

ALY RUTHERFORD AND
THE ANCIENTS



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AND WENDIE WILLSON

ILLUSTRATED BY LUIS FAUSTO

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and Rebecca for their support.

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Mary Ann Eisenberg

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CHAPTER ONE

OCTOBER 5

“He’s been kidnapped!” I whisper, pressing my lips close to the cell phone. I wait and wait. “Chaco! Are you there?...Please say something. Don’t you remember? My mother’s been kidnapped.” My body wants to explode ‘cuz no one ever listens to me; they think I’m still a baby. They think I don’t understand, but I do, so I yell into the phone, “SHE’S BEEN KIDNAPPED!”

“Aly, I know, but the police have come to the conclusion that there’s no evidence of foul play, and without evidence they have to close the case.”

"No! They can't. You have to make them look for her!"

"Aly, shhh..."

"Don't shush me. This is MY mother and your best friend. Please, we have to find her. You have to do something. I don't want to be trapped here in California when I should be there."

"I know. I tried to persuade the police to keep looking, but they refused, so I spoke to the editor of *Geo World*. He's concerned about your mother, too. And..."

"And what?"

"Well, he's going to hire a private investigator."

"He is? When?"

"I don't know. Ummm, I'm sure soon, if he hasn't already."

"Chaco, I'm like really unhappy here. I should be with you in Mexico City. Why did you make me come to California with MeMar?"

"She's your grandmother."

"Duh. But it doesn't make sense for me to be HERE when my mom disappeared THERE."

"You have to know I wanted you to stay with me, but your grandmother wanted you with her."

I had no say in the matter. When do you start school?"

"Huh? START SCHOOL? WHO CARES?" I scream and hang up.

"To whom are you yelling?" A skinny little kid peers at me through his round, horn-rimmed glasses.

"Chaco," I growl. "He makes me so angry 'cuz I should be in Mexico, looking for my mom. There was this earthquake and..."

"Earthquake?"

"Yeah, four days ago in Mexico City. It was scary wild, like riding an elephant: lamps crashing, pictures falling, furniture moving. All I could do was brace myself, hoping the shaking would stop.

"Then there was this weird silence. Eerie, you know, but then Chaco shouted to see if everyone was OK. I was. MeMar was. Of course, Chaco was. We all checked in except my mom. I panicked 'cuz she was just there a minute earlier. We searched the house—nothing, nada, gone. So now I'm trapped here with MeMar when I should be in Mexico. You got it? I have to find a way to get out of here, but none of the adults will listen to me."

"I'm listening to you."

Oh no, it's starting again: that ache right behind my eyes. "Who are you, anyway? And where'd you come from?" I hiss through gritted teeth, trying to hold back the tears.

"Well, who are you?"

"Ah...never mind," I grumble, turning to exit.

"Wait; I'm sorry. Let me introduce myself. My name is Nicholas, and I'm your neighbor. Perhaps I can help."

I stare at this little kid with spiky brown hair, dressed like he's on safari with khaki pants and a bulging vest that's got to have nine million pockets. "Oh yeah, sure. What are you, seven? How are you going to help me?"



"Actually, I'm six, and if I can't, I know my brother can, because he is resourceful."

This little dude is beyond strange, I'm thinking, getting ready to shine him on, when his vest starts talking. "What's that?"

"That voice belongs to my brother Dylan," he says, producing a walkie-talkie. He proceeds to speak into it. "Roger that. I'm in front of Mrs. Foster's. Need you. Over and out."

The next thing I know, I'm dodging a little white ball. "Hey, you almost hit me," I say to a tall, lanky boy emerging from between our houses; his bright blue eyes peek out from beneath his red baseball cap.

"Missed you by a mile," he says, retrieving his ball. "What's up, Nick?"

"You know you're not supposed to use real balls around the house. You could hurt someone," Nicholas says, wagging his finger.

"You're such an old man, Nick. What do you want, anyway?"

"I want to introduce you to my new friend..."

"Aly," I say.

"Aly, this is my brother Dylan."

"Hi," he says and then ignores me completely.

"Aly needs to return to Mexico, and I informed her we would help."

Dylan snickers. "Yeah, right."

"It's OK. Thanks, anyway, Nicholas. See you around." I make a beeline for the house. I'm so embarrassed.

Not a second later, the little kid starts screaming. As I whirl around to see what's up, two enormous white birds almost crash into me. I duck. They whiz by my face and swoop up and over the house. One of them squawks something like "Bull's-eye!" At least that's what it sounded like.

"Dylan, Dylan, I think I'm blind!" Nicholas cries.

"I can't see anything, Nick. Hold still."

"I can't. It burns."

"What happened?" I ask.

"A bird pooped in my eye."

Dylan doubles over, laughing.

"Stop," Nicholas says, "or I will inform Mother of your behavior."

"It's funny," Dylan says, trying to suppress his laughter.

"Stop!"

"Hey, you know it's good luck when a bird poops in your eye," I say.

"It is?"

"Yeah, it's an old superstition, but I believe it."

"I don't know if I like receiving good luck this way."

"Well..." Not knowing what else to say, I add, "I'm glad you're OK."

Nicholas pushes Dylan's hand away from his face. "Aly, your grandmother informed my mother that you would be attending Paseo Real Elementary School. I'd like to accompany you to school tomorrow. I'll see you at seven thirty."

"Ummm..." I don't want to walk to school with anyone, and MeMar has a big mouth.

"It's no use, Aly. My little brother will drive you crazy until you say yes."

I nod reluctantly. "OK, Nicholas. See you in the morning." I do an about-face and head inside. "That was weird," I say out loud to no one in particular and then head upstairs to my mom's old room. *Did that bird...? Nah, I'm thinking as I*

open the door and see my overstuffed suitcase. Guess I should unpack even though I know my mom will be found, and I'll be home soon. Oh no, that ache again. "Stop!" I yell, diving onto the bed, covering my face in her soft indigo comforter. The tears come anyway.

Tap, tap, tap.

I peer over the edge of the bed and spot two white birds at the window.

Tap, tap, tap!

"Open up, we need to talk to you."



CHAPTER TWO

OCTOBER 6

"**Y**ou need to talk to me? Go away!" I scream while trying to shut the window. It won't close. "Go away. Talk to someone else." Huge white wings encase my body. I'm suffocating.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. TAP, TAP, TAP! The tap, tap, tapping dissolves, and the song "Hound Dog" blasts my eardrums. I bolt upright, gasping for breath. It was only a dream.

"Aly. Woo-hoo, Aly, are you awake?"

It's MeMar. She is the only one I know who can do that bizarre "woo-hoo" that sounds like a trumpet. I groan and turn off the alarm clock.

Elvis goes silent until tomorrow morning. I'm awake, and there are no white birds, only things that remind me of my mom. I see her old black-and-white photographs everywhere. There's one of a massive tree, and some others have blue ribbons attached to the frames. Funny, seems like forever since I've been here. I think the last time we visited MeMar, I was six, and Mom told me about the different photos. She told me the tree was her favorite tree in all of Paseo Real. She also showed me this secret compartment in her rolltop desk. I wonder if I can still remember how to open it.

"Aly, you don't want to be late for your first day of school!"

"OK," I call out. Truth is, I don't want to go to another school. 'Cuz of my mom's work, I've been to too many schools already. This will be my third school. One great thing, though: no uniforms! In China, it was a green skirt and white blouse. In Mexico, it was a blue skirt and a white blouse—oh, I forgot, our cardigans matched our skirts, so for a long time, I had lots of white blouses, green-and-blue skirts, and ditto with the

cardigans. Here I get to choose what I wear, so I'm wearing my pink Great Wall of China T-shirt and jeans.

"Aly, your breakfast is getting cold." The trumpet, again.

Quickly, I grab my most favorite pair of shoes: purple high-tops. Yep, purple. They're the coolest shoes I own. MeMar gave them to me for my birthday. I figure they'll give me courage. As a matter of fact, I'm wearing all my favorites today 'cuz, to tell the truth, I'm scared.

When I hit the stairs, I smell bacon—my favorite! But today, *gag*, I'm not hungry. Too bad, 'cuz when I walk into the kitchen, I see a table with every kind of breakfast you can imagine. There are eggs, waffles, pancakes, toast, sausage, melon, blueberries, and...oh no—prunes. *Gag* me twice.

"Aly, I wasn't sure what you liked, so I made a little bit of everything. Did you know your mother always ate a big breakfast before she went to school?"

Nicholas calls from the front porch, "Excuse me. Is Aly ready?"

"Got to go. Don't want to keep Nicholas waiting. Don't want to be late for school."

"Oh, here's your lunch, and here's a bacon sandwich to eat on the way."

"Thanks." I grab the lunch bag in one hand and the bacon sandwich in the other and head for the door. I stare at the bacon sandwich; I'm not eating this. Then I remember the hibiscus bushes by the front porch, the perfect place for a bacon sandwich.

"Oh my, Aly. What, may I ask, are you doing?"

I signal for Nicholas to be quiet as I say goodbye to my bacon sandwich and wish the bushes *buen provecha*. That means "good eating" in Spanish. "So, how's your eye?"

"Much better. I mean, terrific, because I discovered it was a white raven that..." Nicholas scrunches his face as if he's just eaten something nasty and continues, "pooped in it. When I described the bird to my father, he informed me it was a white raven and that he saw one when he was little. They haven't been seen around this part of California for a long time because they are extremely rare."

"So they're white ravens; hmmm." I want so badly to tell him they talk, but I know better than to open my mouth. He'll for sure think I'm crazy. "Hey, what do you have in your bag?"

"It's for show-and-tell. You see, it's a dolphin." Nicholas holds up one of those small glass-globe things that usually have snow in them. You know, you turn it upside down and then right side up, and it snows, but this globe has a little dolphin swimming in blue water that looks like the ocean. "My mother and father bought it for me in Florida," he says, carefully tucking it back into his bag as he marches down the street two strides in front of me.



"Hi, Nicholas," says a little blond girl, holding her mother's hand. "Is that your show-and-tell in your bag?"

"No, it's mine," an unfamiliar voice spits out.

Next thing I know, a gloved hand reaches out and snatches the bag from Nicholas.

"Look, everyone; I have my show-and-tell." The kid, his skin a light-coffee color, mimics Nicholas as he holds the bag high in the air. And then, *swish*, that kid, who is more than twice the size of Nicholas, takes off on his skateboard.

I try to catch the jerk, but it's a losing battle, so I rush back to Nicholas to ask if he's OK. Stupid question, I know, but I don't know what else to say. I notice tears climbing up and over the rims of his big brown eyes, so I quickly take his hand. "Who was that kid?"

