restarts and stammering until she finally exclaimed. "Ah! Your mom works in a greenhouse!"

Jesus' eyes widened with panic. "No. No. Ms. It's white."

Sienna flipped a notebook open and hastily sketched a picture. "Does it look like this?"

"Si."

She kept drawing, "With plants and flowers inside?"

He nodded.

"There are different names for a place like this. We usually call it a *greenhouse*."

"*Pero es blanca!*" he gasped. Tears welled in his dark, almond-shaped eyes.

"Well, it's a house for green plants," she said gently. "Right?" She waited for him to nod and explained, "That's why we call it a *greenhouse*."

"I WANT TO GO HOME!" A loud crash came from within Special Day as a chair hit the door. The door did not jostle much within its frame, but Jesus and Pilar trembled visibly.

Sweat beaded upon Jesus' forehead. Sienna offered him another word. "We could also call it a *hothouse*."

"Yeah," he nodded. "I go in and *mi...*my head gets..." He had no words for what happened to him, was happening to him now, but he got his meaning across by wiping the perspiration from his brow.

"You get sweaty in there."

He nodded, relieved to get another label, one he could use for his everyday experience. "Sw...sweaty."

"People sweat when they get hot." Or, Sienna thought, smiling reassuringly at the child, they are nervous, afraid of being judged too slow, too stupid, found lacking.

Nearby, Pilar had gone sweaty, too. Licking her lips, she tasted salt. *Sweaty*. She had sweated a lot on the way to America, cowering in the back of the coyote's van, hiding

under blankets on the way to the border. A person who perspired that much needed salt. There had been a big block of it, swiped from a rich man's cattle field. Esteban had used a tire iron to break it into very tiny pieces to suck on. It had been nasty, but at least it made them feel as if they had some provisions. When the journey finally ended and they arrived at *Casita Rio* where Lucia had a huge meal waiting, it had felt like they'd crossed over into heaven.

Pilar thought of running back to Lucia now. It would be better to be in the kitchen with her godmother instead of being held accountable for finishing pages she'd couldn't read. It would be much better to be at home, filling hollow plastic skull-shaped molds with sweet paste for *El Dia de Los Muertos*. The only reason Pilar didn't high-tail it out of there was because she knew kids weren't supposed to run in the hall and she didn't want Sienna to see her breaking any rules.

Sienna asked Jesus, "Are you thankful because your mom works in a hothouse?" She chose that synonym for greenhouse because it made the most sense to him.

Jesus nodded.

"Do you like plants? *¿Te gusta plantas y flores?*"

He nodded. "*Me gusta porque cuando le dan dinero, ella puede comprar comida*"

"Claro!" Sienna nodded. "That makes perfect sense! I go shopping on payday. My *hijo* Matt likes to eat, too." She wrote on the elliptical piece of orange construction paper that Tammy had given them to serve as an oversized turkey feather. She ran her finger under each word, showing him how to read, "I am thankful my mom works in a hot-house. It is good she has a job. I like to eat." Jesus chortled and then he read it, haltingly to himself.

His face lit up just like the Swami's had when he ap-

peared to fill Sienna's entire computer screen in *The Writers' Lair*. Jesus recognized himself in foreign words.

Tammy opened the door abruptly. "Done yet?" The sense of the Swami vanished as she scanned the paper feather. "That doesn't make much sense."

"Of course, it does," Sienna said soothingly, wondering why Tammy wouldn't give credit where credit was due. "And he can read it all by himself."

"Well," Tammy snapped, "let's just see how he does on the *Reading Fare* unit test."

Another chair bounced off the metal door. "I WANT TO GO HOME!"

"Come back in, Jesus," Tammy commanded, whipping around. As she rushed back into the classroom, the velour tail pinned to the hem of her black tunic hit the door frame with a threatening thwack.

Jesus hesitated, whispering, "*¿Es la maestra un raton?*"

"Si," Sienna said, without suppressing the mischievous glint in her eye. Tammy's subtle dig about a poetry prize was hard to overlook. "But here, we say she is a mouse." Jesus slipped into the classroom, keeping his distance from Tammy and her disturbing appendage.

The screaming stopped and now inconsolable weeping flowed out of Special Day. Pilar listened, imagining the tears would soon seep out from beneath the battered door and flood the hallway. She imagined Sienna coming to her, with oars and a raft, and that they could ride the waves of sadness away to somewhere safe and peaceful. Instead, Cassandra came, gliding out of their classroom, clutching a fourth-grade hall pass in her hand.

Pilar indicated her blank test. "*No entiende,*" she lamented.

Clad a hand-me-down First Communion dress rigged

with gold wire wings, Cassandra smiled benevolently, an angel of mercy on a mission. "I came to help you. I know all the answers."

Pilar grinned gratefully, feeling even more relief as Sienna approached them.

"Hi girls!" Sienna's whole body stiffened at the sight of Pilar's *Reading Fare* test. Nevertheless, her tone remained relaxed. "What are you two doing out here?"

"I help her," Cassandra explained. "So, she can do art."

"You aren't really supposed to help on a test," Sienna spoke gently.

Cassandra shrugged. She knew it was ridiculous to expect Pilar to take the test on her own. She took Pilar's clammy pencil from her. As Cassandra bubbled in the first answer, her shimmering gold garland halo quivered as if she were receiving direct transmissions from Heaven.

"Oh!" Sienna chuckled softly. "You can't do it for her. You have to tell her what to do."

Cassandra nodded. After a moment's thought, she explained in Spanish. "Pray. Pray to Mary, Jesus, and Joseph." She pointed to the test. "Look at number 1. One is always for Mary. Ask her if the answer is A, B, C, or D. Now, feel your left foot. Which toe tickles? If it's your big toe, the answer is A, if it's the next toe the answer is B, like that. They don't make answers for the little toe because it's just a baby. It knows nothing. It's not fair to ask. Then, look at question number 2. Two is for Jesus. Ask him. Feel your toes.

Pilar understood Cassandra's directions, but she had her doubts. Her faith had been sorely tested during the past several months. Her most earnest prayers had gone unanswered.

"Three is for Joseph," Cassandra said. "Then, go back to Mary. Mary, Jesus, Joseph. Get it?"

Pilar nodded. She liked that it was fair and balanced.

"Do you always take tests like this?" Sienna asked.

"I just started doing it this way this year," Cassandra confided, "Fourth grade is really hard."

"Do you get good scores?"

Cassandra shrugged. "*A veces*. Mary, Jesus, and Joseph get busy. People always distract them, trying to tell them stuff, asking for help. The answers they want to give me sometimes get mixed up with the answers they are giving other people." She lifted her hands up into the air and laughed a little. "Who cares? Commuting with them is good."

The English teacher in Sienna noted Cassandra's mispronunciation of the multisyllabic word *communicating* while the poet within caught a glimpse of the girl gliding over some purgatorial HOV lane, the supportive breath of psyche beneath her angel wings as she shuttled between the Holy Family's home in Heaven and school in Purewater. She asked, "Does it matter what kind of shoes you wear?"

"Flip-flops are the best, but we aren't supposed to wear them to school."

"I WANNA GO HOME!" The shouting began anew.

"Start with Our Lady," Cassandra urged Pilar.

Pilar bowed her head, made her request. As the slender, red second hand ticked around the clock overhead, blood rushed into her third *dedo*! She gasped, eagerly bubbling "c" for the answer to the first question. Then she slowed down, taking time to fill the circle in thickly, darkly, enjoying the throbbing in her toe, luxuriating in the sensation of knowing the answer.

"I WANNA GO HOME!"

Nancy burst out of the classroom, stopping short at the sight of Pilar filling in the correct answer. "Good," she said, grimly. She appeared triumphant, in a black sweater, appliqued with over-sized candy corn as she looked directly into Sienna's eyes, "I'm so glad the Statue of Liberty is here to see what you are capable of when the bar is set high enough."

Sienna was about to respond, but Nancy, cocking her head at Special Day, cut her off. "Did I hear someone screaming?" The candy corn earrings that matched her sweater swung from her earlobes.

"Yes," Sienna replied, keeping her voice highly modulated. "We need to talk about this testing, Nancy. Multiple choice at the frustration level can't reveal what a child does or doesn't know."

Nancy cut her off. "It's best if these kids know what is expected of them right from the beginning. You were right there when the *Reading Fare* trainer said we sabotage their futures if we protect them from grade level expectations in the present."

The principal, Deedee Hayes, accompanied by an unknown blonde woman with a clipboard came through the doors "Oh, shoot!" Nancy groaned, her eyes darting to her October bulletin board. "We haven't even started November yet. I bet Tammy already has hers done." She glared at Sienna for several long seconds and then, as if she had no more time to spend with a teacher as dimwitted as Sienna O'Mara, clapped her hands briskly. "Okay, girls! Time to move along. Pilar, you have five more minutes to finish that test!" Cassandra! Get back inside!

Cassandra waved her pass in the air.

"Why haven't you gone already?" Nancy was clearly

exasperated.

Cassandra said, "I was talking."

Nancy scowled. "There is no talking in the hallways."

"We were working," Sienna said. "Being able to talk and listen in a new language is important for reading comprehension."

Nancy ignored this fact, staring past Sienna, watching as the woman with the clipboard disappeared into a distant classroom and Deedee began to walk their way. "Just hurry up!" Nancy said under her breath, slipping back into her classroom, quickly shutting the door behind her.

Cassandra did not hurry up. She stayed right where she was, standing with Sienna and Pilar, watching *la jefa*. Moore's principal always wore well over a thousand dollars per day in designer clothing, department store shoes, and jewelry.

"Wow!" Deedee exclaimed, striding toward them, grinning broadly at Sienna. "I love your costume! It's amazing what you can do with aluminum foil." She gestured toward Sienna's grey wool clogs less enthusiastically. "And I guess those work."

Sienna opened her mouth to speak, but Deedee went on. "I was up at HQ and got a text that there's a problem in Special Day. I don't know what they expect me to do about it. We just hired another two-hour aide."

Sienna didn't know what to say. Before she could manage a reply, Deedee said. "We were talking about the money that guy dropped in the river a couple of weeks ago." She tapped her elegant chin with the tutti-fruity polished tip of a perfectly manicured fingernail. "Three hundred and fifty thousand bucks! If I could get my hands on that, I'd put it all in my retirement account."

Keeping a poker face, Sienna asked, "Are you plan-

ning to retire?"

"Not until I turn this school around."

"Jesus! *Ayudame!*" Pilar muttered.

"I'm committed to my mission," Deedee said. "It's not much fun though. Everyone is so uptight nowadays. Gee whiz! Do you know there's a petition going around town against that cute little shop? What's it called?" She snapped her fingers, obviously expecting Sienna to supply the answer. When she did not, Deedee tried, "Lover's Lane? Lover's Loot? I can't remember. Anyway, people are all hot and bothered about the lace-up lingerie in the front window."

Sienna jutted her head toward the children.

"Oh!" Deedee bobbed her head from side to side. "Do they understand everything I'm saying?"

"The angel probably does."

"Good." Deedee nodded approvingly. "We've got to get these kids moving along. The requirements are only going to get tougher." She glanced back from where she'd come as if half expecting the woman with the clipboard to reappear. "Still, all we really need," she continued, "are high expectations. From now on, I expect Moore Elementary students to earn above average test scores on the WASTE and someday very soon I expect to be the toast of the realtors' luncheon for exponentially increasing home values in Moore's attendance zone."

Sienna touched Cassandra's shoulder, applying gentle pressure, trying to push her toward the bathroom but *la chica* dug her telegraphic *dedos* into the ground. "It would be wonderful if the real estate market improved," Sienna agreed. "But there's a problem with the new curriculum, Deedee. The ELL kids are having a really hard time with *Reading Fare*."

Confusion and then annoyance flickered over Deedee's face. "Of course, they are having a hard time!" she snapped. "It is a challenging program and we're just starting out with it." She blinked several times and then, as if getting a hold of herself, smiled broadly. "But just you wait! Once they get the swing of it, our scores will skyrocket! And we would deserve a big wad of incentive... if there were ever a chance of getting perks in the public sector! Don't worry, Sienna! If we were running a corporation and got the results this new adoption is going to give us, we would get as much as Baldwin stole from the bank for a holiday bonus! As it stands, they're telling us to get those results just so we can keep the funding we do have coming in."

"I took the *Reading Fare* test," Cassandra blurted. "And it was easy."

Deedee nodded effusively. "Good! Glad to hear it!"

"She has a very interesting approach," Sienna said. "Maybe we could talk..."

"I just pray," Cassandra confessed, clearly giddy in the glow of Deedee's approval.

Deedee clasped the child's hands in her own. "I always prayed in school too!"

Sienna cleared her throat. "And Cassandra just taught Pilar to pray. That's how she got the right answer."

"Success breeds success!" Deedee beamed.

Cassandra flashed a broad smile. Pilar thought the combination of her silver tooth and golden wings was gorgeous.

Deedee let go of Cassandra's hands to pat Sienna's shoulder. "You're a walking social studies lesson. And you look good, too." As if that observation reminded her of something tantalizing, she asked, "How is that" She

framed the air, making quotation marks with her fingers, "boyfriend of yours?"

Sienna didn't want to talk about Andy with her boss. "Deedee," she said reasonably, "you should go into Special Day. It sounded like furniture being thrown."

"Okay." Deedee looked disappointed. "Girl talk, later." She took one step toward Special Day but stopped. "Hey, you don't work with Jonathan, do you? Cute kid. Blonde with blue eyes. Pajamas. Bad breath."

Sienna shook her head.

"Not ELL, is he? Shoot! He stinks to high heaven. Dad is in jail...and you know Mom. All those men. He's in my office right now because he keeps bringing marbles to school and it's not Toys-From-Home Day. I wish you could work with him...you know, make him understand what's expected. Is there a possibility he could be...what?" She snapped her fingers in the air a few times. "Ukrainian?"

Sienna shook her head, Deedee returned to what she clearly really wanted to talk about. "You need to fill me in on your romance, Sienna. I feel responsible for it. I literally put that hunk in your hands." She went on plaintively. "All I ever do is attend boring meetings and out of tune band concerts. And I've been married *forever*. I have to live the...erotic life...vicariously." With a titter and a wave, Deedee turned, leaving the same way she'd come, completely forgetting to go into Special Day.

Sienna looked ruefully at Cassandra. "Don't you have to go to the bathroom?"

"No. I just needed a break." The little girl sounded as desperate as *los hombres* who came to the bar in *Casita Rio* telling Ramon, "*Necesito un cerveza*." Sienna nodded, sympathetically just like Pilar's *padrino* did when he

poured the beer, taking care to minimize the froth forming at the head.

Nancy opened the classroom door. Seething with frustration, she snatched up Pilar's incomplete test. "Maybe you would have finished," she said sharply to the girl, "If you and Cassandra weren't out here just talking with Ms. O'Mara."

Chapter Seven

It was still dark outside and very cold inside her bedroom when Sienna awoke Saturday morning. She pulled her white down comforter up and over her head, as her mother Bridget often told her when she was a child, pulling a hat down over her ears, to keep the fire inside. It was the first of November. Sienna could have been shivering from the chill in the air, but it was also All Saint's Day. *Las brujas*, the witches, in Redención would say she came to consciousness that morning shuddering because the filmy veil between the living and the dead was parting. They would have said it was because the spirits were queuing up, ready to push through as if the boundaries between those with bodies and those without them were as pliable as fan palm, rustling in the desert.

Yet, upon waking, the only significance Sienna assigned to the day was that it was the one on which she permitted herself to reprogram the thermostat. Setting it to sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit until the first of April would cause her to cringe every time she got a bill from the power company, but it would be easier to drag herself out of bed each workday if the master bedroom weren't so icy. A misnomer, of course. There was no master.

Snuggling in her linen, Sienna recalled more of Bridget's maternal advice, imparted during her divorce from Matt's father. "Honey, all you really need is a hot water bottle and a thick pair of socks." Since Sienna's husband had been globe-trotting on business so much for so long before their split, she already knew there was some truth in those words. She was also actually appreciative that, because there was no master, she could toss and turn and sprawl and tug blankets at will, especially on those nights when worrying about work kept her awake. But a hot-blooded man would have been lovely to lie beside at that moment and she thought of Andy.

Ugh! She rolled over in bed, remembering. Didn't Deedee realize that referring to an employee's *erotic* life was inappropriate? For a moment, Sienna wondered, if Deedee really knew what the word *erotic* meant. Oh! I am such an ELL teacher, she thought, but Deedee often seemed woefully ignorant of many words that mattered, like *newcomer* or *language acquisition*. Sienna thought of Miguel's struggle with *greenhouse*. Not a single word in the mandated *Reading Fare* program was inherently more important than the ones the kids needed to learn to share their own experiences and record their realities. A poet's appreciation for the *Swami* and *swap meet* coursed through her.

Sienna rolled over again. Why on earth would Deedee expect her to engage in "girl talk" about her quote, unquote boyfriend, while dismissing Sienna's professional insight? Why indeed, when Deedee herself, had wheedled money out of the Purewater school board to take a team of Moore teachers to Washington, D.C.? Not only that, but Deedee had also gone into the conference bookstore and generously purchased the keynote speaker's latest book

Cognitive Collisions for everyone she'd brought to the conference. Is that what she'd meant when she said she'd put Andy in Sienna's hands? Sure, Deedee had handed a copy of his book to each staff member as they took their seats for Andy's opening session, but she'd had nothing to do with the relationship that sprang up between them after that.

It was three hours ahead on the East Coast. He'd definitely be up. Sienna got out of bed, made tea, and teleconferenced with her boyfriend. Sitting in a lotus pose, with her laptop in a position least likely to reveal the faint smile lines work stress and age were etching upon her face, she sipped Saturday morning oolong as they exchanged greetings. Andy had just returned from his regular run through Rock Creek Park. He was adorable with a terrycloth sweatband around his brow. The sweatband made her think of sweaty Jesus. She turned the conversation to work, saying, "*Reading Fare* is not a good fit for children who don't know very much English."

"I looked into it," Andy said. "*Reading Fare* is not an intervention program. Never was. Never will be."

"The publisher claims to have consulted with Greshem." Sienna said, referring to an ELL expert whose name was listed in the credits in the teacher's manual.

Andy scoffed. "Yeah. I had a drink with Greshem not long ago. He said Pica's not the same company it used to be. Of course, Greshem was glad to get the consulting fees. But he's disgusted. Pica used to hire editors with educational backgrounds. Now, they claim the curriculum has ELL and intervention components just because they tack some no-brainer blurbs in the bottom margins of their teacher editions. Purewater School District should have bought a real intervention program for Moore."

Sienna sighed. "Someone somewhere says we are dumbing it down if we don't give all the kids the exact same level of instruction."

"Why the hell did Deedee waste all that money bringing your staff to the conference this summer?" he asked, truly perplexed. "Didn't I bend over backwards to contrast *Brown v. The Board of Education* with *Lau v. Nichols*?"

"Yes," Sienna said soothingly. He had done an exemplary job explaining how the United States Supreme Court ended segregation for black students with *Brown v. The Board of Education*. He had gone on to explain that *Lau v. Nichols* recognized the need to create access to comprehensible curriculum and instruction for English learners. Andy had gone to great lengths to explain how equal could be a violation of civil rights. But, while he was emphasizing the injustice and counterproductivity inherent in holding students who are learning English to the same levels of performance as children who already know it, Deedee had been texting dinner reservations. Nancy had snuck out to the store in the lobby for a pair of nail scissors. Upon her return, she'd whispered, "It's so much fun to be able to do an errand in the middle of a workday."

Andy said, "I thought I was clear that using the exact same teaching materials and tests is a regression to the sink or swim methods that *Lau v. Nichols* sought to ameliorate."

regressing. It's sink or swim at Moore. I don't know why we're doing something we already know won't work, especially when we already know and have something else that will. Kids need to know enough English to be able to tell their own stories before they can read and understand someone else's." "You were clear about that," Sienna said, "but we're still

"Using *Reading Fair* with English Learners is as discriminatory and illegal as not letting certain segments of a population receive an education at all." Andy pulled his headband off with a growl. His hair stood on end like a lion's mane.

Sienna respected how committed to social justice he was, even in his late forties, after achieving success in the field of education. Of course, for many educators like them, social justice is their real field. "I know."

It had been delightful for her to sit in the grand conference hall with a brand-new book on her lap and watch as Andy stepped up to the microphone. Recognizing him as an old college acquaintance was as delicious as the Butterscotch Blondie the two of them would share later that evening. She'd forgotten his name over the years but, as Andrew Dahlstrom began to speak, she remembered him sitting in the back of her children's literature class.

He'd only made it to midterms. Their class, all women after he left, took his exodus from the teacher credentialing program as a sad and irritating commentary on America's failure to value public education. He'd dropped out because he realized he could earn as much or more driving for UPS than a classroom teacher with a decade of experience would ever see on her pay stub. Plus, he could start pulling that kind of money immediately without waiting to finish his certification, get licensure, find a job, and work for ten years. Clearly though, Andy had somehow found his way back where his heart really belonged.

As he signed her book, he met her eyes and, after a moment of consideration, asked if she'd once created a board game based on the fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling*? Ha! She'd be tarred and feathered like *Brer Rabbit*, if she did something that creative with students at Moore now.

Amazed and flattered that he'd remembered her, Sienna laughed and Deedee immediately invited him to accompany them, adding him to the existing staff reservation at what, coincidentally, turned out to be his favorite restaurant.

By All Saints' Day, Sienna and Andy had been dating online for almost two months. Sienna was grateful they spoke the same professional language. She said, "Brenda Hadley's school board campaign slogan was "Impressive Expectations." *Reading Fare* has been adopted to fulfill them, but people in Purewater just don't understand what English Learners need."

Andy snorted, "Impressive expectations reminds me of Dickens. *Great Expectations*."

"Yeah," Sienna said. "I don't get why Deedee and Nancy are so determined to dole out such indigestible gruel and sugarcoat it, calling it high expectations."

Andy cupped his hands. "Please, sir," he begged, pathetically, "can I have some more?"

"No. Sorry, Oliver," Sienna said.

Andy said. "And so we repeat *Oliver Twist*."

"We are such literary nerds!" Sienna leaned closer to the computer screen. "*Reading Fare* pretends to be nourishing, but it's not. The publisher promises results, but the curriculum is unnecessarily confusing and disempowering for at-risk kids. It's actually doing the opposite of what it promises. I'm going to have to find a way to make Deedee listen to me."

"Yep. And you should start wearing a tee-shirt that says *Eschew Obfuscation*. I'll pick one up for you at the university bookstore tomorrow, so you can wear it to work."

"I don't think anyone on my staff will know what it means."

"Then come work here. I'll get you a job at the college," he said.

"Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest?"

"We'd make it work. Who could blame me? He grinned boyishly at her. "Honestly, Sienna, I feel like a college kid, thinking about you all day. I can't concentrate on grading midterms."

Sienna couldn't stop herself from batting her eyelashes at him through the screen. "Am I distracting you?"

She remembered how, after Deedee and the other teachers finally went up to their rooms, they'd hugged. It had begun as a friendly farewell embrace, but the smell of his aftershave had been as enchanting for her as the jasmine scent of her shampoo had been intoxicating for him. Struck by desire, they'd kissed instead of backing out of each other's arms. Every prism in the chandelier above had twinkled, as if the lamp were drawing the luminosity from every other source in the ornate room to bathe them in a singular spectral light.

"Mmmm!" Sienna had purred.

"Mmmm," he'd echoed. "Can we try that again?"

"In fairy tales," she'd murmured, "things come in threes," and their lips met once more. And then again.

Now, with the memory of those magical kisses boomeranging against their respective screens, Sienna said, "I can't wait ten days to see you in person."

"I wish I were there right now!" Andy said, wistfully. "What are you going to do today?"

She'd had no plans until the answer slipped off her tongue, "I'm going to the swap meet." Andy had seemed serious about the shirt. "And I do want one of those shirts, please. I wear a medium."

Sienna parked her car at the trailhead where the bank robber had abandoned his vehicle and her son had risked his life. Purewater's swap meet was held further south, at the fairgrounds near the South Side bridge but she wanted to hike to it. She loved her daily weekday walk up on Teagan Hill where she lived but enjoyed branching out on the weekends.

Sienna set off at a brisk pace through Western red cedar and deciduous trees boasting plum, crimson, and marigold leaves. Matt would be at the dojang all morning. Maybe she could stop on her way back to the car to buy him a taco at *Casita Rio* for lunch. The food was always good there and she could count on seeing at least one, if not several, of her students whenever she stopped in.

Lost in her thoughts of her son, Sienna gradually realized that a surprising number of teenagers were out along the river for so early on a Saturday morning. Many were sharing binoculars, peering into and across the river. She decided either the local Audubon or Save Our Fish associations were hosting some sort of youth event.

A girl wearing a form-fitting jacket and lounging on a huge granite rock bordering the river caught Sienna's attention. It was Dulce Gantala, a former student. She had to be close to fifteen by now. Her maroon hoodie wasn't anywhere bulky enough to keep her warm on such a chilly morning. She must have been chosen it to match her long, manicured fingernails and her glossy lipstick.

Dulce had first enrolled at Moore as a fourth grader. Back then, she'd worn her shiny black hair in two braids. Now, she could easily tuck her free-flowing locks into the back pockets of her low-slung, skin-tight jeans. No longer

a child, she had a woman's body, but Sienna still recognized her. She did not know the striking, shirtless young man who stood ankle-deep in the frigid water of the river beside Dulce's granite haven. He had dark brown skin and jet-black hair. The ragged hems of his worn jeans were rolled up to his knees as he maneuvered the splintered handle of a shovel with his bare hands. He had to be freezing, but Sienna could sense the red-hot attraction between the kids. It was so transparent, sweet, and disturbing.

"Dulce?" she called, hoping that by initiating conversation she could somehow remind this clearly smitten teenager that she had once wanted to go to college, to become a teacher—that once upon a time she'd wanted to come back to Moore and sit on Sienna's desk.

"Oh!" Dulce exclaimed happily as she recognized the woman who'd taught her English. "I miss you so much!"

"I miss you, too." Sienna smiled at her and at the boy, inviting him into their conversation. He nodded at her pleasantly but did not speak. She guessed he did not know much English.

"Why are so many kids down here today?" Sienna asked.

"Because of the bank robber," Dulce explained. "People think they can find the money."

Amused and intrigued by the treasure hunt, Sienna asked, "How long have you two been out here?"

"A few hours. We started early because Esteban has to go to work soon." Dulce's tone was tinged with pride. Jobs were coveted in the immigrant community.

"What will you do with the money if you find it?"

Dulce shrugged. "Go out for ice cream. Esteban almost got arrested when the police were chasing the robber. Lucky for him, nothing bad happened. A kid came out of

the woods and saved him. He says it was *un milagro*."

Sienna had been concerned about Matt getting hurt in the chase. Now, she realized how his quick action had saved another mother's boy from a terrible fate. Thank goodness, they'd both been safe.

"Poor Esteban," Dulce confided. "He was really scared. He and his little sister just got here. Do you know a new girl named Pilar?"

"*Pilar es su hermana?*" Sienna asked the boy. He nodded and she introduced herself.

"*Senora O'Mara!*" He grinned, telling her in Spanish how much Pilar enjoyed her class.

Sienna began to respond, but Dulce interrupted in English. "People with no papers are scared," she said urgently with a sideways glance at Esteban. "You won't tell the police about all the people in Purewater without them, will you, Ms. O'Mara?"

Sienna looked Dulce in the eyes. "I don't care about papers."

Dulce's eyes rolled upwards with relief. She had no idea that the United States Supreme Court had decided *Plyler v. Doe* back in the eighties, freeing a teacher from any concerns about the citizenship of her students and their families. "Kids wanted to come out here last night to look for the money instead of going trick-or-treating, but some of the parents were worried about us getting taken by *La Migra* or falling in the water." She scoffed, "All the grandmas started talking about river ghosts."

As Dulce translated this for Esteban, a panicked expression flashed across his face. A stream of rapid, agitated speech followed. All that Sienna could manage to understand was "*Pilar no debe escucharlas.*" Pilar should not hear of this. She did not doubt his desire to protect his little sis-

ter from something scary, but Sienna sensed that Esteban was also reacting against a phantom from his own past as well.

Dulce recognized it, too. She spoke to him soothingly in Spanish. "Ms. O'Mara," she said quickly, "can you please explain the science to Pilar? Just tell her the river moves too fast and she should stay away. And can you tell her, there's no such thing as ghosts? Teachers always say that anyway. I mean, if there's a ghost in a story, they always say there's no such thing."

Sienna realized that if the whole town were embarking on a treasure hunt, it would be a good idea for teachers to address river safety. Yet, she found herself surprisingly uneasy at refuting the ghost story the grandmas were telling. Why? She wondered. Was it because as a poet she already knew there are often consequences for dismissing what exists even if it cannot be seen?

As Dulce comforted Esteban, a ray of sunlight grazed the rocks overturned by his bankside digging. One of the wet stones flashed. For a moment it seemed as if he'd actually unearthed a miner's silver nugget. Sienna scooped it up. The stone was round. Like a candle, it had a concave surface. Instead of containing melted wax, it held a thimble-sized pool of water. While she considered the illuminated rock, Dulce opened her arms and Esteban waded right into them.

When Sienna said goodbye, the embracing teenagers didn't seem to hear her. She continued her walk south, suspecting neither Mr. or Mrs. Gantala had any idea that their beautiful daughter was out with this handsome and fragile young man. Dulce's father worked at the local tire shop and her mother behind the deli counter at Bonny Deals. Documentation had never seemed to be an issue for

the Gantala clan.

Sienna caught herself assuming that Dulce would want to date “up.” Elementary kids almost always embraced newcomers, but she knew more established teens were sometimes hesitant to befriend them and could even be harsh and judgmental of those who reminded them of their own vulnerability in the mainstream. As she dried the rock and slipped it into her fleece pocket, Sienna wished she could just “explain the science” and remind Dulce and Esteban to be careful around the raging river of first love, but that wasn’t her job, was it?

Chapter Eight

As Sienna reached the fairgrounds, mariachi music and the scent of nachos with jalapeño floated upon the air. She realized her students had been telling the truth. The Swami, swap meet, did indeed sell nachos at a booth where tissue-paper piñatas dangled from overhead cables.

Nearby, giant marigolds, outgrowing their tiny seedling trays, and the final dahlias and sunflowers of the season beckoned. Mrs. Yang, the grandmother of several of Sienna's Hmong students, plucked blooms from various buckets, snipped their stems, deftly creating lavish bouquets. Her granddaughter Bao was one of Sienna's second grade students. She stood ready to wrap them in brown paper and rubber bands. This may have been a swap meet, but Grandma Yang's sign was clear. She had zero interest in trading. She expected cash.

Two men lugged an old automatic engine toward the flower stall. Sienna recognized the red-faced man wearing an oversized local brewery's promotional T-shirt over his impressive beer belly. He was Ian Hadley, School Board President Brenda Hadley's son and Laurali's dad. Ian was with his brother, Mark, who was much lankier and wore a red bandana tied around his forehead. Sienna realized he must be married to the willful and alternative aunt Laurali

had described to her and Jolie at bus duty.

"Hey!" Ian Hadley said to his brother, "I bet a bunch of flowers could save both of us from some grief tonight." The men set their load on the asphalt in front of Grandma Yang.

Ian squinted at the price list. "Ten bucks to enjoy this baby without nagging?" He patted the top of a metallic cylinder affectionately as if were the downy head of a toddler clinging to his leg. "Sounds like a good deal to me!"

"Good deal." Grandma Yang, agreed, waving her hand over the ready-made arrangements. "These cost thirty in the store."

Ian reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

If Sienna hadn't had to hike back to her car at the other end of Purewater, she would have bought a bouquet for herself. Instead, she turned her attention to the other treasures the swap meet offered — car parts, farm equipment, chipped dishes and used baby clothes. She noted a group of children of stair-step heights, all with glossy black hair, standing around a spread of old toys and tattered books. She recognized some of the books. Darn it! What were they doing here? She'd culled them from Moore's library back when she'd been the school librarian. Some were culturally offensive, particularly to Native Americans. Others were overtly sexist.

During the first big influx of English Language Learners into Purewater, Sienna had begun purchasing brightly illustrated Mexican folktales for the library. She'd put an order in on the morning the Gantala kids and their cousins enrolled. She'd stayed late to process the books as soon as they'd arrived to get them on the shelves or into the children's hands as quickly as possible. She'd wanted them to feel that they and the stories of their culture were welcome

in the school.

Bao was suddenly at her side, presenting her with a red dahlia. She was a quiet child, more reserved than most of Sienna's other students.

"Thank you." Sienna said warmly, knowing Bao would have been embarrassed by profuse appreciation.

Upon hearing her familiar voice behind them, the children at the discard booth turned. Cassandra, Lupe, and Pilar stared at Sienna, awestruck to see her outside of school.

"Why you here?" Cassandra finally blurted.

"I wanted to meet you at the Swami!" Sienna winked.

"Swap Meet!" They cried, bouncing on the balls of their feet. "It's called a swap meet!"

Sienna laughed. "Oh! Excuse me. I meant to say that."

"*Hola Maestra!*" Cassandra's mother joined them quickly, clearly mortified to see her daughter jumping up and down and shouting at the teacher. She had a sleeping baby in the sling she wore beneath the woolen shawl over her shoulders, and she balanced a tray of leggy marigolds in her hands.

Sienna admired the baby, putting Mrs. Fuentes at ease and so, Mrs. Fuentes could not resist asking the question that the ELL parents asked Sienna more than any other. "*Cómo se comporta?*" How is my daughter's behavior?

"*Ella es muy buena.*"

"*Y la lectura?* It is good now?"

It still bothered Sienna to remember the parent-teacher conference Nancy called shortly after school began in September. Through the interpreter, she'd told a worried Mrs. Fuentes that Cassandra *was supposed* to read ninety-three words per minute on a fourth-grade passage that she had never seen or heard before, but that she could only read

twenty-eight. Nancy asserted that because fourth grade was considered the make-it-or-break-it-year for literacy, Cassandra had to start reading three times faster than she currently did within the next few months or she would never ever catch up in school. Mrs. Fuentes swallowed hard. She couldn't read in English or in Spanish.

"Let's look at this another way," Sienna broke in using her own halting Spanish. "My fluency score in Spanish is about sixty on text I've practiced a few times. And it's a lot slower if I'm working to understand what I'm reading, but..."

Nancy interrupted, shaking her head. "Let's keep it to the point. Fluency is our first priority. The National Reading Commission told Congress fluency comes first!"

Mrs. Fuentes wrung her hands when the interpreter told her that Congress was involved in her daughter's reading problem. Sienna tried to explain, "The idea is that if a child can read at the target speed, reading has become so automatic that she's no longer having to think about sounding out or recognizing words. When kids read with fluency, they can concentrate on what the words mean. Putting fluency first doesn't work out very well for people who don't know the language they are reading. They don't know if the words they are sounding out and reading are actually words in the unknown language. They have no way of telling if what they read makes any sense or not. There's just no feedback loop if people can word call in a language they don't know. That's why I teach English by having kids write their own personal stories. They already know everything that happened and what the people in their own stories were thinking and feeling, so their brains can focus on the words they need to learn to tell about that."

"Cassandra is required to reach ninety words per minute by Christmas," Nancy said firmly. "You need to help her at home."

"Okay." Mrs. Fuentes agreed.

As she left, Nancy told Sienna, "I've got the rest of my ELL conferences covered. Please don't waste your time coming to any more of them."

Now, at the swap meet, Mrs. Fuentes reported that Cassandra was always writing little *cuentas*, stories, at home and she was reading them to her younger siblings. She thanked Sienna for working with Cassandra in *The Writers' Lair* and led her daughter away.

Heads held high, Bao, Lupe, and Pilar escorted *la maestra* toward a tent at the end of the lot where Sienna assumed a trio of grinning musicians wearing silver-studded charro outfits, shiny leather boots, and wide-brimmed hats were strumming classic guitars. She carried the red dahlia past displays of secondhand cutlery. And on the way, she began to notice pots of marigolds everywhere – as if the shimmering splashes of radiant yellow and bold oranges were rushing forward, to be first in line, in the foreground of her consciousness. Some of the flowers were banked against a curb where a woman placed them so she could tie her child's shoe. Others were sunk into the faded canopies of strollers so *las abuelitas* could rummage through piles of multi-colored Christmas lights. Packs of top-heavy, leggy marigolds were precariously perched between piles of used clothing so they wouldn't tip over as middle-aged men held shirts up against their midriffs, approximating the fit.

The mariachi band paused. Sienna barely registered the silence because all the marigolds were reminding her that while today was All Saints Day, tomorrow would be

The Day of the Dead and she was wondering if she should celebrate it in the *Writers Lair* on Monday. A sudden explosion of discordance startled her. Rap spewed from a nearby old Honda Civic's radio. The lyrics and the word choices were disturbing. The children at her side did not seem affected by the switch from mariachi to rap, but the happy faces of the adults around her suddenly grew grim at the inciting chant, "Dust the cops off." *Imbécile!* The Mexicans all thought instantly. Everyone knew that the local police and federal agents were still scouring the surrounding area, looking for traces of the bank robber. Law enforcement could be upon them all within moments.

The two Hadley men who'd just bought bouquets from Grandma Yang were parked directly behind the offending car. They were arguing about how to pack the engine they'd gotten at the swap meet into the old Citation they'd driven to the event. The Citation was already full of automobile debris. The sudden noise from the car in front turned their irritation about the lack of space to instant outrage. It was fine to be serenaded by Mexican music while combing the swap meet. It was another thing, altogether, to have their eardrums assaulted while trying to cram their prize in the car while resisting the fear that it might not fit. Fury at what was clearly "gangbanger" music invading their town flashed in their eyes.

In the Civic, Sienna saw a young man with lowered lids and pale skin, slouching behind a cracked windshield. His head bobbed with the heavy beat. He seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he was forcing the community to listen to a piece of music they resented hearing. Ian Hadley stepped forward—a tire iron in his hand. Sienna's heart leapt to her throat. There was violence in the music. There was violence in Hadley's movement. There

was violence in the air.

Suddenly, the side door of a weathered Dodge Gallion parked at an angle next to the mariachi tent slid open. A broad-shouldered man in cowboy boots, faded jeans and a plain black T-shirt ducked his head out, scanning the scene. He stepped down from the van, running his hand over the scant beard on his chin. Roused, like a father from a Sunday nap to snake a clogged toilet, he strode purposefully toward the pulsating Civic.

"Gaul?" Pilar grabbed Sienna's hand.

The man Pilar called Gaul thumped on the window. The kid inside did not hear. The motion of Gaul's dark, muscular arm caught his attention. He rolled the window down, "*Qué?*" Insolence glittered in his basalt eyes.

Gaul mouthed something only the juvenile could see. The kid shrugged, rolled up his window, and started his car. Gaul tapped the window again. The offending music stopped. Gaul stepped aside, watching until the car disappeared. Then he turned to Ian Hadley, his dark eyes traveling to the iron rod in the angry man's grip. He gestured toward the oversized engine and the too small car. "Do you need some help there?" Ian shrugged, sheepishly. Gaul stepped forward quickly, expertly, directing the men on how to rearrange their junk so that the new acquisition would fit.

Lupe and Bao wandered a little closer to the Citation. Overcrowded vehicles and homes were part of their daily lives, and they knew there was value in observing this man's technique. Pilar watched too, but not like a girl watching a man help other men solve a puzzle. Still clinging to Sienna, she'd ossified, much like she had during the lockdown.

"*El conoce?*" Sienna asked.

"No se," Pilar said with a dazed expression.

"You don't know if you know him?"

Of course, a child in Pilar's situation could get confused. Sienna knew Pilar would experience bouts of disorientation in a new country. She wished the school district could still fund a school counselor for newcomers, especially those who'd clearly experienced trauma.

Ian Hadley and his brother-in-law left the swap meet using the cylinders of their newly acquired engine as vases for Grandma Yang's bouquets. As the men drove away, the bright faces of sunflowers, red dahlias, and giant mariolds bobbed in the back window of Ian's Citation.

The children went to play with the flower stand's discarded stems and stray buds. Sienna watched them for a moment, listening to the multi-lingual dialogue of their game, remembering how she once played with her mother's fuchsias. As a little girl, she'd spent hours in Bridget's San Jose, California garden, pretending that each blossom was a fairy. Wearing pink tutus and raspberry tights on their stamen legs, Sienna's fuchsia fairies had leapt from the hanging basket tower to the ground, intent upon enchanting the toads that lived under landscaping rocks. Matt had never played with flowers. He'd always liked tossing rocks into Teagan Creek.

Sienna wandered over to the mariachi tent, vaguely disappointed to discover there was no band—just a boom box. Yet, the bright Zapotec blankets and folk art inside were intriguing. She looked over tin hearts, hand-painted terra cotta tiles, carvings of *los santos*, and free-standing niches that could be installed in corners of the home, creating instant altars for honoring the saints. Some items looked worn, authentically vintage: others newly varnished.

Like Grandma Yang's flowers, these were not to be traded, but sold. Sienna read the business card attached to a stunning serape. *Arte para la Gente*. She noted the price tag. Gaul stepped to her side, smelling of sage and patchouli as he said, "This was handmade in Clemencia."

Clemencia sounded familiar. Sienna had only had time for a brief glance at Pilar's records before creating her ELL file in moments stolen between teaching, testing, and preparing for lessons.

"Do you like it?" Gaul picked up the serape.

"It's beautiful."

"Would you like to try it on?" He asked, pushing it toward her. He sounded friendly. No pressure in his tone.

"I wouldn't really wear something like this," she confessed, taking it from him. Its weight was comforting, like a guaranteed shield against the bite of winter, but she wouldn't pay that much for something she wouldn't wear very often. In Purewater, the only ethnic dressers were the Pakistani mom of a fifth-grade boy and the Iraqi aunt of four girls. In fact, if Sienna wore a serape with such a bold pattern, people would assume it was because she was an ELL teacher trying too hard to make a statement that no one wanted her to make. So, she smiled ruefully, glad she'd had a chance to see handicraft from her students' homeland before Gaul realized there was no market for them in Purewater and took them away.

Gaul said, "This serape is woven from ixtle, a traditional fiber that comes from the maguey plant." He seemed to expect her to know the significance of that fact. Seeing that she did not, he explained, "It's made from the same material as Juan Diego's cloak."

"Juan Diego?"

He spoke as if he were gently chiding her to remem-

ber a story she should know well. "The *indio* who saw Our Lady of Guadalupe. They met in December. It was the dead of winter, and she gave him an armload of blooming roses. She told him to wrap them in his cloak and take them to the bishop to prove that she was real."

Sienna thought of the jewelry Lupe had worn on the day the Swami joined *The Writers' Lair*. She also vaguely recalled prayer cards with the story on the back on them that she'd seen at her grandmother's house when she was a little girl. "Ah, yes. I do know that story."

"Put it on," Gaul urged.

She hesitated.

He took the serape from her. "May I?" Barely waiting for her nod, he draped the holy material over her shoulders. "I sell a lot of these at my gallery in Santa Fe. The dyes in this one are from completely natural sources."

Sienna admired how cleanly the black and red stripes were delineated from the white. She found herself wondering if the colors would run when she washed it.

"The red dye comes from the traditional crushing of female beetles."

Beneath the serape, Sienna suddenly went cold. Crushing a cochineal to dye yarn seemed archaic and cruel. She routinely bought and wore fleece made from recycled soda pop bottles. Still, she didn't want to appear squeamish or unappreciative of the art, so she left the serape on. The fringe of it fluttered around her wrist as her hand swept over the carvings of dancing skeletons displayed on the table before her. "I love all of this. It's really wonderful."

He arched his eyebrow with the playful pleasure of a man happily accepting a compliment from *una mujer bonita*. "Thank you." It clearly didn't matter to Gaul

whether she bought or not. "I am Gaul Santiago."

She told him her name and, that she taught English to newcomers in town, but as she remembered Pilar's odd reaction to him, Sienna had second thoughts about disclosing such personal information. She cocked her head slightly, considering him carefully. Maybe he was a fraud. If he really owned a gallery in Santa Fe, why would he be traveling so far north in a vehicle, which by all appearances, was apt to leave him stranded on the side of the road? Maybe the serape had actually been made in China. Gaul was good-looking. He was probably a revving-down Don Juan, an expert in weaving lies.

Gaul nodded as if he recognized her skepticism and forgave her for it. "I buy and sell arts and crafts so people in Mexico can feed their children. I think it's great that you teach the kids who can get to the states what they need to know to make a living in the United States."

"Well, that's one way to look at it," Sienna said. "But I want to teach so kids can reach their full human potential."

Gaul met her eyes for a moment before he scanned the swap meet. He took in the empty space where he'd just helped Ian Hadley rearrange his car and Grandma Yang's flower stand. Under the table bedecked with marigolds, the little girls were still sharing discarded flowers and trading words in three, maybe four languages. "Are any of them your students?"

"They are." Sienna claimed the girls more like a proud *tía* than a schoolteacher all the while hoping that Pilar wouldn't get confused about which new words she was learning were Hmong and which were English. Would she think red and say *liab*?

Sienna shifted slightly under the serape. "Artists in the making."

"The one in pink? Does she do any sculpting?"

Sienna was taken aback. Did he recognize Pilar as she had recognized him? Was this safe? She decided to answer the question and move on. At Moore, worksheets reigned supreme. Deedee had even scolded the first-grade teacher, Mavis Penn, for letting children practice letters formation with salt dough. Though this was a powerful teaching technique, Deedee had forced Mavis to remove it from her learning center. Sculpture was definitely not part of the curriculum. "Just crayon on construction paper," Sienna said.

He said, "I bet it's an amazing piece anyway. I am sure I could sell it at auction."

Suddenly, something about his enthusiasm felt authentic, good, and true. Sienna imagined him taking Pilar's mermaid away. "I couldn't bear to part with it." She confided, surprised by the small wave of anxiety that washed over her at the thought.

Gaul reached for the serape. It seemed to tear away from Sienna like an adhesive bandage pulling at tender hair follicles. And it was at that moment she realized that wearing something dyed with bug's blood wasn't what had bothered her, it was the phrase—the traditional crushing of the female—that had chilled her.

Gaul refolded the wrap carefully, saying, "I may be wrong about this, but if you are that little girl's teacher, I think you should have something from her homeland. Will you wait while I get it?"

Sienna nodded uncertainly. Would he expect her to pay for it? She calculated that her house payment was probably, at this very moment, being transferred out of her checking account to pay the lender, leaving just enough for the month's gas and groceries. Well, she told herself, just

because he wanted her to have something didn't mean she had to buy it.

Gaul hesitated for a moment too, clearly still considering and then disappeared into his van, leaving Sienna to ponder a set of ornate wooden crucifixes. Gaul returned with a painted terracotta woman. She was about twelve inches tall; her neck long and thin, forehead wide. Her hair was painted black. She wore a yellow gown. A miniature *rebozo*, a baby-carrying sling, was strapped across her shoulder, but there was no baby in it. A vertical fissure ran from her brow to her bare feet. "There has been a lot of trouble in the state of Redención lately," Gaul said, jutting his chin toward the split as if political unrest were directly responsible for the schism in the clay. "I knew this was a precious piece when I snatched it."

Snatched? Sienna was suspicious once again. Did he steal and profit from the disempowered indigenous?

"I couldn't find the artist," Gaul said, his tone bordering on desperation and confession. "I searched, but I couldn't find her. Redención was essentially empty."

Empty? Essentially? Sienna knew Gaul, that like Pilar and Esteban, had seen something terrible. He was clearly overwhelmed by sadness and she felt it too.

"It feels right to give her...I mean this... to you because I feel you know what needs to be done for the children."

Sienna had had a lot of praise as teacher throughout the course of her career, but no other adult, besides Andy, had ever spoken to her like her expertise was valuable after she had become an ELL teacher. Tears warmed her eyes.

Placing the statue in her hands, Gaul told Sienna. "The place this clay comes from is a well-guarded secret, The

clay, itself, has remarkable qualities, especially when used for *calaveras*."

Sienna wondered if she was having an allergic reaction to the paint or the clay. Her palms and fingers were tingling. Small electrical shocks kept her from accessing the English definition of *calaveras*. What were *calaveras*?

Gaul said, "From what I could glean, the clay comes from soil moistened by a hot spring in an underground aquifer. The people call it *matriz*. They say it's given by *La Madre Ardiendo*, the volcano that determines the destiny of the world.

As the tingling snaked up in Sienna's arm, she heard a woman voice in her head, whispering, "I belong to *Las Mujeres de Tierra*." Gaul swallowed hard, peered intently into Sienna's eyes. "Yes. That's right. The clay only reveals its secrets to the women of the earth."

Sienna was confused. What was happening? And how could he be communicating with the voice in her skull?

"Tell me," He said slowly, "What did that little girl draw in your class?"

Sienna could barely keep her arm from spasming. "A mermaid."

"A mermaid?" He frowned thoughtfully. "What does she look like?"

"She has long hair."

"Like yours?"

Sienna shrugged. "Maybe." Just because he'd given her an allergy-inducing gift, just because he'd read what popped into her mind, didn't make the length of her hair any of his business.