"His name is David...I mean Dave, and he's in Dylan's class."

"Well, I'll get your dolphin back."

"I appreciate that, but I'll ask Dylan because Dave is a bully, and Dylan isn't afraid of anything!"

"Well, neither am I!"

"Hurry, Aly, that's the bell." Nicholas releases my hand and runs up to the school's gate. I promptly follow.

"Good morning, Nicholas," says a large, imposing woman dressed in black. Her voice is scratchy, and she smells of cigarettes. "Hurry along; you don't want to be late."

"Yes, ma'am. Mrs. Brisbane, this is..."

"Ah, you must be Aletrice Nike Rutherford. You are in room five. It's right down the walkway."

"I'll take her," Nicholas pipes in. "That's my brother's room, too."

"That will be fine, Nicholas, but don't dawdle. Aletrice, Mrs. Rubenstein is your teacher, and she's expecting you." She hands me some papers. "Please give these to her."

"I will. Thank you, Mrs. Brisbane. Show me the way, Nicholas."

"Are you famous?"

"No, silly. Why do you ask?"

"I overheard Mrs. Brisbane calling you Aletrice NIKE Rutherford. I'm sure I heard Nike."

"All the women in our family have that as our middle name. Do you know anything about Nike?"

"Oh yes, I know who Nike is...a sneaker," he snickers. "That was a joke."

"So, smarty pants, who was she?"

"A goddess and she personified victory. Here's your room, Aly."

"You're pretty smart for a six-year-old. Meet you after school, OK?"

"OK." Nicholas skips away.

I wave good-bye, take a deep breath, and open the door. There's a short, plump woman with graying, frizzy hair writing on the board. The flesh on her upper arm wobbles as she holds the marker and writes out, "Oral presentations today." My insides flop at the thought of standing up and talking in front of a room full of kids I don't know.

She turns and smiles. "Aletrice?"

I nod.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you. I'm Mrs. Rubenstein." She extends her hand.

That's when I notice she has those half glasses hanging on a chain around her neck.

Immediately, I'm reminded of Chaco, and I feel much better. She points to my desk in the FRONT ROW and asks if I have any questions.

"Mrs. Brisbane told me to give these to you," I say and hand over the papers. "And, um... could, um...could you call me Aly, please?"

I'm going to call Mrs. Rubenstein "Mrs. R." but not to her face. Anyway, she looks at me and says, "All right."

I take my seat in the front row, but I'm not happy about it. After I settle in, Dylan walks in with several boys. They're all shoving and giggling and being totally stupid. He looks my way but plays like he doesn't know me. Then a red-haired girl with a long ponytail sits to my left.

"Hi, my name is Kathleen, and I know we are going to be best friends, so you can call me Kathy."

I wonder how she knows we're going to be best friends, and hey, I pretty well know I'm not going to fit in at Paseo Real Elementary School 'cuz I won't be here that long! Another bell rings, and everyone settles down. Mrs. R. points at the

board and begins to talk about the assignment for the day, when the door busts open, and the skateboarder walks in.

"David, you're late." Mrs. R. is polite, but I know he's in trouble. I'm glad. I want him to be in serious trouble.

He slams his butt into the seat right next to me. I can't believe it. "Idiot," I hiss.

"What did you say to me, freckle face?"

Right then and there, I want to slug him. Yep, I have freckles, and I hate them.

"What did you say, David?" Mrs. R. asks.

"Mrs. Rubenstein, I was wondering if you would please call me Dave." His voice oozes with charm. "You know, like I asked you before, at the beginning of the school year."

"Very well, Dave."

I'm thinking, *disgusting!* After that, the morning goes by pretty seamlessly—that is, until we get to the personal sharing part. Specifically, Mrs. R. wants to know the most interesting places we've ever been. Kids talk about Disneyland, Disney World, their trips to the shore, and stuff like that.

"Aly, do you have a favorite place?"

Oh cripes, my turn! "Uh, well, uh...uh, uh, I can talk a little about China. I went to school there for a year."

"That would be perfect," Mrs. R. says gleefully.

So I talked, but I can't tell you what I said. All I remember is that I survived, and for that I'm grateful. But then the class begins to ask lots of questions, like do I speak Chinese?

"No!"

Why did I live there?

"My mom's a photojournalist."

How far is China from here?

"You should look at a map."

What did I eat?

"Dim sum with chopsticks."

Then more hands. Thank goodness for the bell—it's lunchtime. I follow everyone to the cafeteria and try to eat the worst peanut-butter sandwich I've ever had. I want my mom. I'll even take Chaco. I close my eyes and imagine I'm sitting in my bedroom in Mexico City, and then it happens: tears! I look down and stare at my purple high-tops.

Back in class, the sharing continues. It's Dave's turn. Leaning casually against Mrs. R.'s desk, he talks about his trip to SeaWorld and how he loves dolphins. As a matter of fact, he loves them so much he bought a souvenir. Then he produces the globe he stole from Nicholas. What a liar. I want to stick my hand in the air and tell everyone what he did, but I know that would be a mistake, so I write "Liar" in huge letters in my notebook so he can see it. Let me tell you how glad I am to hear the final bell of the day. Oh, and guess who's waiting for me.

"Who you calling a liar?"

"Give me Nicholas's globe, and I won't say anything."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"The globe you took from Nicholas, the one you lied about, the one you said you bought at SeaWorld. I bet you've never been to SeaWorld." OK, I made him mad. Next thing I know, he slams me up against a locker.

"Don't mess with me. Understand?"

He bangs my head against the metal door. I have to tell you, it hurt.

"Oh, and here's the precious globe." And then he drops it on the ground. "Oops, it slipped." He laughs.

I stare at the little rubber dolphin lying in broken glass and a puddle of water.



CHAPTER THREE

OCTOBER 8

"Chaco, did you hear anything about Mom?...I know, I called this morning....I want her to come home so I can come home.... School is fine. MeMar is fine....I don't know, we don't talk, but...I'm going to see her now." I groan. "Did you talk to the private investigator?...What do you mean, why do I keep asking? It's about Mom, just to let you know!" I hang up.

"Hi, Aly," Nicholas says. "May I take a look at your cell phone?"

"No!"

"Why are you so grumpy? Oh, I know; you were talking to that gentleman Chaco again. You always get angry when you talk to him. Any luck yet with your mother?"

I hunch my shoulders in my "don't ask" posture.

Nicholas ignores me and instead leans in and puts his face right in front of mine and, without blinking, looks me in the eye. "Well, have you?"

"No! That answer your question?"

"Who is Chaco, anyway?"

"He works with my mom, and I've known him all my life. Are we going into town or not?"

"Yes, come on. I so wish I could have a cell phone, but I won't get one until I'm in middle school. I don't understand why Dylan gets one in the fourth grade, and I have to wait until middle school. Oh, and Aly, I know it's not your fault about the dolphin. I told you, Dave is a bully. My mother said she would buy me another."

Anyway, on and on he goes about how his dad is a big honcho at the local country club, blab, blab, blab. I tune him out and notice the trees and how their leaves are changing

colors. They're red and orange and golden, and some trees look like they are on fire. The last time I saw leaves turning, I was with my mom, and we were in New York. Funny, Mom told me about leaves turning here, where she grew up, and now I'm here, seeing what she talked about. Oh no, there's that pain in my eye again. I need to find her soon to make this ache go away.

"Look, Aly, there's the Greeter."

Standing on the corner, a disheveled giant of a man with wild, long, gray hair is waving and shouting "Allo" to all the cars. As they pass, he stoops to look in their windows.

"Funny, why's he doing that?"

Nicholas shrugs his shoulders and heads for the newspaper office. "Last one there is a rotten egg," he hollers and races ahead of me.

Fine, so I'm a rotten egg.

When we push open the door, a little bell jingles, an old-fashioned alarm. A tall man with an unshaven face pops up from behind the counter. "May I help you? Oh, hello...you must be Aly. It's nice to finally meet you." He extends his

hand. "I'm David Miller. My son mentioned that you two were in the same class."

"Who's your son?" I ask.

"Dave."

Nicholas and I do a double take.

"DAVE. He—"

"Oh, is he feeling better?" I interrupt Nicholas before he spills the beans about his globe.

"Of course. Why do you ask? Did he get sick at school today? He says he sees you every day."

"Well, actually, he wasn't at school today. That's why I asked. Anyway, uh, it's very nice to meet you." I notice Mr. Miller's face falls into a really sad expression, and I kind of feel horrible for telling the truth. Come to think of it, no, I don't feel horrible at all.

"May I ask why you're Caucasian, and Dave's African-American?"

"Nicholas, shhh."

"That's all right, Aly. Nicholas, Dave is part African-American because his mother is from Kenya. I met her when I was studying there."

"Is my grandmother here?" I ask, to end the conversation.

He pats me on my head. "I'll go find her for you."

We stand there and watch Mr. Miller walk down the hall.

"I hope he gets into trouble," I whisper.

"My sentiments exactly," Nicholas says.

"Welcome, you two," my grandmother calls from her office door and gestures for us to come over. "How was school?"

"OK. I talked to Chaco and—"

"Tell me all about it at dinner. I am so sorry. I want to show you around, but I have a deadline to meet. Take a rain check?"

"Sure. We just wanted to stop in and say hello. Nicholas is giving me a grand tour of the city."

"Be sure to go to the Panadería," MeMar says and slips me five dollars.

I turn to Nicholas. "OK, Mr. Guide, what's next? *¿Vamanos a la panadería?*"

"What did you just say to me? I only speak a little Spanish, just so you know," Nicholas grumbles. "But I want to learn more if you'll teach me."

"I said, 'Let's go to the Panadería.' OK or sí?"

Nicolas grabs my hand. "Sí."

We follow our noses to the best smells on the block. My expectations increase when we open the bakery door. It's like we're walking into the middle of the yummiest-smelling cake ever. There's a short, plump man standing behind the counter wearing a *guayabera*, a Mexican wedding shirt. He's got shiny black hair and a pencil-thin moustache that extends way past the middle of his cheeks.

"*Buenas tardes, señor Rojas.*"

"*Mi amiguito, Nicholás. ¿Cómo estas?*"

"*Bien.* This is my new friend, Aly, and she speaks Spanish."

"*Mucho gusto, señorita.*"

"*Mucho gusto,*" I say, wishing I was back in Mexico.

"*¿Estas bien?*" Sr. Rojas asks.

"*Sí, estoy bien.*"

"I want to show Aly your special pastries. Would that be all right?"

"*Sí, take your time.*"

"Aly, look over here."

I peer into a case full of colorful, dome-shaped sweet breads that have designs etched on each one. Oh, I want, I want, I want. I want a chocolate one, a vanilla one, a strawberry one, a lemon—



"Allo...allo, señor Rojas."

I turn to see that Greeter with Dave!

"Hola, señor Greeter. *¿Lo mismo que siempre?*"

"Yes, the same pan dulce I always have. I know you make it special for me."

Señor Rojas goes to the case that I have been drooling over and picks up a chocolate pastry and hands it to the Greeter. "And you, Dave. *¿Quieres lo mismo que siempre? También, puedes trabajar para mi este Sábado?*"

Hmmm. Dave works for señor Rojas. I wonder what he does...probably steals the pastries.

Dave nods his head. "Yup, the same as always." He takes a yellow bun from señor Rojas. "What time Saturday?"

"A las ocho, por favor."

"OK, eight it is." Then Dave looks at me and says loud enough for the whole world to hear, "I'm getting out of here because this place is contaminated." He leaves, slamming the door.

In all the commotion, the Greeter drops some coins. I lean over and pick up two quarters, some pennies, and this marble disc with a design etched into it.

"Excuse me, you dropped these."

The Greeter smiles a thank you, pays, and leaves.

"*Aly, tengo una especial para ti, también.*" Señor Rojas smiles as he twirls his black-waxed mustache.

"Aly, what did he say?" Nicholas nudges me.

"He said he has a special cake for me."

"Do you have a special one for me, too?"

"*Sí, cómo no, Nicholás.*"

"I think that means yes," Nicholas says. "Am I right?"

"*Sí, sí, señor Nicholás.*"

He giggles, and we both take our pan dulces and head for the door, calling out, "*Gracias.*" One bite and I'm hooked. I'll definitely be back tomorrow.

We find the Greeter outside. Dave is nowhere in sight. The Greeter asks me if I am Athropa's daughter. I say yes, and then he takes my arm and gets his face so close to mine that I can smell chocolate. He reveals that he knows my mother and has something to tell me but can't remember what it is. I'm thinking, *Thanks for the share.*

"OK." I pat the Greeter's arm. "I'll look for you tomorrow. Maybe you'll remember then. Come on, Nicholas."

He's off, and I'm the rotten egg again.

When we reach Nicholas's house, he introduces me to his mom. She's beautiful in a sporty kind of way, with her blond hair tied in a ponytail, and she has the same sparkly blue eyes that Dylan has.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. James."

"Nice to meet you, Aly. Dinner is in an hour, Nicholas." Then she turns to me. "Would you like to stay?"

"No, thank you. But it sure smells good," I say with a tinge of envy.

"Come on, Aly." Nicholas races up the stairs. "Come on." He ushers me over to his window and points. "See, we face each other." Then he's off, hollering for his mother.

Dylan walks in. "What are you doing here?"

"Nicholas is showing me how our bedroom windows face each other."

"Dylan shakes his head. "Unbelievable. Hey, look. Aren't those the white ravens...?"

"Where?"

"Over there." Dylan points to the tree just outside my bedroom window.

"Gotta go. See you tomorrow." I almost knock Nicholas over in my haste. "Oops, sorry. Bye, Nicholas."

I race home, run up the stairs, and fling open the window. "This is freaking me out," I yell at the ravens.

"Aletrice Nike Rutherford, get over it," one of the ravens says back to me.

"Or what?" I say.

"Or you'll fail."

"Aly, I'm home," MeMar calls from downstairs.

I bolt out of my bedroom, slamming the door behind me, and run right into MeMar's arms.

"You're shaking. What's wrong?" MeMar holds me at arm's length.

I look her in the eyes and say, "Nothing."



CHAPTER FOUR

OCTOBER 10

"Woo-hoo, Aly. Rise and shine. I have a surprise for you."

A surprise. What surprise? I grab whatever clothes are within reach and rush downstairs. My eyes fix on the kitchen table full of French toast—my favorite! Steam wafts from a small pitcher. I hope that's syrup. Alongside, there's a bowl of fresh blueberries. But the biggest surprise is MeMar emerging from the pantry in her chenille bathrobe.

"I hope you're hungry," she says.

"Famished." I know I shouldn't, but I grab a piece of French toast and stuff it in my mouth. Delicious. "Tastes like Mom's."

"I know!" she says.

I swallow quickly. "So how come you're still in your bathrobe? Are you OK?"

"Yes, I'm OK. Why?"

"'Cuz I've never seen you in your bathrobe."

"Now you have. Here, have some more French toast, and use your knife and fork."

"So, what's the occasion? I mean, why the French toast?" I ask, brandishing my utensils.

MeMar takes a bite of her food, chews, swallows, and gently cups her hand over mine. "I've been so busy at the paper that we haven't talked about your mom...since, you know. I miss her, too!" Her eyes glisten with tears. "When I look at you, I see her. Looking at you right now reminds me of the time in China when we all walked out of that funny restaurant with our chopsticks, and the waiter came running after us calling out something in Chinese that we didn't understand. He kept pointing at the chopsticks, and we kept saying, 'Souvenirs to remember our lunch.' Your mother took out her camera and wanted to take a picture. She told us to hold our chopsticks in the air and

motioned for the waiter to be in the picture. He shook his head no and made so much noise the police came. Well, we relinquished the chopsticks, and as soon as we got away from all the ruckus, we laughed so hard we had to sit down."

I chuckle, "You said we had to stop laughing, or you would wet your panties."

"Oh, I never said anything like that."

"Yes, you did, MeMar. I remember."

We are quiet as we reminisce.

"Hey, MeMar, remember when we raced up that pyramid in Mexico City, and Mom won. You fooled both of us and stood at the bottom cheering us on. You were supposed to be in the race, too."

MeMar sighs and wipes her eyes. I realize she misses Mom, too. I had forgotten how close they are. They are kind of like how Mom and I are now.

"MeMar, will we find Mom?"

She shrugs her shoulders. She seems far away, and then she says, "There was one time when your mother was small, your grandfather, Albert,

and I took her with us to our favorite lake. We hiked and swam. One day we rented a boat so we could go fishing. Your mom was little, so your grandfather bought a rod and reel that matched her size. It was a lovely day," MeMar sighs. "Albert baited your mom's hook and then dropped it in the water. We were so surprised when she caught a fish that we almost tipped the boat over trying to reel it in. With Albert's help, we landed the fish. Your mom screamed and threw her rod with the fish still on it into the lake," MeMar chuckles. "Albert almost fell in trying to retrieve it."

I watch MeMar as she tells the story. It's like she is back at the lake with Grandpa and Mom. "You miss them, don't you, MeMar?"

"Yes, I do," she whispers. I go to MeMar and put my arm around her. "MeMar, will you tell me more about my grandpa, please?"

She eases me away and nods her head yes. Then she totally startles me by telling me to bring my chair close. "We have things to discuss."

This does not sound promising, but I do as I'm told. "OK, MeMar, I'm listening."

"First things first. We will find your mother!" She stares at me until I nod my head in agreement. "Now, there is something I have to tell you, something your mother was required to talk to you about on your ninth birthday."

"Do you think that's why she disappeared?"

"I have no idea, and please be quiet so I can attempt to explain all of this. This is about you and the women in our family. We have been chosen to protect mankind."

"What?"

"Aly, we have been, that is, the women in our family have been, chosen to protect the people of the earth from extinction. We've had this duty for thousands of years. You, your mother, me, my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and so on. We are descendants of the original seven who saved the earth."

All I can manage to do is shake my head.

"The simplest thing for me to do is to tell you the story that was told to me by my mother, which was told to her by her mother and which I told your mother on her ninth birthday."

I stare at my hands, afraid of what she is about to tell me.

"In the beginning, the universe was ruled by a powerful god named Ianaha. All was well until another god by the name of Chaos decided he wanted control. Thus, a great battle began. Eventually Ianaha was victorious and banished Chaos. Using lightning bolts, she hurled him to the center of the earth to be trapped there forever." Here MeMar takes a deep breath and asks me if I am following the story. I nod. "By imprisoning Chaos, Ianaha didn't realize she had released evil. Soon after the battle, disease, hunger, destruction, and violence broke out on earth until most of the population had been destroyed. Under the secrecy of night, the remaining villages discussed what was happening and how to retrieve their world as they knew it. In one such village, only children remained. They huddled together in a cave and decided that the adults were powerless, and it was up to them to make the earth safe again. They knew that to do this, someone would have to talk to Ianaha. But which child would have the courage?

"Then a soft voice broke the silence. 'I will go.' The children turned and saw Nike, the smallest of the group, standing, ready to leave. They were silent, each fearing she would never return, as she left the cave. Nike walked many days and nights, calling out for Ianaha but got no answer. Eventually, she got so tired she sat down to rest and fell asleep. While she slept, Ianaha spoke to her.

"'Gather a group of seven,' she told Nike. 'Choose the strongest to find the evil and eat it. The others will dig deep trenches to the center of the earth. When the strongest ones' stomachs are full, they will throw up what they have eaten into the trenches. The others will seal the openings with slabs of rock. Your group is now the chosen seven. You will continue to be the seekers, because Chaos must never escape. You must always be on your guard, as must your descendants. Awake now.'

"Nike awoke, returned to the cave, and told the other children of her dream. They did as ordained, traveling the earth, eating evil, spewing it into deep trenches, and then sealing the trenches."

I am silent, so silent I think I hear the air moving. Is there more, or is this it? My mother and my grandmother, me...age of nine. "I'm nine!"

MeMar reaches for my hand. I don't want to give it to her; I don't want her to touch me. I don't know who she is anymore. "If Mom is one of these...people, how come she disappeared?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know, if you are a 'whatever'? Did you eat evil? How do you eat evil? Where are the others? Are there others? This is crazy. I can't do it all by myself! How am I supposed to know what to do? I don't want to do this! I want my mother!" I blabber, feeling helpless.

"Aly, I'm sorry your mother is not here."

"So am I," I yell. I race to my room and lock the door.

A moment later, there's a knock. "Aly, open the door. I forgot to give you something. Aly, open the door."

"No."

"I have something of your mother's."

"What?" I say, opening the door a sliver.

"I forgot to give this to you." She pushes the door open, pulls an object from her pocket, and hands it to me. "This disc. I found it on your mother's bed the day of the earthquake."

I hold it in my hand and study it. "I've seen this before. The Greeter has one."

"Interesting." She furrows her brows. "Are you OK?"

"No," I say and slam the door in her face.



CHAPTER FIVE

THAT AFTERNOON

I slump down on the floor, feeling desperate, holding the disc in my hand, and staring at it. Huh...other than it having this unusual symbol etched into the surface, it's just a marble disc. Why would the Greeter have a disc like this?