"Sorry," Gaul stepped back. "I was just thinking about how much she...all the kids... must adore you," he said. "And about how much you must inspire her."

He seemed sincere. Sienna decided he was a decent man. She lifted *La Mujer de Tierra* slightly, exerting effort to keep her arm from trembling. "I'll keep this on my desk to inspire me."

After thanking Gaul again, Sienna stopped by Grandma Yang's booth. She didn't want to hold the statue any longer. Her fanny pack was quite full with her wallet and keys and it wasn't quite long enough to lay *La Mujer de Tierra* in, so she zipped the figure inside, upright, facing outward.

"Like a joey," Bao remarked, with a shy, grin as she and Pilar crawled out from under the table. Dulce and Esteban had come to take Pilar home. Both Bao and Sienna were delighted Bao remembered what English speakers call a baby kangaroo.

Impulsively, Sienna asked Grandma Yang for a mixed tray of bright yellow, orange, and red marigolds. As the woman counted out her change, Sienna rubbed her arm, realizing she probably wasn't allergic to the clay or the paint on the figurine. The tingling she felt holding the statue was more likely from a pinched nerve in her neck. She remembered Miguel trying to write about his mom with Tammy agitatedly hovering over both of them. Sitting on low student chairs out in the hallway was hard on Sienna's body and her nerves. And, now it was too late to decide against the flowers, against carrying them back to her car. She watched Pilar, Esteban, and Dulce take the river trail back toward downtown Purewater. Where was Pilar's mom? Sienna realized Pilar had never mentioned her.

Moments later inside his van, Gaul watched Sienna walk after them. It was too late to question his decision to give her *La Mujer de Tierra*. It was too late for him to regret

his loss of the lady. He told himself the statue was only valuable if it would be used, and it could only be used by a woman who was sensitive to its power and believed in its value. He'd done the best he could with what was left.

Chapter Nine

On the trail, Sienna met Jolie strolling arm-in-arm with Purewater's police chief, Captain Wolfgang Goodwin. His nickname was Wolf. He greeted Sienna with, "Matt flipped me again," adding as he rubbed his lower back. "He's getting really good."

"Sorry." Sienna frowned sympathetically, although she felt relieved her son could protect himself, at least in certain kinds of danger.

"Dispatch reported commotion down here." Wolf said. "Did you see anything?"

"Commotion?" Sienna shook her head. "Related to the bank robbery?"

"No." Wolf said, "This call was about music."

"Oh! That only lasted for a minute." Sienna told him. "Who would have called the police so quickly?"

"Probably one of Brenda Hadley's people," Wolf said. "Brenda was against the city issuing a permit for a swap meet right from the get-go. But, she's on the school board this term. Rebecca is mayor right now, so it went through."

"Brenda and Rebecca Hadley are sisters," Sienna explained to Jolie. "Part of the Purewater dynasty. They switch back and forth between city government and the school board. I think they were born to personify the pen-

dulum swing in politics. They embody the Reading Wars very well."

Wolf furrowed his brow. He had no idea what the Reading Wars were, but he knew Purewater politics. He told Jolie, "I guess I should warn you that I could get called away at moment's notice for an overturned dumpster. Or, today, for calls about smashed pumpkins."

Sienna and Wolf had always been friendly, but never got involved, assuming it just wasn't a good idea for a woman to date her son's sparring buddy. Sienna was happy to see Wolf with Jolie.

Jolie told him. "I've always got a stack of novels ready to play second fiddle."

"I'm partial to a football," Wolf said.

"As *second* fiddle?" Jolie clarified.

Wolf winked at her. "That all depends on who's playing first."

"Me, of course," Jolie laughed flirtatiously.

As Wolf would confess later, much later, it was at that moment he realized that if he had the money that Baldwin had lost in the river, he'd wine and dine Jolie until it felt appropriate to surprise her with a diamond engagement ring and two tickets for a first-class honeymoon cruise.

Unaware of this degree of seriousness, Jolie gestured toward Sienna's marigolds. "Pretty, but they won't last long. We are bound to get frost."

"These are for my portable," Sienna explained. "Tomorrow is *El Día de los Muertos*."

Jolie and Wolf both looked puzzled.

Sienna said. "It's a Latino holiday to honor the dead. You can read about it in a book I bought for the library when I was still the librarian at Moore, right before I started teaching ELL."

Jolie nodded, taking that in. "We should talk as soon I get through the Veteran's Day assembly, Sienna. Right before I left last night, Deedee said she wanted me to organize the whole thing, including having the high school band and all the flag girls march past Moore to kick it off."

For a moment, Sienna imagined Deedee in the lead, waving a *Reading Fare* banner. "You can't pull all that off by next week! There are too many logistical issues," she said.

Jolie sighed. "Deedee insisted it's essential for poor kids to see a parade. I reminded her there's a good chance it will be pouring rain," Jolie paused uncomfortably. "And then..."

"And then what?" Sienna asked, although she could guess.

"She snapped." Jolie said. "Really. She stomped her feet and shouted, 'I'm sick of everyone around here raining on my parade!'"

"Maybe she has been taking a lot of heat for allowing Halloween." Sienna mused.

"Maybe," Jolie agreed, "But think about all the flack she'll get if something goes wrong with six hundred kids on the sidewalk in bad weather."

"Not gonna happen," Wolf said. "Too late to file the paperwork. We can't just shut First Street down because Deedee Hayes gets another crazy idea." His blue eyes twinkled as he jutted his chin toward Sienna. "I never pegged you for a swap meet kind of girl, Sienna. Shouldn't you be out in the woods hugging a tree or writing a poem?"

"You're profiling, Wolf. One of my students wrote about coming here and I wanted to check it out."

"And now they've got you celebrating The Day of the

Dead, too?"

"It's the fastest growing holiday in Purewater, Captain. You should probably keep that in mind." Sienna winked at the new couple before her. "You two have fun. Don't forget to ice your back later, Wolf. I'm off to see if our black belt will let me buy him a taco."

After her delightful morning at the swap meet with new friends, Pilar ate *empanadas* for lunch and then climbed on a stool to stir the *mole* simmering in the black cast iron pot on the stove. She couldn't risk being seen because she didn't have a food handler's permit. When she helped at the café, Pilar kept herself hidden behind the heavy canvas curtain between the kitchen and the dining area. As she stirred, she craved sugar, tempted by a plate of *calaveras de azucar* at her elbow.

Lucia had made sugar skulls the day before. While Pilar was at school, learning to pray for the best multiple-choice answers on her Reading Fare test, Lucia and Ramon had joked about serving *calaveras* in the restaurant on *El Día de Los Muertos*. Ramon had held a skull up, considering all the orifices. "This is no Chinese cookie."

Lucia sighed. "Yeah. Americans love good fortune. They sure don't want to look death in the eye socket." With that, they scrapped the whole idea. Now, the best craniums were upstairs on *La Sirena's* altar. The misshapen ones had been left behind for snacking, and they seemed to be whispering, calling Pilar by name.

Esteban was working in the kitchen after the swap meet too. He was chopping lettuce. Dulce stood much closer to him than anyone should ever stand next to a man

wielding a knife. When Lucia noticed this, she studied Dulce. Lucia had been the same way with Ramon at that age. When Dulce begged to stay and help, Lucia asked her about school and when the girl confessed to having homework, Lucia urged her to go, kindly inviting her to return for a cooking lesson when the café wasn't quite so busy.

Dulce's thanks were profuse. Pilar guessed Dulce loved Esteban. She probably also wanted to learn how to make the best *mole* in the state. Maybe she wanted to land herself a job at *Casita Rio* as soon as Ramon and Lucia could afford to pay someone. On the way back from the swap meet, Dulce told Esteban and Pilar that if she had the money Baldwin lost, she would have a fancy quinceanera and then move her parents and five siblings out of the two-bedroom apartment they rented in the South Side complex to buy a four bedroom, two bath house with a yard. She'd invite her aunt and uncle and cousins to move in with her family, too.

After Dulce went home, Pilar popped a whole *calavera* into her mouth and continued to stir the *mole*. She loved the way the sugar dissolved on her tongue. As the cocoa and spice in her stovetop cauldron bubbled and swirled around the spoon, she relaxed into a trance of sorts, lulled by the drone of the kitchen fan, the repetitive thwack of Esteban's blade on the cutting board, and the hum of happy diners coming from the front of the restaurant. But soon an argument from the alley behind wafted through the cracked kitchen window and drew her out of her brief reverie.

"I'll pay for it." Sienna was insisting. "Do you want chicken or beef? Corn or flour tortilla?" Pilar instantly recognized Sienna's voice and knew her teacher was talking

to her son. She sounded a little different now, more like a mother instead of a teacher. But, it was subtle. Lucia also sounded a lot like a mother when she was working Perhaps, the fact that Lucia got away with talking to Purewater customers like she was their mother was proof that on some level, people feel cared about when they are cajoled to eat.

"Mom," Matt said, "you aren't supposed to eat right after you work out."

"Did Master In-Su tell you that?" Sienna sounded disappointed. "Is that a Korean thing?"

"I'm just not hungry."

"I can eat when I'm not hungry!"

"Mom!" Matt barked, as if to snap her out of something. "You don't believe in force feeding."

"Right," she said, instantly sounding more like herself. "I'm going into *Casita Rio* for lunch. If you change your mind, please come join me."

Delighted, Pilar dropped the spoon in the *mole*. Wild with excitement, she burst out of the kitchen, sprinting through the aisle between the tables toward the yellow tiled foyer. Intent on being there to greet her teacher the instant Sienna walked through the front door, Pilar lost her footing and slid smack into a man at the counter waiting to be seated. As Gaul Santiago recovered from the collision and steadied her, Sienna stepped through the doorway behind him. "I know you! I know you!" Pilar shouted exuberantly as if she hadn't just seen the teacher twenty minutes earlier. The *calavera* had made her hyper and loud.

Lucia froze. The chiles on the plate she held suspended below a patron's nose made his eyes water. Lucia was shocked to see Pilar excited about anything. Then, she was terrified, fearing that patrons would complain about there

being children in the kitchen.

Ramon was terrified too — but about something else. He rushed to Gaul, barking at Pilar, “*Disculpase chica!* You do not know him. You have never seen this man before. This is my old friend from New Mexico.”

With the same sensation she’d felt when livestock salt pickled her dehydrated tongue, Pilar snapped back into the required ignorance. “I’m sorry,” she said looking at the men with a mixture of fear and pluck. “*Estoy hablando de mi maestra.*”

Sienna hoped Pilar would not get in trouble on her account.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Ramon mumbled to everyone and to no one in particular. The only response was Lucia’s patron’s request for another pitcher of water.

Gaul’s eyes were very kind as he spoke very softly to Pilar. “*No te preocupas.*” He turned and smiled at Sienna. Amusement flickered across his face at seeing *La Mujer de Tierra* peeking out of the pack slung over her hip, “We meet again.”

Sienna could do little more than nod to acknowledge being at the same place at the same time once again that day because Ramon pulled out a chair, gestured for her to sit. Smiling, he nearly flung a basket of warm tortilla chips and a tray of little black pots, miniature caldrons de *bruja*s, heaping with sour cream, salsa, and guacamole on the table before her. Then, Ramon rushed forward, clasped Gaul by the arm, and scurried him back into the kitchen.

Lucia followed the men with studied nonchalance. Given her fears about the health department, she surprised Pilar by calling over her shoulder for her to give “the lady” a menu. Later, Lucia would be mortified for not recognizing, let alone greeting, the ELL teacher more graciously.

Sienna did not mind. Clearly, an important reunion among dear friends was taking place.

Sienna already knew she wanted a taco, but she took the menu from Pilar to practice her own reading in Spanish and to let Pilar take pride in working at the restaurant. Sienna sat there, softly mouthing the foreign words aloud just like the ELL kids in Pilar's homeroom classroom did when they read English. Pilar watched Sienna mystified. Mrs. Albright said kids had to keep their mouths closed when they read. Why was Ms. O'Mara doing it wrong?

With her "below standard" style of reading in Spanish, Sienna read the paragraph about how Ramon and Lucia began their business with a taco truck. They'd made their rounds each day to the many tulip fields in the valley and sold tacos to hungry harvesters.

"It gets easier for me to read this every time I eat here," Sienna told Pilar. "It is good to read the same thing over and over again." Then, she ordered the original, "Taco de Tulip."

Pilar scurried to the kitchen. Engaged in conversation with the men, Lucia didn't seem to mind her coming and going now. Lucia quickly dished up Sienna's plate, focusing on what Ramon and Gaul were saying in rapid Spanish.

"More," Pilar insisted, as if encouraging her *madrina* to stuff the white flour tortilla as full of food as her heart was with admiration for her teacher. As Lucia drizzled another spoonful of mole sauce over Sienna's meal, Pilar snatched another tiny *calavera de azucar* and popped it into her mouth.

Lucia was so keen to talk to the men that she handed Sienna's plate to Pilar instead of taking it out herself. With the candy skull dissolving in her mouth, the proud young

waitress hurried to her favorite customer.

Pilar stopped short as she approached her teacher's table. Sienna had set the marigolds and, then the statuette that Pilar found achingly familiar across from her—as if they were girlfriends having lunch. This filled Pilar with a complex mixture of emotion. Her arm trembled. Her hand wobbled as she served her teacher. Like lava from the mouth of the volcano called *La Madre Ardiendo*, bits of the overfilled taco slid over the rim of the plate. The chicken, drenched in chocolate and spice, the sharp cheese, and the freshest lettuce from Lucia's kitchen flowed to the feet of *La Mujer de Tierra*. Ashamed of her clumsiness, Pilar winced, gulping the last remains of one sweet skull.

"*No te preocupas.*" Sienna smiled reassuringly. Using *una cuchara*, she scooped up a huge dollop of guacamole, playfully plopping it right on top of the spillage. To the clay lady, she said, "*Pilar y yo, le damos lo mejor de esta mesa.* We give you the best from this table."

Sienna might as well have bought Juan Diego's knock-off serape and started wearing it to work and around town. By graciously turning Pilar's anxious trembling into an ad hoc celebration of *El Día de los Muertos*—by making such an *ofrenda*, she became an ELL teacher who opened a border. All that was left was the crossing.

Chapter Ten

Early Monday morning, Sienna unwrapped two cheap black metal and plexi-glass frames, slid Pilar's mermaid picture into one and a color printout of the Swami into the other. She hung the two representations on the wall behind her desk and placed *La Mujer de Tierra* and then an ebony pot of marigolds on top of the bookcase directly below the portraits. Her decorating done, she dashed to bus duty. A first-year, first grade teacher, Miss Whitfield, dragged her tote, overloaded with the *Reading Fare* teacher manuals she'd taken home for the weekend from her car up to the sidewalk and informed Sienna she could not send any of her first graders to ELL that morning. They hadn't finished their *Reading Fare* tests before Friday's dismissal. The district required her to record their scores before lunchtime on Mondays. There was no arguing about whether they could attend ELL or not.

With unexpected free time, Sienna decided to give Miguel extra attention. He'd been so brave, promising to help her fend off the bad guys during the lockdown after the bank robbery, but he struggled to produce in *The Writers' Lair*. When Sienna entered Nancy Albright's classroom, she saw all of the students were at their desks with their

math books open—to double-face pages chock full of story problems.

Nancy was reading aloud, quickly, “If they each had forty-eight party favors, how many bags did they get?”

In the back row, Pilar bent over the text so that it looked as if she were reading. Really, she was playing some sort of blinking game with herself. Left eye, right eye. Sienna wondered if the child might be developing a tic.

On her way to Miguel, Sienna stopped beside Cassandra, whispering “Where are your glasses?” Cassandra reached in and pulled a sequined case out of her desk. Sienna recognized it as an offering from the swap meet and nodded approvingly when the child put the glasses on.

Nancy responded to a child’s puzzled question. “Party favors? Party favors are the little prizes you get at parties.”

Sienna tapped beneath the word *favors* to help Cassandra find her place. Cassandra slid her finger beneath Sienna’s. Her round lenses made her look like a wise little owl, but she was much prouder of her movie star fingernails. On Sunday, Dulce Gantala had come over to the Fuentes apartment to visit Cassandra’s big sister. All the girls had painted their nails hot pink and talked about Esteban. That had been a fun party!

Miguel was bewildered and interrupted Nancy before Sienna could get to his side. He said, “But favors are not little prizes.”

“They *are* little prizes,” Nancy said with her eye on the clock instead of the child’s face. “Just take my word for it, Miguel.” It bothered Nancy immensely to have the ELL teacher hovering, wanting to take someone away from her lesson. It was math time after all. Not ELL. The pacing guide was brutal. Nancy couldn’t even afford the time it

took to acknowledge Sienna's presence in the room. "Now, how many party favors does each kid get?"

Cassandra bowed her head, pressing her heels into the floor, toes pointing upward imploring Mary, Jesus, and Joseph. Miguel's mind was not on division, nor was he invoking any form of divine intervention. His brow was knit in overt consternation, while he muttered, struggling to articulate his next stab at rebellion. He opened his mouth.

Sienna said, "Come with me, Miguel." The exact moment a kid's limited English proficiency threw a Moore classroom teacher off her lesson plan was the exact moment she was most willing to relinquish a student to the ELL instructor. And, so, Nancy sighed, giving Sienna a curt nod.

In the hallway, Sienna compared the favors Miguel did to help others with the party favors the textbook had meant. She smiled kindly explaining, "Miguel, this is just another time when different things have the same name in English."

Anger lurked in the crease of his still knitted brow. "Why didn't Mrs. Albright tell us that at the beginning of math instead of forcing me to say my confusing?"

Sienna had never heard him question adults before. She'd never seen Miguel surly. She did not offer him the noun *confusion* to replace his misused adjective *confusing*. "I guess Mrs. Albright just wanted to focus on the math."

"I can't!" Miguel said.

"What?"

"Focus on the math when I didn't know what she was talking about. She said to take her word, but I didn't know what it was."

"She was thinking that you could have solved the problem even if you didn't really know what party favors

were. Could you have done the math if it were *sopapillas* instead of party favors?"

"Why do a math problem to find out how much of something I got if I don't know what my something is?"

"I guess it's to practice for when you do know what the something is."

"Why can't I practice with stuff I know?" He looked a little wild-eyed. "This keeps happening. I'm *ahogarse* by words."

Miguel was on the verge of noticing how often his very reasonable questions and legitimate observations were "drowned out" in school. Concerned about his morale, Sienna invited Miguel to tell her about a time he'd done a favor for someone. She gave him a new word for the setting, *yard*, so he could write about the work he'd done for his grandma. He'd trimmed the bushes because as he explained, "Grandma doesn't want her yard to be a safari." Sienna let the last word stand for jungle.

After that, Sienna went to Tammy Lewis' classroom, scanning the new November bulletin board in the hallway. Just as she'd feared, Jesus' poem about his mom working in the hothouse was not displayed alongside all the others in which children expressed gratitude for cuddly puppies, playful kittens, and computer games.

"I'm getting another boy from Mexico," Tammy told her grimly. "They just sent him over to the clinic to get his shots, but he will be back soon so you can test him."

It wasn't very nice to give the placement WELTS to a child on his first day in an America school, but Sienna did have to turn the month's ELL count into the district office, the sooner the better. If the new boy did qualify for ELL services the state would, theoretically, give the district a few extra dollars for the month of November. Or was that

the Feds? Who knew? Even though Purewater relied on local levies to pay for her position, she knew the money—wherever it came— from was needed.

Sienna hoped the new boy would not have a reaction to the shots. Itch, pain, or swelling could affect his test performance, but on the other hand, she thought, newcomers always welcomed the opportunity to leave the overwhelming classroom and go to a quieter place with a gentle teacher who spoke a little Spanish or, at least, was at ease with the silence between people who spoke different languages. “I can test him if you send him over after last recess.”

The fourth graders exclaimed over the marigolds in the portable, calling them *Flores del Muertos*. They were awestruck by *La Mujer de Tierra* whose presence transformed the teacher’s bookcase into an altar very much like the ones their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers kept in the little niches of their crowded homes. After church on Sunday, Lupe had drawn a detailed picture of Purewater’s swap meet to go with her story. Sienna taped that picture on the wall right next to the framed portrait of the Swami. She gestured at them, grinning and asked, “These are not the same, are they?” All the kids laughed. It was fun to have an inside English joke in *The Writers’ Lair*. The group discussed possible titles for the three pieces of art on the teacher’s altar during community circle before moving on to the day’s assignment.

Ancestry was one of the fourth grade *Reading Fare* vocabulary words for the week. Sienna knew that having the kids draw pictures of *abuelos y abuelas* would generate lots

of descriptive language and interesting narratives. The work on grandparents was well underway when Jesus who had also noticed his turkey feather was not on his classroom's bulletin board brought Valentin, Tammy's new boy, to the portable.

Clearly, Tammy had forgotten the plan to send him later in the day. Sienna couldn't administer a placement test while she was teaching a group. She scanned the new boy's face. He was obviously in a daze after his first hour at Moore Elementary School. After his shots, he'd had ten minutes in that shouting teacher's room before heading into a bewildering cafeteria where he had just seconds to choose from a buffet of unfamiliar foods. He wasn't sure where to sit or how to eat what he'd grabbed. Then, he had been shooed outside for fifteen minutes of recess and then herded back to the shouting teacher's room. Now, with the few bites of the salty hotdog he'd gulped triggering an uncomfortable thirst, he rubbed the blindingly white bandage covering his injection site. His arm really hurt. Sienna decided it would be kinder to let him acclimate in *The Writers' Lair* before giving him the WELT instead of sending him back to Tammy's class until she had time to do it.

Sienna thanked Jesus for escorting Valentin and introduced herself to him, quickly realizing that his Spanish was not very well developed. She guessed he spoke an indigenous language. She decided to grab his enrollment paperwork during recess to see where he'd come from and how much schooling he'd had there.

Jesus gazed longingly around *The Writers' Lair*. "I can stay here, help him?"

"Sorry, no," Sienna said. "I wish you could, Jesus." She sighed regretfully. *Pobrecito*.

Jesus shuffled to the door while Sienna seated Valen-

tin between Cassandra and Lupe. Sienna knew the girls would automatically assume the roles of big sister and she'd observe how they talked to him to get clues about his language. But Pilar was the one who leaned in, speaking in dialect. Valentin's face lit up as he responded with a long stream of agitated speech. Meanwhile, Jesus lingered. His spine pressed against the horizontal bar which would release the door.

Sienna ignored him for as long as she thought he could get away with being gone before Tammy chewed him out for dawdling. "Is that silly latch stuck again?" she asked.

"I fix it," Jesus said, and then he left, beginning his long, slow shuffle to the main building.

Meanwhile, Cassandra had drawn her grandfather, a stick man surrounded by chickens and her picture triggered lots of conversation and new vocabulary, *hen, rooster, chicks, coop, henhouse, lay, crow, cluck, scratch, peck*. Fortunately for Sienna, by the time the talk turned to *spurs* and *razor blades*, part of underground cockfighting scene in Purewater, it was time for recess.

Valentin and Pilar were still talking earnestly. Although Sienna didn't know the language, she recognized the questioning intonation in their conversation. She decided to get his paperwork after school and invited them to stay in during recess. She needed to prepare the bigger table for her next class, so she asked them to move to a smaller one tucked in the corner.

They'd just settled there when they all heard pounding feet ascending the metal ramp outside. The door burst open, and Deedee and Nancy marched through it, like a sheriff and deputy coming to break up a saloon brawl in a vintage Western. Instead of brandishing a pistol, Nancy

waved a *Reading Fare* test in the air.

Deedee stopped short. The scene in the portable was not the undisciplined party time, Nancy's frantic calls and emails intimated. "Nice flowers!" She inhaled deeply. "Particularly since I've just come from Special Day. The shit is hitting the fan in there." She shuddered. "Literally. Behaviorally disordered kids in diapers are a disaster!" She gazed at Lupe's colorful rendition of Saturday's swap meet. "I love how cheerful it looks in here."

Nancy snorted impatiently. "We're not running an art gallery. Letting kids color is not teaching them to read." She waved Pilar's *Reading Fare* test at Deedee. "All students are expected to take the unit test and, as you can see, Pilar didn't do what was expected."

"She can't read it," Sienna said.

"You have to give these kids the opportunity to try." Nancy snapped.

Deedee glanced at the exam and passed it to Sienna. "She did the first question. You can see she got it right."

Sienna's hand shook like a diamondback's rattle. She tried not to hiss. "This is at her frustration level."

"I know you have a heart for these kids, Sienna." Deedee said. "And for how hard they struggle, but we can't deny them access to our rich grade level material just because they speak a different language."

"She shouldn't have to take this test," Sienna said. "Even *Reading Fare's* own placement criteria says that it has no value if the child can't read."

"Well, even if she doesn't understand what she's reading, we need her test scores to know how she compares with the other fourth graders in the district." Nancy broke in. "We need to put the data on spreadsheets so we can rank every kid."

"Rank them?" Sienna asked. "Why? You already know most of the ELL kids are at the bottom. We should be teaching them instead of testing them. What's the value of giving them tests before we have a chance to teach?"

"So, we know if they need more help."

"We already know they need more help. I'm trying to give it to them."

"Not the right kind." Nancy snorted.

"I think if the newcomers know how far behind they are right from the get-go," Deedee said, "it will motivate them to study more for their WASTE."

"Or demoralize them!" As Sienna's nostrils flared, the scent of marigolds filled her sinus cavity. "There's actually very little diagnostic information or motivation in a zero."

"But the curriculum tells us what skills they need if they miss a question on the test." Nancy said.

"The curriculum assumes that the kids already know the thousands of basic English words they need before they can even approach the skills the curriculum assigns to each question."

"I think you are being too specific," Deedee said.

Sienna clenched her jaw. Being specific mattered...*swap meet, hothouse, party favors*.

"And you are sabotaging our future test scores by coddling these kids." Nancy glared at Sienna. "You can't just do your own thing. You have to follow the curriculum."

Soundlessly, still sitting side by side, Valentin and Pilar watched as Nancy cast *El Ojo Malo*, the Evil Eye, at Sienna. Flabbergasted, Sienna looked to the bookcase full of educational texts and the glossy paperback with the handsome author photo facing out.

"Don't you remember *Lau v. Nichols*?"

Deedee furrowed her perfectly plucked eyebrows. "That Chinese kid in Mavis' class?"

"No," Sienna said. "It was the 1974 Supreme Court Case that established English Language programs to address this very issue. Giving kids who don't understand English the same books, worksheets, and tests as we give kids who do, isn't giving them equal access to an education. It's not an equal opportunity when they can't understand the language of instruction or assessment."

"Oh, your boyfriend was talking about that." Deedee smiled indulgently.

"No matter who talks about it, it's cruel to the children and to the teachers who care about them. And it's educationally unsound."

"Sienna!" Deedee chided. "I live on triple shot espresso. I don't have time for love or theory."

"What about civil rights? What about the human need to find meaning in life? Deedee!"

"These kids are lucky you care so much about them," Deedee said, "but no one is coming to Purewater to investigate their civil rights or see if they have discovered the meaning of life. They get a lot better here on our taxpayers' dime than most kids in the world ever get. And, if we don't get our test scores up in the next few years, someone will come to investigate us and we'll all be out of a job."

Nancy nodded. "It's so embarrassing when they print our test scores in the paper."

"Look," Sienna said levelly, "all we have to do is create conditions where the kids get excited about language and literacy and..."

"You can't just go around doing whatever *you* want," Nancy shrieked.

"I'm helping kids build relationships with literacy!"

Sienna replied.

"Relationships?" Deedee asked. "With literacy?"

Nancy shook her head scornfully. "You just need to have fidelity!"

"Fidelity?" Sienna asked.

"Yes!" Nancy said. "Fidelity to *Reading Fare*."

Sienna wrinkled her nose. "That sounds like a chastity belt!" Who, in the vast field of contemporary educational reform had the *cojones* to command *fidelity* in a profession filled with highly qualified, underpaid women?

"I'm taking about fidelity to implementation!" Nancy strode over to the copy of *Reading Fare* perched on the ledge of the white board and opened it to the scarlet bookmark Sienna had left tucked into it the day the Swami came. "Ah ha!" she exclaimed. "Deedee, Sienna may say she cares about the kids, but look! She's cheating on the basal! We're supposed to be two chapters ahead of this by now."

Clearly, Nancy was not well. Sienna looked to her supervisor for help, but it wasn't forthcoming. Deedee seemed to be in a trance.

Tears stung Sienna's eyes. If they wouldn't honor what was obvious in their daily work with kids and, if they didn't think Supreme Court rulings applied to them, why would they give any credence to what she said? This wasn't just frustrating for her and the children. It wasn't just potentially illegal. It was dangerous. They were erasing so much—compassion, common sense, court rulings—and inviting a very particular cruelty into the school. Sienna shuddered, as if cold fingers were squeezing the nape of her neck.

She glanced at Pilar and Valentin, who had clasped hands. She wondered how Deedee and Nancy could act as

if these children could not understand, were not frightened by this adrenaline-boosting battle, but still expect them to read and comprehend complex material in small print and a foreign language.

"And now I have to go *teach*." Nancy strode out as if she were the only one who ever did any real work in the building.

"The truth is," Deedee gestured toward *The Writers' Lair* banner, "these kinds of kids don't need all this."

"They do need it!" Sienna said. "And what is all this about fidelity? Fidelity! My foot! I never made a vow to *Reading Fare*. This adoption is like a shotgun wedding for an arranged marriage."

"Calm down, Sienna. You're just too passionate for your own good. Life isn't all Butterscotch Blondie with ice cream and a hot professor on top."

Sienna glanced at Pilar and Valentin. They were petrified, clay children, *niños de tierra*. "If we were physicians, this would be malpractice." She crumpled Pilar's test in her fist.

Deedee's eyes narrowed. "How dare you say your way is better?"

Sienna imagined the school officials up at the district headquarters. They all had brass name plates displayed on their desks, right next to the pictures of their own children. "Whose way is this?"

"Don't ask questions like that!" Deedee ran her tongue up the front of her teeth, making a disapproving, sucking noise.

Sienna persisted, "*Who* wants *us* to do this to...what did you call them? These kinds of kids?"

"You know," Deedee said, "You really aren't the right fit for Moore Elementary. I suggest you begin looking for a

job somewhere else. Maybe, at a fancy prep school. Until then, do what I say. Try a little fidelity to our students' success."

Chapter Eleven

On *El Día de los Muertos*, on the other side of the veil between the Living and the Dead, Pilar's ancestors were jockeying for position.

Before Valentin arrived, before Deedee burst in, Sienna passed the interesting stone Esteban unearthed along the river around *The Writers' Lair*. Each child took a turn to hold the "talking rock" and suggest a name for Pilar's picture. Pilar listened to their ideas, pleased to have her drawing taken so seriously. Ultimately, she chose the most beautiful name she knew. *Maritza*. Sienna called the picture of the mermaid, *The Maritza*. Lupe decided to call her scene *Meet Me at the Swami*.

After that, Pilar went to work on *ancestry*, *Reading Fare's* main idea for the week. She drew the *casita*, the little house where her *abuela* lived and worked in Redención with the volcanic *La Madre Ardiendo* towering in the background. Next, she drew that nasty *Diablo*, dogs, and the host of squawking chickens that tried to stake their claim indoors by laying eggs in the clay pots *abuelita* made to sell at the market. Sienna hastily wrote English words next to many things in Pilar's picture. She printed and repeated

roof for *el techo*, door for *la puerta*, window for *la ventana*. When Pilar added the canal outside, Sienna labeled it *canal*. Pilar was delighted to learn that a word in English could be so close to one she already knew in Spanish. It was like a buy-one-get-one-free candy! Then, Pilar learned her grandmother's *pelo gris* was gray hair. Grandma wore it tied back in *un pañuelo*, a scarf. She wore *una falda*, a skirt, and *una blusa*, similar to an English blouse. More *dulce gratis*. What was even sweeter for Pilar was that after Sienna read the words to and with her several times, Pilar could read them as well!

Her mind was on her reading skills, but the air was redolent with *flor de los muertos*. *La Mujer de Tierra* was on watch. Her *rebozo* was empty, but some of the guacamole offering Sienna had made at *Casita Rio* still stained her feet. Perhaps, in that moment, Pilar's grandmother might have come through, whispering words of wisdom, reminding Pilar that she was dearly loved. Pilar might have recalled the comfort of lying with her head upon her grandmother's lap, having her young, vulnerable back rubbed by the old woman's gentle hands.

But, when Valentin came through the door, the ancestors, all, his and hers, decided to give the children a moment. And, like a sleeper waking from a dream, the old language surfaced in the deepest part of Pilar's brain. The ancestors sighed with relief as she began to speak to him. They nodded gratefully, when Sienna invited their descendants to stay in and sit at the small table, knee-to-knee. Pilar pointed to the canal on her paper, whispering in the language *de los abuelitas*. "Do you know *Canal del Luto*?"

Valetin nodded, swallowing hard, too shell-shocked and inexperienced to realize how unusual it was for someone in Purewater to be aware of, let alone speak, in the dia-

lect they shared.

Pilar spoke urgently, "Do you have your family?"

He shook his head. "Only my uncle. He works on a Llama farm." Valentin was also too new to know that, in Purewater, llamas were a rich person's hobby, not beasts of burden.

"No mother?"

He shook his head.

Pilar pushed some crayons his way. "Do you know how to color?"

"A little," he said. "I learned on my way to America."

"That is good. In Ms. O'Mara's class, you can make what you need. Make who you need."

As the scent of *La Flor de los Muertos* grew stronger, winding its way through their olfactory cells, Valentin reached into his sweatshirt and pulled out two small *calaveras*, graced with lint and pocket dust. He gave one to Pilar. Both children popped the sugar skulls into their mouths. As the heads dissolved on their tongues like communion wafers, the connective tissue between the two hemispheres in Pilar's brain became permeable. She was about to remember. Beneath the gaze of *La Mujer de Tierra*, she was about to remember. Her ancestors, her grandmother, maybe even her mother, were about to come through.

But instead, Mrs. Albright and *la jefa* burst into the room. There was shouting. Pilar froze. There were tears in Ms. O'Mara's eyes. On the day of the year when the veils were thin, at the moment the spirit world was ready to send *una muerta* through, Deedee Hayes came to the altar in *The Writers' Lair* and commanded the manifestation very different and very particular type of *Muerta*.

The body of Pilar responded to the tension of it all

with a flood of gastric acid and mucus.

Valentin was at her side with a trash can. "We are still alive," he whispered. "You are okay." Even though his own first day at Moore was traumatic, he gently patted Pilar between the shoulder blades. When she looked up, wiping her mouth on the back of her sleeve, he was holding the concave talking rock. "And we have the Awka."

I remember being splat against the green plastic liner of the trash bin as I was delivered into the new world. My amniotic fluid was laced with sticky granulated vomit. From below Pilar's chin, I watched Valentin rest a comforting hand on her upper back while he waved the rock under her nose, like smelling salts.

Like my living children had once slumbered in my womb, I'd been curled in Pilar's cultural memory and smuggled into a foreign country. I might have lain there in her mind, indefinitely dormant or forgotten forever. On *El Día de los Muertos*, Pilar might have remembered her own mother. She might have learned some of the words she needed to talk about what happened to her. Instead, Dee-dee Hayes intercepted, making a cold-hearted demand for an omniscient and entirely different spirit to come into her school.

Sienna carried the trash can to the door and set my New World spawning bed outside. I ascended quickly, merging with the mist rising off the Purewater. Unseen, but seeing all, I could peer into the classrooms of Moore Elementary and into all the shops on First Street. I saw Lucia grating more cacao in the kitchen at *Casita Rio*. I saw Master In-Su and Chief Goodwin working out at the

dojang next door. I saw into the Hadley homes. I heard the sisters arguing about the school levy on the telephone, watched them shaking their fists at one another through the dining room windows of their neighboring river front homes.

I looked through the decaying roof of the school district's headquarters and watched administrators huddle around a computer screen, staring in dismay at Moore's fourth grade *Reading Fare* scores. Meanwhile, outside of the building, on the other side of the very wall that their computer was plugged into, middle school kids cutting class uncapped over-sized permanent markers and scrawled graffiti all over the superintendent's dumpster.

Over in the largest of Purewater's apartment complexes, I watched a drug deal go down in the parking lot. Next door to where Cassandra and the other Fuentes lived, a silent man hit his silent wife. The only noise that came from that unit sounded like someone beating the dust from a rug hung over a rope.

And I could not only see all of the people. In the boundless, multi-lingual, unfeeling sort of omniscience Deedee required, I knew their histories and their past and present ways of thinking. It didn't matter if the unemployed trolling the riverbank thought in English, Spanish, Hmong, or Chinese. I understood every form of "I hope I find the money."

Inside the portable, Sienna offered Pilar a drink of water, the chance to rinse the taste of vomit from her mouth. Then, succumbing to *la jefa*, she gave Pilar the crumpled *Reading Fare* exam. Resisting *la jefa*, she set a timer for five minutes, gently telling Pilar to do whatever she could, however she could.

Valentin placed the "talking rock" between Pilar and

himself, as if it were something to share. Sienna rewarded him with an approving smile. She boiled water with the electric pot she wasn't really allowed to have in the portable, and while her tea steeped, she watched Pilar pray for answers, but little came through. Trauma and psychic labor of delivering me, a ghost, had worn the girl out down to every last toe.

Sienna felt ill herself. She stared at pictures, lingering on the Swami's portrait wondering, "Why are our true selves being forced out of this school?"

The Swami smiled benevolently at her. Then acting like the good ELL teacher she was, he repeated back what she'd just said, adding a small correction she didn't yet know was needed. "*True selves are being forced out in this school.*"

Meanwhile, after the fiasco in Special Day, Deedee simply couldn't endure witnessing any more bodily extrusions. She fled the instant Pilar began to gag so she caught up to Nancy quickly.

Nancy told her, "It is going to be better for everyone, even for Sienna herself, if we're all practicing fidelity. She just can't see it now because she's distracted by her Ivy League boyfriend and all of his big ideas. I heard she's flying back to D.C. to visit him over the long weekend."

"Oh, I know," Deedee said, airily. "She's just trying to use all that civil rights rhetoric to put what she likes to do above the prescribed curriculum. I probably shouldn't have approved her extra day of personal leave to go see him."

Neither of them noticed *todos los muertos* on the playground. Neither of them noticed the ghostly remains of deformed and starved Reading Babies scuttling among the fallen autumn leaves or limply littering their path, like so

many unwanted Chinese baby girls left in empty fields to mawl and starve in a society that prized one type of child over another. They walked on, eager to forget Sienna's unpleasant gravitas.

"So," Deedee asked, "will the drill team be wearing their hair up or down?"

"We spent half an hour arguing about that very thing last night," Nancy sighed. "But, I can't talk now. It's time to get to get my class from P.E."

Deedee laid a staying hand on Nancy's arm. "When I was in high school, we all grew our hair out to the same length." Images of the locker room full of black and blue polyester flags leaning against aqua cinderblock came to her. She could smell the aerosol, hear the girls in lacy bras and nude tone tights chattering away. "We got to the state championship."

"Well," Nancy said, "at this point we are just going to douse the girls in hairspray, even if they complain about headaches. Bobby pins don't work. They slide out during the performances and distract the judges."

Nancy realized she'd forgotten to write her objectives for the next lesson on the board. "I hope Sienna corrects and logs Pilar's *Reading Fare* test for me. It's the least she can do. It takes forever to grade those things, let alone enter the data into the program to get the print-out telling why a kid got the wrong answer."

Deedee watched Nancy hurry into the gym. She didn't really want to face the third-grade boys who had spent recess in her office, accused of writing the F word on the bathroom walls. She sure didn't want to call all the Life Skill's parents to inform them of the potential biohazards inherent in the earlier incident. She just wanted to stand there, listening to the American flag rippling on the pole in

the middle of the courtyard. As she did, a word she hadn't heard or spoken in over forty years suddenly shot right through lips. "Nooga!" Her peculiar cry reverberated around the eerily empty center of the campus. She clamped a hand over her mouth. Where had that come from?

Suddenly, Bao Yang and Lucero Fuentes burst through the doors, galloping past her. Charged with the very important task of fetching some envelopes from the office for Mrs. Penn, the racing first grade girls were breaking a school rule. Bao, with the teacher's scrawled request on the post-it note in her hand, shot ahead. Lucero's legs were shorter, and she struggled to catch up. "You know," she panted wisely, "you really should walk in the halls."

Deedee glanced around, worrying another adult would see her ignoring the girls or, worse than seeing her fail to discipline them, had heard her shout. Why had she suddenly felt so compelled to belt out what had once been her drill team's competitive expletive? Her own mother had made embarrassing random exclamations her whole life. There was so much Deedee never wanted to deal with. That's how she got me.

Chapter Twelve

Andy was waiting for Sienna just outside the terminal. He took her carry-on bag, tossed it into the trunk of his black Prius, and kissed her. A turbaned taxi driver behind tooted his horn, but the noise was lost on them. Even after the honking became insistent, it took them both a moment to realize it was directed at them. It took another kiss before they could pull apart to get into the car. Andy suggested an early dinner. Sienna agreed. Neither of them would want to go back out once they finally reached Andy's house.

He drove her to *The Old Eli Grill*, the landmark restaurant where they'd eaten before. In the lobby, a mermaid painted upon an antique sign advertised the oyster bar. She was much more seductive than Pilar's *Maritza*. Still, Sienna was struck by the synchronicity of encountering *una sirena* on the opposite side of the country. More mermaids, reclining bronze beauties, adorned the candle-lit sconces that illuminated the dark mahogany booth the host led them to. Andy kissed her again before they sat down. He'd thoughtfully mentioned preparing his guest room, but the question about where Sienna would really

sleep that evening flickered between them like a subtle flame as they sank into sable velour.

As they waited for waitstaff and caught up, Andy mentioned a winter syllabus he'd spent the afternoon drafting and how there was never enough time to cover everything for pre-service teachers. At the mention of how there was never enough time, Sienna was overwhelmed with anxiety and sadness. "I think Moore is making me crazy." She hadn't intended to sound as sincere as she did and to her dismay tears welled in her eyes.

Andy nodded and took her hand.

The waiter arrived. "Just so you all know," he said softly, pouring Syrah into crystal goblets, "I never remember which distinguished looking gentleman is with which beautiful lady. And I make myself scarce during assignations." He backed away quickly.

Andy lifted his glass. "To our assignation in our nation's capital."

Sienna said, "There's a part of me that truly loves the phrase, our nation's capital." After the first sip, with the wine warming her throat, she added, "It makes me think D.C. is like America's brain where people make the connections for the whole system to work."

Andy winked. "Moore is making you crazy."

Sienna knew their first real in-the-flesh, face-to-face date wasn't the time, but as she took another sip of her Syrah, she wanted to confess to talking to the Swami and how he talked back.

"You aren't crazy," Andy said gently. "The insanity around you just makes you feel like you are. Clearly, your nation's capital and its policies exhibit signs of a split personality."

Sienna sighed. "And failing public schools are proba-

bly the best places to see the symptoms."

"The very best," Andy agreed.

Seeking a change in focus, Sienna ran her hand over the plush seat beside her. "It's so fancy in here."

"Members of Congress and the Senate hang out here in the mornings. I'll bring you back for breakfast and you'll see who's who."

Sienna thought about how different sitting among people in thousand-dollar suits and spend an hour enjoying double-digit priced plates of pancakes, drenched in Grade A maple syrup, would be from keeping hungry kids from running in the walking zone toward the free breakfast they only had five minutes to eat before the bell rang. She took another sip of wine, noticing the warm tingle in her lower back and legs. The instant she relaxed she imagined the next GOTCHA show beginning with Chase Haight asking his co-host, "Did you hear about the smalltown schoolteacher who got drunk in our nation's capital?"

"Speaking of who's who, look to your right," Andy said. "That's Senator Panky."

"Who?"

"Dedicated teacher union-basher and anti-immigrant."

Sienna glanced at the balding man. "Panky is such an unfortunate name for a politician," she mused. As Senator Panky's date stared down at her cell phone, he turned his head to wink at Sienna.

She cringed. "Don't tell me his first name is Hank. Hanky. Hanky Panky."

But she kept thinking and said, "Him making everything so much harder is probably part of the reason Dulce has latched onto Esteban,"

"Who?"

"Dulce. A former student. Beautiful. Smart. Hard worker. She always said she wanted to be a teacher or librarian, but I don't know if she'll graduate. I'm worried she'll just marry Esteban. Then the two of them can make, what do the politicians call them, anchor babies?"

"Do you think Dulce is conscious of that?"

"Politically? Probably not. At this point, throwing her future away is personal. Esteban is super cute."

Andy gazed into her eyes for a moment. "You are super cute," he said. "When we were in college, I wanted to ask you out for coffee. I didn't though. I worried it would be inappropriate. Well, it would be because we were both engaged to different people."

"You didn't think it was appropriate for us to talk?"

"Well, you were so beautiful."

"I *was*?"

"Still are. You look just the same."

Sienna blushed. She'd been so busy securing her place in life back then, planning a wedding and preparing for a perfect life to be divided between a big house behind a little white picket fence and a classic brick elementary school surrounded by chain link.

"I'll always remember Dr. Chen's face when you asked why the adopted curriculum was at odds with what child development experts told us." Andy said.

"I'm still asking," she said.

Meanwhile, midshipmen in uniform leaned in too close to talk to women sitting on stools—all of them admiring themselves as they stared at each other in the mirrored wall behind the bar. Senator Panky's voice carried as he told his companion, "And so, I was set for life. I had everything in place. I figured I might as well serve. Holding

public office is a chance to give back a little."

Andy smirked. "I wonder what that means coming from a key vote for a billion-dollar national achievement test. Oh! Sorry! I didn't mean to bring that up again...yet."

The hair on the back of Sienna's neck stood up. "A national achievement test? I thought guys like him were all about state rights."

Andy said, "Senator Panky believes so strongly in state rights, he's pushing for the national test to come a few weeks before each state's annual measure of student progress. He thinks it will help the kids warm up, making each state look better than the national average."

"Why would he want that?" Sienna furrowed her brow.

Andy shrugged. "Follow the money. And guess what they're going to call it?"

Sienna shook her head. "I don't even want to try."

"Come on," he teased. "I'll give you a hint. They took a cue from your WASTE."

Sienna's mind whirled for a moment. "No way? Don't tell me they are going to call it the NASTE?"

"They will if Panky's bill passes."

"So. all my English Learners will get the WELT, do the NASTE, and then fail the WASTE."

"That's right," Andy said grimly. "And, if Panky gets his way, your salary and your retirement benefits will be tied to their scores."

Sienna shuddered. "That's really dangerous."

Andy nodded, but said, "Let's not think about it right now. Let's just think about us."

Even though Panky was directly across the aisle, Sienna suddenly felt joyful. Neither the bitterness at Moore Elementary, nor the fleeting thought of GOTCHA scandal-

inciting news stories could detour her. She would take a chance on love in the nation's capital.

Chapter Thirteen

Andy guided Sienna through the black wrought iron gate and the narrow front yard separating his row house from the busy city sidewalk. He ushered her up the brick steps and unlocked a solid oak door. Once inside, he set her suitcase down on the uneven floor at the base of an aged oak staircase. She took in the intricate carving of a colonial newel post, the patina of the railing, and the Persian runner. The crow's feet pattern on the antique rug pointed the way up the steps and through the open door of what seemed to be a waiting bedroom.

"This is gorgeous," she told him, glad she'd decided against staying at a hotel.

"Yep," Andy was clearly pleased that she thought so. "This place is special."

He gestured for her to walk past the staircase through the narrow hallway into the parlor. Once there, he bent to lay the back of his hand against a baseboard heater. "Sorry, it's still a bit cold in here. The glass in these windows is over two hundred years old."

Sienna left her coat on. Although Andy's place was much smaller than hers, she guessed his mortgage was

easily four times what she paid for her house on Teagan Hill. "How did you ever end up here?" She meant the East Coast, Georgetown, the old home on an end lot.

"It was a total surprise when I inherited this place from my great-uncle," he explained. "The family always expected him to donate the proceeds from selling this place to Public Radio. It never occurred to anyone, yours truly included, that he'd actually leave it to me along with a little money to do a fair bit of renovation."

Sienna smiled. On her sixteenth birthday, just as soon she was old enough to drive, her Uncle Ed had given her the red Volkswagen Beetle he'd meticulously maintained for over twenty years. It was a wonderful gift. "He must have loved you a lot."

"I think so. It was a counter-intuitive gift, given what happened to my wife." Andy's mouth twisted as if he were probing an ulcerated gum with the tip of his tongue.

"What happened?"

"She was electrocuted—by a hair dryer. She wasn't even using it. It fell into the sink while she was rinsing her toothbrush."

Sienna was stunned.

"Our apartment building was better than most on the block," Andy said, "but it was barely more than a tenement home."

"I thought you left school for a high paying job."