"Aly," Nicholas yells from below my bedroom window. "Aly, Aly, Aly, Aly, Aly. Didn't you hear me knocking at your door?"

"LEAVE ME ALONE. EVERYONE LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Aly, Aly, Aly, Aly, Aly, Aly," Nicholas sings.

I get up, open the window, and shout, "What?"

"Shall we go to the glade?"

"No. I can't."

"Why, may I ask?"

"'Cuz."

"You're sick."

"Sick? I am not sick. What are you talking about?"

"If you will allow me, I will explain, but you must come down. Please?"

"OK. Meet you out front." I know this pain-in-the-butt kid won't leave me alone, so I lumber downstairs and kick open the screen door. "What do you mean, I'm sick?"

"Actually, sick means cool, neat."

I want to throttle him, but he's only six. "Buddy, that's so old. And besides, sick is not about people unless, you know, they are really sick, like ill. Sick is about things, situations."

"May I ask why you are so cranky?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Good, then let's go to the glade."

"Nah, it's going to rain."

"Actually, Dylan checked his computer, and the forecast says no rain, low clouds

only. Follow me. The path to our destination awaits."

"What's Dylan doing?"

"He's being tutored."

"Really? Tutored in what?"

"I'm actually not allowed to say."

"Come on, Nicholas. I won't tell."

"Cross your heart?"

I roll my eyes. "I cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye, if I lie."

"Dylan can't read. He's dyslectic."

"Oh! What's that?"

"Dyslexia is a learning disability specific to reading and word recognition. So are we going to the glade or not?"

"Sure."

We head down the street against my better judgment, but I figure at least it's better than sitting around thinking about all this evil-eating.

"Where is this place?"

"Right across the street from school." Nicholas runs ahead. "See that gnarled tree? That's the entrance." He ducks under the lowest branch.

"Aly, if you wouldn't mind, I would like you to hold my hand because it's rather spooky in here."

"What's so spooky about it? Waaahaahaa!" I chant like a ghost in a horror movie.

"Stop! You're attempting to scare me, and it's...it's working."

"Oops, sorry. I promise I won't let any zombies suck your brains."

"Stop." He takes my hand and pulls me through. "Follow me."

"So, Nicholas, do you know where we're going?"

"I'm looking for our marker. Dylan tied a piece of cloth to one of the trees. It should be around here someplace. It's yellow."

As we stomp through the forest, dense with trees of all sizes and shapes, I strain my eyes, looking for this yellow cloth. It's hard to find a yellow cloth when the leaves are turning yellow. *Not a smart move*, I'm thinking.

"Four hundred ninety-eight, four hundred ninety-nine..."

"Why are you counting?"

"I am counting my steps because..." Nicholas runs up to a scrawny pine tree. "Here it is. Now we have to head east. See? I have a compass, and don't worry, Aly, there's a trail coming quite soon."

"Oh yeah, so where's this trail?"

"Right here. Voilà!"

To my surprise, the forest offers up a well-defined path covered in crumbled rock and pebbles. We follow it to a clearing full of dried grass and weeds. I spot a narrow brook at its edge. It looks like it runs along the right side of the clearing, and at the far end, stands a solitary tree.

Nicholas runs toward it. "Last one there's a rotten egg!"

I head toward the tree, the same tree as the one in the photograph hanging in my mom's room. "Nicholas."

"What?"

"This is my mom's favorite tree."



"How do you know?"

"There's a black-and-white picture of a tree in my mom's room, and she told me it's her favorite tree in Paseo Real."

"Oh my, shall we climb her? You will, of course, have to give me a boost. Oh, Aly, by the way, you can actually see everywhere from up there."

I knot my fingers together. "Step on." After I hoist him up, I follow him to the top, where

there's a bunch of branches woven together, sort of like a nest. Nicholas assures me it's sturdy enough for us both.

"Wow!" You CAN see everywhere.

He pulls a pair of binoculars from his backpack. "Here, Aly, look over there. That's Chaos Crag, where the volcano is located. Did your mother ever take pictures of it? Actually, there's a legend that the volcano was created by Ianaha...you know, an ancient god? She got angry with another god named Chaos. They fought, and Ianaha cast him out of the heavens. Chaos landed with such force that he made this gigantic hole. Legend says he became so angry, he started spitting lava. Whenever the volcano erupts, everyone says that Chaos is trying to escape.

"And over there is Paseo Real Hot Springs Country Club. My father is in charge of the whole place. The hot springs are there because of the volcano. There was an ancient Indian tribe, the Mattole Tribe. They lived by the hot springs and slept in the sacred waters in the winter. I found an arrowhead, proof the story is true. But they

disappeared, and nobody knows where the tribe went.

"My father said that a long time ago—I believe he said twenty years ago—some scientists came here to investigate the hot springs and the Native Americans. They didn't find much, but they found a cave at the top of Chaos Crag, and there are pictographs carved into the walls. One looks like a jackal's head, you know, from the Egyptians, but the scientists said that there was no other evidence that the Egyptians were ever here in the United States, and the pictographs had to have been made by the Native Americans traveling from place to place, leaving stories, like a newspaper letting others know of their movements and what they had seen." He takes back his binoculars.

"Ianaha...Chaos...Did you say 'Ianaha'?"

"Yes, he did."

"I turn and see the two white ravens sitting on a branch.

"Maybe you'll talk to us if we introduce ourselves. I'm Madge; this is Hoarse."

"Not now!" I say.

"'Not now' what?" Nicholas asks but doesn't bother to turn around.

"Nothing."

"Aly, that's Doom Point. I'll let you look in a minute."

"We just talked to MeMar and heard you don't want the job," Madge says.

"Go away!" I hiss.

"Why do you want me to go away?" Nicholas turns.

"I'm not talking to you. It's the ravens."

"You can't refuse. It's your destiny." Madge says, hopping about on the branch.

Nicholas drops his binoculars. "Hey! Did you poop in my eye?"

"No, that was Hoarse," Madge squawks.

"Who says it's my destiny?"

Madge cocks her head. "The legend."

"Aly, are you talking to them?"

I nod reluctantly.

Nicholas gawks at me.

"And you have to promise not to tell anyone."

"Sick."

"By the way, you are not alone," Madge says and flies off. Hoarse follows.

"Wait; come back," I yell, but they disappear into the horizon. "Come on, Nicholas; let's get out of here, but wait for me at the bottom before you jump off."

"Aly, that was intriguing. I mean, how did you understand them? All I heard was a lot of squawking. Do you mean to tell me you actually talk to ravens? How can that be?"

"Later."

Nicholas starts down the tree. "I have something to show you, and you must tell me what the ravens were talking about."

"OK. Wait for me before you go running off."

Nicholas whispers, "Aly, come here. You have to promise not to tell anybody." He shuffles along, moving the tall dried grass with his foot. "Found it." He points to a smooth marbled rock about four feet long. It curves around like it's part of a circle but then disappears into the ground.

"Look at this." He points to a round depression.

"That looks like a metate."

"Excuse me?"

"You know, like a bowl for grinding. You know what a mortar and pestle are? Well, a metate is what the ancients used to grind corn. They didn't have tools like we do today. They used native rocks. Over time, the constant grinding left a depression like this one, although it's pretty small."

"Fascinating. I have something else to show you." Nicholas brushes away some dirt and debris below the indentation. "Look at this design. I'm sure it means something. You know, when I was here last month, there wasn't this much rock showing. Look over here." Nicholas crawls to the end of the exposed rock. "Interesting... Here's another. I wonder who has been tampering with my find."

"I don't know, but these designs look familiar." I pull the disc from my pocket to compare them.

"Hey, get away from that." Dave steps out from behind a bush.

I shove Nicholas behind my back and stick the disc in my pocket. "And what are you doing, spying on us?"

"It's for me to know and for you to find out." Dave bulldogs closer. "And you need to keep your mouth shut about me skipping school."

"Let's get out of here, Nicholas."

As we head out of the glade, I hear Dave shouting, "Hey, Aletrice, don't you have any friends your own age?"



CHAPTER SIX

OCTOBER 14

I t's been a long day, what with school, homework, and chores. Now I can finally go into town. As I step out onto the porch, I hear Nicholas.

"Aly, come here. Dylan has a fort, and I want to show it to you. Dylan is busy, and he can't take me, so I thought you would, please."

"I can't. I have to go talk to Rojas."

"Why?"

"About a job."

"Why?"

"I need money, remember? Mexico?"

"Oh yes, but actually, this is very important, and I assure you it won't take much time."

I shake my head hard. My unwieldy brown curls fall into my eyes.

"Aly, it looks like you have a swarm of bees buzzing around your head."

"Very funny! I'm leaving now." I whirl around and march off.

"I thought you were going to town."

I look up to see that I am heading in the wrong direction. Oh brother, I give up. "OK, I'm coming, but I can't stay long."

"Marvelous. The fort's in the gully, and Dylan wants us to see it."

"Why?"

Nicholas shrugs his shoulders.

I know better than to argue with this little guy, so I follow. We head to the gully that sits directly across from our houses. At the lip of the gully, we come upon a well-disguised trail that we descend. I keep an eye out for the fort, but all I see are weeds, dried shrubs, a skeleton of an old couch, and all sorts of trash people have thrown away. It's pretty gross, but I keep my mouth shut

and follow. We head off into the undergrowth. Suddenly, Nicholas stops and motions for me to be quiet.

"Why?" I ask.

Nicholas, for the first time in his life, goes silent on me.

"Nicholas," I holler. "Why do I have to be—"

The next thing I know, I'm being assaulted by Dylan. He starts screaming and hollering at me and Nicholas about how we have invaded his privacy, and how dare we sneak up on him and on and on.

"Whoa," I say. "Hold on. I'm really sorry, Dylan. I had no idea. Nicholas told me you wanted me to see the fort you'd built and that you were busy. He told me that he needed me to come along with him. So that's why I'm here."

"You did what?" Dylan shouts at Nicholas.

By this time Nicholas is crying, and I want no part of this feud between Dylan and his brother. "Hey, I've got to go. I have a job interview."

"With who?" Dylan asks.

"Rojas. Remember the first day I met you?" I get sarcastic. "Well, my mom's still missing, HELLO, and I need to get back to Mexico."

"Oh," Dylan says and goes back to chewing out Nicholas.

I turn and head back the way I came. That was crazy, I think, as I head toward Main Street. Nicholas lied to me. That's something I never thought he would do.

When I get to Main Street, I spot the Greeter, but he's not doing his greeting thing. He's standing in front of the Panadería, talking to Mrs. Brisbane. They are nose to nose. I hurry toward them. Maybe he remembers what he wanted to tell me about my mom.

"Are you going tonight?" the Greeter asks.

"Yes, and so is Carol," Mrs. Brisbane answers.

I open my mouth to say hello but get interrupted by Sr. Rojas.

"Buenas tardes, mis estudiantes."

"Allo, buenas tardes, señor Rojas," the Greeter responds.

"¿Quiere comer pan dulce?"

We nod our heads and follow Sr. Rojas into the bakery, where he hands each of us our special pan dulce.

When he gives me mine, he whispers in my ear, "*Por favor, espera un momento.*"

I nod my head yes, indicating I'll wait a moment.

Soon, good-byes are delivered, muffled by mouths full of pan dulces. The Greeter is the last to go out the door.

"*¿Entonces, quieres trabajar un poco?*"

"*Sí.*"

"*¿Porqué?*"

"I have to work a little so I can make enough money to get back to Mexico." Then I tell the story of my mom.

He nods his head. "*OK, tal vez puedes ayudarme a preparar para El Día de Los Muertos. Tonight I teach how to make sugar skulls, las calaveras.*"

"I would love to help with Día de Los Muertos, but tonight I have to help MeMar. I promised."

"*Ah pues. Voy a construir an altar después tal vez puedes ayudarme con esto.*" As Sr. Rojas

speaks, he twirls his moustache. I've noticed this is a habit of his. Funny, I think I remember seeing a man in Mexico playing with his moustache the same way.

"OK, when do I start?"

"*Sábado.*"

"Thank you, Sr. Rojas. See you Saturday."

"*De nada,*" he says, twirling his moustache again.



CHAPTER SEVEN

OCTOBER 17



“Howling winds muffled the sound of the foghorn while twenty-foot waves threw spray over the lighthouse, hiding its beacon. The ships received no warning of their impending doom. The giant blowhole lay in wait, its jagged-rock jaws open and its mouth roaring as it spewed streaks of foam into the air, anticipating its next morsel: an innocent ship and its crew. It was certain death for all who found the monster hole. The hole roared in glee.” Mr. James pauses to look at us and smiles this sort of evil smile.

Wow, not only does Mr. James look like Dylan, he kind of acts like him too, I’m thinking.

Mr. James clears his throat, “No one knows how deep that hole is. Some say it goes to the center of the earth. On a night like this, if you listen closely, you may hear the victims crying out.”

I hear the lighthouse’s low moaning for the first time. I shiver and try to cover up my fear, but then I see Nicholas’s huge eyes, and he looks petrified, too. I know Mr. James is trying to scare us on purpose, so I change the subject and ask if there have been any recent crashes.

"No, all the ships are warned to stay out at sea when they approach Doom Point."

"Time for bed." Mrs. James takes one look at our faces and, in a very tense voice, says, "Richard, have you been telling the legend of Doom Point?"

"It's a great story."

"Maybe for the boys, but Aly is our guest tonight, and we don't want to scare her." Mrs. James gives Mr. James a look that says *enough*.

"Oh, it's OK, Mrs. James. My friend Chaco always tells scary stories about monsters and volcanoes."

"Speaking of volcanoes, there's one not too far from here, and there is a real story behind it."

"Richard!"

"Good night, kids. Next time, the volcano story," he says as he points to the stairs.

"Well, anyway, tomorrow we're going to Doom Point. Mother, would you please pack us one of your yummy lunches with lots of those goldfish crackers I like?"

"Nicholas, you know Doom Point is off limits."

"Mother, Aly needs an appropriate guide. Please."

I notice that Mrs. James is giving me an appraising stare, so I look to Dylan. "Want to come with us?"

He pauses, looks directly at Nicholas, and says, "OK, I'll go, but you owe me, Nick."

Mrs. James nods her head yes.

In bed, I think about Doom Point and lie still to see if I can hear the voices calling out, but all I hear is the lighthouse's melancholy voice chanting its warning, "Doom, doom, doom."

This same sound permeates the room when I open my eyes, and I don't know where I am. I throw off the unfamiliar blankets and race to the window, pressing my face against its pane. It's cold and wet, and there's nothing but swirling sinister shapes outside. A pounding sound whirls me around. "What?"

Dylan is laughing at the door. "I am the bogey man, and I want to take you to Doom Point. We're leaving in five. Nick is waiting for us downstairs."

"OK," I say as I throw on my clothes. I surprise myself at how fast I can move when I have to. "Ta-da!" I say as I step into the hall. "Let's go!"

"It's about time, you two," Nicholas huffs as he stuffs our bag lunches into his backpack.

"Sorry. OK, Nicholas, show me Doom Point!"

Dylan opens the door, and we step into swirling fog. I wonder if we should go now, 'cuz I can't see a thing. "Hey, where are you guys?"

"Right here, and don't worry, the fog will burn off by the time we get there."

"OK, if you say so, Dylan, but you'd better be right."

"I'm always right."

I decide not to comment.

"Stay close," Nicholas commands.

"And listen for the voices of the lost souls," Dylan adds.

The adventure to Doom Point isn't looking so interesting, is all I have to say. Two bossy boys, impenetrable fog, and the constant thought of voices make me want to ditch the expedition, but I zip my lips and trudge on. I can tell we are getting closer 'cuz I can hear the sea smashing against the rocks.

Nicholas raises his hand. "Watch your step as we descend from here."

"How?" I ask as I look at the fifty-foot drop to the rocks below.

"Over here, Aly." Dylan points to a trail that looks as if the only living things that climb up and down it are mountain goats.

"That! You've got to be kidding."

Dylan ignores me and points out the lighthouse. It's at the end of a long shelf of rock stretching from the base of the bluff to about a hundred and fifty feet into the ocean, like a long peninsula. The fog is lifting, and I see it sitting there in all its glory. It must be amazing up close. "Hey, where's the blowhole?"

Both boys turn to their left and point at a huge spout of water. "Thar she blows," they say in unison.

I stare at the spout as it disappears into a gaping slit in the rock shelf. Each time the ocean pushes against the rocks, a plume of water shoots into the air, and when the ocean retreats, the plume is sucked back into the hole. I think of the boats being tossed against the rocks and people being sucked under the water and pushed into the slit. Creepy!

"Everyone, follow me." Dylan disappears down the face of the bluff. Nicholas goes next, and I bring up the rear. At the bottom, Dylan heads in the direction of the lighthouse, leaving us to negotiate the slippery, wet rocks. We meet up at a barrier made up of rusty poles with rope strung around them, blocking the lighthouse entrance. A big sign reads Keep Out.

"But the sign," Nicholas says.

"Ah, don't worry about the sign. There's no one out here." He crawls under the rope, shouting, "Are you coming?"

Nicholas and I look at each other, grin, and crawl under.

"I believe I need some nourishment," Nicholas says as he shrugs out of his pack. "Anyone else?"

"Yeah, give me some fish." Dylan grabs the bag.

"Yeah, I want some, too." Madge dives down, snatches the baggie from Dylan, and then perches on a rock, pecking at the baggie with her beak.

"Hey! What are you doing? Bring that back now!" I scream. A moment later, the bag falls at my feet, and Madge and Hoarse depart.

"How did you do that?" Dylan asks.

"Don't know. Your guess is as good as mine."

"Hey, you're on private property," a voice shouts from behind us. "Can't you read? Oh, I forgot. You can't, Dylan, can you?"

We quickly do an about face and discover Dave.

"Shut up, Dave," Dylan shouts.

"Make me," Dave answers back.

Dylan charges Dave and wrestles him to the ground.

"Stop it now! Dylan get off. Dave, just leave us alone," I hiss.

Dylan gets up not taking his eyes off Dave. "This isn't over."

"You bet it's not. Look, get off my property, and you, you little smart aleck from around the world. You think you're so good, and just because my dad works for your grandmother, you think I have to be nice to you. Well, think again."

"Where did he come from?" Nicholas asks.

"Nowhere. Now get off my property."

"Who made you boss of this place? This is not private property," Dylan says, looking as if he is ready to punch him.

"Can we go home? I don't wish to stay here," Nicholas says, sliding his hand into Dylan's.

"I own this property, and I say get out of here, now!"

"Look, Dave, I don't know why you don't want us here, but we can go where we want, when we want," I say.

"Yep. Come on, Aly, Nick. Let's head over to the blowhole." Dylan gestures for us to follow. I fall in line behind.

Dave follows and grabs Nicholas by the shoulders. "Go home now, or—"

"Or what, Dave? Let go of my brother."

"All you have to do is get out of here." Dave gives Nicholas's shoulder a squeeze and pushes him to the ground. Not a second later, a huge spout of water from the blowhole sprays all of us. Dylan takes this opportunity to shove Dave away from Nicholas. Dave loses his footing and falls down hard. I want to laugh out loud.

"That's what I'll do," Dylan yells and tells us to head back to the bluff. I grab Nicholas, and we're on our way. I hear Dylan say to Dave,

"What are you afraid of? If you want a fight, pick on someone your own size."

"You'll be sorry, Dylan. All of you will be sorry," Dave yells.

I decide he has a secret out by the lighthouse. "I think he's hiding something."

"I'm thinking the same thing. Let's go to the fort, eat, and see what we can figure out."

"Brilliant idea, Dylan. Thank you for coming to my rescue and protecting me."

"Hey, that's what big brothers are for."

Really! If they only knew what I was protecting...



CHAPTER EIGHT

OCTOBER 21

I don't know why I try talking to MeMar 'cuz she never listens. I ask her again about the legend and what exactly I'm supposed to do, and all she says is the answers will come. She's no help at all. How am I going to get the answers if she won't tell me? Oh, and I mention Dave, but she won't even let me finish my sentence before she jumps in and says, "Forget about Dave."

I think the only reason she's protecting Dave is 'cuz Dave's father works for her. Then she tells me that I have to stay with her in Paseo Real, and I should forget about living with Chaco in

Mexico. Then she says if I want to find my mom, I have to do my job. I feel so frustrated. So since MeMar won't help me, I'm going to see if Madge and Hoarse will. The only problem with that is that I haven't seen either of them for four days. I think Madge is mad at me 'cuz I made her bring back the goldfish crackers. Anyway, the incident with Dave at Doom Point and other things got me thinking, and I believe Dave is one of those evil people I'm supposed to be protecting the world against. So I need Hoarse and Madge to do some spying. I know they hang out by the tall cypress tree on Main Street, so I'm heading there now, before school, hoping to catch them.

"Aly."

I turn; it's Nicholas.

"May I ask why you didn't wait for me this morning?" Nicholas asks.