"I only lasted two years at UPS, before I tweaked my knee delivering a treadmill to a third story apartment. I went back to school. My wife and I didn't want to pay for a car, so we rented a place near campus. Something was wrong with the old knob and tube wiring in our building. Sometimes, you'd blow a fuse and smell the smoke." Andy swallowed hard, making a fist with his right hand. "The

landlord said it was her fault for not unplugging the cord before she ran the water, but by the time she died, the fire department had already cited that cheap bastard seven times. Not that that meant anything to the courts. I've accused and convicted him of negligent homicide over and over again in my mind in the middle of the night for years."

Sienna took his hand and led him to the couch.

"The irony was," he added, as they sank onto the leather sofa, "she was studying to become a social worker. She was actually running late for a community meeting about substandard housing; asbestos in the ceilings, little kids eating lead paint. She never gave a thought to *our* wiring...and I just wasn't paying attention." He sighed, "I never used a hair dryer."

He looked down at their clasped hands. "I never thought about it. Or an electric razor. Disposables were so cheap." His voice cracked on the last word.

"Oh," Sienna said softly, lifting her free hand to cradle his cheek. She felt the poignancy of his late afternoon stubble against her cupped palm. "You felt guilty."

"I sure as hell did. I've needed a lot of counseling." Andy swallowed hard and cleared his throat twice. "I'm really sorry, Sienna. I don't know why I felt so compelled to dump all that on you on our first evening together."

"No need to be sorry," Sienna said gently. "I wanted to know what happened." She looked into his eyes and could tell that there was more—something else that he wasn't telling her, something else he needed to say, even if he didn't yet know that himself. She dared to press him, even if the truth might put a damper on their time together. "Tell me," She said hesitantly, "about the word... cheap."

"Cheap?" He sounded angry. Dark emotions flittered across his face.

She wondered if she'd made a mistake.

Andy leapt to his feet, striding to the window, pacing back and forth as if he were about to put a fist through the leaky glass. "Cheap? Cheap? The apartment was cheap. Cheap enough for graduate students, expecting their first baby." His nostrils flared as he stood facing her. Clearly, in his own mind, his negligence was as criminal as the landlord and regulatory agencies.

"Baby?"

"Yeah."

Sienna bit her bottom lip.

"It was cheap enough for a baby." Andy's eyelids fluttered. He believed he was responsible for the death of his wife and child. He waited for Sienna to judge him.

She rose slowly and, instead of opening her arms as Dulce had done for Esteban, she simply placed her hands, one on top of the other, upon Andy's heart. He closed his eyes, feeling the gentle pressure, feeling held, smelling her, cinnamon, jasmine, compassion.

After a few moments, he whispered, "Thank you." I had a few girlfriends. It never worked out. They couldn't understand my drive—my passion for my work. They said I was a fanatic. Damn it! I don't think I ever fully understood why until just now."

"I'm so sorry," Sienna said, feeling the warm tears skimming her cold cheeks. "Good work that helps people and writing thoughtful books that improve your profession and your world do give Life meaning."

He pulled her close. They stood like that in silence, warming each other as night fell outside the timeworn windows. "Thank you," he said again. "Thank you for

your compassion." The streetlamps came on, casting contemporary light through age-old frames.

Later, after a cup of hot tea and long kiss, as if something had been settled on his end, Andy asked, "So what about you? It must be so hard to be divorced."

"I don't think of myself as divorced."

"You don't?" He looked askance. "Are you thinking you'll get back together?"

"No!" Sienna said. "It's not that. I just don't think a person should be identified by their marital status. I hate how people assume they know something about another person based on labels like single mother."

Andy nodded. "Go on."

"There's a teacher at school who invariably prefaces her take on a kid's learning problems with, 'Well, he has a single mom.' Yeah, there are limited resources in the home, but she never stops to consider that he just might need more hands-on experience with base ten blocks."

"I get it." He slipped his palm behind her neck, cupping the base of her skull. "Let's not have any more relationship history or shop talk tonight." Entwining his fingers in her hair, he took her lips between his. And after a long, sweet kiss that would have set off a chorus of taxi horns at Reagan International, Sienna felt herself melting. "Mmm," she moaned, wanting to merge, wanting to love him.

He pressed into her. "Shall I put your bag in the guest room?"

"Your bedroom would be better."

The next morning, they held hands on the steps of the Capitol. Andy asked, "Did you see all the people here during President Obama's inauguration? They were packed tight, all the way past the Lincoln Memorial." He pointed over the long green stretch of mall to a white blur in the distance that Sienna couldn't have made out even if she had been wearing her rhinestone studded driving glasses.

"I didn't get to watch it," she said ruefully. "Deedee wouldn't allow us to have the televisions on in the classrooms."

"Why not?"

"She said she didn't want the children to see him get shot."

"What? "Andy grimaced. "That's messed up. Are you telling me that at Moore, a school with a fifty percent plus minority population, no one was allowed to watch the first black president in American history being sworn in?"

Sienna nodded. "I was mad. I said the exercise and celebration of democracy were more important than teaching the children to get ready for developmentally inappropriate and unfair testing, but people just rolled their eyes at me."

"What a fantastic example of a hidden curriculum!" Andy remarked. "May I use it in the class I teach next quarter?"

"Sure," Sienna said. "I felt like a kid on restriction—like I was being punished for being a teacher, for being so tied to other people's children that I couldn't witness or participate in such an important event. I mean, if I were at home with my own child, I would have watched it. Matt and I would have watched it together."

Andy shook his head. "Moore is not Deedee's empire. It's an American public school! Did you say anything to her about it afterwards?"

"No. I played it on the radio."

"The radio?"

"She didn't say we couldn't listen. The kids were so happy." Sienna smiled at the memory of the faces gathered around her metallic blue boom box. "You should have seen them smile at me when President Obama mentioned teachers."

Andy nodded. His face was troubled.

"Deedee apologized after she realized the staff and students at Teagan Hill got to watch it."

He shook his head. "But by then, everyone at Moore had learned the lesson."

Later, when they toured the national museums, Sienna was surprised to discover that there were no admission fees. She fervently wished she could bring her English learners to visit them. The only museum in Purewater was the historical museum, open on Tuesdays and requiring a two-dollar entry fee. In the Purewater repository, they could see a Native American stone bowl and knife and a dusty box of indigenous things excavated when they built the original Moore Grammar School. The wife of the town's founder, Mrs. Moore's old mink coat was encased in glass there, but it just wasn't the same as the authentic Lakota baby carrier embroidered with berry dyed porcupine quills in the National Museum or President Abraham Lincoln's actual hat or actual chair.

For any of Sienna's students to see the real Star-Spangled Banner or an original Ford from 1908, they would have to have several hundred dollars each for airfare and hundreds more per night to stay in a hotel and

eat. They would each need far more than Miguel's grandma, a full-time worker at Burger Bling, took home in a month. As Sienna stopped to gaze at Julia Childs' recreated kitchen, she said, "When *Reading Fare* doesn't work for the kids, Purewater will let me do what does, right?"

"Sure." Andy said. "Sure, they will. Let's go for a walk." She thought he was trying to keep the subject of school at bay, but twenty minutes later, they stood before the United States Supreme Court. "The answer to your question was decided right here." He stepped behind her and wrapped his arm around her waist. He spoke softly into her ear. "In 1981 with *Castaneda v. Pickard*, the Fifth Circuit Court established a three-part test to see if schools were complying with the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974. First, the school must implement a program based on sound educational theory, or at a minimum, a legitimate experimental program design. Secondly, they must provide enough staff to carry it out, and lastly, if the children are not making progress, they must change course."

Sienna scoffed. "*Reading Fare* is not based on language acquisition and learning theory."

"I'm sure the marketing department at Pica sold it as being based on sound educational theory," Andy said. "Purewater officials are probably insisting their staff implement it precisely because they were assured that it was."

"I wish there was some kind of Supreme Court mandated counseling program for kids and teachers on how to bear it while we wait for the third part of *Castaneda* to kick in." Sienna gazed at the painstakingly sculpted pediment emblazoned with the words, *Equal Justice Under Law*. She wished the crystalline flecked white Georgia marble pillars

in Washington, D.C. and the peeling metal posts in Pure-water *could* be doing the same job, *could* be supporting institutions that championed justice and mercy.

Why couldn't she just do what she knew was right for the children? Sienna pondered the statutes flanking the entrance to the Supreme Court. On the right, there was a young man called Authority of Law. On the left, there was a much larger statue of a woman called Contemplation of Justice. As Sienna peered at her, she realized that a smaller version of Authority of Law sat on Contemplation of Justice's armrest, like a child receiving a lesson from his mother.

If Contemplation were to spring to life, to stand up, to shift her weight, re-cross a leg, or even swat a mosquito, little Authority of Law would topple right over. Their white marble robes reminded Sienna of the Swami back in *The Writers' Lair*. And what of Pilar's *Maritza*? For Sienna, in the presence of Contemplation of Justice on the steps of the United State Supreme Court, *The Maritza* became a symbol that all children, especially those like Pilar, need teachers who can dive deep and stay down long enough for their eyes to adjust to what lies below the surface in a murky sea. Contemplation of Justice must inform and encompass Authority of Law.

Sienna plucked books from the built-in walnut cases on either side of the stone hearth and curled up on the coach in front of the fire. Andy's private library was packed with many titles that she knew and many more that she did not recognize. *The Secret Greed of American*

Schoolteachers by Senator Panky and *Why the Teachers' Union must be Busted* by Chase Haight were disturbing, even without cracking the covers open.

Andy entered the room with a bottle of dessert wine and two fluted glasses. He bent, kissing Sienna on the forehead. "I could get very used to having you here. Are you sure you have to go home?"

The longing in his question tugged at her heart. She nodded yes, exaggerating her frown.

He turned his eyes to the books piled around. "I see you have no time for love." He picked up a book, *Data is the Answer*. "Got time for a trend line?"

Sienna rolled her eyes.

He chuckled, sinking onto the sofa, pulling her feet onto his lap. She felt the swelling of his groin. "Come on, Baby," he said. "Haven't you ever had a little data envy?"

She pursed her lips primly, while her eyebrows danced. "You're sounding quite Freudian." She took the book from his hand. "Why does Nancy think recording Pilar's test score in a database does any good, especially if we aren't giving her the foundation she needs to make progress? Can't Nancy see how much the kids are suffering?"

Andy's tone switched from a playful lover to a protective commander-in-chief. "Start looking for allies."

"Allies?"

"On the inside. There have to be at least a few in a school that size. If you are determined to bring attention to what's really going on, you will need a lot of support."

"Support," Sienna said slowly, remembering her entire consortium was imaginary, consisting of the Swami, *La Maritza*, and *La Mujer de Tierra*.

"Sienna," Andy stared into her eyes. "I'm serious

about this. You are a poet in a very plebian world. Data envy aside, Freud is discarded, and there's absolutely no purchase order for anything related to Jung's concept of the soul in today's public schools. Panky plays hard ball."

Sienna swallowed hard. Andy's expression softened. He sighed, sympathetically and said, "Enough for now. Let's give our relationship a chance. Let's do something fun. Let's plan a trip!"

Relieved to change the subject, Sienna eyed him over the rim of her glass. "Let's sneak away to where they make this yummy stuff."

Andy picked up the bottle and donned his reading glasses to read the label. "Sierras de Málaga. Andalusia." His blue eyes twinkled behind his lens. "Perfect! We'll bask in romance and beauty. The question is, could you go there and not practice your Spanish?"

She grinned. He looked adorable in his spectacles. "No *bésame, bésame?*"

He shook his head.

"No *hazme el amor?*"

"Absolutely not."

"Oh!" She pouted slightly. "What would we do instead?"

"Explore Moorish delights? Stretch out in the sun? Feed each other olives?"

"Learn flamenco!"

"We can tour the legendary Alhambra."

She laughed, "We'll have plenty of time for all that since we won't be making love."

"Why not?"

"You said *No bésame.*" She leaned in, kissing him on the lips.

"I'm a fool," Andy said comprehending. His hand slid

beneath her sweater, gripping the bare skin of her waist. "What else did I accidentally cross off the itinerary?"

* * *

"Forget what I said earlier," Andy whispered, the tip of his nose nestled in the tender skin beneath her ear lobe. "Feel free to practice all the Spanish you want on our trip."

Her voice was sultry. "I'm glad you've changed your mind, *mi cariño!*"

He laughed softly.

Her body hummed, simultaneously alive and deliciously languid. She wanted to stay with him. "I don't want to go back to Moore," she groaned. "I just want to run away. I want to be a gypsy!"

"I bet we could find you a cart in Andalusia." He traced her clavicle with his finger.

"Let it be red and decorated with roses."

"Okay," Andy said. "I'll put in for a Sabbatical." He touched her so gently, so reverently, so obviously enjoying how her flesh felt beneath his fingertips. Curling a strand of her hair around his thumb, he asked, "What color is this? Red or brown?"

"On the artists' palette?"

He nodded.

"Sienna," she said, softly, "like my name."

If passion hadn't depleted him, Andy might have wondered if she'd really been born with enough hair on her head to inspire her mother to name her because of its color or, he might have marveled at the suggestive power of a name to manifest such a match. At that moment, blissfully spent, he did not have the vigor left to consider those possibilities. "I love it!" was all he could whisper, before

drifting off to sleep.

Sienna's mouth was dry. Her throat was parched. When Andy began to snore softly, she slipped from his embrace and out from beneath the sheets. She gathered her neatly folded pajamas from her suitcase and put them on for her foray into the still unfamiliar kitchen. She found a copper teakettle, a tin of loose-leaf chamomile, and a strainer to make tea. Carefully balancing a steaming mug and a cool glass of water, she climbed back up the narrow and crooked bi-centurion staircase, trying to keep the old steps from creaking.

It was thrilling to think of how many people had climbed those very steps since the colonial era. They'd needed candles back then. Now, Andy had a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired nightlight plugged into an outlet in the hall. The mirror at the end reflected its light, guiding her way through the still unfamiliar house. She remembered Edith Wharton had written, "There are two ways of spreading light. To be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."

If Sienna had paused to stare into Andy's mirror a little longer, she might have caught a glimpse of me, of the ghost, haunting her, curiously tapping into her thoughts and accessing her feelings, but she didn't. Sienna's thoughts were on Andy and her body longed for sleep.

Andy's nakedness was too distracting for Sienna to get any real rest, so she turned back into the guest room. In blissful reverie, she sipped her tea, remembering Andy's touch, his respectfulness, and his compliments. Of course, it was pure fantasy to think of traveling to Spain. She couldn't afford a trans-Atlantic trip. Maybe, they could go to Santa Fe, New Mexico instead. Maybe they could visit Gaul Santiago's art gallery. But, she didn't want to know if

Arte para la Gente was fake. She didn't want to find out *La Mujer de Tierra* had really been mass produced by exploited factory workers. Sienna wanted *La Mujer de Tierra* to be formed from the clay of Redención, dug up from the volcanic base of *La Madre Ardiendo*.

She recalled all the colors in the multicultural colored pencil and crayons collection that she kept in *The Writers' Lair* and thought of *The Maritza*. She was used to students drawing her, representing their fascination with her lipstick by giving her oversized, heart-shaped, crimson lips. They often exaggerated her eyelashes, too, making them much longer and thicker than they were in real life. It really was an interesting twist to have a child create a mermaid with her features, her hair. When Sienna was Pilar's age, she hadn't liked her hair at all. Her mother had been an artist. As Sienna began to drift off, she thought of her mother's palette, and all the paintbrushes she'd dipped in various shades of brown.

When Sienna was growing up, they lived in a sunny rented apartment in an old Victorian house. One Saturday morning when Sienna was nine, she lay sprawled on the yellow chintz sofa stamped with pink roses the size as her hands, surrounded by fairy tales from her school library. In the turret nearby with southern exposure, her mother sat at a folding table covered with blue surgical sheeting. Sienna watched Bridget apply acrylic to the bark of a tree she was painting on a wooden cupboard. "What color is that?"

"Burnt Sienna," Bridget had replied. "Like your hair." Sienna frowned. Her hair wasn't burnt. Suddenly

cranky, she snapped. "That gives me a headache."

Bridget swirled her brush in a jar full of paint thinner and wiped her hands on the surgical rag lying across her lap. Its solid blue contrasted with the busyness of her calico smock. "Maybe, you just have a headache," she said.

"From that color!" Sienna was adamant. "I hate it! I hate my hair."

Bridget sipped from a chipped coffee mug. "I love it. Sienna is beautiful."

"It is not!"

"You didn't even have hair until you were almost three. You should be very grateful to have the hair you have now or at least admit it's better than being bald."

Sienna scowled. There really was an agonizing constriction around her temples.

Bridget seemed to be considering whether or not to reveal something. After a moment's hesitation, she said, "I'll tell you a secret. "I actually imagined you with sienna hair before you were born."

"Mama!" Sienna exclaimed in dismay. The stories spread all around her were full of women who had imagined their unborn children and made specific requests about their appearance. Skin as white as snow. Lips as red as blood. "Why didn't you ask for something different?"

"You were already going to be who you were going to be by the time I knew enough to ask for anything." Bridget said. "I couldn't have changed that, and I wouldn't have wanted to. You're perfect the way you are. Would you like a damp compress for your headache?"

Bridget's faith in the healing powers of damp compresses annoyed Sienna. "No," she retorted. "I just want to know why you named me after an ugly color."

"Come here," Bridget drew her daughter into an arms'

length embrace to hold her and consider the offending hue. "Sienna is very intense," Bridget mused. She picked up the end of the long French braid running down her daughter's back, holding it up in the sunlight so she could compare it to her palette. "Your hair is actually somewhere between raw and burnt."

Both of those options sounded terrible to her. Sienna squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't want to see it."

"Hmm." Bridget sounded perplexed. She placed the back of her hand across Sienna's forehead. "You don't have a fever."

"I'm not sick Mama. I just want stories and magic and I want to have beautiful hair."

"Ah!" Bridget said. "I see."

Sienna opened her eyes. What did her mother see?

Bridget handed Sienna a box of oil pastels, heretofore forbidden, because they were so messy. "Make your own stories and your own magic," she said, digging out a sienna crayon, "and most definitely use a tiny bit of this color, even if it does give you a headache."

"But why, Mama? Why do I have to?"

"Creating your own story with something is always the best way to stop hating it."

Doubtfully, Sienna sprawled at her mother's feet and drew a small, red fairy house on burnt sienna wheels that could be pulled by a snow-white unicorn. She drew, exactly what she needed that morning. Drawing helped her forget what had happened when a classmate told her that smart people only read true books.

When she finished drawing the winding raw sienna path her little cart could follow into the mystery beyond the page, Bridget called her daughter to the window seat where they watched hummingbirds sip nectar from bright

fuchsias in hanging baskets. Bridget asked Sienna if she'd like to hear a story about how she'd known what color her unborn daughter's hair would be before her birth. Sienna nodded eagerly.

An ambulance rushing toward Georgetown's emergency room woke Sienna from memories turning into dreams. She bolted upright, bewildered in the unfamiliar bed. Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she returned to Andy's room to slip under his tangled sheets.

Sleepily, he shook the linen out, so it settled evenly over both of them. They slept with the curve of her back supported by the slight paunch of his belly, fitting together like the handcrafted silver spoons nestled in the kitchen below them.

Chapter Fourteen

On the morning after her flight home, Sienna watched students line up for the bus that would transfer them up to Teagan Hill. She calculated how many more times she'd have bus duty before Andy came to speak at an educational conference in the nearby big city of Sinclair. As the steam rose from her coffee mug, Sienna momentarily lost herself in the memory of Andy's embrace. Too bad she'd have to wait almost a month to be with him again.

Fantasies about a lover are as out of place in a public elementary school as a Swami or *una muerta* haunting the hallways. A girl tugged on Sienna's sleeve. She smiled kindly at the child, masterfully masking her reluctance to shift her focus from Andy. Wearing a plush hoodie with a popular designer's name embroidered across the front, Laurali Hadley screwed up her pale, freckled nose, saying, "Hey Teacher. My dad says this school sucks. He knows because his mom is the boss of the school board. Everyone says the teachers at Teagan Hill are better."

Sienna didn't feel like giving a tutorial in manners and since Laurali Hadley didn't even attend Moore, she decided she wasn't under any obligation to. Instead, she asked, "Who is your teacher up there?"

"Mrs. Alcott."

"I know her." Sienna said. "She's nice."

Lisa Alcott had been the newest and lowest teacher on Moore's seniority list. When Moore's failing status gave parents the option to transfer their kids to Teagan Hill as long as there was room for them there so many decided to make the switch that Teagan needed another teacher and Moore had to give one up. After spending the last two weeks of summer decorating her classroom, making copies, and organizing materials for third grade, Lisa was called at four-thirty p.m. on the Thursday before Labor Day and told to pack it all up, move, and get ready to teach fourth grade at Teagan. Like Jolie's work in the library, most of Lisa's preparation had been a waste of time.

Lisa's husband took a day off of work to help his frantic wife set up her new classroom as quickly as possible. Of course, they couldn't claim his lost wages as a charitable deduction on their income tax. Nonetheless, just by driving her second-hand Honda up Teagan Creek Road, Lisa gained the benefits associated with becoming a substantially "better" teacher. Since the kids at Teagan Hill often came to kindergarten already reading, she would be able to relax and enjoy herself and her students a little more. In fact, the percentage of her fourth-grade students likely to pass the reading section on the WASTE tripled, before she even got a chance to meet, let alone instruct, them.

Laurali said, "Plus, Mrs. Alcott is prettier than any teacher here."

Sienna bit her lip as Deedee approached wearing a silver power suit that complimented her upswept platinum ponytail. Deedee smiled as if she hadn't, only a few days before, accused Sienna of sabotaging their students' success, as if she'd never suggested that Sienna quit, or hinted that she might try to force leaving upon her. "How was

your trip back east?"

"Great." Sienna had no desire to share any more details.

Laurali was bored because the wait for the shuttle was long. She snatched a book right from a waiting child's hand. A loud argument ensued. Deedee turned sharply toward the disturbance and startled. She clutched a gray pillar, gasping, "Are all of the children in that line going to Teagan Hill?"

"Yes." Sienna nodded.

"Those are the kind of kids who pass the WASTE!" Deedee cried. "How can they leave us? How can they just walk out? We need them here now!"

Deedee was usually ensconced in her office, buried under paperwork, emails, and phone calls early each morning, long before Moore's students started coming and Teagan's going. Still, it was no secret that sixty kids had transfers. "Oh my God!" Deedee went on. "If this is the way it is, we're just going to keep falling behind Teagan Hill. The Mexicans here are just like...rabbits!"

"They are good kids," Sienna insisted. "They're trying to learn as fast as they can."

As the buses arrived and unloaded, Alondra hurried past, pale and tense on her way to a free breakfast, clutching a well-worn Guatemalan worry doll in her clenched fist. "Deedee," Sienna told the principal, "There's something terribly wrong with us having to depend on the test scores of these children to make our school look good."

"If they don't get their scores up," Deedee snapped, "our jobs are on the line."

"It's insane for us to have to depend on the test scores of children who don't even understand the language the test is written in to make us, highly educated adults, look

proficient at what we do.”

“Well, that’s just the way it is.” Deedee snapped again.

Deedee’s threats were suddenly overwhelmed by a much more immediate danger. As Travis Hadley, Laurali’s cousin, exited his bus waving the brand-new Play Blade his grandmother had given him, he tumbled from the top step. Struggling to his feet beneath the weight of his backpack and still shouting to friends on the sidewalk, Travis lurched toward them as an incoming bus rushed into the parking stall where he staggered. Sienna ran, frantically waving her arms at the bus driver to brake, all the while pleasantly intoning, “Notice the bus. Travis. Notice the bus!”

Travis made it to the cluster of friends on the other side of the red unloading line in the nick of time. The new driver, a discharged corporal freshly returned from Afghanistan, drove the front wheels right over where the boy had fallen and then up onto the curb. Neither soldier nor student registered the near hit. Travis didn’t even notice Laurali shouting his name and waving smugly as she boarded the shuttle. Travis had had a big breakfast at home. He had the same peanut butter alfalfa sprout pancakes every single day. Well-nourished, he had no real excuse for being so oblivious except that Jorge and Brandon wanted to spin his Play Blade before the bell rang.

With a pounding heart, Sienna returned to Deedee. “If Travis Hadley can’t notice a bright yellow school bus about to bowl him over, just how is he supposed find the main idea, let alone all the supporting details in abstract and contextually divorced academic material?”

Deedee chortled. “You are so funny!” She shook her head in amusement before adding. “His grandma firmly

believes in basing teacher pay on WASTE scores.”

Sienna thought of Senator Panky and his book called *The Secret Greed of American Schoolteachers* and felt twelve tons of insurgence whoosh through her. “That’s crazy! Who does it benefit if a teacher’s ability to feed her own children or pay her mortgage depends on the performance of a kid who is clearly more interested in his new Play Blade than in a boring text selection about a physicist who lived sixty years ago?”

“Don’t start in on *Reading Fare* again,” Deedee said. “Fidelity to that program is the only way we’re going to get our scores up. We’re going to implement it down to crossing the last i and dotting every t.”

In response to Sienna’s exasperated expression, she added, “Soon kids will be riding the shuttle bus down to Moore and they won’t be so hoity-toity up there on Teagan Hill.”

As Deedee rushed to her office, Sienna noticed a stray piece of black yarn on the concrete—a strand of worry doll hair. She put it in her pocket to give Alondra later. No doubt, she thought, the doll will be bald before long.

After school, Sienna was pleasantly surprised when Jolie came to her portable until she realized it wasn’t just a social call. Something was wrong.

Jolie’s face was ashen. “Did you hear?”

Sienna’s heart began to race. “What?”

“Deedee wants me to move the library...before Thanksgiving Break.”

Sienna was flabbergasted. “Why?”

Color returned to Jolie’s face as tears sprang to her

eyes. "She said she got an aha from talking with you this morning."

"About what?"

"Apparently, she looked up how the percentage of ELL kids has increased in our building over the past few years and how it is projected to keep growing. She said we need to create an ELL Center so we can get all of the ELL kids across the district to come here. The library is the only space big enough for that many kids. It's win-win, she says, because this way she can keep our enrollment up to replace all the white kids who are transferring out."

Sienna felt dizzy. If the families of the thirty or so other ELL kids scattered across town agreed to transfer to Moore, it would create scheduling chaos for her already overtaxed ELL program. It was easier to worry about Jolie's immediate concern. "Where would the library go?"

"In the old cafeteria!" Jolie grimaced. "I just looked in there. It's awful. It's full of mildewed curriculum. It will take at least a whole day just to haul all that stuff out of there and another whole day to clean it before the library books can even be moved, let alone make the space nice."

Sienna wrinkled her nose. "It really stinks in there." Even if the moldy books were taken away, it was against school district policy to use scents, potpourris, or essential oils to cover the smell of rotten wood or the decaying carcasses of birds in the rafters. She remembered that Matt's first grade basketball team had practiced in there and the whole time they played, the coach sounded as if he were directing them from under water. "The acoustics are terrible."

"That's why she said you can't have the ELL Center in there. She thinks that since libraries are supposed to be quiet, acoustics don't matter."

"What? You're a library teacher. You are supposed to read aloud and teach research skills."

"Maybe I can get one of those amplifiers, you know, with a microphone."

"There are only two outlets in there." Sienna remembered once trying to help Matt's coach rig up an electronic scoreboard.

"I'll need outlets for the computers," Jolie said, "and shelves. The current library was designed to be a library so the shelves are built-in and can't be taken out."

"This is unreasonable." Sienna sighed. "I don't want to move out of my portable. I'll go talk to Deedee."

"You can't. She won't be back until next week," Jolie said. "She's on her way to a conference and then stopping to visit her family. She told Captain Swabby to round up some moving boxes and to start clearing the old cafeteria right away. She said we can cancel our classes next Wednesday so we can have the move all done by the school board walk-through the first day of December."

"We'll have to work over Thanksgiving Break to get it done by then," Sienna said angrily. "I have family coming from out-of-state."

"And my daughter will be home from college."

Fuming, Sienna called the office to ask the secretary, Mrs. Donahue, for Deedee's cell phone number. Jolie paced the length of the portable while Sienna dialed.

Deedee was breathless when she answered. "I can't talk!" Sienna heard Deedee's heels clicking on the tile floor of an airport terminal. "I'm just about to board the plane. Aren't you thrilled about getting to create a great place for kids to learn English?"

"With *Reading Fare*?"

Well, you can do a little of whatever else you do for

ELL with them too."

"Really?" Sienna's anger was replaced with a twinge of hope.

"Yes," Deedee said like a fairy godmother granting a wish. "As I told the Superintendent when I got approval for the move, we're supposed to be here for the kids, right?"

Sienna was pleased. "I don't need the library. I could stay out in the portable."

"Nope!" Deedee said. "If we are going to do this, we are going to do it right. I want a showcase ELL center, just like the one they have in Sinclair."

"Deedee, Sinclair has completely different demographics. It's a more affluent community. Many of the parents of the ELL students are executives, engineers, or doctors and the district spent a lot of time intentionally shaping their program to address the specific needs of that population."

"Now, don't do that, Sienna," Deedee scolded. "It's racist. Porewater's poor kids should have the same opportunities as Sinclair's rich ones."

Nonplused, Sienna pressed on, "It's very disruptive to move the library on such short notice. Poor Jolie! She just started here."

"We are here for the kids," Deedee said firmly. "If Jolie values her job, she'll have to do what's best for them."

Sienna's stomach clenched. Funding for librarians was just as precarious as funding for ELL teachers. Unfunded by the state, the positions were dependent on the passage of unpopular district levies and administrative discretion. Their existence was always dicey.

"Is this really the only way?"

"Like I said, I've thought a lot about it, Sienna."

Sienna heard a flight attendant say, "Welcome aboard."

Then Deedee said to a fellow passenger, "Excuse me. Will you lift my carry-on up there for me? Thanks. Sienna? Where were we? Oh yeah! Once we have everything in place, it won't matter how hard it was or what we had to give up to get there." Sienna heard a masculine grunt, the slam of the overhead compartment. "Jolie just needs to relax," Deedee went on. "I know! Why don't you go into my office, get the bouquet some kid left on my desk, and give it to her. It's a little limp, but it should cheer her up. Oh! And tell her not to bother unpacking the fiction!"

"The fiction?"

"Yeah. I've been reading an article about the new national standards. It says reading for information is way more important than reading stories. We might as well set our library up accordingly."

Sienna bit her lip to stifle a scream.

"I've got to hang up now," Deedee said. "The person who sat in this seat before me must have been really fat. I need both hands to tighten the belt."

The pilot said. "Welcome to Flight 446 to Palm Springs."

The phone went dead.

Jolie said, "The only good thing about being at Moore instead of at Teagan Hill is that there are only half as many library books here. That's less for me to pack and move." Then, she brightened. "That's it! Teagan Hill surplused all of their old freestanding library shelves just last year because the PTA bought new ones for the expansion. Whatever they sent to storage would probably be enough for Moore's collection." Jolie's face brightened as she asked, "Where would discarded furniture go? Let's call the D.O."

and ask."

"Let's not get the district office involved," Sienna suggested. "They'll probably say something like it's too blatantly inequitable to send Teagan Hill's hand-me downs to Moore. They'd hem and haw about it." Angry about Dee-dee's condescending accusation that she was racist, she said, "They'd say it looks racist."

"It would look stupid to put all the books on the floor," Jolie fumed.

"Let's just ask Captain Swabby to hunt the bookcases down. He'll find them, the old pirate!"

"They're probably some funky color." Jolie said. "I bet they're eggplant or avocado green like a 1970's refrigerator."

"My mom had one of those."

"Mine too."

"Actually, Teagan's bookcases were orange." Sienna said, remembering library meetings up there. "Funky."

"Retro chic," Jolie heaved an enormous sigh. "Well, once the plywood comes off the outside of those windows, there should be some natural light in the old cafeteria." She glanced at the marigolds blooming beside *La Mujer de Tierra*, still pumping their spicy scent into the portable. "And if I brought some big plants in, that would clean up the air a little."

"And you could probably find a nice rug to cover the lines of the basketball court. That would warm it up."

"Or, I could have them sit in the center for story time. You know, use what's there and make it kind of fun." Jolie was overwhelmed, but she was beginning to rally. "Maybe there's a score board and we could record how many stories we've read on it."

Sienna nodded. She decided not to tell Jolie what

Deedee said about the fiction. She looked around *The Writers' Lair*.

She'd have to move all her stuff, too. She thought of her dirty laundry at home still in the suitcase with the airline tag banded around the handle and the shriveled carrots and empty milk carton in her refrigerator. She needed to go to the market. She wanted to download and print some of her pictures from the nation's capital to share with her students. Instead, she grabbed a piece of paper from the recycling bin and made up a plan with Jolie so they could accommodate *la jefa*.

Chapter Fifteen

Nancy Albright decided that it would be a good service project for her students to help with the move. The students would help Sienna and Jolie and Sienna and Jolie would help her by supervising them so she could enter their *Reading Fare* Unit 3 test scores into the RIDE (Reforming Instruction through Data Entry) spreadsheet before the Thanksgiving Break deadline. Pilar and her classmates were excited about the move. Carrying boxes full of library books would be more fun for them than staring at a thick stack of *Reading Fare* worksheets could ever be.

The boys dared one another to be macho, to carry two or three boxes at a time. Sienna was certain that most of their families had no medical insurance and suspected that Nancy's way of getting the data entry time she so desperately needed was violating some child labor law. "No way, Jose!" Sienna shouted at the staggering boys, bending backwards beneath too much weight. "One box at a time – especially since it's pouring rain."

Jolie cringed at the posturing, worried that if a kid dropped a soggy cardboard box en route it would burst open. She imagined the library books sinking into one of the multiple, waterlogged potholes littering the parking

lot. If they weren't damaged that way, she worried her strategically packed titles would be completely mixed up and she would have to sort hundreds of books over the weekend. As she watched the first ragged line of jovial nine-year-olds stagger out of the old library, every box became a ship with an untried captain at the helm, sailing across a dangerous ocean. She actually felt seasick.

When Tammy Lewis discovered Nancy was getting her RIDE done before the holiday break, she sent her second graders to help with the move, too. Even though it was raining, some wore black construction paper pilgrim hats. Others came in scissor-fringed, Native Americans vests crafted from 100% post-consumer fiber grocery bags.

Ahead of them, Sienna cleaned the scavenged bookshelves with her beloved Window Bright as fast as she could. Pilar waited nearby for one of those shelves to dry so she could unload her box.

"That stuff's not approved!" Captain Swabby barked.

"I don't care," Sienna retorted. "It smells bad enough in here without adding the stench of that institutional cleaner you use."

"Is that all the thanks I get?" Captain Swabby shook his head in mock disgust. "Where'd you get those paper towels?"

"Bonny Deals."

"They aren't issue."

"Yeah," she snorted. "No one seems to have any trouble with me buying and bringing tissue from there for the kids to blow their noses on."

"Hey! Facial tissue is not my jurisdiction unless it's bloody."

Sienna grimaced. "You realize, don't you, that it takes three times as long and three times as many of your pa-

thetic paper towels to clean up what I get done with one of mine?"

"I know," he said. "It's job security."

Sienna sprayed more of the forbidden cleaning agent. "These shelves are filthy."

"But I got them for you, didn't I?"

She stopped her frenzied work to bat her eyelashes at him. "Thanks."

Jolie appeared behind a would-be Native American warrior. His brown paper vest was actively sluffing off onto the slippery former basketball court that was now the floor of the library. Jolie dropped a heavy box with a thud beside him. She stood rubbing the tight ropes of tension in her neck as water streamed from her raincoat, mixing with the remains of the boy's costume. "I don't know what we would have done if you hadn't tracked them down. Captain Swabby, you're our hero."

"Yeah, sure I am," Captain Swabby scoffed. "Flattery will get you anywhere. I'm outta here!" He turned to go, stopping suddenly, to examine an unsightly gouge in one of the plaster walls.

"Don't worry about that," Jolie said. "I'm going to cover it with bulletin board paper."

"You can't," he said automatically. "Fire code."

"I don't want you bringing any of that yucky gray paint in here. I hate that color."

"Well, you can buy your own paint," he said. "I won't tell."

Jolie snorted. "I can barely pay my mortgage. Even if I could, it's not right to use my own money for facility maintenance."

"Okay." Captain Swabby conceded. "I still have a partial of saffron somewhere. It's yours if you want to go

gold." He gestured toward the other three walls. They were all red brick. The high windows were coated by raindrops.

"It will look fantastic!" Sienna said. "Red brick, yellow plaster, orange Formica. There was a piñata with those same colors at the swap meet." She turned toward Pilar. "*La biblioteca nueva will be bonita, verdad?*"

Pilar knew enough English to answer. "Yes! I like red and yellow. Very much."

Captain Swabby gave the girl a thumbs up. "It would have been better," he said, "if I'd had enough time to paint in here before you had to move all the books. Sometimes, this school reminds me of the Titanic." He used the skull and crossbones bandana hanging from his back pocket to mop his brow. "I hope Deedee is enjoying her trip down south," he added, "while we grunts get this dump ship-shape."

* * *

After school was dismissed for the long Thanksgiving weekend, Pilar went home to tell Lucia, Ramon, Esteban, and Dulce, who was always hanging around *Casita Rio* now, how her class got to help with the move. Just as she'd finished, the phone rang.

When Lucia hung up, she smiled at Pilar saying, "That was Ms. O'Mara. *Las maestras* are working late and they're getting hungry. Would you like to take their order to them?"

"I'll go with you!" Dulce offered, looking to Ramon and Lucia for permission, "and can we stay and help?"

"You can all go," Ramon said grandly, nodding at his wife. "I won't be too busy. Purewater people don't want

Mexican tonight. They are home dressing up turkeys.”

Lucia waved her hand toward the back door. “The turkeys out there aren’t home.”

Ramon chuckled proudly at her use of the idiom. “*No problema, esposa. El bandido y yo.* We can feed *a todo el mundo.*” The whole family laughed. Pilar thought it was funny how Lucia called people birds and Ramon spoke of a burrito as if it were his best friend.

Since the robbery of the Bank of U.S., finding Baldwin’s missing heist had become the hobby of many. *El Bandido* was a special meal deal Ramon created for folks who did not want to waste time sitting in the restaurant while the riverbank waited to be searched. Like Clemen-cian pilgrims prostrating themselves during the final approach to the shrine of *La Sirena*, the searching hordes combed the edges of the Purewater. Hope alone could not fill their bellies and there was no treasure-hunting dogma to dictate that seekers fast.

El Bandido was designed to give them sustenance. The oversized burrito was most often eaten sitting on a log or leaning against river rock, so *El Bandido* came wrapped in wax paper so that the *carne asada*, *cebollas*, and hot *aj* would not fall out. Ramon told anyone who would listen that he added the *carne* because rich people ate red meat every day. The onions were to trigger the diner’s last tears for once someone found the money, there would never be another need to cry. Ramon added the jalapeno and garlic to create a wall of protection around the person who found the money and his or her family so that they would never be taken advantage of after becoming rich. Ramon told the family that he’d got the idea about the garlic from the 1970’s Dracula comic book Gaul had given him when they were boys back in Mexico. *El Bandido* came with value-

added—a cup of coffee with condensed milk, cinnamon, and a pinch of chili to keep the searchers “hot on the trail.” Ramon got that English idiom from an American television show.

And so, leaving him to stuff his tortillas while most of America crammed breadcrumbs into the hollowed-out cavities of fowl, the others carried a takeout *fiesta* tray laden with *empanadas*, *sopas*, *arroz*, y *frijoles* down First Street. Soon, Lucia was arranging stuffed animals and hanging posters in the new library while Esteban and Dulce began covering old plaster with gold paint. Matt O’Mara arrived after the Dojang closed for the holiday. He greeted everyone and began the second phase of the move, carrying boxes from Sienna’s portable to the emptied library which was now called *The Newcomers Center*.

The police chief wasn’t far behind him. When Wolf first entered the library, Esteban and Lucia grew nervous, exchanging sidelong glances, wondering if they should make their excuses and leave, but it wasn’t long before they realized the policeman, the Chief, was really only there because he was smitten with Jolie and wanted to help. Jolie actually gave him an order, sending him away to help Matt. “I need to think,” she told him with a twinkle in her brown eyes. “And you are distracting me.”

Pilar thought of how Mrs. Albright disapproved of people distracting each other and kids always looked dejected when they were sent out into the hall. Captain Wolfgang looked oddly happy for someone being scolded and banished. Later that evening, Pilar found herself feeling comforted by his presence on campus as she left Lucia to scurry across the dark lot alone, fixating on the light in the windows of the Newcomers Center. When she arrived, she realized the first thing Sienna had done was to recreate

the altar, setting *La Mujer de Tierra* upon the bookcase behind her desk and hanging *The Maritza* and *Meet Me at the Swami* over it.

"That will be a good place for kids to draw," Sienna said, pointing Pilar toward a table and a large moving box full of crayons, markers, colored pencils, and various containers to organize them in.

While Pilar luxuriated in arranging and rearranging art materials, Sienna and Jolie conferred in the back corner of the empty space about a framed picture on the wall. An indigenous woman reclined on an abstract wave while an indigenous man waved a rattle over her body. "This used to be the first thing you saw when you entered the library," Sienna remembered. "When we got the projector, the screen had to go where the picture used to be. Deedee wanted to trash it. I just asked the tech guy to rehang it—out of sight."

"It was really hidden when all the books were in here." Jolie said. "I've never taken the time to look at it before now. I like it."

"Me, too." Sienna said. "And it's perfect for a multicultural center."

"Maybe it should be in the library where the whole school will be able to enjoy it," Jolie said, "so *los gringos* can be exposed to it."

"What are you all talking about?" Wolf set the last box from Sienna's portable down on the ground and joined them.

Together, they considered the picture. Pilar left her art supplies and imaginary studio to have a look and Lucia, having kept vigilant about Wolf's whereabouts all evening, trailed in at a discreet distance to hover behind the group.

"He's a Native American healer," Sienna explained.

"Él es un curandero!" Pilar exclaimed. "*Como las mujeres de Redención.*"

"Ay!" Lucia said softly. Even though her *madrina* was too far behind them to place a warning hand upon Pilar's shoulder, Pilar felt it. She realized that mentioning healers must be like not having papers, or like not revealing how many family members really lived in an apartment, or like pretending not to have known Gaul before she supposedly met him for the first time on All Saints Day. It was just another one of the things she was not supposed to share with *gringos*. But Sienna and Jolie just smiled as if they didn't share Lucia's worry about a girl who sometimes let what she was not supposed to have in her mind occasionally slip out through her mouth.

A man's oddly familiar voice said, "What a treasure!"

Sienna whirled around to see Gaul Santiago and Ramon Vega coming up behind them. Gaul nodded at Sienna. "We meet again, *maestra*. Ramon said we were coming to a school, but this..." his eyes swept over *La Mujer de Tierra*, front and center on her bookcase, "looks like an art gallery to me."

It occurred to Sienna, once again, that he could be a con and, if that were true, she'd be embarrassed for him to think she'd fallen for his sentimental story about the statue's origin. To test him, she gestured toward the shaman painting. "Do you know something about this type of art?"

Gaul studied the small details, peering at the frog carved on the rattle in the healer's hand and at the raven soaring over his head. He pointed to the bottom right-hand corner. "Do you see this icon where a signature should be? It's a mountain and a rock with a river?"

"What does that mean?" Jolie asked.

"In the 1960's, there was a movement by a group of

Native American artists to sign their work this way. The belief was that through using this icon, the artist split the work into a third party, away from himself and away from the spirit that inspired him."

"Why?" Sienna asked.

Gaul said. "I think I can explain it this way. Several years ago, I acquired a raven rattle. A truly amazing piece. The handle is worn smooth from being used in the ritual of passing power from one elderly chief to the next in line for hundreds of years. Collectors would come in, see it, ask the price, and assume that if they could own it, some sacred power would somehow just descend upon them. Over time, I've watched people interact with art. Although few would ever confess to it, many seem to think that if they buy a sacred piece, the artist's power accrues to them. The symbol on this painting was an attempt to remind those in the know of what can be bought and sold and what can never be."

"Hmm..." Sienna said, "That's an interesting school of thought."

Jolie said, "And I love this piece. It does seem out of place in this community."

"That's changing now," Sienna waved her hand toward the unpacked boxes. "That's why we're going through all this, right? We're going to celebrate different cultures now." Sienna felt a twinge of excitement travel up her tired spine. She would staple *The Writers' Lair* banner up before she went home.

"Is there an artistic community in Purewater?" Gaul asked.

Wolf rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "We have a crafts fair at Christmas." He must have felt Pilar scrutinizing his Roman nose just then because he looked down and smiled,

kindly, as if he actually liked her. It seemed to her that he saw her as a real girl, not just one of the many Mexicans moving into town. And, then he strode over to her mermaid picture, asking, "Who is the artist?"

"Pilar," Sienna said. "It was one of her first pieces. Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, it is," Wolf said. "What do you call it?"

"The *Maritza*," Pilar said shyly. Her whisper was barely audible.

"*Sí. Muy bueno*," Gaul declared. His eyes twinkled as he turned to Sienna. "I'll take it. I'm prepared to pay."

"*La Maritza* is not for sale." Sienna glanced at Pilar. "Is she?"

Pilar shook her head. "The *Maritza* is for Ms. O'Mara. I can make you something else."

"You do that," Gaul said encouragingly.

Sienna's stomach clenched at the memory of how Pilar's work on the picture and the vocabulary she was learning about her grandmother had been interrupted on *El Día de Los Muertos* by Deedee's demands and the *Reading Fare* test.

"She'll have more time to work on more soon."

Gaul's eyes flickered over to where *La Mujer de Tierra* stood, still flanked by still vibrant marigolds. He met Sienna's eyes and nodded. And, for the first time, Pilar felt truly safe in America.

Chapter Sixteen

Sienna didn't get home until after 10 pm that evening. Her entire body ached from exhaustion. The dull throbbing in her head was becoming sharper. Sugar would help. Luckily, Matt had been able to get to Purewater's bakery between his last class and Tae Kwon Do to pick up the pumpkin pies Sienna had ordered. Her family wouldn't care if she dug into one now, but she felt guilty for not being able to delay gratification until after their Thanksgiving Day dinner. Sienna's tongue tingled with nutmeg and ginger as she readjusted the laptop, angling it so Andy could not see the open box of pie or the can of whipping cream on the counter behind her. It was the middle of the night for him, but he insisted on checking in with her after the disruptive move. "It doesn't bode well for her as leader for Deedee to force you and Jolie to move on such short notice with such little help."

Sienna shrugged, telling him about the help she and Jolie had gotten and how Gaul had shown up, too.

"Why would an art dealer from Santa Fe be making regular visits to Purewater?" Andy asked.

Sienna reminded him, "He's a friend of Pilar's family."

"Are you sure he's not a drug dealer?" Andy asked.

Sienna was taken aback. "That's not like you."

"Unfortunately, we can't be too naïve about these things," Andy said. After a moment of awkward silence, he cleared his throat, adding, "I can't help wondering if he's tall, dark, and handsome."

"He's not... tall."

"Great." He did look a little concerned.

Sienna was far too weary to engage with jealousy or in flirtation. "And so," she said, "Gaul took the painting of the shaman off the wall. On the back, there was a card explaining that when Mrs. Moore bequeathed the land to the school district back in the 1920's, she stipulated that the painting was to be displayed on site for all perpetuity. I really do want to keep it in the Newcomers Center. The truth is more kids will get to see it if Jolie puts it in the library."

"So, how is the Newcomer Center?" Andy asked.

"Bizarre," she replied.

"How so?"

"I feel like I'm in the belly of a whale, surrounded by all those empty shelves." Sienna sprayed a huge spiraling dollop of whipped cream onto the tiny sliver of pie left on her plate.

"Just think about how lucky you are to have the space!" Andy was animated, despite the late hour. "The Supreme Court waited 146 years to get its own building. You have a Newcomers Center after just a few years in portable Siberia."

"And I don't have a five-minute hike to the bathroom anymore. There's actually a bathroom in my new space and it's completely private."

"What a perk!" Andy said.

Sienna nodded. She appreciated the exercise she got

walking to the main building, but in a world tied to the minute hand and governed by bells, the distance and the length of the line in the women's restroom were significant. "I can correct a lot of paper in the time I'll save," she said.

"Best not to calculate your labor to that degree of efficiency," Andy warned. "Senator Panky just introduced a bill to minimize recess. The way he's going he's likely to add an amendment to dock teacher's pay if they go to the bathroom."

Sienna was angry. Children need recess and all people need bathroom breaks. Why did this guy feel so entitled to treat children and teachers like this? Sarcasm came easily. She said, "And then, Pica will start marketing a standards-based, test-preparation chamber pot for every classroom so teachers can keep teaching and kids can keep listening while they pee."

Andy chuckled, "That's not really funny, is it? In all seriousness though, you are doing good work. I am glad Deedee decided to let you carry on with *The Writers' Lair*."

Sienna smiled. "And I'm really glad to have you in my life this Thanksgiving."

"I feel the same about you," Andy said. "Sorry, if I'm pedantic about the Supreme Court. I wouldn't be if we were together." He sighed. "I wish we were."