"Sorry, Nick. I was—"

Just then Hoarse swoops down. He drops a small silver key by my feet. I want to say something, but Nicholas is gawking at the ravens. I scoop up the key and stuff it in my pocket.

"Did you see that?" Nicholas says.

"I think the ravens like you, Nicholas."

"No, I think you are mistaken. I believe they have an affinity for you. And by the way, you never did reveal how it is that you can talk to and understand the ravens."

"Nicholas, why do you speak like that? No one speaks like you do."

"Would you clarify, please? But first, you didn't answer my question."

"Oh, look, Nicholas, Mrs. Brisbane is waving at us. We'd better hurry." I push Nicholas forward. Question time is over!

"Good morning, children."

"Good morning, Mrs. Brisbane," Nicholas says.

"Morning," I repeat.

And who's by her side? Dave!

The first bell rings, so I drop off Nicholas and meet up with Dylan as we enter the classroom. Dave is somehow already there, talking to Mrs. R., probably trying to explain all of his absences.

As I go to my desk, the floor shifts under my feet. "Earthquake!" I yell.

"Duck and cover!" Mrs. R. screams.

I roll into a ball, cover my head, and wait. I hear hollering and screaming, stuff tumbling to the floor, and rumbling sounds like a Mack truck crashing through the room. Mrs. R. is trying to calm everyone, but her voice is wobbling like she's scared.

Then, for a split second, everything goes eerily quiet, and I start feeling queasy 'cuz I can't help thinking about the earthquake in Mexico. Who's going to disappear now?

Mrs. R. breaks the silence. "Stay put...There will be aftershocks!"

I can't stay put. I have to check on MeMar. I look around, but all I see is a mishmash of colored shirts. Then I notice the computers doing the shimmy. "Duck! Here comes another one!"

A thunderous jolt breaks a window, sending shards of glass through the air. I cover my head again. Then, through the corner of my eye, I see Dylan heading out the door. I wonder where he's going. I decide to follow, not to check up on Dylan, but to see if MeMar is all right.

On my way out, I spot Dave kneeling over Mrs. R. "What happened?" I ask.

"She's unconscious, stupid," he says.

I notice blood on his forehead. "You're bleeding."

"Call nine one one. I think Mrs. R. keeps her cell phone in her top drawer."

I rummage through the drawer. "It's not here."

"Check her purse."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. Check all the drawers. Hurry!"

Frantically, I search the drawers. "Found it." I dig through each compartment of her purse; there sure are a lot of them. Finally, I find it, but that's not all.

"Do you have it?"

"Uh...yeah." I hand him the phone and leave. Before the door closes, I hear him yell for me to check on his dad. I wonder how he knows where I'm going.

The schoolyard looks pretty much deserted. I can't see any real damage—just some cracks in the sidewalk and some crumbled concrete. Nothing more. But then I see Dylan standing by a giant fissure.

"Looks deep," Dylan says.

"Yeah."

"Where are you going?"

"To see if my grandmother is OK. Did you see Nicholas?"

"Yep. He's shaken up, but he'll be fine. You're going to get into big trouble for leaving."

"I hope not." I wave good-bye and make for the gate. I can't help thinking about the disc I saw in Mrs. R.'s purse. Now that makes three: mine, the Greeter's, and now Mrs. R.'s. What's so special about these discs? I wonder if they have anything to do with the legend. But...they're not nine years old...They're old people. Why do they have discs? Why do I have a disc. I don't get it.

On my way to town, I don't see any more fissures. I do notice a couple of trees have fallen over, some broken glass is scattered across the road, and a fire hydrant is spouting water. In town, I hear fire alarms blasting and see shopkeepers hanging out, talking, and cleaning up. There's an ambulance in front of the Panadería. MeMar is sweeping debris outside *The Daily Times*.

"MeMar..." She doesn't look up. I run over.
"MeMar."

"Aly, what are you doing here? Where's your mother?"

"MeMar! You're bleeding! I think we should go to the hospital."

"Why, dear, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine, but I think maybe you are. Do you remember the earthquake?"

MeMar's eyes go blank.



CHAPTER NINE

OCTOBER 22

The emergency room takes forever, but when we finally make it home, I order MeMar to bed. The doctors said she would be fine after a good night's sleep. Chaco calls, worried. He had heard about the earthquake and wants to make sure we are OK. I tell him we are. No news about my mom, though. Don't know what's going on with that private investigator—people don't just vanish. Anyway, Madge and Hoarse show up just as I doze off. Hoarse confirms that Dave has a secret—and the key, it belongs to him. After good-nights, they fly off, leaving me wide awake and thinking about that stupid key.

Now it's morning, and boy, am I glad the school is closed today. I wander downstairs and find a note from MeMar; she went to work. Perfect! Now, I'm hoping someone wants to do some private detecting, so I hurry next door. Mrs. James tells me that Nicholas is still sleeping, but Dylan is at the fort. I leave, hoping that Dylan will want to help me. Maybe 'cuz it's about Dave, he will. I think he hates him as much as I do, so I head to the fort.

In my haste, I almost fall down the ravine but make it there without injury. I immediately notice the bush that hides the entrance is gone, and when I step inside, chaos! Everything is smashed and scattered on the ground. It looks like someone has taken a sledgehammer to the inside. Dylan is slumped over a broken crate.

"What happened here?" I ask.

Dylan is silent. He just stands there and gawks for a second and then begins to clean up the mess without saying a word.

"Let me help you," I say and start gathering bits and pieces of broken crates and ripped

posters. "I think Dave did this," I say, to break the silence.

"Why are you here?"

"Why are you being so mean? Look, I went to your house. Your mom said Nicholas was still in bed and that you were here. I wanted to talk to you without Nicholas, so I'm here. I want to go to Doom Point 'cuz I think Dave is hiding something there, and I don't want Nicholas to go with me 'cuz, you know, Dave might pick on him. So I was thinking maybe you would come with me to search out his hideout."

"What makes you—"

"Look, he's destroyed Nicholas's globe. He knocked me against a locker. He's..."

"What?"

"Yeah, I tried to get Nicholas's globe back, and he banged my head against the locker at school."

"Come on, follow me. We're going to get to the bottom of this."

"What's with Dave, anyway? Has he always been a creep?"

"Naw, we used to be friends. Well, sort of, until his mom left. Then he got all weird."

"Where'd she go?"

"Don't know."

We walk the rest of the way in silence. I notice Dylan shakes his head every so often. Maybe he's just as confused as I am. We crawl under the rope guarding the lighthouse.

"Watch your step." Dylan maneuvers in front of me as we make our way down the path.

I pick up a rusty piece of metal. "Look, it says Skateboarding Forever. Hmmm...Dave's."

"You think?"

"You don't have to be such a turd," I spit out.

"Boy, you're touchy. I was just joking."

"Sorry." I feel like I'm carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. Hey, wait, I am. Can't tell him, though. "Do you think there's something at the end of this?"

"Don't know, but I know the path we're on leads to the blowhole. Hang on." Dylan climbs up a series of rocks and boulders and scans the area. He waves me up. "Aly, there's another path. Come on." He helps me up and over as we shimmy down the other side. "Funny, I didn't know this was here."

We follow the gravel path; it circles the east side of the blowhole and winds its way along the coastline. It dead-ends at a clump of rocks and boulders.

"Hey, Dylan, over here. Look, there's a large space between the boulders. It might be a cave."

Dylan pushes in front of me and pulls out a tiny penlight. "It is a cave. I can't believe Dave would have something in here," he whispers.

"Why are you whispering?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should come back later...you know, bring a better flashlight or maybe a torch."

"Are you scared?"

"What do you mean by that? No, I'm not scared."

"Then let's go a little farther. If we don't find anything, then we'll turn around."

"How much farther?"

"Oh brother. Look, Dylan, there's light up ahead. See it?" I grab the penlight from him.

"No! All I see is the light you're shining in my face."

"Sorry. Follow me."

We wind our way around a series of boulders until we sidestep our way into a huge cavern. Light pours in from a gigantic hole overhead, revealing a room full of stuff: magazines, a collection of miniature skateboards stacked one on top of the other, a folding chair, and other junk.



"You were right, Aly. Look, my ammo box." He picks it up. "I kept it in the fort. I can't believe it...Wait till I get my hands on him."

"He's such a creep, you know." I snatch up a black-and-blue backpack leaning against the pile of magazines and spill the contents. A bunch of baseball cards, some marbles, a candy bar, a yo-yo, a pair of gloves, a ratty notebook, and an old jewelry box fall out. "You know, I had my suspicions he was hiding something somewhere other than his house." I grab the notebook and jewelry box and stuff them in my backpack.

I figure I'll check them out when I get home. "Dylan, how come you didn't know about this place? I mean, you've lived here all your life, right?"

"Yeah, but Doom Point was always off-limits. Besides, that trail we took must have been covered by the high tide, because I've never seen it before."

"David," a voice echoes from inside the cave. We freeze.

"Where's that voice coming from?" I whisper, tugging Dylan's shirt.

"Not from where we entered. I'm sure of that."

"From where, then?"

"Hola, David."

"From behind that boulder!" Dylan says, grabbing my hand as we hightail it out of the cave.



CHAPTER TEN

OCTOBER 23

That voice Dylan and I heard at Doom Point yesterday, well, we both think it might be Rojas. What we can't figure out is how he got there. Oh, and that jewelry box...You'll never believe what I found. A disc! The key Hoarse gave me fit the jewelry box. When I opened it and saw the disc, I almost dropped. Go figure. Who is Dave, anyway? Is he evil or good? It doesn't add up. Four discs: Dave's, Mrs. R.'s, the Greeter's, and mine. Has each one of us had someone in our lives disappear? The discs are the key; I know it, if I can just figure them out.

I start to read Dave's journal, but it's pretty boring. All he writes about is how everyone is mean to him. I can't believe he wrote that. He's the mean one. Oh, and he also writes about how señor Rojas and the Greeter are his only friends. I don't get him.

Dylan and I did get in deep trouble for getting home late. I keep thinking, *Who cares; at least Rojas didn't discover us. But that was yesterday.*

* * *

"Hi, MeMar. I'm home, MeMar." Figures, she's never home. Oh well! I throw my books on the telephone table and head for the kitchen. On the breakfast table, there's a plate of oatmeal cookies and a note from MeMar saying she'll be late.

As I gobble a cookie, I wonder why MeMar used the back door, 'cuz I could swear I heard it shut when I came in. No matter, I decide as I help myself to another cookie. One more cookie and I'm ready to climb the stairs to my room. I put an extra one in my pocket just in case.

"Aiyi!" I holler as I playfully karate-kick open the door. My jaw drops. My room...looks like a

bomb hit it. It's been destroyed, no kidding. My clothes are strewn all over the place, my drawers have been emptied, my desk has been ransacked, and pictures have been pulled off the wall. EVERYTHING has been touched! I want to kill someone without mercy.

Oh no—my secret hiding place. I go to my desk, pull out the drawer, and lift up the side panel. Whew! Whoever went through my room didn't find it. So glad, 'cuz you need to know that in that secret space, I have my disc, Dave's disc, his notebook, and three whistles. I gently slide the panel back in place, and the secret compartment disappears. I love my secret hiding place. Too bad I can't put everything I own into it so whoever rifled through my room would have found nothing.

My computer's lying on the floor; I pick it up and turn it on. It still works. I notice that whoever tried to get into my computer couldn't. They didn't have the password. I shudder at the thought of an uninvited guest spending prime time in here! For the record, right now I want to take all of my things and run, but I stand here like I am nailed to the floor. It has to be Dave.

Madge flies in through the open window, followed by Hoarse. "What happened to your room?" she squawks.

"Did you see who did this?"

"No." Madge flies over to my bed and perches on the pillow.

"I thought you said your job was to take care of me." The tears begin. "Well, you don't seem to be doing a good job."

"Shhhhh, Aly." Hoarse clears his throat and cocks his head. "She needs to know now."

"Know what?"

"We've found a disc," Hoarse croaks.

"What did you say?"

Hoarse settles onto my desk. "An oval stone with ancient symbols etched into the surface."

"I know." I pull the two discs from my desk. "Like these?"

Madge flutters her wings. "We thought you had one of these discs, but two?"

"One's Dave's. The other MeMar gave me. She found it right after Mom disappeared. And you know what else? The Greeter and Mrs. R. each

have one. What do you mean, you thought I had one? Why didn't you say something? What is it?"

Hoarse nudges the discs in my hand. "These discs...Well, there is a legend..."

"Another legend."

"Yes, these legends, well..." Madge hops off my bed and flies over to Hoarse. "You have to understand, Aly—"

"OK, OK, OK. Tell me about the legend."

"Long ago, in fact, thousands of years ago, an evil shaman—"

"Hold up, Madge," Hoarse interrupts, "we don't have to go into every detail. Listen very carefully. A person's spirit is encased inside."

I stare intently at my mom's disc. "How can that be? Is my mom in here? How do I get her out?"

"We don't know."

"Well, you need to help me figure it out." I look at Madge and Hoarse; they're silent. "Hey, did you hear me? You said you found one. Are you talking about mine?"

"No, dear. Mrs. Brisbane has one. I saw it on her nightstand."

"This is like driving me crazy. And look at my room. Do you see this disaster? I think Dave did this. Where were you two? I told you to follow him."

"Aly, are you up there?" Nicholas calls from below my bedroom window.

I lean out. "Do me a favor. Go find Dylan, and the two of you meet me at the fort."

"By any chance are the ravens inside with you?"

"Everything is good here. Go get your brother before it gets dark. I have something to give you."

"What?"

"Go!" I realize I can't do this alone, and besides, I don't know what to do. I don't know how all the women in my family did this evil-hunting thing. I don't even know who the seven are. Maybe I'm supposed to make my own seven. So I scoop up the whistles from my secret hiding spot and grab the discs. "Madge, Hoarse, go find Dave, and don't let him out of your sight."

I head toward the fort, feeling helpless. *How am I going to get my mom out of here?* I think as I turn her disc over and over in my hand.

"What's up?" Dylan assaults me at the entrance of his hideout. "Nicholas wouldn't let me finish my practice. I was out back working on my chip shots, so this had better be good."

"OK, here's the deal. Someone, I suspect Dave, broke into my room just now and tore it apart. And I have these discs. See?" I show the boys the two discs. "But what's really strange is the Greeter has one, and so do Mrs. Rubenstein and Mrs. Brisbane. So there are one, two, three, four, five discs, and they all look alike except for the markings."

Dylan reaches for the discs.

"Whoa!" I retract my hand. "Sorry, Dylan, but you can look at Dave's. Here."

"What about the other one?"

"Well...this is going to sound crazy, but...you see, my mom disappeared, and I think she's in here." I hold up my mom's disc.

"Huh?" Dylan sputters.

"OK, remember it was my birthday, and there was this earthquake, and she just vanished, and this disc was left behind."

"Oh yes, I remember. It is all making sense now," Nicholas remarks.

"Well, you're not making sense to me," Dylan says. "How can she be in there?"

"I don't know, but I'm not lying." I plop down and wish they would quit staring at me. But they don't. "So, I have these whistles." I hand them each one.



"Where did you acquire these?" Nicholas says.

"We were, my mom and I, we were in La Paz, Bolivia, walking down this little street called *Calle de Las Brujas*. In English, it means 'Street of the Witches.'"

"You mean real witches?" Nicholas asks.

"No, there's no such thing as real witches," Dylan interrupts.

"Let me finish, please. Anyway, this wrinkled old Indian woman with scraggly hair and no teeth grabs me, shoves me behind her stall, and hands me these whistles. She tells me they are magic, how to use them, and that I will need them in a time of danger. And then she whispers a chant

in my ear. After that, she disappears. I stood there and stared at them. My mom asked me what was wrong, and I showed her the whistles. My mom said nothing other than to guard them, and that's what I have done. Now I think we need them, 'cuz I know this is a time of danger."

"Danger! What do you mean?"

"Weren't you listening, Nicholas?"

"Oh, you mean about your mother?"

"No, not just my mom. Someone destroyed my room and the fort. Don't you get it?"

"Now I get it," Dylan says.

"All this must be kept a secret. OK?"

They both nod their heads yes.

"Please take each other's hands. Now close your eyes." After taking a deep breath, I begin, "Shee hammeesalahaa...sheehammeesalahaa...zaezeazea." I chant this for about five minutes, 'cuz I can't remember how many chants it takes to get these whistles activated! "OK, open your eyes." We open our eyes, drop hands, and stare at the whistles. They're glowing. "Put them on your tongues, close your mouths, and gently

blow, 'cuz I'm going to talk to you by blowing my thoughts into the whistle."

Nicholas hesitates. "From what material are they made?"

"Bone! OK, Dylan, you want to try?"

"Yeah, sure, let's see if they work."

"What kind of bone?" Nicholas asks, wrinkling his face in disgust.

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't have to. Dylan, are you ready?" He nods, and we place the whistles in our mouths. With the whistle resting on my tongue and my mouth closed, I blow a thought.

Dylan spits out his whistle. "No, I didn't play golf today; I just practiced. Ah...it worked. How'd you do that? It was like I heard you, but you weren't talking. I mean, your mouth wasn't moving."

"I don't know; it's the first time for me, too. Uh...go outside, and let's do it again. See if it works if we aren't in the same room."

"Do it to me; do it to me!" Nicholas exclaims.

"OK, Nick, you and Aly stay here, and I'll go outside," Dylan says.

Dylan leaves the fort, and Nicholas and I wait anxiously.

"I am not..." Nicholas takes the whistle out of his mouth. "Aly, did you hear that? He called me a liar. I'm going to tell Mother."

"Well, you are. Now, Nicholas, put the whistle back in your mouth," I order. I begin to speak through the whistle. "Don't you ever lie to me again."

"I hear you, and I'll never lie again. Can I do it? Can I do it?"

"You are, Nicholas," I say.

"Oh, you are most certainly correct."

Dylan comes back inside; he's staring at his whistle. "Incredible. We can talk to each other, and no one will know. These will be great when we explore the fissure tomorrow."

"You two are going to the fissure tomorrow?"

We both nod our heads.

"Why are you going, may I ask?"

Look buddy, we're curious that's all. It's probably just a hole in the ground. Let me and Aly check it out first, and then we'll take you."

"Oh yes, like you went off to check out the Dave stuff and then didn't even inform me."

"I swear. Look, I'm telling you this time, and I promise I will take you the next time I go."

"And I will talk to you with the magic whistle, so it will be like you're with us," I interject, hoping he'll understand.

"What if the whistles don't work that far?" Tears sprout behind Nicholas's glasses.

"We'll test them tomorrow to see how far they reach, so we need you to be at home. OK?" I look at Nick to see if he understands. He nods his head and stares at the whistle. "No one is to know about these. Keep your whistles with you at all times, and don't let anyone see them. Agreed?"

"Because we're in danger, Aly?" Nicholas asks.

"Yes."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

OCTOBER 24

Saturday at last. No school, no nada. I can sit in my room all day and do nothing, but my brain won't turn off, 'cuz all I can think about is that my mom might be trapped inside this disc and that there was an intruder in my room, touching all my stuff—which really gives me the creeps—and of course, the discs. Anyway, I didn't sleep much last night. Every time I'd nod off, I'd wake up and see giant shadows on the wall that I was sure were monsters or evil ones I couldn't battle. I know; I know; get busy and stop thinking! That's what MeMar would say. Well, sometimes I don't

agree with MeMar. Besides, she keeps way too many secrets.

Someone is banging at the front door. "MeMar," I yell, "get the door." She doesn't answer me; I think she's deaf. I race down the stairs. "Dylan. What are you doing here?"

"It's Nick. He's gone!" He shoves a handwritten note at me. "Read it."

"It says he's going to the fissure by himself because we won't take him, so he is going to prove that he's big enough to be included."

"I know; I know. And look, he signed it, 'Yours Truly, Nicholas.'"

"We should have included him."

"I know." He rips the note out of my hand. "Look, I need your help. We'll talk about this later."

"OK. Do you have your whistle?"

"Yes."

I grab a couple of flashlights from the kitchen, and we take off. Halfway there, I realize I forgot something. "Oh, shoot."

"What?"

"I didn't leave a note. MeMar asked me to let her know where I'm going when I go out."

"We can't turn around now. Hurry." Dylan runs ahead.

"I'm right behind you," I holler. *What a stupid thing for Nicholas to do*, I'm thinking. I reach for my whistle and blow and get no response. I blow a thought again. "Dylan, he isn't answering my whistle."

"I know...I know. I blew into mine a while ago and same here. Either he's miffed and not answering on purpose, or something is wrong."

When we reach the school it's locked up tight. The only way in that I can determine is over the green wrought-iron fence. Dylan tugs my arm and motions for me to follow. We sneak around the perimeter of the school, heading for the back gate, where all the teachers park their cars. Dylan pulls out a key and slips it into the padlock. We're in.

"Where'd you get the key?" I ask.

"I found it in the ammo box. I guess Dave put it in there thinking it was a safe place after he

stole it from the fort." He slides the chain back through the padlock and locks us in.