They blew kisses into their screens and logged off for the night. Thinking about how hard it was to be so far apart, Sienna ate the last bite of her slice of pie. She only had twenty minutes to clean up the kitchen before her mother, Uncle Ed, and Aunt Susan arrived in the car they'd rented at the Sinclair airport. Wishing she hadn't had to work so late all week, Sienna filled the sink with hot soapy water to soak the residue off a pile of dirty plates

and helped herself to a second piece of pie.

* * *

"Teaching kids to write their own stories sounds like good medicine," Susan said when they'd all finished Thanksgiving dinner.

Bridget nodded. "Everybody knows what happens when a part of the population is shut-down, disenfranchised. You get graffiti, gang violence...slum city."

"It's a good thing your principal came around," Susan added. "Imagine what a small community like Purewater would be like after ten years if even just half of all the students who go through Moore essentially end up frustrated with schooling, illiterate, and angry."

"I know. I am worried about that. It's so sad and such a waste. But, Deedee, on the other hand, insists *Reading Fare* will improve test scores and property values." Sienna pointed toward the silver roots at her temples. "I started losing color right around the second week of implementation."

"Ah, honey," Bridget said. "If it bothers you, two hours in the beauty shop is all you need. Plus, you'll get to close your eyes and put your feet up."

"Or you can give yourself credit," Aunt Susan said. "Let the gray symbolize your life experience and wisdom."

"That's true," Bridget mused. "The best part of going gray is it helps women stop comparing themselves with each other and focus on what really matters. Still, if you're too stressed out at Moore, maybe you should just go work at another school. Any school would be lucky to get you."

"But I love the kids," Sienna said. "And, soon the staff will realize how obfuscating *Reading Fare* is and how all

the testing is hurting everyone.”

“What do you mean by that?” Uncle Ed was at the back door, panting, pressing Matt’s basketball into his heaving chest.

“Do you really want to about hear it,” Sienna glanced at her uncle. “My principal always says I’m may too specific when I explain it.”

“No, tell me. Give it to me straight. I want to know what to say when my golf buddies start bashing teachers.”

“Okay, but then I really need to stop thinking about work for a few days.” Sienna described a *Reading Fare* test question that required her fourth-grade students to read a passage with advanced vocabulary. That vocabulary had not been taught during the unit the children were being tested on, nor had it ever appeared in any of the *Reading Fare* curriculum for any of the younger grades.

“So,” Susan said, “the curriculum designers assume that kids have learned those words elsewhere.”

“But,” Bridget asked, “Where would ELL kids learn them if their ELL teachers are required to follow the *Reading Fare* script from day one?”

Sienna said, “That’s what I have been asking Deedee.”

Uncle Ed ruffled Sienna’s hair just like he had when she was a little girl. “I’m sorry it’s so tough, sweetie. I feel sorry for you and the kids. I would be angry about this, if I had a vested interest in the well-being of this community.” His eyes brightened with the certainty he knew how to make Sienna happier. “I’ll get Matt. You get the dictionary. It’s time for a family game of Scrabble.”

Chapter Seventeen

On the Monday right after Thanksgiving before she even visited the cavernous Newcomer Center to see the consequences of her last executive order, Deedee announced, "We should require school uniforms at Moore."

Several teachers grimaced. It might have been at the suggestion or because they were eating prepackaged *Calories Count*. Controlled portions, masquerading as lunch, had gone on sale at Bonny Deals right alongside cans of whole cranberries and post-holiday breadcrumbs. Frugally, they'd stocked up.

"We need to form a committee," one said.

"Can we make parents pay for uniforms?" Tammy Lewis asked. She wasn't eating at all. She stood on a chair, pinning tattered gold garland above the window overlooking the parking lot.

Sienna, standing by the microwave, reheating Bridget's traditional Day-After-Thanksgiving soup asked, "Do you mean something like everyone wears blue pants and a white shirt?"

"No." Deedee said. "I mean like real uniforms. Like with ties."

Real uniforms would cost the Fuentes family or the Garcia clan a lot, Sienna mused—even if they only bought

one per child. There would have to be a mid-week trip to the laundromat where just washing them would cost more than two or three used outfits at the swap meet had. She almost said something about that, but she was wary. She didn't want Deedee yelling at her again. Instead, of pointing out the logistics of poverty, she said, "We should probably stay away from white."

"I was thinking black and blue," Deedee said.

Nancy nodded. "We should just go with earth tones to match the mud because the district can't afford to fix the drainage on the playground."

"How about bright colors?" Jolie said. "It's so gloomy around here in the winter."

Sienna was certain that a faculty that had approved gray paint for the exterior of their school would never select neon clothing for the kids. But, just to check her theory, she said, "Let's go for hot pink, orange, and yellow."

"And electric blue," Jolie added.

"I like rainbow colors, too," Mavis Penn said.

Deedee snarled. "We aren't hippies. Or gay. I want us to look classy. Like a private school."

"We aren't a private school," Tammy said.

Deedee scowled, allowing maliciousness to seep into her tone, "Teachers will wear uniforms, too. Gray tweed. Slacks or a skirt. No! Jumpers!" Suddenly, she clapped her hands in delight. "Teachers will wear gray jumpers!" Deedee beamed happily at the vision in her mind.

Sienna scanned the mostly distressed faces in the staff room. She couldn't tell if her colleagues were disturbed by Deedee's fashion sense or her mood swings.

Mavis Penn was a long-time union representative. She was close to retirement and had seen a variety of administrators come and go over the years. She swallowed her

blood pressure medication with a sip of water and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. Primly, she said, "That will make us even more upscale than a private school. We'd be like governesses."

"Yes. Like *Jane Eyre*," Sienna adopted a playful, teasing tone, hoping Deedee would get the allusion before mandating an edict they'd all regret.

"Indeed, it is," Jolie added, her diction sounding like the queen of England.

"Jane who?" Deedee asked. "Air? Do they have a website?"

"You're joking, right?" Jolie stared at Deedee. The white plastic butter knife in her hand shook a little. She was still furious about the email Deedee sent her over the weekend, reminding her not to bother unpacking the fiction. The books were already on the library shelves, but Jolie resented being at risk for accusations of insubordination just for doing her job.

"No. I'm serious." Deedee said, "Think of the time you all will save shopping for clothes and planning your outfits every day. We can order the uniforms online."

"There might be a link," Jolie said, "to a school for the impoverished daughters of the clergy."

Nancy made a small choking sound, and, as if to stifle the noise, snatched the last leftover segment of a sprinkled doughnut from an empty tray in the center of the table. She popped it into her mouth and chewed with her front teeth, like a rodent.

"We all need to be on the same page around here," Deedee insisted. "Literally, on the same page in *Reading Fare* and in the spirit of achieving higher standards. I want you to remember that every single time you see each other and look at the children. I want you to think common

clothes, common curriculum. I want it to be your mantra."

"Well then," Nancy said slowly, "what color should we wear under the gray jumpers? Black? Blue?"

Deedee beamed at her. "That's where you get free choice! You get to decide that for yourself, Nancy. Pick whichever one you want. Black on Monday? Blue on Tuesday? I don't care. Mix it up. I'll support whatever you choose."

"I look better in blue," Nancy said with green sprinkle stuck between her front teeth. "Would it be okay if I wore blue all the time?"

"That would be just fine," Deedee said. "And look at you, Nancy! Look at how quickly you're adjusting to the idea. You are a model for embracing change. I hope all your colleagues will learn from your example!" Deedee took in the whole room with a gesture before giving Nancy her undivided attention once more. "Would you like to chair the uniform committee?"

Nancy blanched. "Uh...well... my daughter is going to State and my son is starting basketball this week and I'm the team mom, so I have to...."

Deedee nodded her head up and down vigorously.

Nancy joined in. "Okay. I'll do it."

"Wait," Sienna said, "Our fourth graders need to learn how to write persuasive essays. Let's have them do research on school uniforms and write what they think about them. Maybe they could have a debate. The whole school could come and watch. The kids could vote."

"We don't have time for all that research, writing, and speaking!" Nancy gasped. "The fourth grade at Moore is already a whole *Reading Fare* unit behind every other school in town."

"But this would be a personally meaningful project,"

Sienna said. "It's relevant to their lives. We could teach them every skill that *Reading Fare* claims to cover by leading them through this project. And, they'd get to experience being active, thinking citizens in a democracy."

"That is not the point of this," Deedee spoke through gritted teeth. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, lip-synching her count to ten. When she opened her eyes, she spoke with exaggerated calm. "I want uniforms to build team spirit and get rid of distractions so that kids and teachers can focus on our learning improvement plan. We have to get our reading scores up! I don't want to waste time thinking or talking about anything else."

"We teach in an American public school," Jolie said. "Who does it benefit when getting higher reading scores preempts participation in informed public discourse?"

"This is elementary school," Deedee hissed as if they'd all missed the memo. "Kids can't participate in public intercourse. They're too young. They don't know what's good for them. Frankly, some of you don't seem to know either."

With that, the teachers began chattering about uniforms.

When Sienna heard the phrase "regulation hemline" from the table in the furthest corner of the room, she pulled a black beret from her coat pocket and positioned it over her head. She took her soup out of the microwave and deliberately drained all emotion from her voice. She succeeded spectacularly, sounding unusually cold and aloof as she swept toward the door "I've got to go," she said to no one in particular. "I'm binding grammar poems today."

Deedee watched Sienna go, only dimly registering the wake of steam behind her, and then glanced at the clock. "Oh shoot! I've got to go, too. I have a meeting at the dis-

trict office about getting more ELL kids."

"Really?" Nancy wrinkled her nose. "Why? That's only going to drive our test scores down more, especially since Sienna still isn't following *Reading Fare*. There's no grammar poem in this week's scope or sequence."

"Don't worry," Deedee said in a low voice, loud enough to be overheard, "I'm working on getting the other ELL teacher in Purewater transferred here. Even though she's just got out of college, she has apparently figured out how to follow *Reading Fare's* pacing guide with her students." Deedee backed out the door adding, "Nancy, the Jane Air catalog is a good place for your committee to start. Send me the link."

"I can do it right now!" Ashley Whitfield piped up, waving her smartphone. "I'll look up Jane Air and email the link to everyone."

"*Jane Eyre* is a novel," Mavis told her.

"Not necessarily," Ashley said. "It could be a clothing company with the same name."

"Probably not." Jolie muttered.

Peering at her handheld, Ashley exclaimed, "It *is* a novel! With 328 pages! Wow! Who has time to read anything that long?"

Jolie widened her eyes at Mavis. "I'm going back to the library now."

"Quite right," Mavis said, dabbing her mouth again.

In her office, Deedee drooped in her chair, just as her nine-year-old self had slumped in the backseat of the old Studebaker. How many times had she watched her mother from there? She'd peered through two panes of glass, the sedan's window, and the entire east side of a Chattanooga coffee shop. While she ate the dry crusts of a peanut butter sandwiches left over in her Raggedy Ann lunch pail, her

mother sat in the restaurant, drinking French Roast with cream—no sugar—smoking a Virginia Slim, scribbling in a stenographer's notepad, wearing a black beret.

Deedee wondered where Sienna had gotten her ridiculous hat. It looked just like the one her mother had donned during those long, boring hours. Was it a uniform for poets? Deedee could never be on that team. The laughter of her older sisters had made that clear the one time she'd tried on Edwina's beret while they all waited in the car for their mother to sweep through McPhee's, filling a wire basket with discounted tuna and bulk jars of mayonnaise during a flash sale.

Deedee snorted. Sienna was a decent ELL teacher, but she was as incomprehensible to Deedee as Edwina had always been. Her sisters, Marilyn and Maisie, had had their own secrets as well, constantly reminding Deedee of her exclusion from their shared mystery with their impenetrable signals, the lift of a brow, the biting of a lip.

The glances and expressions her staff had exchanged over lunch reminded her of that and, damn it to hell, if they weren't sending her back to square one, after she'd finally cracked her sisters' code.

Yep. She'd done it. Just days ago on Thanksgiving, forty years to the day past her first hush-hush visit from Aunt Flo, in the same kitchen where she'd done her primary school homework, Deedee had finally realized that a head tilted to the side and a tiny right shoulder shrug meant, "See! Mama's crazier than a shithouse rat!" And then, like a young child finally mastering her short vowel sounds and applying them to Dr. Seuss, she realized widened eyes meant, "Don't tell." The half-smile signified, "Keep her guessing." When nostrils flared, her sisters meant. "We've got the upper hand now." Sometimes, all it

took was tucking a strand of hair behind the ear. And once again, as she did after every visit back to her birthplace, Deedee remembered that she hadn't been allowed to get her ears pierced as long as she lived in her Mama's house because of the nasty infection Maisie suffered after her initiation into the world of gold studs.

The way Sienna had tucked her hair behind her ears when she'd donned that stupid hat in the staff room vexed Deedee. The way Sienna seemed to resist her idea about uniforms and then went cold and became aloof was infuriating. She seemed to know something Deedee did not. Deedee hated feeling that way. She knew she'd only stumbled into understanding her sisters' secret language at this late date because she was, for the first time, its beneficiary. Over Thanksgiving dinner, her mother had leaned in asking, "Tell me, Deidre, darling. Do the children at your school read?"

Deedee had nodded enthusiastically. "We've just adopted a fantastic new program!"

"But do they read?"

Something about that question made Deedee nervous. She tucked a strand of her shoulder length hair behind her ear, so that it curled slightly, almost cupping one of the thick, 14 carat, gold hoops she sported. It was a magical act because, as if on cue, Marilyn passed the butter dish to their mother and changed the subject. "Real butter is so much better than margarine."

Maisie said, "And I just love the centerpiece Mama."

"I got everything at McPhee's," Edwina whispered. It pained Edwina to buy flowers at the grocery store instead of the bona fide, but now defunct, florist's shop, so she launched into a lament about small businesses going under downtown. As the conversation at her mother's lace-

covered table eddied around her, swirling away from her school improvement plan, Deedee savored a flaky croissant with intense gratitude.

Her sisters had helped her deflect Edwina's difficult question. They'd protected her from deeper reflection. She certainly didn't need to come back to her school to find her staff creating another private language around her right after she'd had the sweet taste of sisterhood for the first time ever back at home.

* * *

At the weekly faculty meeting that Thursday, Nancy passed a platter of peanut butter cookies around. "They are full of protein," she said, urging Mavis Penn to eat one. "Our jobs are too stressful to survive on *Calories Count*."

Mavis declined. "I have to watch my cholesterol. Doctor's orders."

Deedee held up her hand, refusing as well. She was determined to launch into the implementation of uniforms. Still, she made a point of asking, "Is there anything we need to discuss before moving onto my agenda item?"

"Yes," Mavis said, "I've got first graders who still don't know all their letters, let alone their sounds. I just can't keep up with the *Reading Fare* pacing guide. Given the special needs of our population, I'm wondering why our school didn't get an actual intervention program. Can we still get one for Moore? Or can I get a copy of *Reading Fare's* Kindergarten program and use that?"

Ashley Whitfield spoke up. "If we have high enough expectations for our students, they will eventually rise to meet them."

Mavis smiled warmly at the much younger woman. "I

agree with that to a point, Ashley, but not if we make them feel like failures from the get-go.”

And with that bit of dissension, tension built in the staffroom like a thunderhead forming over an outdoor wedding. A cluster of probationary teachers at the back table burst into frenzied chatter. One of them exclaimed, “Can you believe she’s at the top of the salary scale?” Ashley said, loud enough for all to hear, “I think it’s time for someone to retire.”

Mavis slid back in her chair and stood up. Her chest heaved as she surveyed the room. Her years of negotiating on behalf of teachers, mostly women, to improve their working conditions had given her plenty of experience facing the short-term self-righteousness of bickering politicians and the long-term social betrayal of her colleagues and the children crammed into classrooms. Mavis surveyed the room. Some women were picking chopped nuts out of a cookie. Others doodled in the margins of a notepad. One was trimming laminate from a poster of a puppy that said *Wag your tail for teamwork*.

Mavis knew most of them were exhausted after simultaneously pushing a developmentally inappropriate curriculum on children and then having to respond and contain the non-stop emotional and behavioral reactions to that—all day long—day after day. She said, “Thirty years ago, my sister adopted a nine-year old girl. The kid had spent her entire life, up to that point, in a playpen in front of a T.V. She spoke with the intonation of sitcom characters, always pausing between her sentences, as if waiting for canned laughter to come out of nowhere. Naturally, she was awkward in social situations, but she was so hungry for attention that she was gratified when people laughed at her. The social worker called her communica-

tively handicapped.”

Several teachers glanced at the clock. Some of the mothers on staff had just parked their very own children in front of electronic screens in the hallway outside the staff so they could attend this meeting. Some of them had babies at home and longed to be holding them after spending most of the day pouring energy, enthusiasm, and encouragement into strangers’ children. Other mothers still had chauffeuring older children to activities and orthodontists to do before they make dinner for their families and grade papers to enter scores into the district’s RIDE.

Mavis kept talking. “One day when my niece was about twelve, the family dog snatched one of her favorite shoes. She shook her fist, like a cartoon character, trying to make him drop it. My sister coached her to use a powerful voice, to tap into an authentic feeling. The girl couldn’t do it. The dog ripped her shoe apart.”

Deedee shook her head sadly, “What kind of shoe was it?”

Mavis ignored her and went on. “As she watched him tear it to pieces, the girl sunk into a catatonic state. My sister called me in a panic, asking for advice. I told her to hold the girl. I told her to hold her until she’d been held enough. My sister wouldn’t do it.” Mavis put her hand on her clavicle as if it hurt to breathe. “My sister said, ‘This kid’s too old to be coddled.’ Guess what happened? The kid gave up on talking. She’s said a few things in the last twenty odd years, always keeping it simple. Real simple. *Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know, and I’ve never thought about it.* She felt like a failure. She dropped out of school and now she lives on prescription pills in a group home. If I had to do it over again, I would have marched over to my sister’s house, pulled that girl onto my lap. I would have told her

it is hard to communicate clearly but I was there with her to help her. I would hold her so that she didn't lose all hope and collapse."

"Mavis!" Deedee jumped to her feet, flushing beet red. "How can you say such a thing? You have a union background!"

"Yeah!" Someone shouted. "You know that we're not supposed to hold our students."

"I wouldn't even want to." Nancy wrinkled her nose. "Jonathan stinks!" Some teachers laughed. Others looked aghast.

Mavis furrowed her brow. "I don't mean literally! I mean metaphorically. Don't you remember Sienna's poem?"

There was a collective gasp. Sienna froze in her seat like Pilar often did. No one at school ever mentioned her poem—last year's grand prize winner in *Poetry Now*. For some reason, her accomplishment seemed to be taboo. Or maybe, it was the subject matter. She'd written about the dynamic interplay of hope and help.

Deedee responded loudly—angrily, "We are here to do what research says is best for the children, not what we, what you think is best for them. *Reading Fare* is research-based so we are using it. Mavis, you just need to push yourself and your students harder without a bunch of handholding. You may not use a different program or reach down into a lower level."

"I will not make children cry," Mavis said, "or let them give up on reading or communicating before they even get started. I want them to read because they love it."

Deedee thumped her hand against the breast pocket of her tailored blazer, beating out each word as if she could pound it into Mavis' head. "They don't have to *love* it, Ma-

vis," she said. "They just have to *do it*."

Mavis gripped the edge of the table apparently struck by a wave of dizziness, but Deedee clapped her hands briskly. "And now for what's really good for the order. Let's discuss jumpers. They come in small, medium, and large. Extra large is available, but it is a special order."

Mavis was absent the next day. By morning recess, the staff had learned her husband, the bank manager, had rushed her to Purewater's emergency room around ten o'clock Thursday night due to arrhythmia. Her heart had suddenly begun to beat far too fast. While being airlifted to the University Medical Center in Sinclair, she'd had a heart attack. A long-term substitute was being interviewed to cover her class. Mavis would be on leave for at least three months, probably longer. Her medical team had raised the possibility of her needing an artificial pacemaker for the rest of her life.

In the Newcomer Center, Sienna replaced the fading marigolds with pots of miniature roses. As she set the red and white blooms beside *La Mujer de Tierra*, she hoped Mavis would recover quickly and without complications. After the previous day's staff meeting, she'd been sure Mavis was going to be the ally Andy told her she'd need. She'd been planning to talk to Mavis at lunch. "Now she's gone," she murmured to *La Mujer de Tierra*.

La Mujer de Tierra seemed to whisper back. "Teachers are getting sick."

Then the Swami added. "Or going crazy."

Chapter Eighteen

The Writers' Lair was dwarfed in the hull of the old library. Sienna only used one light switch to save the district money on the power bill. Children's voices echoed among in the dark, hollow space as they passed the "awka rock."

Belmaris whispered. "One night my grandpa was sleeping and he heard a noise."

Sienna cupped her hand behind her ear as if trying hard to hear it herself. "What kind of noise was it?"

Belmaris clutched at her heart, hunched her shoulders, and made a sorrowful sound.

"Oh!" Sienna said. "That's a *moan*."

Belmaris nodded, receiving the vocabulary, and getting on with the story. "First, my grandpa, he went to the bathroom. There was no one in there. Next, he went to the kitchen. The back door stayed open. But no one push it. My grandpa, he was getting some water. He heard the noise again. Finally, he went to the liquor store." Belmaris looked around at her fascinated fellow authors. "And that's the story of how my grandpa heard a ghost."

"Where was your grandpa's house?"

"By the river." Waving her hand dismissively, Belmaris added, "In Mexico."

"Did your grandpa tell you anything more about the ghost?" Sienna wondered.

Belmaris leaned forward studying her teacher's face in the dim light. "You think she real?"

All of the children leaned in, breathlessly waiting for her verdict.

Sienna inclined her head thoughtfully, "What did your grandpa say?"

"He say she after him all the time he a little boy and a man."

"Same ghost?"

Belmaris nodded.

Pilar shifted uneasily as she made some sense of the conversation.

"Did he ever see her? Did he ever say how she looked?" Sienna asked. "I want to make a mind movie of her."

Belmaris fluttered her fingers in the air. "She nothing, and then," the girl broke off, grabbing the back of her own neck and hanging her head as if she were a kitten suspended by the scruff of her neck between her mother's teeth. She shuddered as if an amorphous spirit had actually seized her.

And in that moment, I, the silent omniscient narrator of this tale suddenly wanted to break into the conversation. I clasped the nape of Sienna's neck. She shuddered and I knew she felt the pinch and the chill. She put her hand at the very base of her brain, struggling to keep the panic arising within from showing upon her face. With her warm palm upon what had once been the back of my human hand, I shuddered too. It had been ages since I had been touched. I began to wail. I cried, not as I did when trolling the rivers, but with relief.

Pilar could hear me. She clamped her hands over her ears, shaking her head violently from side to side.

Valentin's eyes widened. He asked Pilar, "*¿Es La Llorona?*"

Desperately, Sienna tried to free her neck from my chokehold. "*Que es esto?*" she gasped.

"*La Llorona.*" Valentin turned his mouth down and mimed brushing tears from his eyes.

Tersely, Sienna asked Belmaris. "Was your grandpa's ghost sad?"

Transfixed by the teacher's urgency, Belmaris nodded, replying "*Muy triste.*"

"Oh!" Sienna said. "She was very sad."

With that, I relaxed. With a loud moan, I let go of the teacher and began to breathe naturally. In the wake of my silence, Pilar uncovered her ears. Sienna and Pilar made eye contact. There was a wordless moment of awareness that something significant had just occurred. And whatever it was, they knew they were in it together.

Sienna drew a deep breath and got back to business writing a word on a sticky note for Belmaris to stick in her ELL folder. "When you write your story," she said, "say the sound your grandfather heard was a *moan* and don't forget to explain that the ghost was very, very, sad."

With that, I felt a new and unfamiliar longing. I wanted to be part of *The Writer's Lair*. I wanted to make story and be witnessed.

Belmaris wrote about her grandfather and the ghost. As she wrote his story, mine found an opening. Just as the children brought the Swami to *The Writers' Lair*, they were bringing me into it, too.

* * *

Meanwhile, in the library, Captain Swabby cleared a musty broom closet. "It's great you are taking that disgusting stuff away," Jolie said, wrinkling her nose at the matted tangle of an ancient gray mop head, hair drooping over the rim of an industrial-grade garbage can. "

"Yep," he said. "It smells like something died in here."

Jolie knew Captain Swabby's shift was over. The night custodian had already come on duty, letting her know he couldn't vacuum the library that evening because someone had shoved a wad of paper towels down every toilet in the boys' bathroom. "I don't need that space tonight," Jolie told Captain Swabby. "You can finish the rest tomorrow."

"I can't!" Captain Swabby exhaled in exasperation. "Deedee wants this closet cleared out and cleaned up by four o'clock today." With sweaty vengeance, he tossed an archaic fuse box and a broken yardstick in with the old mop.

"Why?"

"I don't know." Gasping, he swiped his forehead with a red bandana before positioning a rusty two-drawer metal file cabinet on a hand truck. "I just do what I'm told."

"I suppose somebody has to." Jolie finished taping a new spine label onto a children's novel. "It's fiction," she announced defiantly, holding it up for him to see.

He was used to teachers telling him random things and nodded agreeably. "That's just what I'd expect to find in a library." He slid a fresh new mop head onto the end of a new mop handle and began to swab the floor in the concrete closet.

Nancy entered the library. "Hey Jolie, my kids are writing non-fiction book reports this month. Please don't let any of them check out any fiction."

"Actually, I always let kids pick two..."

"Good! So, for this month, make sure they each get two non-fiction books. Same topic. I can't stay. My bladder is timed to the minute." She hurried away.

Captain Swabby set up a box fan. "This should dry the floor more quickly and maybe even freshen the air. I'll be back in a few minutes." He pushed his junk laden hand cart to the door, barely missing a collision with Sienna as she rushed into the library.

"Hey!" Jolie's eyes lit up when she saw her. "I found your poem. It was awesome. I can't believe I actually work with someone who won the *Poetry Now* prize! I hope you're still writing."

Sienna nodded slightly. Jolie seemed sincere, but Sienna had become guarded about her poetry at Moore. It seemed to make people uncomfortable.

Jolie waived her hand toward two boxes barely visible behind the library counter. "Captain Swabby found these books shoved in the back of the broom closet. They are full of brand-new multicultural stories that have never been processed. Do you know anything about them?"

Sienna opened a box.

"Be careful," Jolie cautioned. "There's fiction in there."

"Heaven forbid!" Sienna exclaimed in mock dismay. "Imagine having stories in an elementary school library! Leave it to Deedee to misinterpret the next new set of standards."

"Nancy's on the same bandwagon, now," Jolie said. "She's banned fiction for the month."

With a rug rolled under his arm, Captain Swabby wheeled the handcart back into the library with a teacher's desk upended upon its platform. Jolie gasped with pleasure. The only workspace she had was the library counter.

"Don't get any ideas," he barked. "This desk is not for you. You can't have it."

"I thought there weren't any extra desks around here."

"There aren't. "Captain Swabby unrolled the plush oriental rug that Sienna recognized from Deedee's office. He centered it in the broom closet. "Deedee said to get a desk in here immediately, so I grabbed the one from Mavis' room."

Captain Swabby was a political genius. Mavis's sub would surely be chagrined to lose the teacher's desk, yet she was so happy to have a long-term job in town that she wouldn't dare complain. She'd probably buy one from Goodwill with her own money and have her boyfriend haul it to school for her.

"Who's moving in here?" Sienna asked. An itinerant speech pathologist? An occupational therapist?

"Don't know," Captain Swabby said. Huffing and puffing, he bypassed the fan to position the desk on top of the rug inside the closet. He dashed out.

"Visiting dignitary?" Jolie proposed.

Sienna shrugged.

Captain Swabby rushed back in with the bouquet the school secretary's husband had just sent to mark their twentieth wedding anniversary. A little water sloshed out of Mrs. Donahue's vase as he set the swiped flowers on the corner of the desk. "Done!" he exclaimed with relief as he straightened a wayward purple aster. "I've gotta get outta here. My grandson has basketball practice. See you ladies tomorrow." He sprinted out the door.

Jolie walked into the closet. "There's no ventilation in here." She surveyed the roughly plastered walls. She sank onto the metal fold-out chair Swabby had placed at the

desk, apparently the best seat he could procure on such late notice. Her eyes narrowed. "This is creepy. Anyone who sits here with the door open will have a view of everything in the library. I feel like I'm under surveillance."

"That's what you get for circulating fiction," Sienna said wryly.

"I guess so. This is the perfect spot for the library police."

"You are partial to cops, aren't you?"

"One of them, anyway." Jolie touched the petals of a rosy powderpuff tenderly. Then, she plucked the florist's card out of the arrangement of pink, purple, and white blooms. "Happy twentieth!" A shadow crossed her face. "I got a bouquet like this once."

"How long were you married?"

"Twenty-one years. Do you think Mrs. Donahue will miss these?"

"Maybe she donated them to the cause."

"What cause?"

Sienna shrugged. "The mission against fiction? I don't know. Right now, I'm looking for ghost stories from Mexico."

"There just might be something in those boxes. Help yourself and feel free to put some spine labels on them if you're so inclined." With that, Jolie pushed a heavy cart behind a bookcase and knelt on the floor to shelve a day's worth of returns. Sienna knelt behind the counter to search through the boxes.

They'd barely begun their tasks, when they heard the click of Deedee's heels and then her voice. "I'll be sure to have Captain Swabby clear the reader board before he leaves tonight."

Sienna was about to stand, to make her presence

known, but the woman with Deedee gushed, "Oh, Deedee. I'm so glad you understand why the school board just doesn't want to single out immigrants. Spanish signage on First Street sends the wrong message to the community."

"Oh Mimi!" Deedee echoed the other woman's effusion, "I'm so glad you are coming aboard."

"Thank you for such a warm welcome, Deedee. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

The principal waved the thanks away, saying, "With your help, I'm sure we'll get our reading scores up."

"Well," Mimi said. "Let me remind you that at this point I'm only here to observe and, maybe, just maybe, offer a few teeny-weeny suggestions now and then."

Deedee's laugh ended with a snort. "I'd love to see the notes you've already taken."

"I don't have much yet."

Deedee cut in. "Here's your office!"

There was a moment of silence. Mimi sounded stunned. "Wow! Thanks for the flowers."

"You're welcome." Deedee said. "You'll love Jolie, our new librarian. She gave me a little lip about holding back the fiction. But she just didn't understand how important it is to get kids used to the idea that informational reading is the way of the future. She came around and did a nice job moving in here after our ELL teacher requested we turn the former library into a Newcomer Center."

It wasn't clear which of them moved first. Jolie stepped out from behind the shelves as Sienna rose from behind the counter to see Deedee standing with a familiar woman—the blonde with the clipboard who'd she'd been conferring with in the hallway on Halloween. Now, the woman had a name—Mimi.

Slowly, it dawned on Deedee that the woman she'd

been discussing during this administrative briefing had been within earshot the whole time, but she decided to pretend she hadn't been talking about them, lying about them. "Oh! Speak of the Devil! Devils. They're both here."

Deedee laughed. "Do you ever hear your mother's words just fly out of your mouth? I never speak of the Devil, but my mother sure did. Mostly, she meant my father. I don't have kids," she said, patting Mimi's forearm, "but sometimes I say the things my mother said and I feel my face getting all consorted like hers."

"Contorted?" Mimi asked.

"Yes. I remember how my mother used to cake the make-up on. I remember freaking out once when I was little because her face looked like it was flaking off."

"As I explained to Brenda Hadley," Mimi interrupted, "I'm sure your staff will benefit from a little support and coaching while implementing a brand-new curriculum and I will be happy to provide it." She smiled warmly at Jolie and then at Sienna. "We have an opportunity to make a real difference now. Purewater School District is willing and eager to improve, and we are poised to make some great changes here." She nodded sympathetically as if responding to unspoken disagreement. "I know change is hard, but I'm sure we can all agree that it is time for the system to align with itself and give students the education they deserve."

Sienna wanted to ask if aligning the system with itself was the same as aligning with the children, but Deedee had just lied about her and she didn't feel safe. Asking a probing question didn't seem to be a good idea.

Deedee led Mimi away, saying, "And please let Brenda know I have always been opposed to sending notices home in Spanish. I agree that we should save the district

money on translation services. And Mimi, if you wouldn't mind, could you please check on how Brenda feels about school uniforms? Some of my teachers want the kids and staff to start wearing them. I'd love to hear her opinion." As the women disappeared from earshot, she added, "One of our go-getters, Miss Whitfield, has already found a supplier for the uniforms. Jane Air."

"Did you hear that?" Jolie hissed, striding up to the counter. "I gave her lip? What am I? Sixteen? I'm not her daughter. She's not my mother. I have professional expertise, a master's degree in Reading Instruction and Library Science. And she said you, you *wanted* the Newcomer Center? You tried to talk her out of it."

"And she's the one who wants school uniforms."

"Something is wrong with her." Sienna felt a pang of compassion. "Maybe she's ill... like Mr. Rochester's first wife!" She racked her brain. Had there been a diagnosis in Austen's *Jane Eyre*?

"Then we ought to lock that lunatic in the attic." Jolie looked up, searching the ceiling. "Just as soon as we find the opening."

"Captain Swabby knows where it is."

"And I bet he'd be willing to help put her up there after this afternoon. Who is that Mimi person?"

"I don't know," Sienna said. "I saw her here once. It seems like she's from the district office or, maybe some kind of reading coach or consultant."

"Then she should help me defend fiction. Stories can change, even save, a person's life when all the articles, reports, and studies in the world can't."

"I know," Sienna scanned Jolie's face. "Which story saved you?"

Jolie sighed. "Let's just say a short story about two

cowboys on a mountain helped my ex-husband have a conversation with me that he should have had with someone when he was eighteen."

Sienna racked her brain, for character, setting, and plot. "Oh," She smiled. "I bet that was helpful."

Jolie nodded. "Why didn't we interrupt Deedee and insist on accuracy?"

"You mean why didn't we correct our boss while she was trying to impress someone hired to figure why we are failing and help us fix it?"

Jolie nodded.

"Because you, my friend, don't even have a desk of your own and Brenda Hadley doesn't even think we should have our jobs."

The next day, Sienna was at her computer. She had Valentin's school registration paperwork with her and she searched for information about primary schools in Mexico. It took a long time to find a registry of schools in the state of Clemencia. Annoying pop-up ads seemed to be getting past the district firewall, but she didn't have the time to put a tech ticket in.

The server was slow. When she finally came across the correct website, the word *Cerrado* was printed in red beneath the town of Redención. Closed. She wondered how much schooling Pilar and Valentin had had before coming to the United States.

As Sienna clicked a link, hoping she could find out how long the school in Redención had been shut down, Deedee strolled into the Newcomer Center, smiling. She sank into the chair next to Sienna that students used during editorial conferences. The painting of the shaman still hung on the far wall, and he seemed to be shaking his rattle right over Deedee's head.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "The school board doesn't support having a Newcomer Center after all."

Sienna's heart sped up. The loading icon on her computer screen continued to spin.

Deedee waved her hand toward the empty bookshelves. "You really don't need all this room."

"I know I don't need all this room." Sienna said evenly. Her heart continued to race. It was hard for her to speak without sounding as if she were running.

"Don't worry," Deedee said. "I'm not moving you back to the portable, at least not yet. I can't. It's already full. Can you believe it? As soon as you moved out, people started dumping all their frigging old curriculum in there."

Sienna gasped for air.

"I know. Crazy, isn't it? Well, that's not your concern. Back to what is. Apparently, we are going to move in another direction altogether. We won't be having ELL anymore. You won't be taking kids out of their classrooms any longer. You will go in there and help them do whatever the teacher wants you to do with them."

Sienna wanted to say that would be fine if whatever was happening in the classroom was more like what was happening in ELL, but Deedee did not give her the chance.

"That is to say, you will help them with *Reading Fare*. You won't really need your own teaching space at all anymore. So, for now, I'm going to have you move into the library with Jolie. We'll put a partition up and you can test and tutor kids behind it."

Sienna pressed against the base of her sternum with her fingertips. Her diaphragm felt like a vise. She tried rolling her shoulders backwards. The spasm continued.

"Don't you get along with Jolie?" Deedee asked and smiled, delighted with herself at being able to read Sienna's body language. She'd had such a breakthrough with her sisters over Thanksgiving!

"I like Jolie."

"That's interesting." Deedee said doubtfully. "I bet you didn't know that Jolie came to me with a long list of complaints about the way you left things in the library."

"What?" Sienna asked. Moore had had a series of part-time librarians for the past few years, ever since she took the ELL position. "How is that possible? I haven't worked in there for a long time."

"Well, don't worry." Deedee said. "Mimi will be in there with the two of you, at least part-time, so if you and Jolie have any problems Mimi can help smooth things over."

"I don't understand what you are getting at," Sienna said. A wave of adrenaline washed through her. "Jolie and I are friends. Who is Mimi?"

"You met her yesterday!"

"I mean what is her role, exactly? What is she doing her?"

"She's our brilliant new reading coach."

Sienna said, "The ELL kids need small pull-out groups because the classrooms are too crowded for me to let the ones who need to talk the most, talk. And, in the classroom, they get overwhelmed, intimidated, or interrupted by the native speakers' very legitimate needs to go faster than they can."

Deedee shrugged. "You can pull them out once in a while. Hmmm...once a week at max."

Sienna felt another, stronger burst of anxiety. Deedee didn't seem to get what she was saying. "It's crucial to be

able to speak and to be listened to while learning a new language. Meeting in a library where they are supposed to be quiet defeats the purpose. The acoustics in the old cafeteria are atrocious."

"You mean the new library." Deedee nodded her head up and down, signaling Sienna to accept the new reality.

"Can't I just have my groups in here until next year?"

"Nope." Deedee shook her head vehemently. "I know this is difficult, but you need to move in with Jolie before winter break."

"We just moved!" Sienna looked over Deedee's head and met the shaman's gaze. It dawned on her that if she were moving in with Jolie she could and would take him with her. She had quite the collection now, what with *The Maritza*, *The Swami*, *La Mujer de Tierra*, Lupe's drawing of the swap meet and the shaman. Somehow it comforted her to know they could go with her, but now irritation seeped into her anxiety.

She didn't want to repack, move, and set up her stuff again. Andy was coming to spend Christmas with her. All she wanted to do in her spare time was daydream about spending time with him.

She drew a deep breath and, trying not to sound argumentative, asked, "And What's this space going to be used for now?"

"Special Day!"

Sienna hadn't expected that. "This whole space is going to be used for five kids?"

"Six." Deedee grimaced. Confident that Sienna had accepted her orders, she explained. "Here's the real deal. They need a private bathroom where the kids in diapers, or whatever they wear, can be changed. As it is now, they have to use the regular kids' bathroom and the stalls are

too narrow for all the wiping and such. Normal students keep walking in on them. Pee-Yoo! It's embarrassing all around. Some parents are making a stink. Pardon the pun." Deedee chuckled appreciatively at her own little joke.

"Seriously," Deedee continued, "This is actually a major legal issue. If we dedicate this space for the Special Day kids and they are the only ones to use the bathroom, then they have the privacy they need. Problem solved. Plus, you know those kids are too loud. They throw chairs and cuss like sailors. We can't have that going on in the main hallway. Parent volunteers and community members go through there all the time."

Sienna gestured around the space that could easily accommodate seventy students and seven thousand books and would now be used for six kids, one teacher and two aides. "Wouldn't it be more practical to build a bathroom in their classroom so more people could use this space?"

"Then, we'd have to deal with codes and permits and contracts. The money for that sort of thing comes from a different fund." Deedee held up her hand, like a traffic cop. "No more discussion. Yes, your Newcomer idea was a good one, but we don't want to get sued by Special Ed parents."

"What about *Lau v. Nichols*?"

"The Chinese kid again?" Deedee scowled. "If he's still acting up, go ahead and send him to the office. I'll take care of him."

As the door shut behind Deedee, Sienna's computer finally loaded a State Department report on Clemencia.

United States citizens were advised to avoid the province due to drug wars, frequent kidnappings, torture, and violence, even and especially against women and children.

Sienna was upset, imagining Pilar and Valentin and even Esteban there. He was the same age as her own son. She knew something terrible had happened. The children from Clemencia were obviously traumatized.

Sienna stood up. "It's time for us to move again," she told *La Mujer de Tierra*. Something about the reassignment of space, beyond wasting precious instructional time packing, unpacking, and adjusting to a new environment disturbed Sienna. She realized it was Deedee and the district's casual disregard of the bond she created with the children in a small group and the familiar, cultivated space of *The Writers' Lair*. Having to relocate was not only disruptive it was destructive.

Curiously, she pulled the *Reading Fare* Assessment book from the shelf beneath *La Mujer de Tierra* and flipped through it until she found the exam for the unit in which the prefix *re* as a meaningful unit of speech was covered. The test question for that particular concept was, ironically enough, *Which word means move again?* She checked the answer key and found that, according to Pica, the correct answer was *remove*.

What? Who edited these textbooks? Should she teach that with fidelity? Should she teach the students to say and write things like, "We have to *remove*. We have *remove* ourselves? They want us *removed*?"

Trying not to think about how removing *The Writers' Lair* felt, Sienna returned to searching the Internet for pictures of Redención, but all she found was an image from a private art collection that was currently on display at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was a mermaid fashioned from clay. The caption read, "Made from Clemencian clay."

"Hmm," she said to *La Maritza* and *La Mujer de Tierra*.

"You've both got something in common with her."

As Sienna glanced back at her computer screen, the Swami materialized in a window in the top corner. She heard him say, "Dive deep." With that, he was gone and in his place was the screensaver Andy had sent her from Washington, D.C. It was a picture of the statue outside the highest court of the land. The Contemplation of Justice seemed, just for a moment, to raise her eyebrow.

Sienna knew how to slow the muse. Triggered by the Swami and the Contemplation of Justice, she knew how to stem the tide until four o'clock when she could go home and let the erupting poem flow. She just needed to splash cold water on her face, but when she dashed into the staff restroom, Nancy was blocking the faucet.

"I keep forgetting to trim this," Nancy confided when she caught Sienna's reflection behind her in the bathroom mirror. Nancy used her pinky finger to push an unruly, fast-growing hair back up into her nasal cavity. And then, as if allowing Sienna to witness her personal grooming allowed her to access to Sienna's sex life, she asked. "How's Dr. Doll these days? Still dreamy?"

Sienna had an instant vision of Nancy in the staff lounge urging everyone to help themselves to a plate of Butterscotch Blondies and gossiping about whatever Sienna might say. She frowned.

"Oh!" Nancy pulled her finger out of her nose. "Not so good, Huh? Long distance relationships are hard to hold onto, especially since they are usually delusional."

Sienna had just had a meeting with Deedee. She'd just talked to the art, *La Maritza* and *La Mujer de Tierra*. The Swami had spoken to her and the Contemplation of Justice

was demanding her attention. It just wasn't a good time for her to be called delusional. "I'm not going to tell you about my lover!" she snapped. "Not when the only passion in *your* life seems to be forcing me into fidelity to a sadistic curriculum."

Nancy's eyes widened and the hair, or a completely different one, popped right back out of her nose. "We have to do what's best for kids."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Then we should be paying attention to all those poor dead little Reading Babies piled up like bones in a mass grave..."

Jolie dashed into the bathroom interrupting Sienna's outburst. Jolie's hair was wild and windblown. Raindrops spackled her face. In her hand, she held an adult-sized pair of black-handled scissors—tip up, gleaming like a knife. Slamming into the tension between Nancy and Sienna, she nearly bounced straight back against the inside of the door as it swung shut behind her.

"Hold it!" Nancy hollered. "Don't you know how to walk with scissors? Give those to me!"

Jolie relapsed, spinning back in time, to a brick building, to Room 4 in Portland, Oregon— to Ms. Smith's class. Obediently, she laid the offending object in Nancy's outstretched hand.

Nancy stuck the tip up her nose and snipped. Then, she turned the scissors upside down, squeezing the point with her palm. "This is the proper way to carry scissors," she said. "I expect my students to carry them like this and I expect my colleagues to model doing things correctly, even if you are just a librarian and an ELL teacher." She waved her hand shooing Jolie away from the exit. As she left the

restroom with the confiscated object, Nancy added, "You may have these back at the end of the day."

Jolie's mouthed a soundless, well-formed "Oh, My God!" Then, she said, "I just heard you're moving in with me!"

"Two derelicts in a pod!" Sienna said, relieved that if she had to share a space, it was with Jolie. Then she remembered. "And Mimi!"

And so, it was at twilight on an already dark, stormy evening that Sienna wrapped the shaman and his patient in an oversized garbage bag to protect them from the elements and waded across campus to the library. A strong wind from the south crackled the black plastic around the picture, making her grip the frame more tightly, for fear it would be blown right out of her hands.

The same singularly forceful gust jostled the horizontal rain gutter along the outside of the library so that a thin crack formed at the joint where two long sections of the drainage canal met. As rain fell, water began to seep through the schism and slip, drip by drip, down the brick wall. On the other side of that wall, Jolie defiantly dusted and displayed the 398.1 section, fairy tales and myths. Nancy left school in a hurry to drive her daughter to flag drill practice. She didn't have time to return the commandeered scissors to the library. She didn't even have time to leave them in Jolie's mailbox in the office.

When each of the three teachers left school that evening, rushing to their cars through driving rain, slivers of sleet stung their cheeks. When they each fastened the safety belts inside of their own vehicles, they were as bedraggled as *La Llorona* has ever been in the nightmares of children, the hallucinations of drunks, or the cautionary tales of the grandmothers.

Chapter Nineteen

Sienna entered Ashley Whitfield's first grade with her mind on Andy. He was at her house, recovering from jet lag and resting after yesterday's keynote presentation in Sinclair. He'd promised to help her finish moving into the library later in the day. Ashley glanced at Sienna. Clearly, the joy on her face was not welcome. Ashley gestured toward the *Reading Fare* vocabulary words projected on the whiteboard. "Have them put each word in a sentence," she said as if Sienna were a subordinate instead of a highly qualified, much more experienced colleague.

Dubiously, Sienna scanned the list and gathered some ink-smeared whiteboards and dried-out black markers from a bin. Ashley called a small group of strong readers to her table, taking the only adult chair in the room for herself. Sienna's English learners stood in front of the words on the board, literally scratching their heads.

Pobrecitos. "Sit down, kiddos," Sienna said gently, gesturing for them to sink to the floor. "Your friends behind you can't see." Not that being able to see the words would have made a difference for any of them. Even the native speakers, the ones Ashley expected to accomplish the assignment independently, were at a loss, chewing on their

pencils or picking the rubber erasers out of them.

"Okay, guys," Sienna said, sinking to her knees and selecting the potentially most meaningful word from the list to write on her small board. "This word is *basketball*." She searched the whiteboard ledge for an orange marker. There wasn't one there, so she grabbed a red one instead and sketched *una pelota*.

"My cousin has one him house."

"I a team."

"My brother plays."

Mimi strolled into the classroom with her pen poised over her clipboard.

Sienna thought about how much English this little band of *amigos* could learn and practice by talking and then writing about their personal experiences with basketball, but the assignment was not to write about personal experiences. It was not even to write about basketball. It was to write a sentence containing the word *basketball* and then move on to write nine more completely different sentences about nine more completely unrelated things.

Sam didn't get that at all. He began telling a story, "I have a basketball! *Mi hermano y...*"

Feeling heartsick, Sienna stopped him. "Let's just make a complete sentence about basketball."

Although Mimi had pulled a short plastic chair close to Ashley to observe her with her small group, Sienna felt Mimi's gaze upon her. When Sienna looked over at Mimi, Mimi smiled, made a quick note, and turned her attention back to the classroom teacher.

"What else could we say about basketball?" Sienna asked her group.

Sam went on happily. "We do it by the cars. It do this." He pressed his hands together, making a whooshing

noise.

"It went flat?" Sienna asked.

He nodded.

She groaned. Drawn in by her sympathy to Sam, Enrique volunteered, "I play béisbol." He waved his hand vaguely toward the door.

Sienna realized he didn't know the words he needed to communicate where. Did he mean on the school grounds, at the house across the street, or two blocks away at the park? In *The Writers' Lair*, she would have given him choices and asked which it was. Instead, in Miss Whitfield's room with great trepidation, she just wrote *I play baseball* on her whiteboard. "This is a good sentence," she said "because it gives us a clue. If someone does not know what a baseball is, this sentence lets them know that a baseball is something a person can play. They could think baseball is a toy or a game, right?" The boys nodded. Enrique beamed proudly.

"The problem is we are supposed to say and write something about a basketball to show we know what a basketball is. We could say *I play basketball*. We could also say *Sam's basketball is flat*."

She wrote the sentences fuming inwardly and quickly explaining that a flat ball has no air in it so it cannot bounce. She wondered about teaching, clarifying *flat*. She could use a piece of paper, a two-dimensional plane. She looked around the room for something round to compare it with.

That's when she saw that the native English speakers at the table beyond her group had copied Sam's *I have a basketball* from her board and, eager to finish their work before recess, had moved on to the other words, independently writing *I have a blue*. *I have a big*. She glanced at

Mimi. Couldn't she see how meaningless this all was? Mimi's expression was masked, clinical, as if now that she'd begun collecting data, human experience, expression, and interaction were forbidden.

Sienna reread the three sentences on her white board. The first time she framed each word between her thumb and finger so the boys could hear her say and see each individual word as separate entities. The second time, she moved her finger fluidly under each letter as she made its sound. The boys watched intently, moving their lips, always a sound or two behind her.

When she was done, Enrique patted her knee and beamed proudly. "You a good reader, Teacher. Nice job!"

"Thank you," she said, thinking. *Oh sweetie, you have no idea how far behind the pacing guide I am now.*

Enrique stood up, stretched his legs, and juttied his chin at her board. "We do a baseball one, now?"

Sienna was thrilled by Enrique's desire, but she could do nothing about it with Mimi monitoring her fidelity to *Reading Fare*. Regretfully, she said, "Baseball isn't on our list of words."

Completely bewildered, Enrique scanned Sienna's face. "*Pero*, I like baseball. Basketball, no."

One of the boys edged backwards, as if by scooting half an inch at a time, he could withdraw from the lesson without her noticing. Sienna tried to explain. "Well, Miss Whitfield wants us to use these special words because they are in a story you will read later."

Enrique chuckled. "But, teacher," he said affectionately, "you know I can't read."

And as the words he spoke filled his own ears, Sienna watched his awareness rise. He licked his lips nervously, swallowed hard. "I no English boy," he whispered. Fear

flickered in his dark eyes.

Her heart ached for him. "You know what the word basketball looks like now. You can read that. Watch for it in the *Reading Fare* story, okay?"

He sighed raggedly. "I like *béisbol*."

"I know." Sienna felt very sympathetic. Learning to write was hard work. It would be easier and more engaging if he could do that difficult task with something he liked. He was just a little boy—like her own son had once been. Enrique's wrist was so small. She could encircle it with her thumb and the finger she'd used to frame the word basketball. She felt a surge of tenderness. It had been a long time since Matt was that little, and she would never have made him write about basketball if he wanted to write about baseball—not when he was just learning. Damn it! "Okay," she said in a low voice. She wrote. "*Enrique likes baseball*," and read it to him.

"That's a good one!" He grinned as the bell rang for recess.

Relieved, the students hurried to line up. Once again, Sienna had failed at fidelity to *Reading Fare*.

Mimi caught up with her in the hall. "That was great!" She enthused.

"Do you think so?"

"Of course! I saw you making sentences with this week's words."

"I don't understand how that's helpful, though" Sienna said. "I already know how to make sentences. The kids should be making sentences."

"You're modeling," Mimi said. "That's exactly how an ELL teacher should support the curriculum. That's explicit instruction."

"Well, it may be explicit instruction," Sienna said, "but

their minds aren't on it. The kids would learn faster if I supported them in making and expanding sentences with words they know and care about before I expect them to write sentences about words they don't know or care about."

"Forget it," Mimi said firmly. "They need to make sentences with this week's vocabulary words."

"They can't. They don't have enough language so then the teacher ends up doing all the work. What's the value in that?"

"It gives them *exposure* to grade level curriculum."

"The week's words aren't connected to each other in any meaningful way. The kids need to practice generating sentences that are meaningful to them."

"This just sounds like an excuse to do what you want to do, instead of what your job is." Mimi said.

Sienna was angry. "Okay, just tell me *who* decided that this week's grade level vocabulary words are more important than the hundreds of other words and phrases these kids still don't know, like yard, playground, parking lot, or alley?"

Mimi sighed impatiently. "The curriculum designers picked the words."

"Why can't the children pick them?"

Mimi scribbled furiously on her clipboard and muttered under her breath, "I bet your mother was a hippie."

Sienna couldn't believe Mimi had just said that and Mimi snapped back to the administrative tone so quickly that Sienna could only wonder if she'd imagined the comment. "The *Reading Fare* designers probably had a very good reason for basketball instead of baseball."

"If they did, it should have been because basketball is more phonemically regular than baseball which requires

paying attention to the silent e.”

“That’s probably it,” Mimi said.

“But, you realize,” Sienna went on, “in this case, the word a kid wanted was actually more rigorous than the one the curriculum gave him. I could have introduced the silent *e*. Plus, he would have felt like reading and writing are truly relevant to him and he could have learned some vital vocabulary for communicating about his life.”

“That sounds well and good, but you can’t just go galivanting off that way. You have to help him learn the material that will be tested at the end of the unit.”

“Well, all I can say is that the boys did not learn this week’s vocabulary. And I’m afraid that what they are learning is that school assignments don’t make any sense. Enrique just realized he is already far short of what his teacher expects him and he also learned that there’s no time or space for the literacy activity that he really wants to engage with at school. He wanted to write and read about baseball.”

Mimi checked her watch. “Don’t worry about any of that. Don’t be so specific. Stick with the systematic approach. It’s just too hard to make sure required learning objectives are met while integrating subject matter with student interest.”

“It’s not too hard,” Sienna said.

“Mimi sighed. “But you are talking about where teaching becomes an art.”

The knot in Sienna’s heart loosened slightly. She nodded. “Yes. I can do art.”

Mimi scoffed, rolling her eyes. “No one is paying you to be an artist. Just trust *Reading Fare*. Support the curriculum. Get the kids through each unit. The trouble with ELL and Special Education and every other supplemental pro-

gram is that they pull kids away from what's happening in the mainstream classroom. Then, the kids who are floundering the most are being taught different things. If all our energies are focused on the same lessons, the same concepts, and the same skills at the same time, it will be much better for them. You should keep doing exactly what you did with those first graders today."

Sienna began to protest, but Mimi interrupted her again. This time she smiled sweetly with warmth in her eyes. "First graders are so cute, aren't they? I just love their chubby little cheeks."

Down from where they stood, Pilar sat at a desk in the hallway outside Nancy's classroom, holding a pencil in her hand. Her eyes were closed. With the side of one calf resting on her opposite knee, she flexed her bare foot and wiggled her big toe.

Mimi caught the motion in her peripheral vision and watched. "Why isn't that little girl wearing shoes? What is she doing?"

Sienna said, "Praying."

Mimi frowned. "That's strange."

"No stranger than expecting her to take a reading test she can't read," Sienna said.

Mimi pulled her cell phone out. "I've got to run now. I'm late for an important meeting!" She smiled brightly and gave a little wave.

There are so many people, so many dramas, so many little stories, *cuentas*, in a school. Omniscience has its perks. I decided to follow Mimi. As she strode across the campus playground, bypassing kids jumping rope, she used her clipboard to protect her head from being hammered by stray four-square balls sailing through the air. She had no idea that I was hovering just above her.

Chapter Twenty

When she reached her broom closet in the library, Mimi was startled to find a stranger sitting at her desk. His black hair was slightly rumpled, and he hadn't shaved that morning. He wore tight black ski pants and a black turtle-neck. At first glance, she thought he was a dad all set to pick up a child for an afternoon of skiing, but then she realized she'd seen him before at one of Pica's promotional conferences. He was dressed differently now. Still, he was as handsome leaning back in a folding metal chair as he had been in a three-piece suit standing at the podium.

"Ms. Lang?" he asked, rising to his feet. "I'm Jules Holdaway, senior vice President at Pica. I know you had an appointment with my sales rep today. Unfortunately, she couldn't make it. She cut herself."

"Oh, my God!" Mimi exclaimed.

"It's not that serious," Jules said quickly. "Apparently, slicing a Yule Log and managing a conference call at the same time was just too much multi-tasking at once. I happened to be in Sinclair this week so when I got word that the sales rep couldn't keep her appointment with you. I decided to fill in for her, so here I am."

Mimi extended her hand. "I really appreciate your vis-

it Mr. Holdaway. My questions could have waited until the sales rep is better."

"I am glad I came. I've always known that Purewater is an enthusiastic implementer of *Reading Fare*, but I didn't realize what a fantastic place Purewater Pass is for skiing. Have you been up yet this year?"

"I'm afraid I've had no time to ski." Mimi tried to sound happy and upbeat as she confessed. "I've been absolutely swamped with work."

"I hope you get a little R&R over the holidays," he said.

Mimi flipped through the assortment of clipboards, standing on end in a milk crate crammed under Mavis Penn's desk. She found the one she wanted and handed it to Jules.

"Nice printing." He was clearly impressed.

"I used to teach first grade."

"Sweet!" Jules eyed her closely, grinning at Mimi as if she were a lollipop wrapped in shiny cellophane. I could tell he thought first grade teachers were easy, happy to give out stickers, stars, and candy bars for the simplest work. He glanced at the clipboard again. "This looks like it will take us an hour or so. "He leaned forward slightly, as if confiding in her, "I'm starving. Is there anywhere to get some food around here? I'll focus better if we eat." He arched his brow, cockily, absolutely certain that she would be impressed by his willingness to take responsibility for paying attention to the work.

"There's always something in the teacher's lounge." Mimi said. She knew for a fact that the snowmen stenciled on Tammy Lewis' decorative tablecloths were buried under an avalanche of Christmas cookies and holiday sweets. Of course, if she took Jules in there, they'd be constantly

interrupted by exhausted teachers rushing in to pop rum balls in their mouths before hurrying onto another task that had to be finished before the Winter Break began. Mimi was suddenly aware of how Jules' aftershave mingled with the musk of his early morning exertions. "We won't have any privacy in there. I could go get some cookies and bring them back for you."

"How about I take you out to lunch?" he said.

Mimi was sleep-deprived from staying up late the night before to make her son finish his reading homework, but her body was tingling with attraction. She figured it was because of Jules' pheromones. She'd learned about them during her brief stint at medical school.

"Can we get any good Mexican in this town?" he asked.

Her stomach answered with an embarrassing gurgle. It was lunchtime. Her blood sugar was plummeting. Mimi reminded herself that she wasn't a first-grade teacher anymore. She didn't have any students to supervise, and she wasn't actually tied to Moore Elementary School. They could just as easily discuss *Reading Fare* in a booth at *Casita Rio* as they could in a moldy closet or up at the district office. Besides, she could pick up a nice flan at *Casita Rio* for the party she and her husband were to attend that evening. It would be a treat to go out to lunch on a school day with a good-looking man. Not many women working in an elementary school got to do that. "There's a great little place just a few blocks away," she said.

"Would you like to walk?" he asked. "Or, we could take my car."

As Mimi gathered her purse, Andy wheeled an old T.V. cart laden with moving boxes through the library's entrance. The men scanned each other's faces as they

crossed paths—as if they thought they knew each other and were trying to recollect how. Neither was in his hometown so it couldn't be that they worked out at the same gym. It couldn't be that they filled up at the same gas station nor could it be that they attended the same little league games to cheer for godsons or nephews. They exchanged polite nods as Jules and Mimi left.

"I know that guy." Andy moved the boxes from the cart onto a long table. "I can't place him. Who was she?"

"Mimi."

"Clipboard Mimi?"

Sienna nodded. They heard jingle bells before Deedee rattled in.

"Well, well, Andy!" Deedee exclaimed. "It's so wonderful to see you again! Thanks for helping Sienna with this move."

"It's my pleasure," Andy said. "Though two moves in as many months is a bit much in the middle of the school year, don't you think?"

Deedee just grinned at him. After a moment, she asked, "How long are you staying in Purewater? Are you sleeping at Sienna's house?"

"It's great to see your school," he replied.

Deedee nodded. "I suppose it is a special treat for you to get out of the ivory tower once in a while. It's good for you to get a dose of what those of us in the trenches are really up against."

"Of course, it is." Andy said. "It's also helpful for those in the trenches to come up to the tower once in a while to get a broader view."

"Ah, well," Deedee waved her hand dismissively. "No visionary can clean up those walls out there. Did you see all that graffiti? It just makes me sick. We've never had

that kind of smut before. What's this world coming to?"

Sienna hadn't seen the graffiti. She just knew and wanted to say it would only get worse if the children weren't allowed to express themselves—through writing, through drawing—in the places where teaching became an art, but she didn't bother. She just thought of Mimi's confident smile and muttered to herself. "You say basketball. I say baseball."

"It's so embarrassing!" Deedee practically wailed. "We have tons of parents coming today to help with holiday parties and whatnot. Captain Swabby had to go to Bonny Deals to buy a new paint brush with petty cash so he could cover it. God only knows how many people saw it before he got back. Chief Goodwin is looking for the culprits. I'd like to find them myself and bang their little heads against the wall they've just defaced. They've got to learn to stop and think about the long-term consequences of their actions."

Sienna stopped unpacking to stare at Deedee, who nodded at her as if they were colluding. Deedee went on sagely, "We need some kid to rat those hoodlums out, to give us a lead, to tell us who's been out there bragging about this on the street. Frankly, I'm a little worried about what will happen around here over the two-week break. I've told Captain Swabby to keep his paint brush at the ready." Deedee pantomimed a broad swipe, her action beset with frenetic jingles. "What are you two up to for the holidays? I hope you aren't going to spend your precious time together hashing out school reform?"

"No," Sienna said curtly.

"You can stop worrying about what we're going to do with our ELL kids because we've got Mimi now." To Andy, Deedee explained, "We are so fortunate to land

Mimi Lang. She's such a cutting-edge reading coach. Totally up to date on the standards. She's got tons of experience implementing *Reading Fare* in Sinclair. They seem to win the Governor's School of Distinction Award every year."

Andy rubbed his chin as if pondering the news. "How have your teachers reacted to bringing Mimi on board?"

"Oh, we haven't told them yet," Deedee said. "It's not official. The school board is still tweaking her contract, trying to get her job description just so. Where is Mimi anyway, Sienna?"

"She just left," Sienna answered. "I didn't ask her where she was going."

With tiny bells tied to their shoelaces, Bao Yang and Lucero Fuentes ran past the open door of the library, arm in arm. Deedee spun toward the sound of their pounding, jingling feet. "Stop!" She screeched, "Walk!"

Deedee drew her wrists up to her shoulders with her hands thrown back as if that would help her balance on the spiked high heels of her own ringing red pumps as she ran after them.

Andy watched her go, asking, "Do you ever feel like a captive audience in her three-ring circus?"

"Sometimes," Sienna said. She realized she'd wished he had and taken the opportunity to stand up to Deedee for her— to stand up for her expertise, for her ideas, for democratic principles, for her humanity, for her heart. Was that a childish, wishful fantasy?

Andy shifted uneasily, loosened his collar, and swallowed hard. He sighed, torn, clearly sensing her unspoken longing. "It's just a job, honey," he said, knowing it wasn't. "It's just a job."

At *Casita Rio*, the rich scent of mole wafted from the kitchen into the dining area as Ramon placed a basket of warm tortilla chips and a bowl of fresh salsa between Mimi and Jules. Esteban poured water into their glasses.

"I keep thinking I know that guy at your school," Jules said. "I've seen him before. What's his name?"

Mimi shrugged, smiling apologetically. "I haven't been on the job very long. I don't know all our teachers yet."

Jules dunked a chip in the salsa. "Tell me how I can I help you with *Reading Fare*."

"I'm wondering why in some cases the readability of what Pica has labeled ELL material is actually the same or harder than some of its mainstream selections."

Jules knit his brow. "That seems a little strange, doesn't it?"

Mimi nodded.

"I mean, you'd think it would be a little easier, you know, for kids still learning English."

Mimi nodded again. "I've got an ELL teacher who won't use *Reading Fare* and she's setting a really bad example for the rest of the staff."

"Well," Jules chewed thoughtfully. "I don't have an answer for you about that. I can assure you that we've hired experts in the field to help design this program. I'm positive there's a very good explanation for this and I'm sure they thought that through. I'm sorry it's not patently clear to your staff. Or to you. You know," he brightened, looking relieved, "we are hosting a big meeting in April for researchers, our curriculum designers, and assessment developers. And, of course, we always keep a few select slots open for administrators who are adopting the pro-

gram. You should come." He nodded enthusiastically. "Oh!" He broke off, seemingly racking his brain for a vague memory, "Now that I think of it, I heard we were publishing a companion piece to the curriculum—sort of an idiot's guide." He chuckled apologetically. "Not really, of course. At Pica, we think teachers are actually quite intelligent." He whipped out his cell phone and began scrolling through old email. "Here's the memo. Apparently, we're calling it *Tollbooth to the Teacher's Manual*. He scowled. "I don't really like that title. I can't remember why they picked it."

"Yeah," Mimi said. "It sounds like you have to pay your fare—your Reading Fare—at a tollbooth. It's kind of muddled."

"It does seem a little discouraging." He frowned slightly, holding his phone at an angle to see it better, still reading the memo. "It's supposed to be more like the *Cliff Notes*. Anyway, you should come to our conference."

"Maybe I should send a teacher instead."

"I don't know about that. Don't teachers just want to focus on their own classrooms? They don't really need to or want to understand how a whole program fits together, do they?"

"The ELL teacher I'm thinking about teaches kindergarten through fifth grade. She really does have a multi-year perspective. Maybe I should send her. Where will the conference be?"

Ramon set *El Bandido* in front of Jules. Jules nodded at the plate approvingly, without making eye contact or saying a word to Ramon. Instead, he told Mimi, "Santa Fe, New Mexico. Nice place to go in the spring."

Mimi gestured for him to start eating without waiting for her meal to arrive. "I went to Santa Fe once with my

dad. He inherited an O'Keefe that he loaned to a museum there and he took me to see it on display. I was astonished that a desert could be so chilly." She'd always remembered the hot chocolate her father bought her after the exhibition. She'd been surprised and delighted by the little bit of chili pepper she'd tasted in it. She was remembering that special moment when she realized Jules was watching her closely. A little flustered, she asked, "How much would it cost to send a teacher?"

His eyes were fixated on oversized diamond glittering atop her wedding ring. "How did someone like you end up in a place like Purewater?" He took a mouthful of *El Bandido* and his eyes widened with pleasure.

"I want to make a real difference," she said. "Purewater School District is willing and eager to improve and poised to make some great changes with...."

"The best curriculum," he said, chewing vigorously. "And the right leadership."

"I think so."

He swallowed. "So, what fool stuck you in the broom closet?"

For a moment, Mimi was taken aback and then embarrassed. "The principal. She felt bad about it. The school is crowded. She's completely out of room. It's not ideal, but I don't want to complain. Poor woman! Her test scores are in the dumps. She's really stressed out."

"Educators make a lot of sacrifices."

Mimi scanned his eyes, searching for the condescension she often experienced and had come to expect from her dad and his associates who thought that because educators were willing to sacrifice luxuries and sometimes even a few of the simpler pleasures in life to eke out a modest living, they deserved less. She didn't see that pity-

ing superiority. All she saw, in that moment, was Jules' interest in her. Sitting with him, Mimi realized how overwhelmed she'd become in just the past few weeks, racing from school to school, meeting with school board members and administrators. They treated her like the Messiah and she was feeling a lot of pressure to save them from their fear of failing test scores. "Deedee was really sweet. She got me flowers!"

"I noticed them. I thought they might have been from your husband."

No, not from her husband. Mimi shook her head. She looked down at her hands. Ever since she started commuting to Purewater, her fingernails and her moods at home had been as uneven and as ragged as her workdays. She was ashamed about how often she'd unloaded her stress by nitpicking at her family. There was no reason for her husband to want to send a bouquet or do anything else nice for her. Of course, Jules didn't know that. He didn't seem to notice how overdue for a manicure she was. He didn't seem to notice the zit, erupting on her chin. In fact, he seemed to be a man making an effort to conduct business while simultaneously resisting an intense attraction to his client.

"Well, if you have to work there," Jules sounded resigned to an unpleasant fact, "the least she can do is keep a steady stream of flowers coming."

Mimi was intrigued. After all, she reminded herself, there is such little flirtation to be had in the field of elementary education. Hadn't she been the one to seize on what there was available, marrying the only male teacher at Sinclair Elementary twelve years ago? And hadn't they started their romance in this very way, over a table, over a page full of questions about curriculum? Back then, they'd both

been wearing jeans, sneakers, and matching sweatshirts with school mascots screen-printed on the front of them. Her husband had been wearing that exact same shirt that morning. Over the years, he'd accumulated a few dry erase slashes at the cuff and coffee stains on the sleeve, but he didn't want a new one. His sixth graders didn't care what he wore. Now, Mimi wore suits that cost more than she'd spent on her whole wardrobe during her first year of teaching,

Jules was still talking. "Let me know if they don't."

"Don't what?"

"Send more flowers."

Suddenly, Mimi realized she hadn't shaved her legs properly in days. His attention was enough to make her blush. "One of our first-grade teachers doesn't even have a desk. I really don't need more flowers."

"Yes, you do. It takes a ton of passion to bring about a turnaround. That's worth at least a few dozen roses."

"A few dozen?"

"At the very least."

"So," she said coquettishly, "shall I send you an email if they don't keep up with the quota?"

"Absolutely," he said. "Just type WILTED in the subject line."

"Wow!" Mimi giggled. "You corporate types live large. I suppose you have a desk?"

"Two or three of them," he said, scanning her face. "And a florist on retainer." He took another bite of *El Bandido*. "Look," he said when he swallowed, "I can tell by your questions that you're the real deal."

Mimi nodded. He was right. She was the real deal. *Summa cum laude* smart and her heart was in the right place. She really wanted the system to work for the kids

and for the teachers.

"And it would be good for your mission if you come to Santa Fe. Did you know that Pica is one of three finalists for the contract to write the NASTE?"

With that, Mimi felt a surge of excitement. So, she had been right to commit herself to *Reading Fare*! If Pica got to write the NASTE, any student who had *Reading Fare* would score well on the national test. With her commitment to the curriculum, she was truly poised to lead Purewater School District in the race to the top, to first place in the future.

"So come," Jules said. "Come meet the real movers and shakers. Forget about sending your ELL teacher. Come on your own. I've booked a block of rooms at a top-notch hotel there and I'd be happy to take you back to the O'Keefe. Plus, there's a place nearby with some of the best Mexican hot cocoa I've ever had."

He leaned back in his seat as if giving her some space to consider, but before she could reply, he leaned in again. "Hey! I've got another great idea! Maybe as a successful implementer of *Reading Fare* you could speak at a NASTE retreat I'm planning in Southern California next year—if we get the contract, that is. I'm putting a series of retreats together. I'm calling it *On the Road for Reading*. Catchy, isn't it?"

"Yeah! It is." Mimi decided she wouldn't send Sienna. Fantasizing about two sun-soaked work trips, she didn't even notice Ramon at her side.

"Careful," he said, producing a plate of simmering mole. "Hot dish. "

Chapter Twenty-One

Nancy stopped in the library, a sandwich in one hand and blackline masters to copy in the other. She smiled warmly at Sienna as if forgiving her outburst in the bathroom the other day. "Can you help a kid with writing this afternoon?"

"Who?" Sienna felt uneasy, as if this were a trap, as if Nancy would send an email of complaint to Deedee as soon as she agreed.

"Maria Guzman. She needs a lot of help. Why doesn't she go to ELL?"

Normally, Nancy acted as if ELL was a waste of everyone's time. "Maria passed the WELT at the end of second grade. Technically, she no longer qualifies for service."

"How could she have passed?" Nancy asked. "She's stuck at a first-grade level in everything."

Sienna grimaced. "She might have passed the WELT with a few lucky guesses."

"I'm really worried about her," Nancy said. "The aide, Mrs. Geiger, spends a lot of time with her and she's still not making any progress."

Sienna had often noticed Mrs. Geiger, a teacher's aide, sitting by Maria. Some EL's hated needing extra help, so they pretended, lied about understanding material they

didn't really comprehend. But some, like Maria, become addicted to having a personal assistant who, if they were lucky, ultimately fed them the answers in the final minutes leading up to recess. Mrs. Geiger often did that less out of sympathy for Maria and more out of fear that Nancy might report her as falling short of her duties if Maria didn't finish her papers on time. Although Maria technically did not qualify for ELL, she needed it and without access to appropriate instruction had become a supplemental support junkie.

Nancy scowled. "I'm thinking about referring her to Special Ed. She might even need Special Day. She thinks a paragraph is a hamburger!"

With that bit of information, Sienna made an instant assessment. "Have her come down at 2:45 this afternoon and I'll see what I can do."

"No! Wait!" Nancy frowned, "I don't want her to miss social studies. Can't you just come in and teach her how to write while I go on with the lesson?"

"She needs to focus on one thing at a time. What do you want her to write about?"

"Captain Cook."

"Captain Cook?" Sienna racked her memory for what she knew about him as a historical figure. "Hmm," she said cautiously, "an eighteenth-century British explorer might be a little abstract for Maria."

Flustered, Nancy snapped, "It's part of *Reading Fare*. She has to write a summary of the selection about his life."

Sienna felt a flash of outrage. Who in their right mind would expect a struggling student to produce a written summary of a selection that she couldn't read? "Does it discuss his death?" she asked curiously.

Nancy narrowed her eyes.

"Does *Reading Fare* describe how he was murdered by Hawaiians?"

Nancy's nostrils flared.

"Did you know that he and his men traded nails with the native men for sex with their wives?"

Nancy took a step back.

"Of course, the natives might have thought it was an honor when they thought Cook was a god, but once they realized he was just a man..."

"That's not in the curriculum!" Nancy snorted. "Will you please just help the kid write a decent paragraph?"

Sienna shrugged. "Of course, I'll help her. But, really Nancy, don't you ever wonder how those women must have felt whenever they saw a nail afterwards? Like in a door frame?"

Nancy squinted at Sienna, scanning her face. "I'm worried about you. I mean really. Why would you even want to think about these things? Maybe, you should tap into our mental health benefits while we still have them."

Later, when she came to the library to see Sienna, Maria said, "I have to do something about a baker on a ship a long time ago."

"Do you mean, Captain Cook?" Sienna asked.

Jolie looked up from where she stood behind the library counter, covering second-hand books with protective plastic film.

"Yeah," Maria shook her head sadly. "Travis, in my class, he tell me Captain Cook die on Valentine's Day. In Hawaii." She clearly thought it was very tragic for him to pass over without getting to unwrap waxy chocolate in red foil or savor a single sugary conversation heart.

"They didn't have Valentine's Day in Hawaii back then." Sienna smiled reassuringly. "He didn't miss *that*

party." Then, she flashed the black line drawing of a hamburger, she knew Maria's third grade teacher had used as a teaching aid. "Can you remember how many sentences a paragraph needs?"

Maria smiled shyly and shook her head. Sienna tapped each section of the hamburger; top bun, patty, lettuce, tomato, bottom bun. She tapped each one a second time, whispering, "One, two."

Maria counted the rest of the layers. "Five?"

"Usually. Good job. Do you remember the job of the sentences that go here?" She pointed to the buns.

"That's for the ketchup." Maria's lack of comprehension made the metaphorical comparison between the ingredients needed to build a sandwich with the functions of each sentence in a paragraph a particularly obfuscating academic exercise.

Jolie stifled a cough and looked at Sienna, clearly curious about how she'd address this.

"Let's not do this," Sienna said quickly, setting the hamburger aside and sliding a box of magnetized photographs toward the girl. "Your job is to sort these in any way that makes sense to you."

Maria's eyes lit up. Eagerly, she reached for the magnets, enjoying the slapping sound they made against the surface of the table. Quickly, she grouped pictures of people to her right. "These is the family." She put children displaying a variety of emotions in front of her. "And this is ways kids are."

"You mean these are the different ways kids can feel?"

"Yeah." Maria slid pictures of seat belts and bike helmets to her left. "And these are ways of being safe."

"Great," Sienna said. "Now, pick one group so we can write a paragraph about it."

Maria looked astounded. "I don't do that."

"You don't do what?"

"Write."

"I'll help you," Sienna said. She waved her hand over all the magnets. "Which group would you like to work with?"

Like a child extending an arm for a blood draw, Maria pointed to the family.

"Okay. So, what can you say about this family?"

"It's a big family."

"That can be your main idea!" Sienna beamed. "If we were using the hamburger, which we're not, that would go in the top bun. We're just going to use plain paper today." Sienna picked up a pencil. "I'll do the writing. You just think about what you want to say about these pictures."

While Sienna worried that scribing for Maria would reinforce the child's over-dependency on school personnel, she also knew that if she didn't do the mechanical aspect of writing for her, Maria would never get to the *thinking*. She'd postpone that by pretending the lead on her pencil was too dull and needed sharpening. She would form letters sloppily and decide to erase them. She'd rub a hole in the paper that would need to be taped up or, maybe even the whole thing would have to be replaced. Then, she'd have to start over. The bell would ring and she'd be off the hook. "Before I write your main idea," Sienna said quickly, "Let's give this family a name. What do you want to name them? You can pick anything."

"Nah!" Maria sounded lazy. Sienna saw that she really lacked the self-confidence to make a suggestion.

"Let's use your last name. It's a great last name." Sienna wrote and then read aloud *The Guzman family is a big family.* She pointed to the magnets again. "Now tell me

everything you notice about these pictures."

Maria furrowed her brow, hesitating.

Sienna waited a full minute and tapped the sentence she'd written with the pencil, "If this is your main idea, you need some supporting details. You need to explain why you said this. How do know it's a big family?"

"There are ten people."

"There are!" Sienna said, writing. *There are ten people in the family.*

Maria smiled weakly and slumped. Clearly, she wanted Sienna to notice how exhausting this was.

"Remember," Sienna went on, "we need five or more sentences for a paragraph. We only have two. What else can you say about this family?"

Maria trained her eyes on the photos. The clock ticked loudly. Finally, she said, "There are a lot of mans in the family."

"There are?"

"There's a grandpa, a brother, a baby, an uncle, and a father."

"That's good!" Sienna said. "The grandpa came first in the family, so I'll put him first in the sentence."

Maria nodded. "And he the boss."

"Maybe. Is there anything else, you can say about the family?"

"No."

Jolie leaned forward to listen to the lesson.

"You mentioned the men." Sienna studied Maria's blank expression intently. "Can you say anything about the women?"

Maria shook her head, frowning.

Sienna said, "You could say there are a lot of women in the family."

"Nah!" The girl shrugged, completely disinterested.

"And you could say that there is a grandmother and a mother and three little girls. That would be fair and give you two more sentences to support why you said the Guzman family is a big family. Do you want to do that?"

The girl shook her head.

"Oh! Come on, Maria!" Jolie suddenly burst out. "Acknowledge fifty-one percent of the population."

"What?" Maria asked, turning around to look at Jolie.

"A little more than half of all the people in the world are girls," Jolie told her.

"So, Ms. Fox thinks the girls should get at least half of the space in your paragraph," Sienna explained. "Listen to what we have." She read.

The Guzman family is a big family.

There are ten people in the family.

There are a lot of men in the family.

There is a grandfather, a father, a brother, and an uncle.

"Oops. And a baby." Sienna made the correction and laid the pencil down, "Is this really how you want it to be?" She flexed and stretched her fingers. "Does this sound good to you?"

"Yep!" Maria seemed pleased.

"Shall we do another sentence?"

"No."

"Well, we are going to. I'll let you look at the rest of the magnets for a few minutes and then I'll be back." Sienna walked to the library counter, ostensibly for the economical district-issued tissue that felt like sandpaper on a human nose. She'd have to pick up the better kind at Bonny Deals.

"I hope you realize how hard I'm biting my tongue," Jolie whispered. "So much for gender equity on the page."

"It disturbs me too," Sienna whispered, "but I can't teach English, sentence structure, paragraph formation, *and* raise consciousness in twenty minutes. No matter what I do Nancy is going to complain to Deedee or Mimi."

"What would it cost the kid just to *say* that there are women and girls in the family? For Heaven's Sake, you were doing the manual labor for her."

Mimi bustled into the library heading straight for her broom closet, clutching her clipboard and smelling of *El Bandido*. She stopped abruptly, taking in what was plainly obvious to her—teachers standing around, chit-chatting.

How could she go before the school board and vouch for Moore's fidelity to *Reading Fare* when these women squandered teaching time? Mimi knew it wasn't up to her to deal with personnel issues. That was Deedee's department, but as her eyes fell on Maria, she realized that the epitome of all that was wrong in public education was playing out right before her eyes. Here was an at-risk child, pulled out of her class, missing rigorous grade level instruction to play with magnets while her supplemental teachers talked to like friends. The girl was one of the children who, if Sienna would just follow the curriculum and raise the school's test scores, would surely get Mimi promoted up the ranks, out of the broom closet, and perhaps to becoming a celebrated presenter at *On the Road to Reading* where she could really have an impact on the world. As Mimi surveyed the blatant infidelity to *Reading Fare*, she clenched the muscles in her jaw. Fury tightened her torso.

Sienna saw Mimi and sensed her rage. She returned to Maria calmly. Maria pointed to a picture of a miserable boy and to a grinning girl saying, "They are not the same. They're...uh...opos."

"Opposites? Opposite what?"

"Feelings."

"*Bueno!* So, if you were going to write a paragraph about opposite feelings what would your main idea be?"

"Feelings are opposite," Maria declared.

Sienna beamed. "You've got happy and sad. What's your next detail?"

Maria seemed to lose her organizing principle as she pondered the picture of a child sticking her tongue out. Sienna suspected the girl didn't want to associate with someone as naughty as the child in the photo. "It's okay to pick her," Sienna whispered. "She's just being silly. *Chistosa con tus amigas.*"

The muscles across Sienna's shoulders constricted as Mimi watched, but she pointed to the picture of a child playing chess.

"What about him? He looks serious. He can be the opposite of the silly girl."

"No!" Suddenly, Maria pushed two other magnets together.

"Okay," Sienna said, examining Maria's choices. "How are angry and surprised opposites?"

"Well, someone could have a surprise party," Maria said, "and be angry because...." she floundered.

"Because they don't like surprises?"

"Yeah. They only like to know everything."

"So, that sounds like cause and effect to me," Sienna said. "I know Mrs. Albright taught that lesson. Do you remember cause and effect from *Reading Fare* last week?"

Maria screwed up her lips, shaking her head as if Sienna had asked her if she remembered robbing the bank.

"Your main idea could be one feeling can cause another."

Maria nodded. "A kid could get angry because someone say she stupid and feel dis...disa... because he got angry."

Sienna sensed a story. "Are you talking about two people? A he and she? Or just one person? Who was angry? Who was disappointed?"

A fuming Mimi finally spat, "This is not *Reading Fare*." She struggled to contain her impatience. "As I told you earlier today, you have got to accept that no one supports you teaching these kids to write. It's more important for you to focus on reading. From now on, any writing your students do should be directly related to a *Reading Fare* selection—as a response to something the students read."

"She tried that with Captain Cook!" Jolie said. "It doesn't work."

Mimi held up a staying hand, continuing to scold Sienna. "Deedee told me you are a poet. Clearly, you are just making excuses here so you can be creative with students—so you can do whatever you want to with them."

"So that I can do whatever I want to with them?" Sienna repeated. "I am an ELL teacher. I want to help kids learn how use pronouns. I want to find out why a girl can't or won't acknowledge the women in her family so I can figure out if this language is too complicated for her or if she has built such a thick wall of cognitive disassociation and denial around gender that she can't even express if it was a *he* or *she* who was angry. I can't scale walls like that with people waving Pica's script at me to follow."

"I am absolutely sure *Reading Fare* covered pronouns," Mimi said.

"In the first week of third grade. Are you telling me that Maria has already missed her window of opportunity to get clear on them?"

"Remember, the only progress that counts is measurable." Mimi said. "If what you say is true about the third-grade scope and sequence, pronouns aren't likely to be on her fourth-grade test. Since they are not being tested, they are not being measured. You don't have to worry about teaching them right now. She'll pick them up later whenever the curriculum spirals back to them."

"How is she supposed to comprehend anything with pronouns until then?" Sienna asked. "And by the way, it never spirals back to them. It assumes she already knows them."

"Where's your fluency timer, Sienna?" Mimi asked as if she were a student who'd left her jacket out at recess for the tenth time.

"My what?"

"Are you telling me you don't know where it is? I would expect every teacher at a failing school like Moore to have one in her pocket at all times. You should have been timing and documenting how many words this girl can read per minute instead of trying to be so...um...creative with the curriculum."

Later that day, Sienna gave each of the students in *The Writers' Lair* a series of fluency tests. Each child read three different passages for one minute each. She didn't get to teach them English through writing. Instead, she used half of an hour to re-discover and document that they all read fewer words aloud per minute than what was expected of fourth graders.

That night in her bedroom, Sienna tossed her staff identification badge onto her dresser. It slid, falling be-

tween the wall and her bureau. She let it stay there.

"Sienna," Andy said soothingly. "You've done your job. You've advocated for the children and informed your supervisors of the problems with the tools they are requiring you to use. If they choose to ignore you and all the research that supports what you are trying to do with kids, that's their prerogative. It's out of your hands. You've done exactly what a good employee should do."

Sienna was exasperated. "But...is it enough for a good citizen? Is it enough for a humanitarian human being?"

"You're preaching to the choir, Baby." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. She was angry and tense, ready to hop right out of the embrace.

"I don't want to squander our precious time together over this," she said, "but it's all so wrong."

"I know," he said softly. He pressed his lips into her hair and inhaled. "It's the system. You have to wait for the third part of *Castaneda* to kick in."

Sienna felt betrayed that he wouldn't get angry with her now. She'd seen him as equally impassioned about issues. Obviously, all he wanted to do now was make love. "That's bullshit!" she cried, pulling away. Her eyes flashed.

"Come to Vandya," he coaxed, "next September when Matt goes to college. Just bide your time for another year. Don't rock the boat."

"This is ridiculous!" she cried. "I'm an excellent teacher and I've raised my son in this town. This is my home. Why do I have to move away just to do my best at my job?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Andy took a step back. Sienna saw the hurt in his eyes and softened a little, wiggling back into his embrace.

With his arms around her, he said, "I want you to be able to do the work you love and be with me at the same time. It seems more likely that that can happen at Vandy."

Sienna sighed deeply, struggling to release her worries about work to focus on him. She let her hands slide down, pushing them into the back pockets of his jeans. Pulling his hips toward hers, she kissed him fully, pushing her tongue into his mouth, tasting Café Rio's *pico de gallo* and *cerveza* on his inner lip. "You are a delicious man," she whispered, relaxing into the warmth of his pelvis. "And that's a very tempting offer. However, I honestly can't believe *you* just told *me* not to rock the boat."

"I want you to be free. Until then, I want you to be safe."

"I appreciate that," she kissed him softly. "But really? Don't rock the boat? That's so cliché, Andy. Surely you can come up with something better than that?"

His hands slid up beneath the hem of her sweater. "I'm not interested in linguistic prowess right now, Sienna." One hand traced the curve of her breast, the other moving to her waistband. "And, yes," he added, moving to unzip her jeans, "I can come up with something better." He knelt, using his tongue to trace a line from her bare belly button to the bikini waistband of her silk panties. Pulling the fabric down, he kissed the tops of her thighs. With one last insistent tug, denim and black lace crumbled around her ankles. She stepped out and he pushed the clothing aside with his foot.

Sienna shimmied out from beneath her sweater and let it fall to the ground as well. She lifted and pulled to hurry him out of his clothes, hungry to feel his flesh against hers. His evening stubble chafed the tender skin on her chin

when they embraced for another long, hard kiss. As he pushed his tongue between her welcoming lips, he reached behind her back, unhooking her lacy black bra.

And when she listed onto the quilt, he sank with her. Everything institutional was easily forgotten in the inspirational grammar of sex. In the spectral whiteness of a fallen sheet, the primal beat of a headboard against the wall, and the echo of guttural utterances, she let go of the need to teach pronouns. She did not have to ensure that *he* and *she* are subjects with meaningful antecedents. There was no need to be concerned about direct objects like *him*, like *her* receiving the action of a noun. The possessive nature of *his* or of *hers* was clearly understood. Dr. Dahlstrom was just about to prove his non-verbal prowess for the third time when he was—when they were—interrupted by a startlingly insistent beeping sound.

“What’s that?” he asked breathlessly, his body becoming still.

Cradled between his forearms, still undulating in the combined heat of their bodies, Sienna cringed. Weakly, she gestured toward the crumpled pile of clothing on the ground. “It’s my fluency timer,” she groaned. “I must have left it in my pocket.”

“Oh my God!” Andy swore softly as the unrelenting sound continued. “That was one hell of a minute.”

Sienna laughed. “Honey, that was a lot longer than a minute. There’s no telling what buttons got pushed when we started.”

Andy slipped off of her.

She rolled to her side, reaching to the floor to dig the timer out of her pocket and shut it off. Andy’s strong, still taut arms pulled her to him. In a side-lying embrace, they rested, legs entwined. “That damn timer is definitely a

way to kill the love," he sighed a long, ragged sigh. "I guess we don't get to finish that last one."

"Don't worry, sweetie," she said soothingly. "Even the best ones rarely do." As the light layer of sweat on her bare skin dried, cooling her down, she snuggled even closer. "Anyway, we only count your middle score. And that one was way, way off the charts."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning, *Gringo* Jonathan lingered beside Sienna watching kids scramble down from the buses. Some wore furry red, white-trimmed Santa hats. Several staggered under weighty platters of cookies and various *postres* covered with aluminum foil. A few of them carried small, wrapped boxes or beribboned bags for their teachers. Bao Yang and Lucero Fuentes shyly presented Sienna with gifts. Bao gave her a red rose, the rims of each petal blackened by frost. Lucero presented her with a box of candy from the Mexican grocery store and a prayer card commemorating the Mexican Holy Day of Obligation to celebrate the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Sienna examined the prayer card carefully. The downturned face of *La Madre de Dios* was framed by a midnight blue mantle strewn with stars. It was as if she had risen straight out the earth and the night sky had received her, like a mother crowns a toddler rising from the tub with a hooded towel. And like steam emanating from a child's body, a golden aura radiated around the lady. The story of her 1531 appearances to a peasant was printed on the back of the card and stamped with the slogan, "Protect the Unborn."

Sienna thanked the little girls for her gifts. As they

skipped to the cafeteria, Sienna returned her attention to *Gringo*. She noticed the backpack at his feet was so full of overdue library books he couldn't zip it shut.

He peered up at her. "How you know what school you work at?"

"I know which school I work at because I can read the sign out front."

"I don't mean that," *Gringo* said. "I mean that." He pointed toward the old brick building where the library and ELL were now housed. "There are two addresses on the same place."

He was completely right. When Sienna first arrived at Moore, Sienna had asked the administration about the two distinct plaques bearing different numbers over the same front door, but there had been no response.

Jonathan chortled. "That's so weird."

"Yeah. It is." Over time, the anomaly had become imperceptible to her. When she'd gotten no response from the administrative building, she'd just started using 2001 First Street, the address on an old publishers' invoice she'd found in a library cabinet. She'd completely forgotten all about the other option, 360 First. As the last bus pulled away and her duty ended, she invited Jonathan to bring his books to the library before school started, noting, "That backpack is too heavy to lug around until Mrs. Albright brings your class to the library."

Clutching the prayer card protectively and careful to match *Gringo's* shorter pace, Sienna wondered how a public institution could have persisted in having two addresses over the same front door for so long. It really seemed like a problem for emergency personnel. Good thing Mavis hadn't had her heart attack at school in the library. What if Baldwin hadn't escaped down the river when he robbed

the bank? What if he had run their way, panicked, and entered the school? What if there had been a real lockdown? Which address would the police dispatcher have been given? As for more mundane matters, having two addresses seemed like a problem for substitute teachers and UPS drivers. And then, because he was still at her house, at that very moment, Sienna had an image of Andy, younger, more buff, in a UPS uniform and then she thought of him, older and naked with a bottle of Andalusian wine in his hand. Quickly, with a smile tugging on the corners of her mouth, she banished that sexy phantom from her imagination.

The central office could ignore her request for clarity, but *Gringo* wasn't about to be put off. "What if Santa Claus wanted to find you? How is he supposed to know which one is your address? Mrs. Albright says if kids don't know their address and parents' phone numbers by the time we come back from Christmas break, we have to stay in at recess and practice them. She says it's *vital*."

"She's right! And vital is a great word!"

Gringo scoffed. "That's the name of my mom's shampoo."

"Oh!" Sienna thought for a moment. "Well, that's because the people who invented your mom's shampoo thought it was a great word, too. It means lively, alive. It also means super important. That's how Mrs. Albright is using it. It is vital to know your address."

"Why?"

"So if you needed help, the ambulance or fire fighters can find you. And if you get lost when you aren't at home, the police can help you find your way back." She smiled at him. "Do you know your address?"

"932 WGM"

Sienna furrowed her brow. The Side Street Apartment complex units where she thought he lived weren't numbered that way. "Did you move?"

"Yep," *Gringo* nodded. "Into the car." He grinned proudly, "Wanna know how I learned our address?"

She nodded, feeling heartsick.

"932. I'm nine and my mom is thirty-two. W is we. G is gotta. M is move. When the police came to our place, they say we gotta move. I say it like this. We gotta mooooo, 'cause moo rhymes with two. 932 we gotta moo. But, we aren't really cows. Actually, I think Mrs. Albright should make kids learn their license plates too, in case they have to downsize." He struggled to keep from dragging his backpack on the ground. "Mom says the good thing about a downsize is it helps kids find all their overdue library books."

"Yep," Sienna said. "And you can build up your muscles by bringing them back. You are being a very responsible library patron." She beamed at him, wishing again that they still had a school counselor, or preferably, a case manager, to see what support was available for this little guy and his mom. Where would they use his mom's Vital shampoo? It was wintertime now. Their car must be freezing. "When did you move into the car?"

"Day after Halloween," he said.

"The day after Halloween! Mrs. Albright knows, right?"

"Nah!"

"She doesn't? Are you sure she doesn't?"

"Yeah. We made Christmas wreaths yesterday and she told me to give mine to my mom to hang on the front door of our house. So, that's how I can tell she thinks I still have one."

Sienna bit her lip. It would be easy for a frantically busy teacher to slip up that way, to forget, in the hustle of trying to squeeze a holiday art project into a jam-packed academic program, but Nancy didn't know. She really didn't know. If the students were given a chance to share what was happening in their lives and express themselves in the classroom instead of being forced to write to the curriculum's fatally stilted and dull prompts, it wouldn't have taken a month and a half for someone at school to find out that this little boy was homeless. She remembered Mimi's directive from the previous day. Any writing you do should be directly related to a *Reading Fare* selection."

"So where have all these library books been since you moved into the car? The trunk?"

"Nope. That's where we keep the food. I was keeping these books in a locker at a gym. Our free trial is up so I have to bring them back now."

Sienna imagined the books shoved in the steamy locker room of a local gym.

"So, what school do you live in?" *Gringo* asked. "2001 or 360?"

Live in? When their conversation began, he'd asked her which one she worked in. Very young children often think their teachers live at school, but Jonathan was old enough to know better. Maybe he's regressing, Sienna thought. Sometimes when children live through a traumatic event, like losing their home and moving into a car, they can block big chunks of information and experience from their memories. She had a feeling that Pilar and Valentin had done that. Sienna didn't have the heart to remind Jonathan that she had a house to live in and that she only worked at school.

"So, which one is your address Ms. O'Mara?"

"360 First Street," she said. And suddenly, despite her concern for him, it was fun pretending she operated in a completely different dimension from the rest of Moore. "My address is *The Writers' Lair*."

After Johnathan turned his books in and went to class, Sienna read the prayer card Lucero had given her again more closely. In 1531, Juan Diego was passing Tepeyac Hill in Mexico. He saw the Blessed Virgin Mary standing there bathed in mysterious light. She spoke to him in his indigenous language, telling him that she wanted a shrine built on that very spot so she could demonstrate her love and compassion for the people and offer them protection. For a native Indian to build on native land colonized by Spain and the Catholic Church, Juan Diego needed permission from the Bishop in Mexico City. Bishop Zumarraga refused the request to build the shrine the first time Juan Diego asked, so Juan Diego returned to where he met the Holy Mother and told her of this rejection. She bade him try again. That time, the bishop asked for a sign so when Juan Diego next encountered the Blessed Virgin, she told him where to find flowers to take to Zumarraga. Juan Diego found the flowers, wrapped the offering in his rough *tilma*, the poor peasant's cloak, and carried his bundle back into the city. When Juan Diego opened his cloak, beautiful red roses—miraculously blooming in the middle of the winter—rained down upon the bishop's feet. Additionally, to the men's amazement, there was also an exquisitely colored portrait of the Blessed Virgin standing on a snake on the inside of the cloak. According to the card, "despite the more than twenty-two languages and almost fifty dialects spoken at that time, all were able to read and understand the symbolism contained in the sacred image. So it was in this manner that millions of natives were almost instantly

converted to Roman Catholic Christianity.”

Our Lady of Guadalupe’s shrine was constructed right where the Spanish conquistadors had leveled an ancient temple dedicated to Tonantzin—to Mother Earth, to the Goddess of Sustenance, to the Honored Grandmother, to the Snake, the Bringer of Maize. As Sienna read, she viscerally recalled wearing the serape Gaul had encouraged her to try on. It had been made from the same fiber as Juan Diego’s and colored by blood gained by crushing the feminine.

Deedee rushed in wild-eyed, interrupting Sienna’s thoughts. “There’s a huge line of parents dropping home baked treats off in the office! I need you to come over and tell them to take it all back home! I don’t understand what’s happening. I sent notices out days ago to remind people that all party treats have to be store-bought. Can’t they read? Jesus! I’ve got cookies and cakes and brownies coming out the ying-yang.” She stopped for a moment to catch her breath. “And Brenda and Dr. Fray are dropping by any minute. Oh my God! It’s a *board policy* NOT to have homemade treats in the building!”

“Apparently, it’s also a board policy NOT to send notices home in Spanish,” Sienna said, calmly placing the prayer card beside Bao’s rose at the feet of *La Mujer de Tierra*.

“Just fix it!” Deedee screamed. Her head seemed to balance on the erupting cords of tension in her neck. Her pupils dilated. And then as if she couldn’t take another second of being in the light, she rushed into Mimi’s dark, dank office and slammed the door behind her.

Sienna met Mrs. Fuentes, the mother of Cassandra and Lucero, in the main office. From what Sienna could gather from her, all the mothers who lived in the South Side

apartment complex were under the impression that some store-bought cookies had been poisoned and that Mrs. Hayes had written to ask them to help protect *todos de los niños* by doing all the baking for the class parties. As Sienna faced the loving, protective mothers, who'd likely overspent their grocery budgets to buy sugar and margarine, she didn't have the heart to explain that the school board feared that theirs were the tainted offerings.

Mrs. Donahue looked up from the daily attendance report, carefully keeping her face neutral. Deadpan, she told Sienna, "Angela Hadley is in the copy room."

Sienna understood the unspoken suggestion. "*Un momento, por favor!*" She excused herself from the throng of moms bringing baked goods in as she rushed to consult with Travis Hadley's mom—the school board president's daughter-in-law, who according to her niece Laurali, took a lot of grief for not sending her son to the "better" school on Teagan Hill. Angela was quite willing to blame all the trouble on her mother-in-law. Drawing on her own sketchy Spanish, Angela sent the parents and their platters home, explaining that Brenda Hadley did not trust them. As the parade of cupcakes wound its deflated way across the back field to the apartment complex, Angela called her husband's Aunt Rebecca and Rebecca began to design the campaign signs for her next bid as the school board president. Aunt Rebecca spent the afternoon gleefully photo-shopping a picture of her sister Brenda dressed as Dr. Seuss's *The Grinch who Stole Christmas*, which was ironic because Brenda usually got a lot of political support from the local churches and its was Christmas.

Maria came back for more tutoring in the morning. She pulled the candy cane out of her mouth to show Sienna where the red stripes were dissolving. "This is all we

got," she said. "No party. It's a rip-off. The kids are watching a movie while Teacher puts our scores in the computer. I'm still a zero." Maria handed a sticky worksheet to Sienna. "I was supposed to read the fast facts and write a paragraph." In the top margin, Nancy had written a note. "Today's topic sentence should be: (The subject) had an interesting early life."

Sienna wished the assignment had been *Write about something interesting from your early life*. "What is an interesting early life?" she asked Maria.

Maria shrugged. Sienna urged her to read the first fast fact aloud but ended up reading it to her. *John had to leave school at an early age because of his father's stand against slavery.*

"What do you think it means to leave school at an early age?"

"To go like my mom," Maria said. "She only did three years in Mexico, but she wants me to do all the grades."

Sienna remembered the hopeful face of the illiterate woman who'd brought a tray full of warm *churros* to school that morning and how her whole bearing had drooped when Angela turned her away. Maria, that woman's child, was clearly so far behind the moving target of rising standards that statistically her chances of graduating from high school were almost nil. "That's a good text-to-life connection," Sienna said. "So, your mom and the man we are reading about both left school when they were very young. Now, do you know what slavery is?" Maria did not.

Sienna tried tapping into what early classroom teachers often covered in social studies. Harriet Tubman? The Underground Railroad? Either Maria hadn't heard of them, or she couldn't remember what any of those words

meant when the teachers presented them. Did she remember her own family's journey to America? Had it been anything like the Underground Railroad? Or had they simply boarded an airplane?

Despite Maria's ability to word-call part of the paragraph, it soon became clear that she did not comprehend it. She thought John had to stop going to school at an early age because his father was literally standing in the doorway, blocking his path so he couldn't leave the house. "My mom, she could not go, too. She told me her dad stand like this." The girl crossed her arms over her chest. "He say she have to stay home and help grandma with the babies."

Sienna skimmed the rest of Maria's reading assignment quickly. It wasn't likely from Maria's background experience or the way the paragraph itself was written that the girl would ever be able to infer that the main character and his family lived in a pro-slavery community and John actually had a strong parental role model *for* actively bucking that injustice.

So, Sienna just explained homeschooling and read the second fun fact for Maria because the child had never heard the words for what John studied at home. *At home John studied botany, zoology, and geology.* Even if Maria could have sounded them out, she had no idea how to pronounce the scientific words for the study of plants, animals, and the earth. Sienna told her, "He liked rocks and stuff."

Maria read the third fun fact. *John lost his arm in the Civil War,* but she thought that he broke it, so his sacrifice didn't have the same impact on her. *John became a professor of Geology.* Sienna defined Geology, but Maria didn't know what a professor was. *He developed a theory about the formation of the Grand Canyon.* Maria didn't know what a the-

ory was or what formation meant. She had no idea what a Grand Canyon could be. Sienna glanced around the library for a book that might have a picture of the Grand Canyon.

All through the tutoring session, Jolie had been sitting at a card table she'd brought from home. Perched behind the computer balanced on a stack of thesauri, she said, "Do you realize the fun facts haven't actually told us which side he was fighting for? It's odd they don't say how it felt for him to lose a limb. They say nothing about how he coped with that?"

"We can't worry about any of that," Sienna said wryly. "That happened in his later life. Maria just has to get her assignment done."

By the time Mimi bustled into the library a tedious twenty minutes later, Sienna had transcribed, and Maria had read her own paragraph twice. Mimi stopped to listen as Sienna urged the girl to read her work for the third time, inviting her to see if she wanted to add anything at all.

Maria read, "John had an interesting early life. John learned about plants and animals at home. John learned about the earth. John grew up to be a teacher of rocks. John had a new idea about the Grand Canyon. There you have some fun facts about John's early life."

Mimi glanced down at the *Reading Fare* Fun Facts worksheet and smiled. "This is great!" she exclaimed. "Just great!" She reached over to pat Sienna's arm. "You're figuring this out! I'm so glad you are using real grade level material! It's vital since standards are only going to get higher." Then, in her happiness, she seemed to float into the broom closet and, just as Deedee had done earlier that morning while hiding out waiting for the mothers to be sent home, shut the door completely.

Since there was no sense sending Maria back to class just a few minutes shy of recess, Jolie invited her to sit on a bright orange beanbag chair in the middle of the old basketball court and look at some Christmas books. To Sienna, she said. "I really liked what you were doing with the magnets yesterday." She waved toward Maria's assignment. "Why do you have to use that crap?"

"I don't know." Sienna shook her head. "I've seen fourth graders write about things they know and care about and whatever they produce is always better and deeper than regurgitating facts they haven't been able to process."

Mimi stepped out of her office, her cell phone against her ear. "Jules? Jules? I have no bars. Jules? I can't get a signal." Frowning, Mimi shook her device. "Oh well. By the way," she said to Sienna, "I do have just one teeny-tiny suggestion for you. Get a highlighter, a bright pink one for that girl. Girls just love pink, you know. And have her pick out and highlight the most important details in the text while she reads. Okay? Will you do that for me?"

Glumly, Sienna looked at Maria. The girl wasn't reading. She was only moving her lips pretending to be good, eager to please, desperate to be safe. Her Reading Baby would probably never be healthy, and Maria might well have a real, human baby of her own without ever developing the skills needed to support it. Lucero's prayer card said, "Protect the Unborn."

Sienna turned away from Mimi, turning pleading eyes to the sacred image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, propped against *La Mujer de Tierra*. In truth, the artist had rendered *La Madre de Dios* on the prayer card to appear as miserable as Sienna felt. The holy mother's eyes were puffy. The skin over her cheekbones appeared bruised. One side of her

upper lip was swollen as if she'd been punched in the mouth. Her neck was cocked to the side, at an angle, suggesting a painfully pinched nerve, a dislocation of her cervical spine.

Sienna felt her vital energy draining as if all her blood were pooling out through the tips of her toes. She could not trust her facial expression or what she might say. She took the candy Lucero had given her from where she had lain it beside the prayer card, wordlessly offering a piece to Mimi.

"Thank you!" Mimi said sweetly, accepting it as the white flag of Sienna's surrender. "This will freshen my breath for the Superintendent. He and Brenda Hadley will be here soon to wish us all a very happy holiday!" Mimi popped the candy into her mouth as Sienna unwrapped a piece for herself.

Mimi gasped. "H...h...hot!"

Sienna's dejection made her apathetic toward Mimi's discomfort. Sucking on her own piece, as if trying to draw revitalizing heat from it, she watched Mimi's eyes water. "You know," she said, "I gave a fluency test in Ashley Whitfield's first grade this morning. The first sentence of the passage was *It was a hot day*. It took almost the whole minute before the little boy finally sounded out /h/ /o/ /t/. Then, he laid his cheek down on the table, completely exhausted. His eyes lolled back into his head, and he asked me, 'What's a hot?'"

Normally pale, Mimi's complexion had gone bright pink. Her eyes darted about, obviously looking for water. She fixated on the fountain in the corner, but it had been shut off years earlier by the county health department. "What was his overall score?" she panted.

Sienna replied, "Four."

"Per minute!"

Sienna nodded.

"And that's in the RIDE?" Mimi left her mouth open so the air in the under-heated library could cool her tongue. Evidently, she was imagining a dismal trend line on the progress-monitoring graph. "That's terrible! "Mimi spit the translucent red disc into the same trash can Pilar had vomited me up into and answered her whistling cell phone. "Hi Jules! Oh, my goodness! Yes! Dr. Fray will be here any minute. I'll meet you outside."

Mimi skipped out of the library. Maria ran to recess. They both passed Deedee who did not shout at either of them to walk. Deedee carried a tape dispenser and a few papers pressed under her arm against her side. Moving like a child on Christmas Eve, stealing away with sheets of wrapping paper and a handmade gift she was certain would delight the recipient, she seemed to believe that because she willed it to be so, no one noticed what she was or wasn't doing, and in fact, that strategy often worked.

After school was dismissed, Sienna plucked tiles with individual letters on them from a plastic tub to prepare for the *Reading Fare* lesson slated for the first day back after Winter break. Andy entered the library. Joyfully, she told him, "I'm almost ready." He didn't look happy. "What's wrong?"

Angrily, he asked, "Who hangs the reading material in the bathrooms around here?"

"Deedee."

"Have you seen this?" He thrust a paper with tape still stuck to the top of it at her.

"I haven't had a chance to go to the bathroom since school started. What does it say?"

Andy read an anonymous Internet story aloud. It was about a teacher receiving holiday gifts from her students. When he got to the last part, his voice shook. "The next gift was from the son of a liquor store owner. The teacher held the package over her head. It was leaking. She touched a drop of the leakage with her finger and put it to her tongue. 'Is it wine?' she asked.

"No," the boy replied with excitement. The teacher took one more taste before declaring, 'I give up, what is it?'

"With great glee, the boy replied, 'it's a puppy!'"

For a moment, against her will, Sienna visualized Nancy, or maybe Ashley, holding a cardboard box above her head, the damp bottom nearly collapsing beneath the weight of a snuffling, wiggling puppy as she tasted its pee. It was offensive. She was just too demoralized to get fired up. All she wanted was to find one more tile with the letter *a* on it, leave campus, and forget about Moore for two weeks.

"Is this the kind of culture Deedee creates around here?" Andy asked sharply. "Is this how she communicates her belief that teachers are stupid? Does she really think that just because something is nicely packaged and tied up with a ribbon, they lose their senses? This is disgusting! What kind of principal, what kind of person would tape this in the only place an exhausted, overwhelmed teacher might have a moment alone?"

Sienna was touched by his outrage. After all, she had wanted him to defend her the day before, but her despair was causing her to disassociate. "I guess she just thinks it's funny."

"And she's upset about the graffiti outside? What

about what she's putting up inside? What's wrong with that woman?" He asked. "Why doesn't anyone call her on the culture she's creating here?"

Sienna shrugged, mimicking Mimi, "The only thing that counts as real is what you can measure." Tears of hopelessness welled in her eyes. "No one wants to rock the boat."

Andy shook his head. "I'm so sorry, sweetie," he said. "I guess I had to see this to believe it. I am sorry I said that stupid thing about not rocking the boat."

She wiped a tear from her cheek. "So, professor, may I be excused from fidelity to *Reading Fare*?"

As if Mimi really had been hired to maintain surveillance, she suddenly rushed into the library. She looked from Sienna to Andy, clearly still assuming he was a teacher in the building. "*Reading Fare* is not optional," she said, with a slight lilt of panic in her voice. Then, as if the corruption of such embedded, clandestine treason dawned on her, she snapped. "You two have no choice in the matter if you're going to work for Purewater." She smiled, beauty-queen style. "Forgot my laptop." She dashed back into her office, shutting the door behind her.

"Hey, do you have a map of this school?" Andy asked. "For reconnaissance."

Sienna gestured toward the plastic tub labeled GUEST TEACHER EMERGENCY PLANS stored under her desk.

Andy took a school map out and pecked her on the cheek. "No PDA," she said, glancing sideways toward the broom closet. He chuckled, seized her lips with his for a sizzling kiss. "Finish up here quickly," he whispered. "Then, I'll spring you from the dungeon."

Like a knight, leaving the castle for battle, Andy left the library. Captain Swabby had spent the morning paint-

ing over graffiti. Now, Andy visited each bathroom stall in the building, including those in the children's wing, to tear down what the principal had posted about holiday gifts for teachers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sienna and Andy met Jolie and Wolf at *Casita Rio* to celebrate the beginning of the holiday break. A light snow fell outside as they settled into the alcove table. Holiday lights framed and twinkled in the restaurant's wide window. Dark red poinsettias bloomed on the sill. With their backs to the couples, Esteban and Gaul sat at the counter, eating with their eyes cast down. Through the gap of empty space between them, Sienna glimpsed Gaul's stoneware plate piled high with Lucia's chicken mole and decided that's what she wanted as well.

After they ordered, Jolie said, "I looked up Maria's fun fact guy. The one with the interesting early life."

Sienna sighed. "I seriously don't want to talk shop."

"Just hear me out," Jolie said.

Sienna shrugged. Winter Break technically started in the morning.

"He was an interesting guy," Jolie went on. "While he was out exploring the Grand Canyon, he got interested in and befriended the Native Americans. He collected the myths, tales, and vocabularies of several Southwest tribes. He helped Congress create the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology. Apparently, his passion for ethnography helped lay the groundwork for anthropology in the twentieth cen-

ture. He was all about letting the people tell their stories and preserving them."

"Wow," Sienna said, dipping into the guacamole. "He's probably rolling in his grave over what *Reading Fare's* curriculum designers decided were the fun facts of his life."

"What are you two talking about?" Wolf asked. "I swear," he said to Andy, "these women have a secret language."

Andy chuckled. "Educationese." The bells on the café door jingled.

Jolie said, "There's Mimi with her husband. I swear she *is* spying on us."

Sienna chose not to turn around.

Jolie waved enthusiastically. "Mimi! Mimi!"

Sienna glowered at her.

"Hello there!" Mimi said joyfully. "Imagine running into you two here. This is such a small town."

Sienna turned around in her chair. Her face was tight. She tried to smile convivially, knowing she probably wasn't managing it very well. She hoped she seemed pleasant enough.

Jolie said, "We were just talking about *Reading Fare's* Fun Facts."

"Great!" Mimi said. "You really did do a good job with it today, Sienna." She stepped aside so the man behind her could step up to their table as well. In that moment, Sienna thought they were holding hands, but then figured she was wrong because Mimi introduced him as Jules Holdaway, adding, "He is very interested in how we are using *Reading Fare*."

"Oh!" Jolie said. "This is not your husband?"

"No! No!" Mimi blushed. "He's not."

Jules and Andy stared at each other, once again trying to identify the other.

Jolie said, "I was just now wondering why the curriculum leaves all the interesting details out of the fun facts. Maria was reading about John Wesley Powell today. It might have been good for her to learn that he formed a theory about the formation of the Grand Canyon, but it might have been even better for her to learn that he also developed a lifelong passion for the languages and stories of the indigenous people who lived in the Southwest. I mean the guy actually formed the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology to help preserve native culture. Isn't that a fun fact, especially for at-risk minority students?"

Mimi blanched, unconsciously putting her arm in front of Jules like a driver slamming on her brakes attempts to keep her passenger from flying through a windshield. Her voice became quite clinical as she said, "It sounds like that Fun Facts activity was focused on geology."

"Nope," Sienna said. "The focus was supposed to be on his interesting early life."

"That's why," Jules said, taking charge. "He studied Native Americans *later* in life. Do you get it? Later. Not earlier."

"The only thing interesting about his early life was that he was homeschooled because his father cared about human rights and was opposed to slavery." Sienna said. "He got to choose what he studied, based on his own interests. He liked rocks, which led him to the Grand Canyon, which led him to the people. *Reading Fare* designers could have turned that into a beautiful cause and effect piece."

Jules looked at his watch. "I'll wait in the car, Mimi. I

need to program the GPS."

When he ducked outside into the snow, Mimi confided, "We're meeting Dr. Fray for drinks! Mrs. Fray just loved the flan I brought to their cocktail party last night. Thank God because that made it worth my husband being mad that I decided to attend the Fray's event instead of making it to his staff party in Sinclair. When I introduced Jules to Dr. Fray in the staff lounge today, Dr. Fray mentioned the flan and Jules said he wanted some and I said I'd get him some sometime. Of course, I never thought anything would come of it, but suddenly Dr. Fray invited us over for an intimate dinner while Jules is still in town! That means it's tonight. Wala!" Mimi glanced toward the counter. "I hope I can buy another flan on such short notice."

Sienna and Jolie glanced at each other. Were they supposed to congratulate her for any of this?

"I'm a strong believer in networking," Mimi said. "I'm formulating a theory that networking is actually more important for educational reform than teaching is."

"That's very interesting," Andy said. "Do you think networking is more important than data?"

"Ha!" Mimi twittered. "You are a funny guy." She wiggled her way through the crowded restaurant up to the counter, leaned in between Gaul and Esteban, and asked Lucia for an entire flan.

Andy said, "I still can't place the guy she's with. Jules Holdaway? It's making me crazy."

"That's making you crazy?" Sienna took a swig of his beer. "What about what she said?"

"Yeah, but the guy." Andy said, taking out his phone and scrolling.

"You travel a lot." Jolie said. "Maybe you just saw him or someone who looks like him at the airport." She reached

over to take Wolf's hand.

Wolf said, "Maybe he was on the cover of *Forbes*. There's something shifty about him."

"That's it!" Andy said. "He is Jack Holdaway's son. They own Pica. Wow! It seems unethical that he's dating Mimi."

Jolie and Sienna exchanged a glance. This was scandalous and would have to be analyzed when they were alone. Sienna said, "She's married. They can't be dating!"

Andy shrugged. "Wining and dining, then. He is the heir to the throne."

As if the reference to royalty reminded her, Jolie pulled a dirty dog-eared picture book out of her tote bag, "Look what was in Jonathan's overdue pile! *The Little Mermaid*. I'm going to try repairing it at home. I've got some fantastic old book binding glue that is so toxic Captain Swabby would never let me use it at school. When it's all fixed up, I want to let Pilar check it out. What do you think? She loves mermaids."

Sienna took the book. The bottom third of the cover was ripped away from the spine. The corners of the pages curled as if the book had been dipped in the sea and yellowed from brining in the sun. "It is all about a mermaid, which she loves. But this little mermaid gives her voice up on a gamble, on the off chance that she might please a prince who could never, ever really care for her."

"Yeah. It is a sad story." Jolie said. "Of course, we could talk to her about not giving up her voice. Hans Christian was a genius. Maybe we should give Deedee and Mimi a copy of the *Emperor's New Clothes* to read, only we should call it the *Emperor's New Reading Fare*."

"That's a good one," Andy said. To Wolf, he added, "Librarian sarcasm."

Jolie nodded.

Sienna laughed. She said, "Hans was brilliant, but let's not give this story to Pilar. All she can do with it at this point is look at the pictures." She held the book up so they could all see the final illustration. A girl's lovely face, cracking with heartbreak and dismay, floated in a sheet of white foam. Her body had been swallowed by the gray, murky sea.

Examining the illustration, Wolf grimaced. "I've seen too many real drownings on the Purewater. It is not a pretty sight in a picture book. It's horrible in reality." He sniffed audibly.

"Oh Wolf!" Sienna registered that he was touched. She almost patted his arm, but when he sniffed twice more, she realized he wasn't choked up.

"This reeks of pot!" he said.

"That's the other reason I was taking it home," Jolie said. "To air it out."

"Jonathan's coat and backpack smell just like that," Sienna said.

"Well, if that's all his mom is doing nowadays, that's great. She's another sad story." Wolf handed the book back to Jolie. "Nice try, sweetheart."

Jolie nodded. "I've been racking my brain for a different mermaid story."

Sienna said, "She needs to write about the one she drew."

"I wish she could," Jolie said. "I wish everyone would just let you help her do it."

"Teach the kids to write, Sienna," Andy said, "Go ahead. Rock the boat in Purewater. Their stories matter, even if their facts aren't fun."

After handling the grubby book, Sienna reached into

her purse for hand sanitizer, her fingers brushing over *La Mujer de Tierra* reclining inside, wrapped in extra soft, brand name facial tissue. She hadn't left the statue at school. She was legitimately worried that someone would vandalize the library during the break or as Jolie had joked, "Captain Swabby might paint her gray."

Rubbing alcohol left a chill behind as it evaporated from her skin. Sienna said, "I'd love to know more about what's happening in Clemencia and *Redención*. If I knew what was going on down there, I might know how to help Pilar and Valentin."

Their plates came and they spent a pleasant hour eating and talking before Wolf got a tagging-in-progress call and had to leave, hoping he could finally catch the town's newly prolific graffitists. Wolf promised to text Jolie as soon as possible to let her know how long he'd be tied up. Sienna and Andy offered to drive her home if needed. The restaurant cleared and soon such a silence fell over the space that the distant music and crooning of *El Fuego* could be heard coming from the radio in the apartment upstairs where Pilar and Cassandra were having a sleepover. Lucia strolled out of the kitchen to tempt them with flan. When she returned with their dessert, she had Ramon and Gaul in tow.

Gaul nodded to Jolie and Andy but spoke directly to Sienna. "I couldn't help hearing you earlier. If you are interested, Lucia and Ramon would like to share a little with you about *Redención*. I can translate the difficult parts."

Sienna was well-fed and getting drowsy. The draft from the front door was a few degrees too cold on her legs and she wanted to go home. She wanted to have a long bath with lavender-scented Epsom salts and Andy, too. Matt was with his father, so she'd have no compunction

about playing a siren and luring her lover into the depths of her own tub.

Still, this was a precious opportunity to learn more and they had to wait to see if Wolf would be able to return for Jolie in a reasonable amount of time anyway. "Do you mind?" she asked her companions. Jolie shook her head. Andy was already pulling chairs over from the next table.

As Gaul sank into Wolf's emptied seat, Sienna introduced him to Andy.

Andy's eyes widened slightly. He attempted to sound friendly, as if he'd never once worried that Sienna might have been attracted to Gaul. "I understand you know something about the painting in the library," he said, "Of the shaman."

"Oh yes! That's a very interesting piece," Gaul replied, glancing from Sienna to Jolie and back again. "I've thought of it often, wondering what you decided to do with it."

"We're sharing it now," Sienna said. "The problem was solved when I was relocated."

Gaul nodded, although he was clearly confounded, wondering why teachers moved around so much. He shifted uneasily. "I fear I must confess to something."

Andy sat back in his seat, trying to wash his irrational jealousy down with a swig of *cerveza*, telling himself not to be concerned about Sienna and this man.

Gaul said, "I overheard you talking about ethnology, myth, Pilar, and her mermaid, and because of that, I know you are the ones, the ones able to hear what someone in Purewater must hear to help the children in your school."

With that, Andy's worries were appeased. Lucia, Ramon, and Gaul told what they could of biography, current events, and history though none of it would ever be included in *Reading Fare's* Fun Facts.

Lucia and Ramon were both born and grew up in the small village of Redención. Lucia's grandmother, Esperanza Cuevas, was famous there and throughout the state of Clemencia for her pottery. As Gaul had told Sienna when he gave her *La Mujer de Tierra*, the clay from Redención was very special. The Cuevas family claimed the rights to a special hot spring beneath *La Madre Ardiendo*. The clay moistened from that particular spring was called *matriz* and it was considered particularly sacred.

When an object made of this clay was placed on an altar to call back *los muertos* or to request a blessing or a healing, petitioners usually received a sign that their prayers had been heard, if not answered, within three days. The spring that was the source of the *matriz* was a well-guarded secret. For centuries, only a few chosen Cuevas women from each generation were permitted to know exactly where it was. The mates of these women were required to undergo an elaborate ritual to prepare them to stand guard whenever their wives went into the hills to retrieve the clay and vials of spring water to replenish it when they worked with the clay back at home.

While this ancient tradition went on in rural Redención, other parts of Clemencia modernized. In the early 1960's, when Esperanza Cuevas was still a teenager, Gaul Santiago's grandfather ran for governor in the capital city. Just before he put his name on the ballot, his mother traveled to Redención and bought him a Cuevas pot. She instructed him to create a shrine to social justice. He did. He placed the pot upon his altar at home, filling it with strips of paper on which he'd written his intentions and requests for blessings upon his work for the people. He prayed that he would only win this election and any subsequent ones

as well if *La Madre Ardiendo* approved of his efforts.

After a grueling campaign, Santiago won the election. He'd worked hard, but he always believed that his victory was due to his connection with the *matriz*. Because of his gratitude and reverence, he sent his adult son, Gaul's father, to Redención with the following instructions. Gaul's father was to find the source of the clay and to—very discretely—ensure that it was always guarded by the elder Santiago's new government. The clay was precious and powerful, and the new governor did not want to rely upon the poor peasants to protect it.

Gaul was a small child of three or four when he accompanied his father on this first mission to Redención. While his father negotiated with the Cuevas family, Gaul quickly befriended Raul Vega, the child of the Cuevas' family's neighbor. The boys were just a few months apart in age. People made jokes about their names rhyming and teased them about being twins.

No one had expected Gaul's father to be absolutely enchanted by Redención and by the Cuevas family which embraced him and the protection he offered—with stipulations. They insisted that the guards he employed never know the precise location of the source of the clay. The Santiago soldiers were "permitted" to guard the Cuevas men who guarded the Cuevas women. Gaul's father adored Redención so much that he had a second home built in the village. The Santiago family spent a lot of time there so Gaul and Raul became lifelong friends.

When Raul's little brother, Ramon, was born, Gaul thought of him as his own brother. As the years went by, Gaul, Raul, and Ramon befriended Pablo Flores, who came to live in the village after spending his early life higher up on *La Madre Ardiendo*. Pablo was a gifted painter. When

Governor Santiago sent his grandson Gaul to boarding school in the United States, Gaul took some of Pablo's art and a few pieces of Cuevas pottery from Redención to remind him of home. Coincidentally, Gaul's new roommate's parents were wealthy and well-connected art collectors. They were instantly intrigued by the pieces they discovered in their son's dorm room and thus Gaul's own career as an art dealer was born.

Meanwhile, back in Redención, Pablo married Lucia's elder sister, Esperanza Luz, who had been named after the grandmother whose *matriz* had given Governor Santiago several consecutive political victories in Clemencia. Soon, Pilar was born to the artistic couple, Pablo and Esperanza Luz.

Ramon and Lucia were newlyweds and were thrilled to become her godparents, but before baby Pilar cut her first tooth, Gaul's grandfather became ill and died in the capital city of Clemencia. During the months of an interim government, a powerful drug cartel attempted to expand its presence in Clemencia. Since Grandfather Santiago's guards in Redención had been funded from his own discretionary funds, and no one else knew about the secret deal, the soldiers were no longer paid for their clandestine protection. They left the village.

Ramon and Lucia decided to join Raul on a tourist visa to visit Gaul in the United States before starting their own family. Pablo and Esperanza Luz sent Raul, Ramon, and Lucia on their journey north with a van load of paintings and pots for Gaul to sell. Pablo's paintings sold as soon as they hit the market in Santa Fe. While Lucia and the Vega brothers were having a wonderful time visiting him in Santa Fe, a shocking and brutal raid occurred in Redención. The Clemencian drug cartel came in, kid-

napped several young people, and murdered the few who were brave or foolhardy enough to resist.

When Raul tried to call home, he couldn't get through. He didn't worry right away, but after a few futile tries, all of them began dialing non-stop until they finally reached someone in Redención. It took two days before Ramon got through to his own panicked mother, who was able to assure them that Raul's wife was safe. Still, she was convinced that the government could no longer keep order in Clemencia. It broke her heart to banish the young people, but she pleaded with them to stay in the United States. She was so upset and unclear on her geography, she forced them to promise to go as far north as they could possibly get.

Afraid, heartbroken, and excited about a new life in the United States, Ramon and Lucia applied for legal status and, with sponsorship and a small loan from Gaul, bought a taco truck, following migrant workers from the Southwest to California. Eventually, they worked their way further north.

Raul refused to let his wife travel north alone and returned to Clemencia on the next flight. He learned that Pablo and Esperanza Luz had taken Esteban and baby Pilar into the hills for a trip to the *matriz* the day before the cartel raided Redención and were still up there. Raul made the rugged drive up into *La Madre Ardiendo*, found them, and pleaded with Pablo to come with him, to move both of their families to Santa Fe.

Pablo and Esperanza Luz refused for two reasons. First of all, Esperanza was the only woman of her generation so far who had been initiated into the *matriz*. Pablo was the only man initiated into protecting her work with it. They did not feel they could leave. Even if Redención

were threatened under the cartel or even if it were to modernize under a strong, future government, the Cuevas family's legacy would always be their sacred responsibility.

Indeed, prayer and rituals involving the *matriz* appeared to be working. A new government, composed of many of Santiago's original cabinet, reorganized and successfully used the military to arrest members of the cartel. While increasing the military meant less money for many things like schools in Clemencia, it also meant it was probably safe to stay and create the sacred art Pablo and Esperanza Luz had been born to make.

Redención was haunted by the trauma of the cartel's first raid, murders and kidnappings, but life slowly returned to a new normal. Pablo and Esperanza Luz continued with their work, producing increasingly numinous work. Gaul was able to sell many pieces for very good prices. Resettled in Santa Fe, Raul got the license he needed and partnered with Gaul becoming an exporter, driving back and forth between Redención and Santa Fe several times a year.

Things went well for a few years until the previous summer. Gaul and Raul were all set to visit Redención for a traditional festival. They couldn't travel together because Gaul had a friend's wedding to attend so Raul went a few days ahead of him. When Gaul reached Redención, a few days later, he was shocked to find the village empty.

The people had disappeared. The art was gone. The only piece left was *La Mujer de Tierra*. He found her standing alone in the center of Esperanza's worktable. There had never really been cell service to speak of and Gaul realized the telephone wires in and out of the village had been cut. Horrified, sweating, and nauseous, he drove ten miles to the nearest town with a land line and called *Casita*

Rio in Purewater. Lucia answered the phone and before she could say anything, Gaul frantically asked if Ramon had heard anything from Raul? Had Lucia heard anything from her mother? Her sister? Had they heard from Pablo or Esperanza Luz?

Lucia was completely distraught. She told Gual on the phone that a mysterious, terse midnight call from a stranger had directed Ramon to leave Purewater immediately to come pick Esteban and Pilar up in San Diego, California. Ramon was already on the road to meet the coyote who was apparently smuggling them into the United States.

When Ramon returned to Purewater with them, Lucia could see that her godchildren, her nephew and niece, had *susto*, soul trauma, but at least," she said, with tears in her eyes, "they could still walk. They could still breathe." To this day, neither of the children had revealed what they had or hadn't seen in Redención. No one knew what had happened to them. For weeks, they'd feared the worst for all of the adults, but then received word from an immigrants' rights' volunteer that Raul was in a detention center in Arizona. How that happened was a complete mystery because he'd always had the papers he'd needed to travel back and forth across the border. They had no information on Pilar's parents.

"Please keep this close," Lucia implored Sienna, looking to Jolie and Andy to include them in her plea and adding, "There's much we don't know. And it is all so dangerous."

"Of course," Sienna promised, humbled and touched by the family's ordeal. "I'm so sorry." She removed *La Mujer de Tierra*, from her purse and held her. She felt Gaul's

dread at finding nothing left, except for this. She wondered if the statue had been a sign left behind for him to find. Had Esperanza Luz, in desperation, somehow managed to send her children to a foreign land in the care of a human smuggler? Had she cut the clay woman with an empty rebozo in half on purpose to signify her broken heart, her shattered home, and the absolute desecration of Redención?

"What about Valentin?" Sienna asked urgently. "Do you know about him? He seems to speak a dialect that Pilar knows and his papers say he is from Redención too."

Gaul and Lucia both looked down at the empty plates on the table. Sienna had a feeling that they wanted to tell her more but were afraid. Carefully, Ramon said, "He has *susto*, too."

Sienna nodded. So many children needed so much support. Meanwhile, data collection and test preparation superseded all other priorities. Even dirty, little, blonde, blue-eyed *Gringo* had been homeless for weeks and no one at school had known until he told her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next day Sienna and Andy went snowshoeing. Afterwards, Andy dragged the mattress from the bed at the cabin they'd rented to the fireplace. They made love before the crackling flames, smiling the entire time, and then Sienna took a long afternoon nap, nestled beneath a down comforter. She slept deeply for two hours, awaking to the enticing scent of basil and oregano simmering in a saucepot on the stove and sourdough bread, fresh from the oven. She stretched her full length beneath the covers, contentedly watching the snow fall outside the window. She thought of Matt snowboarding with his father. She missed him a little, but knew he was having fun. As for herself, she loved being on vacation.

Vacating. Running away. She'd fled Moore. But not like Pilar and Esteban escaping Redención. She shook her head, trying not to think about their tragedy as she pulled her jeans and sweater on and took her place at the table.

After filling their wine glasses, Andy looked at her seriously. "Do you ever want to talk about your divorce?"

"No," she said. "Do you want to talk about my divorce?"

"A little," he answered.

"Why?" she wondered.

"I just don't understand how it could have happened?"

She grinned at him. "Because I seem so great? Because I'm a fantastic lover and you just can't imagine how Matt's dad could let me go?"

"Basically, yes," he said.

She shrugged nonchalantly, but tears came to her eyes.

"I want to know if you were hurt," he said. "If you are hurt?"

"I was," Sienna nodded, "but we had a child to consider. Ultimately, we had to forgive each other for what didn't work in our relationship. I could forgive him mistakes because he's always taken good care of Matt and of me too, so that I could be there for Matt whenever he needed me. Sure, I was sad, terribly sorry for my son. When I realized there was no life left in my marriage, in our little family, I felt my heart breaking, literally, splitting right down the middle."

La Mujer de Tierra was still in her purse and Sienna dug her out. She set her on the table between their steaming plates of pasta, next to the breadbasket and sighed. "My hurt was mostly about my fear that my child would feel pain and confusion. I never wanted him to feel abandoned or powerless over his life." Almost mindlessly, Sienna broke the crust off her bread and laid it at the feet of the statue, just as she'd put guacamole there of the eve of *El Día de Los Muertos*.

"Honey," Andy said gently, "you're feeding a doll."

She asked, "What if Pilar's parents were murdered? What if she saw it when it happened?"

He shook his head sadly. "I don't know." He reached out to stroke Sienna's hand. A moment later, he asked.

"Would you ever remarry?"

"Maybe." Sienna blushed. "I do want the trust and fidelity that people assume come with a wedding ring."

Andy leaned forward, peering into her eyes. "You do?"

Sienna realized that Moore's interpretation of fidelity had ruined the word, fidelity, for her. "I want a man, a partner, to cherish my spirit."

Andy nodded. "He'd have to have the eyes to see it to do that."

"He would," Sienna agreed. "He'd also have to be able to show me his."

"You know what?" Andy said, thoughtfully. "I could see how someone who got a glimpse of what you are calling your spirit might want to try to control it."

"In a relationship?" she asked.

"Yeah. And at work," he replied.

"That's not fair!" Sienna said.

"Right, especially since you chose a caring profession."

"I can't stand what's happening at Moore," Sienna said. "It's breaking my heart."

I was curious about Sienna's heart breaking. I wondered how many times a living woman could survive that process. When I was a living woman, I didn't tolerate it very well at all. But then, Sienna lived in a time and a place where if her child's father wasn't willing to help her support their child, the government would make him give her something. As I witnessed Sienna and Andy, I found myself wishing someone or some structure had been there to help me. If someone had, I might have had the hope for and another chance at love.

* * *

During the long, cold, rainy month of January, record amounts of snow fell in the mountains. It rained every day in Purewater. As the raindrops pelted their classroom windows, classroom teachers dutifully recorded what kids didn't know in RIDE. Sienna did what her colleagues wanted her to do in their classrooms, but in the pull-out groups that she expected Deedee to cancel at any moment, she continued teaching English the best way she knew how. The stories that were produced, revised with vocabulary that was new to the children, and edited in *The Writers' Lair* were full of spirit, word play, and even heartfelt confession.

We took the ice cream to my room. My cousin, Nita, put her dresser in front of the door, but then I realized we forgot the spoons. We had to push the dresser away. Nita sent me to get the spoons, so I ran to get them. Luckily, my grandmother wasn't in the kitchen. She was still taking the garbage out, so I grabbed two spoons and ran back to my bedroom. We ate all of the delicious vanilla ice cream right out of the container! Then, our stomachs hurt horrible. I was so worried that my grandma would find out. She thinks kids should eat healthy food before they eat sweets.

One early Christmas morning when I was seven in my house my younger sister and I were awake and my parents were still sleeping. I was thirsty and I went to the cold kitchen to get a drink. Then I asked my sister to go see the Christmas presents under the tree. The tree was in my Uncle's room because he went to Mexico in a truck. My sister said, "Yes" We went into my uncle's room. The floor felt like ice on my bare feet and it was a

little dark in the room. My sister felt scared. We saw a gold light coming through the window. A present was wrapped in shiny gold paper. My parents came and we opened it. It was a video game controller.

I went to my cousins' house to celebrate Christmas. We ate posole and all the people that were there were talking about stuff. They talked funny stuff about their lives and they kept talking and laughing. The kids all went upstairs to play school. I was the teacher. First, I did attendance and then we did reading and the students were not listening to me. The students were talking and laughing. I told them, "Put your heads down." They did and I said, "You guys are too loud. You need to start acting like second graders. If you are ready, put your heads up and line up for recess." I didn't walk them out. I just walked in a circle and they followed me around and around. I said, "Here we are." They said, "Yeah!" They ran out. I went inside and made some work for the students to do. When I picked them up, I said, "You are going to take a test."

They said, "No!" I said, "When I call your name, you may come." Soon everybody got their test.

I made them finish their tests. Some kids took a long time, so I started to send them out into the hall, but, then we stopped playing. I said, "Let's go downstairs. I don't want to be the teacher anymore.

And then after listening to so many of her friends' stories, Pilar began to tell one of her own. In English, Spanish, and a little dialect, with help from Cassandra and Lupe, she spoke haltingly. Sienna wrote.

I slept in the van. A man opened it. I woke up. We were at a church in America and a skinny mother of God was standing in

the river over the door. She had no shoes on her brown feet. She had a white dress on and there was a white star shining over her head. I saw hills, like where my mother has matriz. She was a star of the sea.

"What happened at the church?" Sienna asked.

"Ramon got us."

"And brought you to Purewater?" Sienna recalled Ramon's trip to San Diego. There had been no Statue of Liberty to greet her on the West Coast in Southern California, but it seems Pilar had been welcomed by The Star of the Sea.

Sienna helped the children correct their grammar and Jolie created Xeroxed anthologies of the stories and gave a copy to each child. Like a proud parent, Sienna read them aloud to Andy over the phone the day *The Writer's Lair* published it.

"It's fantastic that Pilar is beginning to open up and express herself," he said. "Good work, Sienna!"

Jolie also read the children's stories to Wolf when he stopped in the library to say hello, which was often. The kids loved how much he seemed to enjoy their tales. He claimed all graffiti calls at Moore. Soon all of them on the surrounding mailboxes and fences became his exclusive beat. The increase in graffiti wasn't good for the community, but it was good for his romance and the elementary students learned to relax around him, even if their parents were afraid. In *The Writers' Lair* students never tired of reading and listening to their own and each other's stories over and over again.

For the first time in their lives, they experienced how it felt to read smoothly and fluently. Eagerly they read the words they knew, words they understood, words that rep-

resented their most precious memories, and their own inner selves. They began to ask questions about pronouns and conjunctions, adopt synonyms used by others, and look forward to writing their next pieces.

On the last school day in January, Pilar began sketching a woman who was forming a clay pot.

"Who is that?" Sienna asked gently.

"My mom," Pilar said matter-of-factly. "She makes these."

Sienna's heart caught in her throat. She certainly didn't want to push the child, to have her remember or reveal something that she might not have enough support to deal with, but if there were something that would be good for Pilar to share, perhaps a wonderful, tender memory, Sienna wanted to give her the chance.

Sienna believed they might be on the verge of a breakthrough, but when the first day of February rolled around, it was time to begin the annual WELT. Testing meant Sienna had to cancel her ELL classes to administer the four-part test to every single ELL student in the school. It took all month. As soon as that was finished, she had to assist classroom teachers in administering the PPT. (The Purewater Preparation Test) for the state WASTE. That took up the first two weeks of March.

She was finally able to resume *The Writers' Lair* on St. Patrick's Day. She decided to have students write stories about what they would wish for if they encountered a leprechaun or other magical creature on the school playground.

In her story, Cassandra met an angel swinging on the swing set and asked to be whisked back to Mexico. Alondra met a glittery butterfly by the water fountain and asked for a puppy, and oh yes, a house with a yard, too, so

she could keep him, since pets weren't allowed in her family's apartment. Miguel encountered a ninja under the cedar tree who would grant him speed in all things, especially in reading so Mrs. Albright would quit waving his fluency chart—with all its red bars well below the goal line—in his face. Belmaris met a leprechaun and asked for the still missing money the bank robber lost in the Purewater months earlier. A talking monkey got Javier's attention by tossing chocolates at him from the top of the slide and hitting him on the head with a big truffle. *Truffle* was Sienna's word. Javier asked the monkey to give all the kids a lot more time to write stories and do art in school.

Then Pilar spoke. Sienna wrote what she said.

School a desert. I see the puma black as night. I say Esteban needs a shirt for the quince de Dulce Saturday. I tell her tell me all the English. I tell her I want the present of the river. Where is my mom and dad and Puma, she say, "You ask too much little girl."

Sienna wanted Pilar to get her wishes. That night, with Matt's permission, she cleaned out her son's closet. On the way to Goodwill, she stopped by *La Casita Rio*, offering a nice formal button-down shirt, a tie, slacks, and a pair of dress shoes to Lucia for Esteban. Esteban got to wear the whole outfit to Dulce's *quinceanera*. Sienna was happy that she and Matt could grant Pilar's first wish. She was working on the second, giving Pilar the English. She only hoped that the puma didn't get the final word.

Sienna visited Andy for Spring Break. Over lunch at

the *Old Eli*, they discussed his upcoming plans to visit schools in Finland with colleagues at Vandya. Sienna shared how excited her students continued to be about reading each other's stories. "I wonder if I should try to balance out the magical creature fantasy with having them write about a time they didn't get what they wanted. I think it might help if we explored the theme of disappointment and generated some strategies for coping with it."

"That would be very powerful," Andy said, "but since Deedee and Mimi are so committed to positive thinking, the consequences would probably be depressing, for you. Your staff would probably accuse you of trying to drag everyone down."

"In addition to dumbing it down." She laughed bitterly and then shook her head. "Make me stop. I want to have fun this week."

"Tell me about the weather in Purewater," he said.

"That's always a good transitional topic."

Sienna rolled her eyes, pretending to yawn. "There was a lot more snow than usual this year. The ski resorts expect to stay open for a few more weeks."

"Okay," Andy said. "Enough small talk. I have a proposal for you." He cleared his throat. Color rose on his neck.

"Oh!" Sienna gasped nervously.

He said, "It's a professional one."

Did she hear regret or relief in his voice? She wasn't sure. "Okay. What is it?"

"I'd like you to work with me to create a presentation and eventually even a full-blown conference on how writing with ELL students is an extremely effective, efficient, and economical way of educating them in today's public

schools. You can show how you address academic, language, and social-emotional needs through creating well-structured and intentional writing projects around their own life experiences. We can illustrate how your *Writers' Lair* is a means to an end in itself for protecting children's civil and human rights. You can show how vital it is for kids to..."

"Encode."

"Si!" Andy answered in Spanish. "Will you? I think we'd make a great team and I'm just starting to set up next year's speaking circuit. Maybe you could write a book on the topic. If you did, I'd be honored to write your forward. You could offer a fresh perspective."

Sienna was excited, intrigued, and now she realized he'd actually been priming her for this with comments and reassuring praise over the past few months. She said, "Andy, what I'm trying to do with kids isn't really new. It just seems fresh because it's bucking the trend right now. Honestly, honey, I'm not interested in being political. I just want to teach. I want to help kids reach their potential. I would do what you're talking about only if it would help the pendulum swing back to the child-centered side sooner."

"Good," he said.

"I do have copies of all the student anthologies Jolie and I have made. They're good. I honestly believe a lot of the kids in my fourth grade group are close to passing the writing portion of this year's WASTE."

"That would be just the data you need."

Sienna frowned at him. "Are you already working on the marketing?"

"I know you don't care about data, at least the way it's being bandied about," he said, "but having some will gen-

erate an audience.”

“I do care about that in the sense that I want my kids to experience passing a high stakes test to build their faith in themselves. They can’t handle the reading assessment yet, but with the writing, they have some control. They get to choose words they know to demonstrate what they know and what they think, instead of being quizzed on words they don’t. If I could keep working with them, toggling back and forth between their writing and reading words written by others, I think they’ll eventually become happy and competent readers.”

“That’s a fresh, subtle, back-door approach to reading instruction,” Andy said.

“I’ve only gotten away with what I’ve done so far because they think I’ve accepted my fate for next year. And, my instructional year is already almost over. When I get back from this trip, Nancy, Deedee, and Mimi want me to print out sample WASTE selections and make the kids practice and practice and practice.”

“What a waste of valuable instructional time and taxpayer’s money!”

“I know,” Sienna said, “and it’s so unfair to the kids.”

“And to you and your career.” Andy leaned forward. “You need a chance to collect data to show how writing and reading work together this way. And if they won’t let you do that, you should leave Moore and find a place that will.”

The thought of having to spend all next year sitting on the floor in the corner of a classroom trying to force children to do *Reading Fare* worksheets made her want to jump right out of her skin. “Are you making a completely professional proposal?”

“There is a personal component. I think we should get

things settled before you have to sign your contract for next year."

They were distracted by a party being seated right across the aisle.

"Ah! Look!" Andy juttied his chin toward the opposite booth. "There's Senator Panky in for his lunch and a bourbon. He looks inordinately pleased with himself. Must have gotten an insider trading tip."

It was true Panky looked happy. In fact, his balding head and shoulders were dappled with the pink petals falling from the street's springtime trees. He was grinning as if he'd just nabbed the woman of his dreams and had led her through a wedding party convened to toss cherry blossoms at them in celebration of their nuptials. But, he was not with a bride. He was with three businessmen. One of them clapped him on the shoulder, calling loudly for champagne. "Give us a bottle of *Le Grande Dame*."

While a waiter responded to boisterous party, a waitress carried the restaurant's famous Senator Sandwiches to Andy and Sienna. With her apron-clad back to Senator Panky and his cohorts, the waitress narrowed her eyes and tightened her jaw. "That bubbly is two hundred and twenty-five dollars a bottle," she hissed. "Two months of dancing lessons for my kid down that greedy hatch in less than ten minutes. I can't believe it. They cut P.E. out of the school. Can't pay the teacher. They cut recess. Can't afford supervision and what they really need are some cops out there to keep the drug dealers away before and after school. I wanted her to take tap at the community center, but they closed that, too. And we wonder why there's an epidemic of obesity and crime?"

Panky snapped his fingers. The waitress whirled around showing him a friendly face. "Your plates are up

next, Senator Panky."

Andy's phone vibrated. He glanced at it briefly, swearing under his breath. "What a nightmare!" He looked up at Sienna. His face was grim. "How is it that you happen to be here in our nation's capital on this historic day?"

Dread mixed with the rumbling in her empty belly. "What?"

"The NASTE has passed in the Senate. And it looks like Pica got the contract, hands down."

"Ugh!" Sienna groaned. "Jules Holdaway and Mimi will be delighted. Apparently, she's at a summit with Pica people in Santa Fe right now."

"Pica holds summits and meetings all over the country, but, the truth is, they're headquartered in Panky's home town." Andy inclined his head toward the party across the aisle. "Talk about pork belly legislation." He turned his attention to his meal.

"Do you know what this green stuff is?" he asked her.

"Arugula. It's really good for you."

As Sienna took the greens he didn't want to replace part of the overly-generous portion of ham she'd removed from her sandwich, things fell into place for her. "I heard my state spends something like thirty-five million dollars a year on testing. I suppose now they got the contract for the NASTE, Pica can charge a fortune for test-prep curriculum. Purewater's measly three hundred and fifty thousand for *Reading Fare* was just a drop in the bucket for them. A drop in the bucket that's drowning a lot of kids. And though no one is letting on, I think it is starting to make a lot of teachers really miserable." She sighed and took a bite. "Is this Boursin cheese?"

"Yes," Andy said. "It's very rich."

"Bon Appetite."

Although her first bite of the Senator sandwich was truly delicious, Sienna couldn't keep herself from casting grim sideways glances at Senator Panky. How could he be in charge of so much and be so clueless and careless?

The waitress returned. Sienna expected her to ask how everything tasted, but she surprised both of them by grimly saying, "Senator Panky would like to offer you two some champagne."

"What?" Sienna exclaimed, disgusted.

Panky himself stood and walked over. "I can tell you're curious about our little *fiesta* over here. We're celebrating a great step forward for America. I'm Senator Panky." He beamed with a gesture that included the companions behind him. "And these are my friends Chase Haight and Jack Holdaway. Please have a drink on us. Join us in toasting the passage of my NASTE bill."

In their stunned silence, he gestured for waitresses to hurry and fill their glasses. "Do you care about education, Miss?" Panky asked Sienna. "Do you have a heart for America's little public-school children?"

Sickened, Sienna managed to say, "Yes. I do. I'm a teacher."

"Well," he took a step back. "What grade do you teach?"

"Elementary," she said. "ELL."

"What's that?"

"English Language Learners."

"Oh!" Panky stepped back a little further. It seemed to dawn on him that maybe the sideways glances she'd been giving him earlier might not actually have been an invitation for him to buy her a drink. Maybe, she hadn't been planning to dump the tweed blazer after dessert. Well,

now that he'd gotten closer, he could see that this woman wasn't really quite as young as he liked them. "Of course," he said, "the NASTE will require you and your students to work harder than you are used to. It may require you to sacrifice a little more—to toe the line to meet rigorous national testing requirements to get federal funding, but I'm sure you'll ultimately agree that it what's best for kids."

Toe the line? Work harder? Images rushed into Sienna's mind—the black puma telling Pilar that she'd already asked for too much, Cassandra and her barefoot disciples, Dulce attaching herself to traumatized Esteban because she couldn't afford college even though she could probably get in. Sienna stood up angrily. "I won't agree. You have no right to assume or insist that I will. Why would I ignore what I know because you have no clue about what teachers actually do for America's little public-school children?"

"Amen, Sister!" a waitress cried. "Amen!" Other waitresses came closer, cheering, whistling, and stamping their feet. They would have clapped too, if their hands weren't full of Panky's champagne.

The color rose in the senator's face. He masked his chagrin with bravado. Like a hero in an old-time Hollywood Western, he called to the bartender, "Get this little lady a stronger drink. Whatever she wants." To Andy, he said, "My sympathies, Man. You got yourself a looker, but she's a pistol."

"You should go back to the House." Andy jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, pointing the way. "Read the writing on the wall. First floor. Roosevelt said it. 'Any oppression, any injustice, any hatred, is a wedge designed to attack our civilization.' Why are you and all your cronies attacking public school teachers and little children?"

"You guys are way too intense." Panky said. "Lots of

experts have agreed that the NASTE is a good move." He grinned at Sienna. "Teachers just have to learn there's really no such thing as a free lunch. Trust me. Go back to school and pledge allegiance to the NASTE. Or..." He picked up the bottle of champagne he'd just gifted them as if he actually had the power to carry out his threat. "Or there might not be any federally funded free breakfast anymore either."

Chapter Twenty-Five

On the first day of May, Sienna placed a bouquet of hyacinths on her kidney table in the library. The past several weeks of trying to prepare her students for a high stakes reading comprehension test in English had been disheartening. She'd begun bringing flowers in on a regular basis. The coping technique wasn't great for her budget, but it was good for her spirits. She'd also taped an incentive chart on the corner of her desk. At the end of each class, when she gave her students stickers for submitting to the meaningless test practice, she stuck a small smiley face on her own personal chart. When she filled it up, she intended to call in sick and recuperate by reading for her own pleasure all day long. She'd also taken to listening to audiobooks on her phone on her way to work and even in the moments, like now, when she didn't have to interact with staff or students, she kept the earbuds in. Immersing herself in good literature kept her from thinking about how much time they were wasting on reading test preparation. When Jolie touched her arm, Sienna saw she looked upset. She pulled a plastic earbud from her ear. "What's the matter?"

"Deedee wants me to cancel the library this morning to cram with the kids the classroom teachers think are in

danger of failing the Reading WASTE.” Jolie grimaced. “The kids on the list they sent me are mostly from your *Writers’ Lair*.”

Sienna breathed in the sweet fragrance of blue hyacinth. “The kids I’ve been coaching all month?”

“Yes. Apparently, they aren’t up to snuff. The teachers gave everyone another practice test Friday afternoon and now Deedee is completely freaked out. She wants me to tutor them one last time before they start the exam.”

“I’m so glad the WASTE starts today. I just want it to be over with!” She tried not to feel miffed, disrespected, shamed. Sienna pulled a cluster of tiny blue flowers from the vase and laid it at the feet of *La Mujer de Tierra*. She taped a sprig to the bottom of the Swami’s frame.

Jolie ignored her odd little ritual, reading Deedee’s email aloud. “We know Sienna has tried, but since she wasted so much time focusing on writing this year, we think a different teacher might help the kids get ready for the all-important reading portion of the WASTE right now. We will try to get Sienna more training on teaching reading to ELL kids and on how to work as a professional team player as soon as possible. Meanwhile, thank you for all your cooperation on this.”

“I quit.” Sienna said. “I quit.” Then, she clapped her hand over her mouth. Teachers never said that in May—not when the fiscal director was grappling with staffing budgets for the following year.

“Don’t give up yet,” Jolie said. She typed and then read her reply. “Sorry. Deedee. I watched Sienna work with the children. No one else could have done any more or any better. If you insist, I will be happy to read with the children on your list. However, we also all know that cramming at the last minute is likely to be counterproduc-

tive. We should be careful about raising students' anxiety levels."

"Thank you, Jolie," Sienna said. Andy had been right. It helped to have an ally at work. "I would go crazy here without you. I have an ethical responsibility to advocate for my students, but my boss won't listen to me. And she won't even look at Andy's books on the subject because he's my lover. But she should at least listen to the advice of other ELL experts."

Sienna went to her bookshelf for what she called her ELL 101 textbook. "I'm going to the office to copy the chapter on how stress affects learning and performance and I'm going to stick it in her mailbox. I mean, if Deedee assumes that we are all going to accept and forgive her poor decision-making because she's too stressed out to think more strategically, then why does she think stressing the kids out is going to make them perform better?"

Sienna reached for the book and her hand brushed against the edge of a piece of construction paper, lying across the tops of the spines. She pulled the paper out, studying the penciled outline of Pilar's missing mother, of Esperanza Luz, beginning to form a pot from sacred clay. Pilar had never finished the picture of her mother. She'd never finished the picture of her grandmother either. She'd never had enough time or help to write the stories that went with them. Her stories were being systematically erased before they ever had a chance to be remembered or written.

* * *

As Sienna hurried to the office, hoping there wouldn't be a long line at the copy machine or that it wouldn't be

jammed, she felt an increasingly familiar fury rise within. As the thin soles of her Mary Janes pounded on unforgiving asphalt, her shins burned. Day after day, I hurry, she thought. We all hurry, hurry, hurry for nothing, or for very little. The bones in her ankles were jammed. Her knees ached. Her hips locked. She felt the sting of sciatica. Anger scalded the lining of her heart and she wanted to scream to release a torrent of emotion. Weeping might be quieter. Even so, she had nowhere truly private to go. Sienna knew if she took refuge inside one of the bathroom stalls she'd have to look at pictures of gray tweed jumpers taped right over the toilet paper dispenser or read another anonymous intellectually insulting or artificially inspiring Internet story.

She took a deep breath as she hurried past a parked rumbling diesel truck, delivering its usual bleached-out bread to the nearby cafeteria. It belched exhaust and Sienna breathed in the black fumes—as foul smelling as her mood.

“Ms. O'Mara! Ms. O'Mara!” Frantic children's shouts broke through her despair. Her fourth graders stood in a cluster under the blooming dogwood tree near her old portable. “Come here! Ms. O'Mara, come here!” Cassandra called. Sienna guessed they had discovered some horrendous graffiti that Captain Swabby had missed on his morning rounds and would have to remove immediately. She'd have to hunt him down. He was probably in the cafeteria, helping with breakfast. She'd have to copy the research on stress and shame for Deedee later. Damn it!

As she reached the kids, Cassandra pointed back at the building she had just stomped out of. Sienna turned around to look. As if arising from within the solid wall, the dark shape of a woman was embossed upon the brick. The

shimmering outline of an elongated, oval aura surrounded her, radiating a pure, white light.

In a hushed, reverential tone, Miguel asked Sienna, "Do you know Mary?"

"Mary?"

"*La Madre de Dios*," he whispered. The Mother of God. Sienna nodded.

"It's her!" Cassandra declared.

With joy on their young faces, they studied Sienna's face. Would she believe in the miracle?

"It's *La Virgen de Guadalupe*," Lupe added as if to contribute to the teacher's comprehension.

Like drops of baptismal water, white dogwood blossoms fell from the branches onto their heads as Sienna continued to consider the woman's illuminated shape. She stood directly below a crack in the center of the gutter. All the colors of the rainbow undulated around her edges. A surge of what could only be called serenity settled over Sienna.

"You think so?" Pilar asked her, hopefully.

"Yes," Sienna said, blessing what the children saw. "It is *our* Lady of the Brick Wall."

"She come to help us with the WASTE," Cassandra said confidently. "But, don't tell Mrs. Hayes. Or that lady with the clipboard. Don't tell Mrs. Albright too. *Ellas no entienden*."

"Don't worry," Sienna promised. "I would never tell them she came to help you."

And then Cassandra made a motion, rather like the traditional Catholic response to the word of the Gospel. With her thumb she made the sign of the Cross, on her forehead, on her heart, and then on each shoulder. The other children repeated the sequence and grinning, devot-

ed and determined; they made the pilgrimage to the WASTE.

Nancy and Sienna stood in the front corner of Nancy's classroom, proctoring the Reading WASTE. Nancy had reminded the students several times to be completely quiet during the testing session. "In fact," she added ominously, "even a noise like coughing could create a testing irregularity."

"What if you have allergies?" Jonathan *Gringo* asked, nervously. "I might have to sneeze."

"Don't." Nancy gestured for Sienna to move the box of tissues from the back shelf to *Gringo's* desk.

"What if you have to throw up?" Travis Hadley asked in consternation. No one giggled. He was asking a serious question, one that several had on their minds, but were afraid to ask.

"Just don't do it on your test." Nancy gestured for Sienna to move the trash can next to Travis' desk. And with that, the WASTE began.

Sienna and Nancy watched students open the test booklets. They watched their eyes rolls back in their heads as they turned the first page.

"The print is too small," Sienna whispered, feeling the children's unease fluttering in her own stomach. "The passages are too long."

After the first few minutes, Nancy hissed, "Cassandra's too fidgety." Cassandra had slipped her foot out of a worn sneaker and was circling her ankle and wiggling her toes. She was also scratching at her solar plexus, as if hives were erupting on her torso. "I hope she's not getting the

chicken pox or something."

"Nerves," Sienna said, feeling that something was very wrong in the room.

After a few more minutes, Nancy inclined her head toward Javier. "Could you check on him?" With tears welling up in her eyes, she choked, "I just can't take any of his shenanigans right now." For weeks, Nancy had told her class, "Take your time on the test," but now overwhelmed and anxious to be "done" with it, some kids were filling in their bubble sheets way too fast to have actually read any of the test selections. And to make it worse for Nancy, Javier actually seemed quite amused by what he was doing.

With a sudden burst of sympathy for Nancy, Sienna strolled over and knelt beside Javier. "How's it going?" she whispered casually.

"It's funny." He was obviously surprised and delighted to discover how entertaining the WASTE really was.

"It's funny?"

He chortled. "Look!" Bursting into uncontrollable giggles, he pointed to a short answer he'd written. *It has a big boody.*

"Shh!!" Sienna wanted him to quiet down, so he wouldn't make Nancy mad or make anyone laugh. His gleeful chortling was contagious under so much stress. Asking him to read would be the quickest way to sober him up so she said, "Can you read the question to me?" The question was about how an animal's body could serve it in its environment.

Proudly, Javier said, "I found my answer in the text, just like you and Mrs. Albright made us practice." He pointed to a line in the passage and guffawed, "See, it says the animal has a big boody."

Javier had read *body* as *boody* and thought that *boody* meant “booty” as in buttocks. He thought the test passage said the animal had a big butt. Remembering how the Swami came from the swap meet, Sienna realized that it could only be at a moment like this—when a child reveals such a misperception—would it ever occur to a teacher to teach the proper spelling and pronunciation of *booty* in contrast to *body*. Javier was going to miss the question because even though, in truth, the animal he was reading about did have a very large rear-end, he was not able to explain *how* a big butt helped it survive in the wild.

Meanwhile, Miguel, who had spent most of the test so far staring at the ceiling, began to hum. Within twelve minutes of starting the exam, he was alternating between rocking his chair and his desk back and forth or side to side. Sienna sauntered toward him. “What’s up, Miguel?” she asked, looking him in the eye and then glancing down at his reading passage to show him where he was supposed to be looking without actually telling him.

“I don’t get it,” he said, drumming the page. His test booklet was already so battered Sienna wondered if it could still be fed through the scanner to be scored upon its return to the state’s central office. Miguel’s head swayed back and forth with a beat only he could hear inside his head. His feet took up the rhythm, tapping on the tile floor. Cassandra scratched her shoulder desperately.

“Shh,” Sienna said, reading the specific question for insight on what could be triggering this usually well-behaved boy’s conniption fit. Miguel was stuck on the question that asked him to select which details from the text best supported the claim; *Doctor Jones was a generous man*. Sienna scanned the test passage. In the fourth paragraph, she read, *Dr. Jones was known for being altruistic. He*

volunteered at free clinics and organized fundraisers so children could attend summer camp.

Sienna quickly analyzed what Miguel would have to do to get the points for this question. C—*He supported children getting fresh air and exercise*—was the best answer for supporting the claim that Doctor Jones was generous. A child would have to realize that organizing fundraisers for summer camp meant Dr. Jones supported children getting fresh air and exercise. Miguel didn't know what fundraisers were and he had never even been to camp. He got fresh air and exercise in the small yard that his Grandma didn't want to be a safari.

But that wasn't the only layer of obfuscation. Sienna was certain Miguel had encountered the word *generous* many times at Moore and knew it meant sharing. He would have also had to know that *generous* is a synonym for *altruistic*. She didn't think he'd ever heard that word.

Even if he had encountered *altruistic*, the teacher who introduced it may have quite reasonably explained that an altruistic person is caring or giving. *Generous* and *altruistic* were certainly not part of Miguel's daily speaking vocabulary, so even if both of them had been covered in a previous vocabulary lesson, it would be hard for him to remember them. Plus, they weren't the sort of words that could be sounded out. So, it was very hard for Miguel to read them and then recall their individual meanings. Thus, even if Miguel knew both *generous* and *altruistic* meant the same thing, he'd still have to figure out that *volunteering at free clinics and organized fundraisers so children could attend summer camp* matched up with *supported children getting fresh air and exercise*.

Sienna snorted. Senator Panky had asked her, "*Do you care about education, Miss? Do you have a heart for America's*

little public school children?" If Senator Panky had children, she was sure they'd been to very elite summer camps with lots of fresh air and fun exercise. Heck, they'd probably been on world-class safaris too, slumbering beneath canopies of mosquito netting. But, during the WASTE, Miguel was the mosquito. With the tip of a brand-new, extra sharp pencil, he dive-bombed his scantron sheet and short answer workbook. Like a parasite with an eager proboscis, he ground the graphite into the circle beneath the *a*. "If I'm gonna be smashed by words, I'm gonna smash you," he muttered to his test booklet.

Nancy finally snapped at Cassandra, "Stop all that scratching! You're distracting everyone!"

All of the children glanced up at their teacher. Although they were used to her yelling, they appeared quite stricken. Their teacher's amygdala was like the bong Jonathan's mom kept under the driver's seat of her car. As Nancy's stress permeated the air, the children were getting second-hand stoned on her fear. Their test booklets were as rank with anxiety as the pages of *The Little Mermaid* had reeked of pot until Jolie buried it in Christmas potpourri—for two weeks straight. Sienna thought of Senator Panky's smug proclamation "*lots of educational experts have agreed that the NASTE is a good move.*"

Afterwards, as Sienna walked back to the library, the breeze ruffling her hair helped lift a little of the WASTE misery from her shoulders. She saw Our Lady of the Brick Wall again and drew a deep breath. When she entered the library, Pilar was there, deeply immersed in her work on the image of her mother that Sienna had inadvertently left out on the table. Pilar's newcomer status let her skip the reading portion of the WASTE, for this year only, and Jolie had been enlisted to supervise her while the rest of the

fourth-grade class endured the exam. Over the next few days, the state would still expect Pilar to write and solve a string of complex word problems on the math portion of the WASTE. Obviously, Jolie had set the *Reading Fare* packet Nancy had sent with Pilar aside and let the girl resume the work of *The Writers' Lair*.

"Did she tell you anything about her mother?" Sienna whispered to Jolie.

Jolie shook her head. "Not a word. She got a little teary-eyed when she saw you left the picture out for her to finish, but she got right to work on it. How's the WASTE going?"

Sienna relayed what she had observed in Nancy's room.

"Maybe we should buy Nancy a really nice bottle of wine," Jolie remarked. "Maybe, then, she'd give me my scissors back."

Sienna scanned the glossary in the back of a fourth grade *Reading Fare* textbook. *Generous* was not even listed. The word *Pica* put on the test wasn't even in the curriculum it sold to prepare children for the exam. She searched her regular dictionary and read aloud. "Generous, characterized by noble or forbearing spirit, magnanimous, kindly, liberal in giving, openhanded, marked by abundance or ample proportions, full-flavored—as in a really nice wine. "Altruistic is not even listed here in the regular dictionary."

She turned to *altruistic*. "As an adjective, it is listed under the noun *altruism*. That's another layer of language complexity and it's defined it as *unselfishness*."

"What?" Jolie remarked wryly. "Not *generous*?"

"And *unselfishness* in all its glory has a prefix *and* suffix. And *unselfishness* is not part of the definition for *gener-*

ous either. How could we expect ELL kids to link all this together while they are still trying to decode an unfamiliar text full of unfamiliar words?"

"This is so unfair," Jolie said. "To kids and teachers!"

"Especially when English Learners can be anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 words behind their native speaking peers." Sienna said, thinking of Miguel grinding his pencil into his packet. "Nancy has drilled them on vocabulary lists all year long, but success on that one question hinges on a full analysis of just one of the thousands of words they haven't had time to learn and wasn't even included in the curriculum. Pica designed the WASTE and wrote *Reading Fare*. Even though Nancy practiced fidelity to *Reading Fare*, her students will still miss this one on the WASTE."

"Why would they even put *altruistic* on the fourth grade WASTE?" Jolie asked.

Mimi Lang shouted from her inside her office. "I can't believe my ears!" She stormed out of the broom closet, shaking with rage. "It is a violation of professional standards to discuss what it is on the WASTE. It is against the rules for a teacher to read the selection or the questions or look at the student responses. And here you are, Sienna. Not only have you done that, you are also revealing top secret information to someone who didn't even go through proctor training."

"Wait a minute!" Jolie said. "That's crazy. Why can't teachers read selections and questions?"

"To protect the integrity of the instrument," Mimi snapped. She scowled at Jolie as if she were an idiot.

"Actually," Sienna said, "I think it's so the testing company can get away with asking unfair and unreasonable questions. Otherwise, why don't we get to find out which specific questions kids missed when the test is over?"

Why do we just get a score and a ranking? Why are we being told to put all our trust into Pica? Pica's curriculum? Pica's test? Why are we being driven to waste valuable time blindly aiming for moving targets? Why are administrators like you hired to bird-dog teachers like us? Why does Pica get to rake in millions of tax dollars that we should be spending much more wisely and altruistically?"

Coldly, Mimi said, "I advise you to keep your questions to yourself. There's absolutely no excuse for you to know what's in the WASTE and you could be disciplined, even charged for revealing what you found out."

Mimi's rebuke about not paying attention to what the children were being tested with made the familiar sign outside the testing areas of their failing school seem even more ominous to Sienna. It read "Authorized Personnel Only. No Media Allowed."

That afternoon, Sienna found herself, once again—not teaching—just proctoring the ELL students who hadn't finished the WASTE before lunch.

Belmaris clutched the hem of Sienna's cardigan. "Teacher," she stared up at her, her dark brown eyes pleading, "I want to write." Sinking into a sea of children earnestly grasping at the print for something they could comprehend, Sienna knelt beside her. Belmaris's eyes widened. Absolutely frantic, she whispered. "I cannot make a mind-movie of this."

One week earlier, this same coffee-skinned little girl had sat in *The Writers' Lair* beaming, taping yet another page of notebook paper to the bottom margin of the last, generating a scroll that ran down the front of her desk and curled on the threadbare carpet. Her tale about encountering an elf on the playground was full of new English vocabulary. She read it to herself repeatedly while drafting

and then again fluently to her delighted peers during “Author’s Chair.” Now, Belmaris trembled with self-doubt and fear. She whispered, “What’s the office going to do to me?”

“Nothing, Sweetie,” Sienna said, thinking about how livid Mimi had been with her. She wondered, “What are they going to do to me?” but despite her own fear, like the ancient healers—the shamans—in some indigenous cultures, she stepped into the role of sin-eating. She swallowed the institutional sin and expelled a lie. “This test is to help your teachers know what you need.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The annual writing assessment was scheduled the day after the reading test. *The Writers' Lair* was very quiet. All that could be heard were the sounds of pencil lead skittering across the pages of barcoded pamphlets, the occasional erasure, and the periodic turning of dictionary pages. The air was thick with currents of creativity and concentration. Occasionally, kids look over cardboard tri-folds, otherwise known as "private offices" to look at Sienna. She scanned each face, questioning with her eyes. Each child grinned conspiratorially. *Conspiratorially*. In Spanish *con* means together. *Conspiratorially*. *Together in spirit*. As *la maestra* exchanged smiles with her students, they were conspirators, united in the celebration of burgeoning literacy.

Outside, a sign stamped with the state seal hung on the exterior door of the library. Just like during the reading portion of the WASTE, only authorized individuals were allowed to enter. No press. No laughter.

Inside *The Writers' Lair*, there was an occasional irregularity, the self-contained chuckle of a child discovering the Swami within. Sienna watched as the children, even under the pressure of the WASTE, generated and organized appropriate ideas using the best word choice given the words they did know. She watched them demonstrate

sentence fluency appropriate for their development in grammar. Despite Mimi's admonitions that she not look, she glanced at their work, gratified that they were remembering to start sentences with a capital letters and end them with periods. And Belmaris even dared to use quotation marks! Students were permitted to use conventionally published dictionaries on the writing WASTE. Sienna crossed her fingers, hoping they could figure out the first two or three letters of the words they needed, but couldn't spell, so they could find them in the fat alphabetized tomes. Compassion, sweet conspiracy, and pink hearts filled the room.

On the final day of the WASTE, Miguel opened the math portion, took a look at all the text, stood up and walked right out of the classroom.

"Come back here, Miguel!" Nancy called as he let the door swing shut behind him. Barely able to breathe, she dialed the office. "Irregularity! Irregularity!" she gasped, practically hyperventilating into the receiver.

When the call came, Sienna happened standing at the file cabinet next to the secretary's desk, quickly reviewing the enrollment papers of another new student from Clemencia. Mrs. Donahue was helping the bus driver fill out a discipline report about the fight that had broken out in the back of the bus during a stop at the tracks for a long train. At first, the vet from Afghanistan wanted to make the offenders march straight off the bus and do push-ups in the median while the Amtrak commuter whisked by, but he'd been working for Purewater long enough to realize that no one could act on a decision until they'd filled out the pa-

perwork to get permission from an administrator or a committee to move forward. Actually, driving a bus for a school district was a lot like being in the military, except there you didn't have to fill out paperwork before you assigned push-ups.

With an irritable glance at the honorably discharged lieutenant and secretary huddled over a carbon triplicate, Deedee stomped out of her office to snatch up Mrs. Donahue's phone. "Shit!" she hissed, slamming the handset down. "We've got another runner! Fourth grader named Miguel. Smack in the middle of the WASTE!" She began to pace, muttering, "Damn! Damn! Damn! Last time a kid escaped, he got all the way to the highway and it was on GOTCHA News Four." She snapped her fingers and pointed at the bus driver. "Is your bus here?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Let's get him before he gets too far!" Deedee grabbed her gold lamé rain jacket and gestured toward the back door where the school bus was parked behind the office. "You come too, Sienna."

Sienna exchanged an alarmed glance with the bus driver. She didn't know his name, just his bus number, 47. "Deedee," Sienna said in her most soothing voice, "I'm supposed to help proctor..."

"Come with me, now!" Deedee screamed, grabbing her umbrella, brandishing it at Sienna's feet. "I need you if the kid doesn't speak English."

"He spe..." Sienna began to explain.

Like a nipping sheepdog, Deedee herded her to the bus, shouting at Mrs. Donahue. "Call the cops!"

Afraid she was about to be poked with the point of an umbrella, Sienna scrambled up the steps and quickly slid into the seat behind the driver as he started the diesel en-

gine.

"Go! Go! Go!" Deedee yelled as Lieutenant 47 backed out of the parking stall. As he accelerated, Deedee stood clinging to the galvanized boarding pole. Her eyes gleamed with the thrill of the hunt as she craned her neck and scanned the sidewalk. "Take a right!" She shouted. She continued barking orders to turn left or right until they were several blocks away from campus. Finally, they ended up in the Bonny Deals' parking lot.

"I don't see a kid anywhere," Lieutenant 47 said over the rumbling engine. "Is this where you wanted to be, Ma'am?"

Deedee looked around somewhat dazed. "Yes," she finally said, fixating on the Starbuck's sign. "Let's go through the drive-up."

"Bus won't fit." Lieutenant 47 was very sure of that.

"No excuses," Deedee told him disdainfully. "You just have to try a harder."

Suddenly, Mrs. Donahue's voice came out of Sienna's pocket. She'd forgotten to put her bus-duty walkie-talkie back in the charger that morning. The secretary said, "Captain Wolf found Miguel. He's bringing him back in. I just called Grandma."

Just then, the dispatcher from bus barn radioed the driver, "Forty-Seven? I repeat, Forty-Seven. Why have you not docked yet?"

"I've been hijacked, Sir."

"What?"

"By the principal."

"Where are you?"

"At Starbucks."

"Get the hell out of there!" the operator ordered. "That place is off limits. GOTCHA News Four will be on our

backs in no time."

"I am an administrator," Deedee said. "Let me out. I need an enormous espresso before I have to deal with that little stinker. My God! I bet his Grandma doesn't speak a lick of English."

Later, Deedee sat in her office with her steaming espresso cooling on her desk. She ignored the boy huddled on a plastic chair in the corner completely as she welcomed Miguel's nervous grandma to the meeting.

La abuela was obviously very tired and quite anxious. She'd worked late at Burger Bling the night before, alone with the skinny, pale, pimply kid who swore at her in English. After they'd finally closed the fast-food joint, she'd gone straight to a tulip farm to trim and wrap freshly cut flowers in cellophane to ship to market. At least, this summons to school had come near the end of her shift. *El jefe* hadn't been happy about her leaving, but he was willing to let her go early, just this once, because she was a full crate of banded bouquets ahead of the other workers. Deedee made Sienna question Miguel about leaving campus.

"It was supposed to be math today," Miguel said, "but it was all reading, reading, reading. I'm sick of being smashed by words. I'm sick of being crushed, broken, and destroyed by them." He grinned at Sienna mischievously. "Those are cinnamons, aren't they, Ms. O'Mara? I looked them up in the thesaurus when I was working on my story yesterday."

She smiled. "They are synonyms. Good job, Miguel!"

"Oh, my God!" Deedee rolled her eyes. "Would you

people just get serious?" She was shaking her head with dismay as Nancy and Mimi bustled in. Helplessly, Deedee told Mimi, "I have no idea how to record this irregularity."

Miguel continued, "*Estoy* shattered and wrecked."

"Enough with the verbiage already," Deedee snapped.

Red-faced, Nancy nearly pushed her nose into Miguel's. "What's wrong with you Miguel? Why are you acting this way? You can never, never, ever just leave school! And right in the middle of the WASTE! Shame on you!"

Miguel's face suddenly hardened with fury. He clenched his fists.

"Stop!" Sienna insisted. "Give him a break."

"He didn't do a single problem," Nancy snapped. "He doesn't need a break."

Mimi nodded vigorously. "We need to take this incident very, very seriously."

As if Mimi's words frightened her, Deedee suddenly tried interceding on the boy's behalf. "He did say he's being smashed by words—whatever that means."

"He just needs to build up his stamina," Mimi explained to Deedee. "A kid running away during the Math portion of the WASTE is a prime indicator that Moore's students, especially the EL's, need to read more story problems. Next year, we need to send a page of story problems home for homework every single night."

"You're right!" Deedee nodded vigorously. "That's a very good idea."

Nancy's jaw dropped. "I have been sending them home every single night," she said. "I really have."

Turning to Miguel's grandmother, Mimi wagged an accusatory finger at the woman. "You haven't been helping him, have you?"

Not understanding the preceding conversation or the

question now being put to her yet sensing the women had somehow resolved the whole problem, Miguel's grandmother shrugged meekly and relaxed a little.

While Deedee, Mimi, and Nancy conferred about how to mark the irregularity of running away after starting the test on the back of Miguel's test booklet, Sienna walked outside with the little family.

Miguel said, "I didn't leave school. Ms. O'Mara. I really didn't. The police will tell you that."

"Where did you go?" Sienna asked gently.

"To Our Lady of the Brick Wall," he said with the ruefulness of a good boy accused of being bad. "Just to see her again."

Nancy swept out of the office, catching up to them. "Come on, Miguel," she said, grabbing his hand to lead him back to where the properly designated, trained, and approved Mrs. Geiger was proctoring on Nancy's behalf so she could attend to the emergency.

His grandmother watched Miguel shake the teacher off and drag his feet as he followed her to the classroom. "*Tengo miedo, maestra.*" She looked down at the muddy hem of her lavender swap meet stretch pants, trying to hide her tears and the struggle to find the words she wanted. "He is a tulip," she said, brokenly. "We plant the bulb. We don't want the rats to eat him in the winter. The sun comes. He grows a little. He opens, but if the rain drowns him, he will never bloom."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dulce Gantala began volunteering in Moore's library the week the WASTE wrapped up. It was unusual for her to start the community service required for high school graduation at the tail end of her freshman year, but Sienna decided it was a good idea. Dulce was still planning ahead, striving to get her service credit out of the way so she'd be free to take more college prep classes later. Dulce started during the annual school-wide book fair school librarians were expected to run. Jolie was happy to have her there in the afternoons, selling paperbacks, feathery-tipped pencils, and posters of cute animals to the few kids who had actually had money to buy something at last recess or after school.

They got a lot of first grade business, probably because Mavis Penn had returned from medical leave. She had a pacemaker and was missing a desk, but she had obviously sold her class on the joys of the book fair. Bao Yang and Lucero Fuentes and a few others came to the book fair every day and bought heart-shaped erasers or knock-off Play Blades with storybook characters painted on the side.

The end of the WASTE and the book fair happened to coincide with National Teacher Appreciation Week. It was

a pleasantly, unseasonably warm week with lots of sunshine. The snow on the mountains was melting. It was almost reasonable to start counting down to summer vacation. On Friday, Superintendent Fray actually brought coffee and muffins to Moore and set them up in the staff lounge himself. He walked all the way over to the library to personally deliver some treats and form letters of thanks from the school board to Sienna and Jolie. "Thank you for the work you do with our students," he said before walking back to confer with Deedee in her office, to resume the administrative huddle that somehow always excluded teachers.

"Wow!" Sienna said, enjoying the latte. "This was nice of him. He knows how to step out of the big-wig bubble for a while."

"I think so," Jolie said. "Remember when he came at Christmas?"

Sienna nodded, but she didn't. That had been the chaotic day she'd sent all the mothers and their baked treats back home and then focused on packing and moving again as fast as she could to turn the short-lived Newcomer Center over to Special Day before Winter Break.

"His wife gave me a private donation to buy more books for our library. She was truly upset that we don't have nearly as many in here as they do at Teagan Hill."

"That was sweet of her," Sienna said, nibbling at the cinnamon crumb topping of her apple muffin. "I think he got these from the Purewater bakery. They're really delicious." It was hard to imagine that that he'd hadn't opted for Bonny Deals discount pack for Teacher Appreciation.

Sienna went to face the hostility she always felt when she taught in Ashley Whitfield's classroom. When she came back to her treat at recess, she sipped the cold coffee

and watched Bao and Lucero Fuentes return to the book fair again. This time they bought two coloring books and two boxes of crayons. Hmm. They were big spenders. Mavis had really hyped them up.

Dulce was manning the cash box during the afternoon recess when the girls came back again. Valentin came too and they bought him a poster of a race car. When she was done with their sale, Dulce disappeared into the stacks, re-alphabetizing the picture books that the kindergarteners always left in disarray.

Deedee came in and asked Jolie and Sienna to sit with her at Sienna's kidney table. "I'm really sorry to have to tell you this," she said, her voice oozing sympathy while her blue eyes glittered like ice. "Dr. Fray has given me some bad news. With the projected budget cuts for next year, both of your jobs are on the line. Jolie, I think you should know that you very well may get a RIF notice next week."

The teachers were mute. As if Deedee thought they didn't understand English, she spoke slowly and loudly. "RIF means reduction in force."

Sienna shook her head slightly. It wasn't that they needed an explanation. Every teacher knew what RIF meant. It was the timing. On Teacher Appreciation Day?

Deedee continued, "Sienna, you have enough seniority in the district. You'll probably be transferred to Teagan Hill to take Lisa Alcott's position. She'll be getting a RIF for sure. Now, Jolie, I don't want you to worry. I just want you to be prepared. Dr. Fray is trying to figure out a way to keep everyone on board. He's even going to the swap meet tonight to promote a new levy the district is putting up for a special election. Of course, a lot of people there probably aren't registered to vote so I doubt it will do

much good. Unfortunately, for the two of you, Brenda Hadley is equally determined to cut out nonessential instruction."

"Non-essential instruction?" Jolie repeated.

"Is that English for kids who don't know the language and the library for kids who don't have books at home?" Sienna asked.

"Guess so." Deedee nodded her head.

Sienna sighed. The swap meet had been rescheduled to Friday nights and relocated to the alley behind the row of businesses that included the Vega's restaurant because local sportsmen had petitioned Brenda for the use of the fairgrounds every weekend in May so they would have a place to trade guns and knives.

As the dismissal bell rang, Bao and Lucero came bounding back into the book fair, dripping wet. This time Dulce sold them neon pink and lime green spiral pens and matching miniature notebooks with glittery stars stamped all over the covers. She gave the girls plastic bags to protect their purchases from the surprise downpour occurring outside.

Sienna thought about leaving Moore Elementary, about not getting to watch those little girls grow. As frustrated as she was there, she wanted to stay, to keep teaching her English learners. Now, it seemed her choices were Teagan Hill or Vandy.

Jolie, shaken, asked Deedee, "Can't you—as the principal—defend teaching English to ELL students and library skills for all the students at your school? Can't you advocate to the school board for what we do here?"

Deedee looked surprised. "Me? No. I mean I can try, but until the state funds us adequately, everyone just has to tighten their belts. We have to learn to stick to what's

most important."

"Ms. O'Mara! Guess what?" Lucero called as she and Bao stopped by the table on their way to the exit.

"What?" Sienna tried to smile in the face of their enthusiasm.

Shy little Bao announced, "We bought stuff to write stories with."

"Great!" Sienna exclaimed, as if she still weren't in the middle of a completely demoralizing conversation with her boss. "I can't wait to read them!"

Bao said. "You come to the swap meet tonight. I show you."

"I don't think I can come," Sienna said. She could already feel the need to be alone to process what Deedee was telling her. "Bring your stories back to school on Monday for me. Okay?"

"Okay!" Lucero nodded eagerly. "I'm going to write about Our Lady of the Brick Wall!"

"Me too!" Bao said.

Even though Sienna was dejected, she couldn't help hoping that the little girls really would go home and write in those shiny new notebooks. She wanted to see what they would have to say about the lady shimmering on the outside of the library wall.

The girls skipped away.

"Wait!" Deedee called, bolting after them, grateful for a reason to flee. "You have to walk at school."

"Shit!" Jolie said. "All I want to do is hurry home, crawl into bed, and cry, but I have to stay late tonight, greet parents, and run the book fair with a big, fat friendly grin on my face." As the ramifications of being unemployed sank in, she added. "Thank God, I'm only renting and I didn't buy a place. I couldn't recoup all the closing

costs so soon. I've never been fired before."

"They can't fire you guys!" Dulce burst from behind the shelves. "All the kids love you," she cried passionately. "You are the best teachers ever!"

"Thank you, Dulce," Sienna said, trying to comfort the girl while her own mind was racing. Like Miguel, smashed by the WASTE, she suddenly wanted out. She wanted to run away.

The surprise storm that had blown in earlier was breaking up. Sienna hurried along the slick rural road trying to outdistance her anger, attempting to escape the frustration she felt flooding her whole body. She barely noticed the pale clumps of involuted tulips, shut down, and folding in on themselves against the deluge after a week of spring. At least, it was starting to stay light later. She'd have enough time to visit where Teagan Creek met the Purewater. Loggers used to float timber from that point, where they could watch the trees felled on the hill sail down the river. She had often taken Matt there to throw rocks. She probably needed to hurtle a few stones herself. She couldn't call Andy. He was still overseas.

She traipsed on and on, listening to the gushing creek filling with snow melt as it crisscrossed properties on the hill. Dogs ran to their fence lines, yipping and growling as she marched past and instead of talking to them kindly as she normally did, she glowered at them instead. She stomped past horses in their pastures and a neighbor's small private golf course, which when it was clear, had a fantastic view of Purewater Pass. Furiously, she passed an upscale mansion, the walls of which almost throbbed as a

high-end sound system blasted the exact same cop-dusting song as the kid at the swap meet played before Gaul sent him away. That had been right before he had given her *La Mujer de Tierra*.

When she reached the gravel where the trail she wanted started, her cell phone vibrated. Checking to see if it was a text from Matt, she saw she'd received a picture instead. Our Lady of Guadalupe with Juan Diego kneeling at her feet filled the screen. The image was very similar to the one on the prayer card Lucero had given her way back at Christmas. The call back number read RESTRICTED.

Her phone vibrated again. A new text message read, "*Never was it known that anyone who sought thy intercession was left unaided.*" Who would have sent this to her? Jolie? Maybe, but her number wouldn't have been restricted. One of the ELL students? No. How would they get Sienna's number? It was unlisted. Andy? He had sent her posters of the Supreme Court's Contemplation of Justice and the Statue of Liberty, but he didn't even know about the apparition of the *Madre de Dios* at Moore Elementary School yet. Because of the time difference and his packed schedule in Finland, they hadn't had time to talk since the children first saw Our Lady of the Brick Wall. And they wouldn't talk until tomorrow night, at the earliest.

No matter who'd sent it to her, Sienna suddenly felt she was not alone in her fury and her grief. "Thank you," she whispered. The mysterious message comforted her, but her body still screamed for activity. She was so intent on finding rocks or branches—anything to hurl into the water—she was surprised to look up and see a faded red van by the creek's edge.

Gaul Santiago sat on the threshold of the open side door with a bottle resting on his knee. The nearly cresting

river was louder than her feet had been storming across the gravel. He looked startled to see her—as if she were a ghost.

Sienna was perturbed by the stricken expression upon his face. “Mr. Santiago? Are you all right?”

“Ms. O’Mara,” he said, regaining his composure. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“And you.” she replied. “Are you going to the swap meet tonight?”

“No.” He shrugged. “I don’t get much purchase in Purewater.” He grinned wryly.

“Me neither,” she said.

“Mothers and children in tears,” he told her. “Pilar is hysterical.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re leaving. But don’t worry,” he said, amusement and admiration playing on his lips, “Dulce has vowed to save your job. And the librarian’s too. She’s a firecracker.”

“Oh!” Sienna was touched. “That’s very sweet of her! It’s too soon to know how serious these RIF’s are. They are always stressful and demoralizing. However, we get them often enough to keep from being completely shocked.”

Sheepishly, Gaul indicated the bottle on his lap. “I am also feeling particularly defeated this evening. Would you like a drink?”

“What is it?” She didn’t really want a swig. She wanted to know what he was drinking and how drunk he might be.

“Irish Cream.”

“Straight?” She only drank Irish cream in decaffeinated coffee after dinner between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day.

"I see." Gaul laughed. "You belong to a wine-by-the-month club?"

How could she explain that for her whiskey was a very hard spirit—that it made her sink straight into a hopeless view of the human condition?

"I don't usually drink it either," he said, "but there I was in Bonny Deals thinking about all the work Lucia and Ramon have done to help Pilar and how glad we all are that you are her teacher. I was standing in the store, realizing how crazy it was that we never considered you might be transferred or leave before she got better. I was just standing there thinking this, scanning the wall of alcohol, and my eyes fell on this bottle." He showed her the label. "O'Mara's. I thought it was appropriate tonight."

His reaction to her potential transfer seemed a little melodramatic. Still, Andy had told her that in Japan, elementary teachers gained celebrity status. In many of the Hispanic homes in Purewater she'd probably attained a lot of respect and affection. That was understandable. She, herself, had often been very emotionally invested in which teachers Matt got.

Gaul continued, "And then I just felt the urge to be by the river. So, I drove up here. I laughed when I saw the sign back there. What's a more perfect place for drowning one's sorrows with Irish Cream than a place called Teagan Hill? Teagan is an Irish word, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Sienna said. "It's old Irish for poet."

"Do you live up here?"

Cautiously, she nodded. "With my son. You might have seen him at Master In-Su's. He's a black belt." Unsettled, by Gaul's emotionality, she blurted. "He might come along soon. He's into jogging."

Gaul knew who Matt was. He'd been paying close at-

tention to everyone and everything connected with Sienna ever since their first meeting at the swap meet. He knew there was no way that the same red-blooded teenage boy he'd seen hanging out with his friends behind the dojang on a Friday night was about to be trailing after his mother. He held up the bottle.

"Care for some, anyway?"

Sienna hadn't had a drink since Spring break when she and Andy, savoring their Spanish wine, discussed dates for their fantasy trip to Andalusian vineyards. Now, here she was with a Mexican man offering her Irish whiskey.

And she did want some. It would be very tacky, almost unimaginably, to drink with him, but she wanted the sweetness of cream on her tongue and the heat of whiskey to warm her heart. A little dulling of her brain wouldn't hurt right now, either. She shivered involuntarily and she wrestled with temptation and indecision. She was a lightweight when it came to drinking and would still have to walk home. She certainly couldn't let him drive her.

"Hold on a moment." Gaul said. He ducked into his van and returned with two clay coffee mugs and the red, black, and white serape. He gave her a cup half filled with the drink, set his down where he'd been sitting, and held the shawl up. "May I?" She nodded. He draped it across her shoulders.

The weight was comforting. "Did you say this was made from the same fiber as Juan Diego's cloak?" she asked.

He nodded.

"That's so interesting." She showed him the picture and text message she'd received as she approached the creek.

"That's really odd," Gaul said, showing her his phone. "I got the exact same thing just seconds before you showed up."

Sienna took a sip from the mug. Her first swallow made her feel warm and relaxed, and she tried not to think of how what she was drinking had passed over the rim where Gaul's lips had been when he thought he'd be drinking from the bottle all alone. Her lips began to tingle.

"Someone must be on our side." Gaul observed, looking at the text once more before tossing his phone behind him into the van.

"Our side?"

"Trying to keep these kids afloat," he said. "To turn them toward their human potential, instead of turning into drug dealers, gangbangers, and graffiti punks."

"Instead of drowning them in words and believing—or pretending—that we are being so very altruistic while we do so," she added.

Gaul patted the floorboards, inviting her to sit beside him and she did, hesitantly. As they drank from the clay mugs, they watched Teagan Creek merge with the Purewater. Overhead, dripping alders rustled, flashing the silver underbellies of their late spring leaves. A few vibrant blue Steller's Jays squawked and soared south along the river. Following the trajectory of the birds, down the hill, Sienna noticed two tiny hot pink blurs, two children in the distance. The little ones seemed to have slipped out from beneath the green canopy of riverside trees. As they skipped along the bank, dread at seeing them so close to the water's edge rushed over Sienna, but her protective impulses were inhibited both by drink and distance. There was nothing she could do about those faraway children and she ceased to worry when the dots of bright color

merged with the bushes set farther back from the water.

Gaul poured more into his cup. "Do you know the story of *La Llorona*?"

"The ghost?"

He nodded.

Sienna hadn't eaten since she'd savored Dr. Fray's teacher appreciation muffin and she never did well drinking on an empty stomach. Still, in full awareness of all this, she held her mug up for more.

He poured.

"I don't know the story," she said, realizing he'd given her more than he had the first time. "I keep meaning to look her up, but I always run out of time or get rerouted."

"Well," Gaul said, "Legend has it she was a very, very poor and very, very pretty *indio*. She used her beauty to lure a rich Spaniard into marrying her. They were happy for a while. Had some kids and then he cheated on her. And she lost it, went nuts. Drowned the children in the river."

Sienna frowned. "I don't get that at all. Why tell a story about a mother who would drown her own babies just because their father was unfaithful? Who would really do that?"

"*La Llorona*," Gaul said, solemnly. "She felt bad about it afterwards. She died of grief and to this day, her ghost haunts all bodies of water, especially rivers, constantly searching for her lost children. Parents tell their kids not to get lost because if *La Llorona* grabs them, the only thing she knows how to do with a child is drown them."

"That sounds just like Moore Elementary School," Sienna mused. "When a student gets lost, all we do is suffocate him or her with more tests and worksheets."

"I don't get that," Gaul said.

"Me neither." Sienna had no desire to discuss the educational system with him. She wanted more story. "Who told you about *La Llorona*?"

"Well, she was always just there in Redención when I was growing up." He refilled his cup. "Esperanza Luz, Pilar's mother, always told the story really well."

Watching the rising rapids crash over sharp slabs of granite river rock, Sienna remembered the day she'd found the awka rock. Esperanza Luz was Esteban's mother, and when he was digging for Baldwin's lost money bag, he told Dulce that his mother never wanted Pilar to hear about any river ghost. Was it because she didn't want her daughter to know that a woman could do that to a child? Or was there another reason? "Can you tell me her version?" Sienna asked. "Do you remember it?"

"I can," he said. "And I can tell you."

A bevy of raindrops fell, feeling like chilblains pelting Sienna's scalp and cheekbones. A black cloud traveling overhead wept uncontrollably into her clay cup. She was childishly miffed. She wanted magic and a story, and she didn't want dark clouds diluting her drink one little bit.

"Here, get in," Gaul said.

Sienna stepped up into his van and swayed, clutching at the door frame to keep her balance.

He narrowed his eyes, calculating. "There's seventeen percent alcohol content in Irish Cream."

"Is that a lot?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Okay, then. I've got an *El Bandito* that's still warm and some fine Mexican chocolate to offer you."

"Just as long as you don't have an Evil Eye in here. I can't handle any more of that," she broke off, aware that her words sounded peculiar although they seemed to make sense in this particular conversation.

Gaul gestured for her to sit on a thick slab of shag carpet where she could lean against a tall pile of Guatemalan blankets. Wrapped in the serape, Sienna sat beside him while Gaul poured more creamy sweetness into a mug made from *matriz* and pulled a woven blanket from the top of the stack to cover their legs. Gaul recalled Esperanza's face and tried to bring her version of *La Llorona* to mind.

The events of Sienna's evening were unfolding somewhat like the stories she'd assigned in the *Writers' Lair*. She wasn't meeting a leprechaun, a ninja, or a monkey tossing truffles in the school yard. An art dealer in the woods was far more interesting. And had she been asked by a magical creature to make three wishes, following the WASTE and the probable pink slip on Teacher Appreciation Day, she would have requested exactly what she was getting—yes—a strong, sweet drink, a sturdy blanket, and a good story.

Their feet rested on the rubber edge of the van's side entrance. They had a bird's eye view of the Purewater valley below. Rain crystals speared white caps on the thrashing river. The surrounding foothills were illuminated with pink as the day's descending sun broke through parts of the dark cloud cover.

Of course, Gaul had no idea what parts of the story he didn't know. He had no idea that I, who had inspired the story of *La Llorona*, had been thinking about my life in *The Writers' Lair*. Esperanza Luz had always told my story better than anyone else ever had, but I didn't want anyone else to tell it anymore. I wanted to try it. I wanted Sienna to witness me. If *The Writers' Lair* was to be erased, I had to take this chance. I begged *Los Muertos*, the ones who'd pushed me out into Purewater when Deedee demanded cruelty on *El Dia de Los Muertos*, to help me. I also begged

ILLUSIONS OF MORE

La Madre de Dios, Our Lady of the Brick Wall, to intercede.
I didn't deserve her help, but I dared to ask.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Gaul said, "Once upon a time, a long time ago in Redención, a young couple named Jesus and Juanita were married. Soon afterwards, they decided it was time to have a baby. So, they lit the leftover stub of their nuptial candle and knelt on the dirt floor of their tiny hut to pray to the Virgin for a child."

As I listened to Gaul begin the story, I wanted to tell Sienna how the women in Redención make these kinds of requests. They form tiny infants of clay and sprinkle blood-red flower petals over a simple altar of volcanic stone given to them by La Madre Ardiendo.

Gaul said, "Within the year, *una hija* with glistening skin was born. Her eyes opened immediately, ready to take in the world. The women cooed over the newborn as they swaddled her in bright cloth and passed her from one *abuela* to the next before they presented her to Jesus.

When Jesus saw his daughter, he was touched and said, "*Ella es muy bonita!*"

Gaul did not convey how unsettled Jesus was by the whole event. Yes, he gently touched his daughter's little hand, and he bent over Juanita, who lay exhausted upon straw mats still soaked with the fluids of birth and gave her a squeamish kiss on

the forehead. Then, he fled to be with the men until well after the clean-up and recovery.

"The baby was baptized," Gaul said. "They called her Maria Guadalupe. She was the answer to her parents' prayers, but some unseen darkness disturbed her. Baby Maria Guadalupe kept the whole village up at night. She squalled for hours on end. Her howls were louder than the coyotes. She made *los perros* bark, *los gatos* shriek." Everyone had advice for Juanita, and she followed their suggestions. But, it didn't work to hold the baby upside down or tighten a sash around her tummy."

"Soon, whenever the baby whimpered, Juanita's arms stiffened, her whole body grew rigid, and Jesus would hustle out to join *los hombres* for a smoke. Before long, everyone was gossiping about what a terrible mother Juanita was."

Gaul did not tell Sienna that the people said Juanita's milk was sour.

Even so, Sienna was indignant. "That's not fair," she said.

"I'm just the storyteller here." Gaul begged indulgence, unwrapping a disc of stone ground Mexican chocolate and passing a wedge to Sienna. "Late one afternoon when Maria Guadalupe had been crying for hours, Juanita reached her limit. She snatched her daughter up from the crib that had once been a water trough and shook her hard. Then, with the baby in her arms, Juanita ran, scattering the village chickens as she practically flew toward the stagnant canal. Juanita held her baby over the mosquito-infested water that the people mocked for daring to dream of ever becoming a real river and wailed."

Feeling the unfamiliar grittiness of the chocolate dissolving on her tongue, Sienna said, "She must have both

been absolutely desperate. Sleep-deprived and desperate."

Gaul went on. "Juanita wondered why the Virgin sent her such a difficult child. She wondered why her infant came to disturb everyone around them. She wasn't as upset about the child's pain as she was about how the baby's crying made people think she was a failure."

Sienna pondered the young woman's state of mind. "So even more than wanting to *be* a good mother Juanita wanted people to *think* she was one."

Gaul nodded. "She came from an ancestral line that believed a real *mujer*, one worthy of respect and admiration, could command a child's body, mind, and soul to do exactly what others expected by the sheer force of prayer, charm, will, or, if all else failed, the powers of manipulation. The village's techniques and Juanita's tireless efforts didn't work with that baby, with that body, but Juanita's fear that she would be judged a failure overpowered her. Juanita's fear and rage penetrated her daughter as she shook her baby, again and again screaming. 'What's wrong with you? Why are you acting this way?' And then, she cursed her child. 'You should be like Donna Theresa's baby.'"

Gaul was doing a decent job, but he could not conceive of how much fear shot straight through that distraught baby's little body. The panic of her mother's shaking and then shaming and comparison was far worse than the colic that ha made her bellow and writhe.

Gaul said, "Somehow sensing that Juanita was about to fling her into the murky water, Maria Guadalupe swallowed her screams. Her body became as still as stone. A coyote howled on a faraway ridge and when Juanita realized that what she heard was the cry of a distant beast and not the misery of her daughter, she did not drown the

child."

"Oh!" Sienna said, surprised. "I thought Juanita was *La Llorona*."

Gaul shook his head. "Stay with me. We will get to her."

Sienna leaned in a little. She was intrigued. He was a good storyteller. She felt the thrill of getting the authentic *Redención* version. "Please go on," she urged.

Gaul offered her another piece of chocolate. She was about to refuse until she remembered that it was still Teacher Appreciation Day, and her position was being riffed. She popped the rich, coarse segment into her mouth.

"From that moment on," Gaul said, "Maria Guadalupe was a model child. She grew up to be the most beautiful and well-behaved girl the village had ever known. She never failed to please. She was always a success. She garnered little leniencies from the elders and praise from the people. When Donna Theresa's own daughter, the very child Juanita had demanded Maria Guadalupe be like, asked, 'How is it that you are always so perfect?' Maria Guadalupe simply shrugged."

Gaul didn't know to say that Maria Guadalupe had no idea of how she'd become so perfect. He didn't note that she had constant stomachaches.

He said, "As she became a young woman, the young men in the village hung around her, as young men will do. *Maria Guadalupe* enjoyed the attention, but she decided to wait for *un hombre rico* who could show her a larger world and give her nice things. One day, not long after her *quinceanera*, when she was helping Juanita pull *pan* from *el hornos*, Juan Gonzalez drove up to the ovens. He'd heard gossip about the lovely Maria Guadalupe and came to see

her for himself. He didn't even bother to get out of the car. With his engine idling, he just sat and admired Maria Guadalupe. She looked at his angular face, fiery black eyes, and broad shoulders and thought he was handsome. Obviously, if he could afford a car like that, he could take good care of his future wife and child. She smiled at him. With that, they were enveloped in lust, a passion as hot as the steam rising off the rocks in the ovens Juanita used to bake stone-ground tortillas."

Sienna realized that Gaul's body was emanating a comforting warmth. He felt their closeness, too, took a hasty sip from his cup, and continued. "It wasn't long before they were married. Maria Guadalupe was proud and very pleased with her promising prospects. During the wedding preparations, she talked endlessly of her plans for *la vida perfecta*. Naturally, she had every expectation that they would be fulfilled. The people in the village were happy for her, but also envious. The burden of envy is heavy so they were relieved when the wedding came and went and the bride moved to a distant land with her new husband.

"*En la casa nueva*, Maria Guadalupe enjoyed many choices. The market offered many different and more plentiful foods and fabrics than what her village had. Their *hacienda* was spacious, well-equipped, even fancy. The surrounding land was pleasant. After the rare desert rains, a wash would form and drain out into the sea which was not far from their home. Things were good, but it wasn't long before Maria Guadalupe discovered an unpleasant truth. Her rich husband had cruel friends. Before long, she began to suspect that shaking down the people, blackmail, and bribes financed her cozy existence. Sometimes, she felt sick to her stomach about it, but what could she do? Juan took care of her and, within a few years, they had two

beautiful children. She was a good mother. She did everything right. The children were healthy and active, talkative, and affectionate. People nodded approvingly when they met in the *plaza*. It was plain to see, Maria Guadalupe was a fine person, a good woman, wife, and mother. No matter what wrongdoings her husband was guilty of, she did everything right. She hoped she could balance the scales of justice for her little family.

"Then, one afternoon Juan told Maria Guadalupe to go to evening Mass and the gathering at a neighbor's house afterwards without him. 'Go alone,' he said. 'Take the children.' 'Por que?' she asked. That's when Juan told Maria Guadalupe that he was leaving her for Donna Theresa's daughter."

Gaul couldn't imagine the pain Maria Guadalupe felt in her lower abdomen. It was as if Juan had stabbed her with a knife, but as I convulsed in the space between them, Sienna felt acid, searing the lining of her own stomach.

With another spurt, thunder rumbled over Purewater Pass. Lightning struck, splitting the valley below them in half for a fraction of a second. Hail began to pound the roof of Gaul's van.

Gaul resumed the tale with a trace of irony in his voice as he realized the weather outside was coinciding with the events in his story. "As Juan threw some clothes into his *maleta*, thunder boomed outside. Lightning struck the desert, and rain began to fall with an intensity that was unusual in that part of Clemencia."

Sienna thought *La Llorona* was generic myth, set in a generic place. She interrupted, asking "Were they really in Clemencia?"

"Yes," Gaul replied. "They were in Clemencia. Maria Guadalupe begged Juan to stay, to reconsider her heart,

their vows, and their children.”

Empathy for Maria Guadalupe filled Sienna’s entire body as thunder crashed so loudly overhead shock waves rattled the van. As Gaul’s tone hardened, Sienna began to shiver involuntarily.

“Juan told her. ‘You aren’t good enough. You don’t deserve what I give you.’ He tossed a few coins her way. ‘You can use this to buy a little food for the children, but this is the last you will ever get from me. You’ll have to find a way to manage on your own. Do you hear me?’

“When he asked that, Maria Guadalupe heard a voice hissing in her ear. The voice said, ‘*You should be like Donna Theresa’s daughter.*’ Maria Guadalupe knew this would be the talk of the city and the countryside, and most definitely of the backwater village that she and Donna Theresa’s daughter both came from.”

As Juan turned away, it seemed as if he’d withdrawn the knife he’d plunged into my belly and was walking away, pleased to see so much of my blood on his blade. I was falling apart. Rage was the only coagulant left.

Gaul said, “Shame and a pride, as twisted as any colicky lower intestine could ever be, swelled up and engulfed Maria Guadalupe.”

Sienna resisted, “Why was *she* ashamed? Her husband was cruel.” Although she was the one asking the question, Sienna’s troubled heart, mind, and belly rapidly supplied the answer. Maria Guadalupe came from an ancestral line that believed a *mujer*, worthy of respect and admiration, could somehow force an unwilling or unable other to do exactly what “society” expected no matter what the cost to herself. She remembered Nancy standing at the front of the room watching her students take the WASTE, wafting fear that she wouldn’t be able to make them do what her su-

pervisors wanted her to make them do.

Full of the same helpless panic Juanita felt when she realized her efforts didn't work with baby Maria Guadalupe, Deedee, Nancy, and Mimi had shamed Miguel the day he ran away from the WASTE to visit the Lady of the Brick Wall. They were also filled with the fear Maria Guadalupe felt when she grew up to realize her efforts weren't enough to keep Juan fulfilling his duties to provide for their family. Like the very confluence of Teagan Creek and Purewater River, Juanita and Maria Guadalupe's panic, fear, and helpless rage merged with the fear and helpless rage Sienna had sensed and seen at Moore Elementary School. As Sienna's body shook, the burning in the pit of her stomach ignited and erupted, flooding her body and mind—overwhelming all of her senses.

From a long distance, she heard Gaul calling her name, patting her hand. She almost rallied, almost heard Chase Haight broadcasting on Gaul's dismantled radio, "American Schoolteacher Celebrates Appreciation Day by binging with Mexican Storyteller," but she didn't. Sienna lost consciousness.

The mind movie, Gaul had started with his painstaking translation continued to reel in Sienna's dreamlike state. Now, felt as if she were in the story. She watched as Juan entered his office, gathering up his accounts. She watched as I stormed into the kitchen where my children, with brown eyes shining with love, looked up at me adoringly, admiring how beautiful I was in my long, flowing, white dress, chosen for the evening's festivities.

To Sienna, my daughter looked just like Pilar, my son like Valentin. Maria Guadalupe grabbed them by the hands, dragged them out the back door and stomped through ankle-deep, lukewarm puddles. Sienna followed

us, the muttering mother and the bewildered children through a wrought iron gate in the adobe wall that separated our, well Juan's compound, from the surrounding desert.

Twisted cacti tried spearing us as we moved toward the edge of the darkened plateau. Shockingly sudden shards of electricity *en el cielo del noche* illuminated the moonless night. Wide-eyed and rigid, the children resisted moving forward.

"Mama!" my girl cried. "What are we doing?"

My boy asked, "*Adónde vamos?* Where are we going?"

Instantly, Sienna knew the answer and I knew she knew. From her vantage point, Sienna knew what Maria Guadalupe was thinking. She felt what Maria Guadalupe was feeling. Maria Guadalupe was furious. Furious at Juan. But she was too enmeshed in the expectations of a woman's role to be furious at the situation in which children were so dependent on her while she was forced to be so dependent on a man who did not care about her—did not care about them. He had used her and now he was finished. She had nothing to give the children now, nor would she ever be able to get anything to give them later.

Maria Guadalupe's fury fixated on the children themselves. Their very presence, their weakness, their neediness ruined her chances of looking good to the tongue-waggers, to those who did not know how to contemplate justice, who had no compassion for those crushed by the very culture that they so cruelly or unconsciously reproduced. Without Juan's love, or at least, his financial support, Maria Guadalupe knew the children would always be a liability to her.

It would only get worse as they got older. Before long, they'd be a walking testament to the absolute failure of her

charm or will or manipulation or prayers. She could give them all her life energy, but they would still be hungry, still wear tattered clothes. They would still walk about with the stunned longing for a parent with the resources to care for them in a village that refused to understand how criticizing and shaming a mother is a lazy and malicious way of excusing and colluding with the carelessness and cruelty of a father.

Nearly wrenching their arms out of socket, Maria Guadalupe dragged her children downhill to the river's rapidly blurring edge. Sienna followed. A scorpion swirling in the swift, rising current brushed against her calf and caught on the hem of her jeans.

Lightning struck again. As if she were *La Mujer de Tierra*, Sienna felt a sharp pain cracking through her, as if it would split her in two. As if she were Maria Guadalupe, she felt Maria Guadalupe squeeze, breaking a fine bone in her daughter's fragile hand. Between her own fingers, Sienna felt the child's crumple. Maria Guadalupe yanked the children forward.

From where she was, just behind them, Sienna screamed, "Stop!" She flung herself against the transparent wall between the living and *Los Muertos*, grasping for the hem of my dress. Rain was the only thing that passed through her inflamed fingers. "Stop it!"

"I don't know what to do with you!" Maria Guadalupe, I, told the children.

Sienna jockeyed to Maria Guadalupe's side, to my side, but she could not quite penetrate the veil.

"I don't know how to make you right!" Maria Guadalupe, I shrieked. As Sienna watched, my ghostly profile took on Nancy's features, then Tammy's, then Mimi's and finally Deedee's. Each time my face transformed, my voice

changed, taking on each staff member's distinctive tone. "I don't know what to do with you. I don't know what to do with you. I don't know what to do with you. I don't know what to do with you."

"You do know!" Sienna cried frantically. "You know."

As my, Maria Guadalupe's face, came back into focus for her, I shook the children violently. Sienna persisted. "They'll forgive you," she said. "If you stop this insanity. They will forgive you if you stop this right now."

"Stop it, Mama!" the children cried. "Stop!"

"Listen to them," Sienna pleaded. "Just listen to what they say. They are telling you what they need."

Lightning flashed upon my crazed face. For a moment, I froze. Then, my proclamation filled the timeless canyon we were in, overriding the crashing sounds of river and storm. Coldly the words spewed from my mouth, "There's no excuse for knowing what's in the WASTE."

Sienna watched as Maria Guadalupe, as I, swung the children over the abyss and let go. They fell a short distance before they hit the deep river. Sienna and I watched them submerge and recoil, gasping. Groping unsuccessfully for each other, they spiraled around and around, as they were washed away, disappearing downriver.

When I turned away from the cresting river's edge, the current caught the hem of my white dress, swirling it around my legs. I tripped over a tangled mess of tumbleweed and the skull of a cow hovering, floating upon the desert floor. I fell toward Sienna, reaching out to her for help balancing, but neither of us could reach through the veil between us. When I hit the ground, water and mud splattered all over me. I realized what I'd done to my very own children.

Sienna witnessed the agony racking my entire body.

She heard me gasp and moan, "I've killed all the joy in my life." She watched me scramble up and run alongside the river toward the ocean, calling for my children—weeping. It was plain to see that it was too late. They were lost. Sienna watched my form disappear among the cedar trees.

The cedar trees? There were no cedar trees in the desert where I destroyed my children. Suddenly, I realized that I was watching Sienna watch Maria Guadalupe run. How could I watch Sienna watch me run through evergreen trees? If I were watching her, watching me, then I wasn't the one running. If I wasn't the one running then somehow she'd pulled me or pushed me out of my story by getting into it with me. Somehow something shifted. I was out. Did this mean I could just quit being La Llorona? Could I just quit?

Although Sienna's feet were cold, growing numb, as if she were standing knee-deep in water peering through the cedar trees, she became aware that Gaul was still telling the story. "The people say Maria Guadalupe never got over what happened. She never stopped crying. Esperanza Luz says if only there had been one strong, wise woman in Juanita's village, this might have never happened. If someone had been there to teach the people that handling a difficult baby isn't about will or manipulation, or prayer, the whole story would have been different. If someone taught the people how to remove the disturbing elements from a child's diet and to allow little ones to move in ways that release what causes them pain, Maria Guadalupe would have known how it felt to be cared for and so, even when she was wronged and desperate, she would have found a way to care for her children. But, in the absence of that knowing, in the absence of that care, Maria Guadalupe continues to weep."

The cedar trees were gone. All Sienna could see were the dark backs of her closed eyelids. She felt hot raindrops, tears, streaming down her chilled cheeks. The bottoms of her jeans were soaked. Slowly, she registered Gaul's arm around her, his body supporting her. She felt the rise and fall of his warm chest, smelled the hint of whiskey on his breath, and inhaled the sandalwood scent of his armpit.

Gaul said, "She's never stopped looking for her lost children. The people call her *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman. They say she haunts all rivers, continually reliving and recreating her story. She is a sad, sad ghost and as long as she roams in her woundedness all children are at risk."

Sienna startled as if awaking from a nightmare. "I just saw her." Sienna's voice was surprisingly hoarse, as if she had been screaming.

Gaul peered into her eyes, as if searching for an imprint of *La Llorona* on her pupils like Juan Diego had seen the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the tilma he presented to Bishop Zumarraga.

Sienna said, "*La Llorona* is in Purewater, running amok at Moore Elementary. Her spirit is the one that makes Deedee and Mimi and teachers like Nancy drown children in assignments and suffocating assessments. They are stuck in the same fear of being judged and cast out. *La Llorona* is here. I didn't understand that until now."

Gaul rubbed his face in his hands and looked aghast. "I didn't know *limpias* could happen this way?"

"*Limpias*?" Sienna asked.

"A type of cleansing," Gaul said, grasping for an explanation. "*Una limpia* allows a traumatized soul to heal, to reintegrate body, mind, and spirit."

Suddenly, shouts and frantic cries traveled up to

them, cutting through the cacophony of the river and creek. Gaul scanned and pointed down river toward the town of Purewater. Sienna struggled to focus her eyes. Was there a child flailing on the rapids? A small head bobbed up and down. Whitecaps swirled around it, like the child was being strangled by the fluttering skirt of *La Llorona's* dress.

Gaul leapt from the van. "Call for help!" he shouted. The way was rutted and rocky. He would never make it in time, but he took off at a gallop. Sienna pulled out her phone. There was no signal. As she followed Gaul through the woods, tracing *La Llorona's* path, Sienna was aware of every real physical detail. Moss hung overhead. Bleached fungi swelled from crevices in cedar bark. Blackberry runners scratched her as she ran—still in the grip of a nightmare, feeling as if she'd witnessed murder. As they rushed toward Purewater, Sienna felt she was leaving a past trauma only to journey into an impending one. With her finger on the emergency button, hoping to get a signal, she found herself pleading for divine intercession, "Oh, Lady of the Brick Wall, help us."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ramon and Lucia were stunned when Dulce announced that Ms. O'Mara and Ms. Fox were being sent away from Moore. Gaul had been right when he said that it had never occurred to any of them that their beloved ELL teacher could be eliminated— especially when so many children needed her help to learn English. Unfortunately, the only control the Vegas felt they had over anything in Purewater was what happened in *Casita Rio*.

"We will pray about this later," Lucia told all of the upset neighborhood children milling around outside the back door of the kitchen hoping for the last of the day-old tortillas she would not serve to paying customers. "For now, play and be happy." She gestured toward all the people setting their tables up in the alley for the evening's swap meet. "Go browse."

"And listen to mariachi," Ramon added by way of offering comfort. "We got a real band tonight. No boom box."

"Yuck!" Dulce rolled her eyes in the most Americanized way possible.

Lucia thought she was already acting like a daughter in their house. She glanced at Esteban, dicing *cebollas*. Lu-

cia loved Esteban and Pilar dearly and wondered if they would ever be reunited with their parents. She glanced at Ramon. Maybe it was time for them to try again, to have a baby of their own, but would she really want her child to go to a school that would send a teacher like Ms. O'Mara away? She grimaced at the thought.

"What's the matter?" Ramon asked her. "You don't like mariachi anymore either?"

"I love mariachi," Lucia said, "and I love you." She thought of the altars back at home, where women rolled their requests for infants into clay and laid *matriz* babies at the feet of *La Sirena*. Suddenly, she had advice for the disheartened children. "Go back to our Lady!" she said. "Go back to the brick wall and ask *La Madre de Dios* to let Ms. O'Mara and Ms. Fox stay."

Pilar, Cassandra and her little sister Lucero, Lupe, Belmaris, Alondra, Javier, Miguel and Valentin quickly formed a procession. On the way back to the school, they stopped beside Grandma Yang's flower stall where the gray sky overhead made the huge bunches of vibrant yellow, orange, and red tulips all the more brilliant. Grandma Yang's English was poor, but she was attuned to the acute timbre of sadness. When Lucero explained the mission to Bao, Grandma Yang urged every child to choose one flower to take to the brick wall, as an offering to the lady.

The bigger kids had longer legs and a more elevated sense of urgency. Soon, they left the little ones trailing a full half block behind. Bao and Lucero stopped, still struggling to comprehend the issue.

Bao said, "They have to go away because the school have no money?"

Lucero nodded.

Bao said, "We have money. We can pay for them."

"Want to?" Lucero asked.

About twenty minutes later, they rejoined the rest of the elementary petitioners at Moore. The fourth graders sat cross-legged on the asphalt outside the library, gazing up at the apparition on the brick wall. Grandma Yang's bright tulips and some dark purple irises, borrowed along the way from in front of the dentist's office, had been arranged at her feet.

"We can save the teachers!" Lucero announced. Grati-fied to be the answer to their prayers, she reached into her *El Fuego* hoodie and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill.

"Whoo Hoo!" Javier whistled. "Where did you get that?"

Lucero shrugged. "Is it enough?"

"I don't know." Alondra furrowed her brow, thinking hard, thinking about Mrs. Albright's story problems. Teachers need rent, gas, and groceries. "No," she decided. "We need a little more."

"Can you show us where you got that?" Belmaris asked kindly. Kids like them never had cash. She hoped the little ones hadn't done something that was going to get them in trouble.

Bao waved her hand back the way they'd come, saying, "Let's go."

All the kids retraced their steps, traipsing back through the swap meet in time to hear Dr. Fray begin his speech about the importance of passing a local levy because the state wasn't funding the district sufficiently. All that was meaningless babble to them. They hurried past the card table that served as his podium and were hiking north by the time Brenda Hadley stepped forward, as a sitting school board president, to heckle the superintendent about using hard-pressed local people's money for

non-essential frills like P.E. and music teachers, recess monitors, school librarians, and, for Heaven's sake, English Language teachers—in America, of all places. Meanwhile, enjoying the sensation of being in the lead, Bao and Lucero led the group beyond the city limits into the woods.

Just a short distance from the river, they came to a double-wide trailer. The narrow porch was swept and bedecked with several planter boxes full of well-tended, black-faced yellow pansies. But the surrounding property was strewn with dismantled car parts and ditched vehicles in various states of disrepair. A *No Trespassing* sign propped on the front bumper of a 1957 Chevy pick-up truck indicated that the junkyard was someone's private domain.

The property actually belonged to the Hadley family. Indeed, Pilar recognized her classmate, Travis Hadley, kneeling on the seat inside the old truck, turning the wheel, pretending to drive. There was no telling what color the truck had been when it was new, back in the year when Brenda Hadley had been born. Her father had bought it as a personal reward for enduring the long months of his wife's odd cravings and the trauma of listening to her curse him during her labor. His pride and joy was faded now. Its shell was like a hard-boiled egg chipped and dipped in watered-down purple dye. An antique by American standards, the Chevy was exactly like what the few people who had cars in Clemencia now drove. And so, like folks in Clemencia when someone they know has a car, all the kids simply clambered in. They discovered Jonathan the *Gringo* was on the seat beside Travis. The boys were having a sleepover and chose to have it in the truck since Jonathan was used to sleeping in cars and

Travis had always wanted to try it.

"Ms. O'Mara can't go to Teagan Hill," Jonathan said when he heard the news. "She has to do bus duty."

Travis looked down at his grimy hands, resting on the iron steering wheel. He didn't really know the Spanish kids' teacher. He remembered how kindly she'd smiled at him when he thought he was going to be sick during the WASTE. She'd been really nice about it when Mrs. Albright ordered her to put the trash can next to his desk. She obviously hadn't thought he was faking his terrible bellyache. "I want her to stay too. She's a good one, but," he added knowingly, "it takes a lot of money to buy a teacher. My mom says it would be a bargain at twice the price for a good one, but my uncle and my grandma say teachers cost way too much because you have to pay for them to go to the doctor if they get sick from all the germs at school and you have to give them money for when they are too old and tired to take care of all the kids."

"We can afford it," Lucero announced, grinning proudly. Her big sister, Cassandra, had learned the word *treasure* when Ms. O'Mara taught her class to write about encountering magical creatures in the woods and getting three wishes. And, of course, Cassandra taught the word to her. And now Lucero could use the vocabulary in real life. "Bao and I found a treasure."

She pointed toward a Chevy Citation in a low-lying part of the property. Since it had been raining for months, water lapped at its underside. Blackberry vines with dark pink blooms trailed across its rust-spangled roof.

Travis laughed. "My mom wouldn't call that a treasure."

"Let's go!" Cassandra said. "We have to save Ms. O'Mara."

With water up to their ankles, the kids approached the Citation.

"It's getting dark," Travis observed. Gallantly, he opened the driver's side door and switched on the dome light. It did not illuminate the interior, but one headlight and one brake light came on outside. Bao opened the hatchback to reveal an old engine behind the back seat. The desiccated petals of a few marigold blooms powdered the surface between the dirty cylinders.

"I 'member this car," Pilar said, recalling how Gaul had helped make the engine fit inside on *El Día de los Muertos*. She remembered how the two men stuck flowers in the metallic tubes. Lucero reached in to where Grandma Yang's bouquets had been and pulled out a large Zip-lock bag full of rolled up cash.

"Whoo Hoo!" Javier whistled again.

"There is a lot more," Bao said with a gesture that included a variety of junked vehicles scattered across the Hadley place.

"How did you find it?" Jonathan asked, impressed, wondering if his mom could find some cash in a similar way.

"We came by here one day," Lucero said, "and Bao saw her grandma's bouquet sticking up in the window."

"It was a rip off of good flowers," Bao said. "If the man not use them, we get them back."

"Why didn't your dad give them to your mom?" Cassandra scowled at Travis.

Travis shrugged. "He forgets to give her lots of things. Flowers, the rent."

"Yep. I know how that goes," Jonathan said. "My dad forgets to give my mom things too. That's why it's very lucky we don't have a car payment." He scanned the inte-

rior as if imagining how it would be to move into the Citation.

"We took the flowers to school so the principal could be happy." Lucero said. "We heard Mrs. Hayes yelling at the flagpole."

"She's like that." Miguel said.

"It's gonna take a lot more than flowers to make her happy," Jonathan noted.

Lucero shrugged, acknowledging that the flowers had been not particularly effective.

Miguel added, "That principal is a rip off."

"Yeah, man." Travis patted Miguel's back. "I wanted to walk out on the WASTE with you. I just didn't think a kid could do that, you know? I bet everyone wanted to run away."

"I didn't run away," Miguel said, "I just went to see..." Then, he stopped. The Lady of the Brick Wall was not something to confess to *gringos*. Ms. O'Mara didn't count.

"We found this money," Bao said, swinging the bag of cash before them "when we got the flowers out." She gave the money to Pilar, certain that the nearest fourth grader would be able to count it better than she or Lucero could.

Lucero could see that Cassandra was about to scold her for stealing. "We only spent a little bit," she insisted. "At the book fair. Mrs. Penn, she say, we can't have book fairs at our school if people don't shop."

"She say she be so sad if we don't have a book fair," Bao explained. "We came back here to get a little money to buy stuff at the book fair. We can't let Mrs. Penn be so sad. She have a broken heart already."

"Well," Cassandra said, clearly appeased. "Who do we give the money to when we pay for Ms. O'Mara and

Ms. Fox? Should we give it to Mrs. Hayes?"

The contemplation of this dilemma was shattered by Laurali Hadley. Stomping through the saturated field toward them, she shouted, "Just what do you all think you are doing here? This is private property! Didn't you read the sign?" She waved her arms back toward the No trespassing sign on the truck. She stopped, knee-deep in water with her hands on her hips and glowered. "Oh right!" she said, recognizing the kids. "You can't read. You go to Moore. All you ever do is tax and spend!" Laurali's eyes widened as she also recognized what was in the bag Pilar held, "And now you're even stealing the car part stash!"

"Car part stash!" Suddenly, Travis understood. If his dad and uncle didn't hide their money out here, his mom and aunt would spend it on rent, food, and clothes. He frowned at Laurali. "What do you care, Laurali? You don't give a rip about car parts."

"I'm a good girl," she said primly. "I report crimes when I see them. Now, I know for sure that Daddy and Grandma are right when they say your school sucks!"

"Our school doesn't suck," Miguel said angrily, swallowing hard. In truth, he'd suspected something was wrong for a long time. Did the school suck because they were all so dumb? But, then the writing portion of the WASTE had gone so well for all of them. They weren't *that* dumb, were they? He was truly confused.

"Moore is a terrible school!" Laurali stomped closer, shrill and splashing mud with every squish of her boots, corralling them with her cruel words, "It sucks. It really, really does. It sucks!"

"She's my grandma's favorite," Travis told Jonathan.

"Obviously," Jonathan said.

Laurali continued to rant. "Just look at your reading

scores. Pathetic! Absolutely pathetic! You are all way, way behind the rest of the schools in Purewater and all the research shows if you don't make standard by fourth grade, you'll end up in jail!"

"I AM not going to jail!" Jonathan screamed. She'd clearly hit a nerve.

Pilar did not want to go to jail either. She did not want to fight over a bag of money. She threw it at Laurali and fled. Valentin followed, both of them moving as quickly as possible across the spongy splashy ground.

Laurali Hadley might have been a fluent reader. She might have met standard on the WASTE and even finished it early, but she could not shift her footing fast enough to catch the bag. It fell with a plop a few inches beyond her where it was promptly snagged by the overflowing creek's undercurrent and began to glide toward the river. Muttering about "wetbacks," Laurali tromped after it, pulling her boots up by the straps each time they got mired in the mud.

Meanwhile, beside the open hatchback of the Citation, Lucero grasped Cassandra's hand, whimpering. "We're going down."

"We aren't going down," Cassandra said reassuringly. "The police chief loves Ms. Fox. He won't be mad at us for trying to save her job."

Lucero shrieked, "No! The water is going up!" It was true, the river was rising. Their boots were filling with cold water. Their pants were getting soaked. The water was at the hem of their second-hand coats and sweatshirt. Chortling and shouting at this unusual turn of events, all the kids climbed on top of the Citation, just like Pilar's goat in Redención had climbed on top of her school.

Meanwhile, Laurali made a final lunge for the bag of

cash and tripped over the submerged chassis her uncle had long since forgotten was there. The rising water cushioned her bellyflop, but she never hit the ground. As the full river mingled with Teagan creek, the overflow of their meeting flooded Hadley land. Hidden currents swirled beneath the surface. As what had been Teagan Creek pushed Laurali closer to the money, what had been the Purewater pulled it away. She craned her neck to keep her face out of the muck. When she stretched her full length, reaching for the elusive treasure, the Purewater seized her.

On the Citation—sitting like the solemn marble Contemplation of Justice outside the Supreme Court—Cassandra pointed her finger and declared, “It’s *La Llorona*.”

All the kids on the car beside her followed the arc of her finger and saw Laurali slipping away. They began to scream, shout, and wail. “*La Llorona! La Llorona!*”

Pilar and Valentin had reached the river trail. They weren’t far from the edge of town where the backsides of the First Street businesses began. Pilar strained to hear what the others were shouting behind them. *La Llorona! Jail or La Llorona*—both were the stuff of nightmares! Out of the corner of his eye, Valentin caught a flash of white as Laurali swirled past in the river alongside them. *La Llorona* had *her*? He’d thought she only went after Mexicans.

“Help! Help me!” Laurali screamed.

Valetin recognized the terror mirrored in her eyes. She tried to reach for him, but *La Llorona* spun the girl around. Laurali made a terrible sound as her back was flung against a boulder in the middle of the river. She tried to grab hold of it, but it was too wet and too slick. *La Llorona* pushed her head under.

“How do we stop *La Llorona*?” Valentin cried.

Pilar stared at him hopelessly. "We need an awka rock."

Valentin reached into his pocket, pulled out the awka rock, and handed it to her. "Ms. O'Mara says make what you need."

Pilar stared at it. Was the awka familiar because it was part of sharing in *The Writer's Lair* or had she seen rocks like it before? Yes, she had. In a very different place. She and Esteban had been fleeing, heading for the hills. Her father had practically been carrying grandma. And the goat, *Diablo*, he'd helped somehow, leaping off the roof, headbutting someone giving them time. And Mamá? Where was she? Her mother was bending beside the water. There wasn't time to stop. There wasn't time not to. Her father had been begging her to hurry. Hurry! *Apurate!*

The kids on the Citation shouted some more. Pilar looked up and saw a man racing toward them, running down from the hills as fast as he could. He was a little heavy, a little clumsy, but obviously coming to help. It was Gaul. She automatically knelt at the cresting river's edge and scooped some of the cold water into the little bowl of the awka.

Meanwhile, despite the weight of the throng on top of it, the liquifying mud released its impounding quality on the Citation. The river grasped and tugged. The car began to float. If *La Llorona* weren't involved, the children huddled onboard might have found the ride exciting, but now they sailed into the currents of the nightmare too. Completely terrified, they continued to scream, "*La Llorona! La Llorona!*" As the car moved along, they clutched at one another, yelling at full throttle.

Downstream, Esteban hadn't understood everything Brenda Hadley was saying to Dr. Fray. He knew it wasn't

good. When he saw the hostility on the faces of those who applauded her and the downcast eyes of those she'd directed her diatribe toward, he sensed danger. He heard his father's voice whisper in his inner ear. "Help your sister." Esteban backed away from Dulce, broke from the crowd outside *Casita Rio* and began running north along the river, following the path he'd noticed the children taking when Dr. Fray began his speech.

The Citation continued to drift off the Hadley property. As it approached the main flow of the river, just a little upstream of where Laurali struggled under water, its single working headlight connected with the awka rock in Pilar's hand. The high beam refracted off the water in its concave section so that when Laurali surfaced, barely conscious and turning blue, the awka caught her in its spotlight. Gaul, approaching from the north, and Esteban, coming from the south could see exactly where she was.

Esteban leapt into the water. He caught the girl in his arms. Gaul dove in. When, he reached them, he pushed them toward the rock island in the center of the river. He grasped at jutting pieces of granite and found a break in the stone in which to wedge his feet. He formed a cross with his body anchoring them in safety as if he could withstand the forces of the river and the rage of a ghost. He felt his heart pounding, against Esteban and the girl. All he heard was the rushing water as it swirled around their necks.

Esteban could see over Gaul shoulder. He said, "Pilar is the on the bank. She is the one with the light. She's okay. They had both been desperately afraid that the floundering child was Pilar. Now, they realized that the child they'd saved belonged to someone else. Laurali was not from their "family." She was not one of the children Gaul

had smuggled into the safety of Purewater along with the precious art of Redención.

Sienna had followed Gaul downriver, finally connecting with the 911 dispatcher on her cell phone. Still in their white doboks, Captain Goodwin, the Fire Chief, and Matt motored upriver in an emergency rescue boat. The light reflecting from the awka let see where to stop. Gaul handed Laurali over. Then, they pulled Esteban aboard.

Sienna reached Pilar and stood, panting a foot behind her. Pilar stood too close to the edge to risk startling her out of her trance. Fascinated by the bright clear light emanating from the awka rock, Sienna watched Gaul board the rescue boat.

Then, the screaming of children broke into her consciousness. She turned around. The Citation was traveling slowly between the banks of the creek. Sienna saw that it was about to intersect with the river. There was no possible way all the children clustered upon it could all be rescued if it entered and capsized in the Purewater. As the vehicle approached the rushing, cresting river, the hysterical children froze, suddenly as silent as colicky little Maria Guadalupe had been when her mother dangled her over the canal, threatening to drop her in.

Sienna stepped forward, wrapped her arms around Pilar and dared, now that she was holding the girl to yell at all the other children. "Jump! Get off now! Get off while you still can."

Caught in *La Llorona's* spell, the kids didn't seem to understand. Sienna screamed, struggling in her panic to remember Spanish. "*Atrás! Tienen Saltar!*" Was that right? Did it matter what she shouted? Even the white kids, even the *gringos* who should have understood her English were in *La Llorona's* thrall. Why hadn't it occurred to any of

them to jump? Why were they just going along on the ride that would kill them?

"Get off!" Sienna yelled. "Now!"

Pilar trembled violently. Water sloshed out of the aw-ka, slipping back into the Purewater like a fish desperate to catch its breath. With that sloshing movement, the kids on the car threw themselves overboard. With the equal and opposite thrust of each leap of faith, the car shimmied, bogging down just enough between ancient tree roots to slow its motion. Sienna helped pull the children up, urging them to scurry to higher and more stable ground. Jonathan's feet had never fully grown into his boots, so it was easy for La Llorona to swipe them as he stumbled and fell and the Citation was seized by the rampaging river.

As Pilar and Valentin reached out to help their friends too, people from the swap meet swarmed upriver. Parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, strangers, Jolie and Superintendent Fray embraced the children, giving them their own dry sweatshirts and jackets to wear.

Brenda Hadley sobbed while the paramedics strapped Laurali to a gurney, and she rode to the hospital in the ambulance with her precious granddaughter. As the siren started up, the river crested and there was no longer any distinction between the Purewater, Teagan Creek, and the lowlands.

It wasn't long before the rumor started that the ELL teacher was *una curandera*—a healer. She had thwarted *La Llorona* and kept her from drowning all the kids. One story held that *La Llorona* had been so scared that after the kids jumped off, she'd hijacked Ian Hadley's Chevy Citation and driven out to sea. Another held that Our Lady of the Brick Wall had orchestrated it all to teach Brenda Hadley to count her blessings, each and every one, including the

JANIECE ANJALI

Mexican teenager and the swap meet vendor who saved her favorite.

Chapter Thirty

When the Hadley family heard from Travis how the near tragedy had been caused and the school board and the central office had been briefed, the Hadley daughters-in-law opened individual bank accounts for themselves and made their husbands build a fence around the junk that they were able to salvage after the water receded.

In the middle of June, Deedee scheduled a meeting in the library with Sienna, Jolie, and Nancy. To the teachers' surprise, Mimi and Dr. Fray were there as well. The air was rife with tension.

Dr. Fray began gravely. "We seem to have some irregularities on this year's WASTE."

"What kind of irregularities?" Sienna asked.

"Well, the first one," Dr. Fray said, "is that almost every fourth grader in your ELL writing group passed the writing portion. This is quite startling. ELL students rarely, if ever, pass."

"Oh!" Sienna was giddy. "That's wonderful!" She beamed happily around the table. Mimi and Deedee were stone-faced. Nancy snarled, "They took that part of the WASTE in here with her."

"So?" Jolie asked. "I was in here the whole time. There

was no cheating.”

“It’s difficult for kids to cheat on the writing portion,” Dr. Fray observed. “But we will need your word on that, Jolie. Would you be prepared to sign an affidavit attesting to that?”

Jolie glanced at Sienna. “Of course.”

“Well, there’s another irregularity,” Deedee said, “and it’s much more important because it has to do with reading. Apparently, all of the ELL fourth graders in Nancy’s class had the exact same scores on the reading component.”

“How did that happen?” Sienna asked.

“We aren’t accusing you of anything yet,” Mimi said to Sienna. She looked from Nancy to Jolie. “We were just wondering if any of you might be able to shed some light on this situation for us.”

“You need to tell the truth,” Deedee said.

“Did they pass?” Sienna asked.

“No!” Deedee snapped. “We’re still a failing school—worse than ever—and now, we will be seen as a cheating school.” She shrieked, “We’re even failing at cheating because we got caught! GOTCHA News 4 is gonna have a field day. Now, I’m never, ever, going to be the toast of the realtor’s luncheon.” Deedee laid her face down on the table and covered her head with her arms, sobbing.

Dr. Fray cleared his throat.

Sienna said, “But, I was in Nancy’s classroom with her during the reading test. I was with her the whole time.”

Nancy stammered. “Nothing happened. Sienna just passed out tissue and barf bags.”

Mimi said. “She also read a few questions over kids’ shoulders.”

Nancy said. “She didn’t give anyone answers. The on-

ly strange thing that happened in there during the reading section was that Cassandra Fuentes couldn't sit still to save her life."

"Did you inform the test coordinator?" Dr. Fray asked.

Nancy looked at him blankly.

Dr. Fray asked, "Who was the test coordinator at Moore?"

Deedee raised her tear-streaked face, saying "Mimi" just as Mimi said, "Deedee."

"I'd say it's irregular not to know who the test coordinator is," Jolie remarked.

Sienna explained, "It used to be the school counselor, but since we don't have one anymore..."

"What happened to her?" Mimi asked.

"Budget cuts," Sienna said. "She was considered non-essential."

Dr. Fray's pen was poised. "Nancy, did you inform either test coordinator about the irregularity?"

"Which irregularity?" Nancy asked.

"The itchy kid," he replied.

Nancy shook her head. "Cassandra is an ELL kid. If there was a problem, it would have been Sienna's responsibility to report it."

Everyone around the table stared expectantly at Sienna. She looked at the anthologies of her students' beautifully illustrated stories displayed on the whiteboard ledge. She remembered the story Pilar had written after the night with *La Llorona*.

The Awka Rock

By Pilar

Mermaids make awka rocks with matriz. If there is water in

an awka rock, it makes a mirror. One time my mother say a girl needs the awka rock if La Llorona comes around. She say if La Llorona looks into one and sees herself so mad and sad, she won't drown you. In my country, it was not La Llorona after me. It was men with big guns. They want to take kids. We run. My mother—she stop and fill awka rocks with water. I pray the bad people look in and go away. I pray to Our Lady of the Brick Wall that the mermaids help my mother and my father and my grandmother.

Suddenly, the whole administrative inquisition made sense to Sienna. Cassandra and all the kids had been praying to Our Lady of the Brick Wall before the WASTE. Sienna remembered their little ritual. The little girl who'd been an angel on Halloween hadn't been getting a rash during the WASTE; she'd been trying to help her friends, the best way she knew how. She'd made the sign of the cross with her thumb on her forehead if the answer to the test question was A, on her solar plexus if it was B, on her left shoulder for C and her right shoulder for D. She had tried to be blessing, to be generous, to be *altruistic*, to ease the fear pulsating in the room, to tide them over until they could get back to *The Writers' Lair*. The children had watched her exaggerated signs and recorded the answers, trusting that Cassandra's toes were channeling the correct choices through *Mary*, *Jesus*, and *Joseph*.

Mimi spoke to Dr. Fray. "Sienna did not inform me of an irregularity."

"She didn't say a word," Deedee added.

"The DFA doesn't require us to report a child's skin condition," Sienna said.

"DFA?" Dr. Fray asked.

"Directions for Administration," Nancy said smugly.

"Why didn't you bring this girl to anyone else's attention, Sienna?" Dr. Fray asked.

"I did. I talked to all of them about Cassandra before," Sienna said. "I told them that *Reading Fare* is too frustrating for her and the other English Learners. I told Deedee that Cassandra has been coping with the curriculum through prayer."

Deedee scoffed. "So, she was praying during the WASTE?"

"She wasn't praying. She was..." Nancy broke off, resorting to mimicking Cassandra's motions.

"Seems Pentecostal," Deedee said.

Dr. Fray cleared his throat again. "She was probably just fidgeting. She sounds like a sweet kid who cares about doing well."

"They are all sweet kids who care about doing well," Sienna said. "When they write their own stories, they already know what they want to convey. That lets them focus on the English they need to learn to say what they already comprehend. When they write, they get to practice reading what they and their friends have written and they learn more words through revision. Once they have success with that, they want to read and understand what other authors have written. Right now, when they work with *Reading Fare*, they say their Reading Babies are dead. They say they are being smashed or drowned by words."

Sienna wanted to show him the students' stories, but worried she'd be proving her infidelity to *Reading Fare* if she did.

"Writing their own stories has nothing to do with our reading scores on the WASTE," Mimi said. "Neither will it promote success on the new NASTE."

"They passed the writing!" Jolie broke in. "We should

celebrate!"

Dr. Fray nodded. "The writing scores are something to be proud of."

"But we are judged and funded on reading and math scores," Mimi said.

Deedee said, "So, Sienna needs to get over herself and stop bragging. This is a perfect example of why I'm so keen on uniforms for our staff. We have to be a team. I run Moore just like a family. If one sister gets too high up on her high horse, the others just have to cut her down. It's for everyone's own good."

Dr. Fray furrowed his brow.

Deedee continued. "It is time to put this program to rest in peace, Sienna. No one cares about whether or not these kids can write about what happened to them in Mexico or wherever."

Sienna looked at *La Mujer de Tierra* with her eerily hollow *rebozo*. She asked Dr. Fray, "How can this be?"

He thought of the district administrators and the elected local school board. He thought of the state legislature, the federal government, the Supreme Court, taxpayers, curriculum designers, publishers, for-profit testing companies, special interest groups, and culture wars. Dr. Fray shrugged.

Sienna thought of each of the children and *The Maritza*, *La Sirena*, the Statue of Liberty, the Swami, a nasty goat named *Diablo*, all the ancestors, *El Dia de Los Muertos*, *La Madre Ardiendo*, *La Mujer de Tierra*, *La Llorona*, Our Lady of the Brick Wall, the Contemplation of Justice. She looked at Deedee and sighed.

Some say what happened in the *Writers' Lair* was an illusion. In a place where only that which is measurable counts, it is very difficult to tell. But you—you have been

ILLUSIONS OF MORE

told. In *The Writers' Lair* we can make what we need. I'll meet you at the Swami.

Who's Who in Purewater

School Superintendent: Dr. Fray School Board President: Brenda Hadley Moore Elementary School Staff: Principal: Deedee Hayes Dean of Reading Fare: Mimi Lang School Secretary: Mrs. Donahue School Custodian: Mic Swabby School Librarian: Jolie Fox (dating Capt. Goodwin) K-5 ELL Teacher: Sienna O'Mara First Grade Teachers and Students Mavis Penn (married to Mr. Penn at the bank) Bao Yang and Lucero Fuentes Ashley Albright Sam and Enrique Second Grade Teachers and Students Tammy Lewis Jesus and Valentin Fourth Grade Teacher and Students Nancy Albright Pilar, Cassandra, Javier, Miguel, Lupe, Belmaris, Alondra, and Maria. Gringo Jonathan and Travis Hadley Lisa Alcott (Transferred to Teagan Hill) (Laurali Hadley; takes the shuttle to Teagan Hill) Sienna's personal life	Community Rebecca Hadley (Mayor) B.J. Baldwin (Bank Robber) Mr. Penn (Bank manager) Wolfgang Goodwin (Police Chief) Officer Stroup Master In-Su (Tae Kwon Do Instructor) Grandma Yang (Florist) Ramon and Lucia Vega (Restaurateurs) Angela Hadley (Travis' mom) Ian Hadley (Laurali's dad) Special Interests Chase Haight (Media Mogul) Jules Holdaway (CEO and heir of Pica Curriculum and Testing Conglomerate) Senator Panky Pilar's personal life Lucia and Ramon (godparents and aunt and uncle) Esteban (brother) Dulce Gantala (Esteban's girlfriend) Uncle Raul (in detention center) Esperanza Luz (Mother) missing; presumed dead Pablo Flores (Father) missing; presumed dead Abuela (Grandmother) missing; presumed dead Gaul Santiago (grandson of former governor of Clemencia, Family friend, art dealer)
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ILLUSIONS OF MORE

Matt (son) Andy Dahlstrom (Professor) Bridget (mother) Aunt Susan Uncle Ed	
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