Seems like I'm not the only one keeping secrets, I'm thinking as we maneuver our way around orange cones and broken concrete on our way to the fissure. I make sure I keep an eye out for any other intruders. Up ahead, I spot a rope wound up and lying beside a galvanized steel barrier, protecting the fissure. There are Keep Out signs on both sides. Dylan ties the rope around one of the metal stanchions; he signals for me to go first. I grab the rope, hoist myself over the edge, and shimmy down. Dylan tugs the rope once again and then joins me.

"Well, where is he? I thought there was just this fissure, nothing more. Nick should be right here. I'm going to blow my whistle again. What are you doing?"

"Searching." I shine my flashlight around and discover that it's not just a fissure—the earthquake has uncovered a tunnel. "Come on; let's look."

"Do you think Nick would have followed the tunnel?"

"Yep."

We follow the tunnel and get about a hundred yards in when I say, "I'm going to try the whistle again. Maybe there's a limit to how far these work. I was hoping they somehow worked a great distance. I guess not."

"Go ahead," Dylan says.

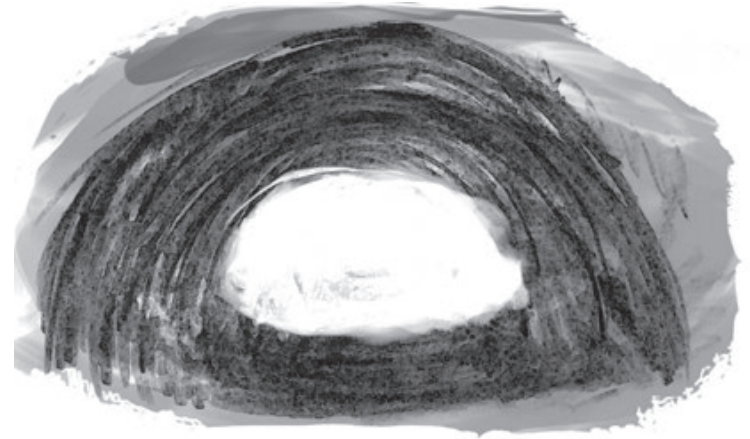
I place the whistle in my mouth and blow. I wait. Nothing! Not a good sign.

Dylan rushes forward. "I know my little brother, and he wouldn't have come this far."

"I don't think you know your brother at all. Think about it."

We scan the walls with our flashlights but see only dirt and rock. The fissure is beginning to look more like a tunnel. Here and there we spy tree roots protruding through the soil but no Nicholas. I blow my whistle again but hear nothing but my own voice. The passage seems to be getting bigger, rounder. "Whoa, it's a lava tube."

"A what?"



"A lava tube. You know, when a volcano erupts, the lava flows in channels. Some channels are so deep that they crust over, forming a pahoehoe."

"A what?"

"A pahoehoe, a lava tube. Some of these tubes lead directly to the volcano. This one has to be ancient. See these lines on the wall? They are marks of the lava flow. Hey, look over there. A lavacicle. It's kind of like a stalactite."

"Thanks for the geology lesson."

"Hey, you don't have to be such a smart aleck. I want to find him, too. Did you know this was here?"

"How could I?" Dylan says and forges ahead.

We walk in silence until we come to a meeting point of different tunnels.

"Which one should we take?" I ask.

"I don't know. You choose, and do it fast."

"I don't know which one."

"Never mind!" Dylan says and shoves in front of me. He takes the tunnel to the right and breaks into a jog. After a while, Dylan stops.

"Hear anything?"

All I hear is my own panting. When my chest stops heaving, I gasp, "I think I hear the ocean."

"Me, too."

"Should we follow and see?"

"I don't know. Do you think he went this way? I'm going to blow my whistle again."

We both wait, but there is still no answer. In silent agreement, we turn around and head back the way we came until we get to the juncture.

"Which one now?"

Dylan points to his right. "This one."

We use our flashlights to scan the walls. I'm thinking maybe Nicholas left a clue. "Do you smell that?" I ask.

"Yeah, smells sweet."

"It smells like the pan dulce I get from the Panadería. Do you get a special one?"

"No."

"I guess only special people like me get them."

"Well, if you ask me, I think Rojas is odd...like you."

"I think we're under the Panadería," I say, changing the subject as I shine my flashlight on the ceiling. "Hey, look, it's a trapdoor."

"No way." Dylan aims his light toward mine. "Do you think Rojas put it there?" Dylan directs his light onto the walls. "Look here. Look at these drawings."

I stare. "Dylan, I think..."

"Yeah, I'm thinking the same thing. They sort of look like the drawings on the discs."

"Why are they here?" I reach into my pocket and squeeze my disc. "You know, Dylan, I think Rojas used these tunnels to get to Dave's hideout. What do you think?"

"Aly, we need to find Nick."

"You're right."

"Turn your flashlight off."

"Why?"

"Just do it! Now let's blow the whistles again. Maybe if we blow them at the same time, something will happen."

I don't know why we have to do it in the dark, but I don't argue. "OK, one, two, three, blow. Dylan, stop. I think I hear Nicholas. Listen a minute!"

"I hear him; he's calling me," Dylan's voice squeaks.

"Come on."

We hurry forward in the semidarkness. Nicholas's voice is getting clearer. My heart is racing. The tube turns left and then right.

"What took you so long?" Nicholas says.

We skid to a stop. It's Nicholas, looking down at us from above! A stream of light sneaks its way around him, into the tunnel.

We both shout at once, "Nick! Nicholas!"

He giggles.

"How did you get up there?" Before Nicholas answers, Dylan says, "Why did you come here by yourself? You were supposed to wait for me and Aly."

"You sound exactly like Mother."

"Yeah, well, you wait till I get a hold of you." Dylan jumps up, trying to smack Nick on the head but misses.

"How did you get up there, Nicholas?" I scan the wall with my flashlight. "I don't see an exit."

"Go a little farther up the lava tube. There's a small passageway that leads right out to the glade. I'll wait for you there."

We follow his directions and walk straight out and into the glade. Nicholas is smiling from ear to ear, but that doesn't stop Dylan from charging Nicholas and tackling him to the ground.

"Why didn't you use the whistle?" I yell to get them to stop carrying on. "I told you to keep it with you all the time."

"I did, see, but I put it in this soundproof container to protect it. I guess this is a powerful soundproofifier."

"You're supposed to put it in your mouth," Dylan says and starts to tickle Nicholas again.

"Were you scared?" I ask.

"Aly, your friends helped me."

"My friends?"

"Yes, the ravens. They showed me the way. I wasn't afraid, because they accompanied me." Nicholas whistles, and Madge and Hoarse fly over.

"Thanks, you two!" I say.

"Did you just thank those ravens?" Dylan asks. His face looks like he's suffering from constipation.

"Yes!"

There's dead silence.

"Oh, and watch this. Bye, you two." I look over to Dylan and smile.

Both ravens take off.

"Bye, ravens." Nicholas waves and turns to Dylan. "She talks to them all the time, and I am sure they talk to her, too. I've witnessed it."

Dylan shakes his head. "Yeah, right...Look, we've been gone a long time, and I didn't tell Mom where I was going. Did you, Nick?"

"Actually, no."

"Well, we'd better get home fast, or my butt will be in big trouble."

"What about me? I forgot to leave a note."

"Yeah, but I'll get in double trouble because I'm the big brother and should know better."

I don't want to start a fight 'cuz that will take more time than we have. "Do you know a shortcut?"

"The forest trail, I think. Anyway, I'd rather that than the lava tube."

We follow Dylan, which I have no problem with, although Nicholas protests. He'd rather go back through the tube. Me, too. I'm curious about the tube and what we discovered. I have a feeling it holds another key to this giant mess I'm in.



CHAPTER TWELVE

OCTOBER 25

Just to let you know, we've been grounded for four days just 'cuz we didn't leave a note. I'm allowed to go to work, though, so I'm on my way to the Panadería. Dylan and I talked about the trapdoor and the etchings on the tunnel wall. He thinks I should scope out the bakery to see where the trapdoor is located. I think so, too, but I don't want to get caught snooping.

One of Dylan's bright ideas is to pretend I'm sick and about to throw up. He thinks that Rojas has to have a bathroom somewhere in the back. I tell Dylan he should do it, 'cuz I don't think it's

such a great idea. Then he tells me to make like I'm cleaning and sneak around the back. I don't like that idea either—nothing he comes up with sounds plausible. Well, after I turn down all his suggestions, we get into an argument, and I tell him never mind, 'cuz I'm going to be late. Finally I'm on my way, hoping I can come up with a good diversion.

"Aletrice—whoops, I mean ALY!"

"Who's calling me?"

"We are."

"Oh! I always forget to look up!"

"You are a very funny girl."

I can't tell if Hoarse is being sarcastic. I would know if it was Madge; she's always sarcastic.

"Where are you going? You seem preoccupied."

"Well, I'm off to work. Remember, I'm making money to go back to Mexico. But I was wondering how to create a diversion to get rid of Rojas so I can search the joint."

"Is 'joint' referring to the bakery?" Madge asks.

"Yes, I saw an old detective movie, and the private investigator referred to the location

he was going to search as 'the joint.' Anyway, Dylan and I discovered a trapdoor in the lava tube, and we think it leads to the Panadería. Do you know anything about it? Oh, and we saw some drawings, too. They seem to be identical to the ones on the discs. Do you know anything about this trapdoor and the drawings?"

"No, but I believe you are beginning to understand your job."

"No way, Madge. I don't get this job at all. All I want is my mom back."

"Aly, tell us what we can do to help, and we will." Hoarse says and pecks my cheek.

"Ow, that hurt!"

"Always complaining!" Madge says, puffing her feathers. "Do you have a plan?"

"Well, while I'm working, I'm going to try to sneak into the back to see if I can find the trapdoor. I just don't know how I'm going to get rid of Rojas."

Hoarse and Madge look at each other and click their beaks. "Leave that to us. Right, Hoarse?"

"You bet. Just get ready to move when we show up."

"What are you going to do?"

"It's a surprise. Come on, Hoarse."

With that, they're gone, and I am now standing in front of the bakery. Pushing open the door, I call out, "Hola. *Estoy aquí.*"

"Ah, Aly, so glad you are here and ready to work. Help me with the altar, por favor. *Dame los flore.*"

I see the marigolds, those bright orange flowers, lying on some newspaper. I scoop up a handful. "*Aquí estan, señor Rojas.*"

I look at the altar. It has four levels, all covered in bright fabrics. The levels are for flowers, photos, candles, food, toys, and other things that the dead enjoyed when they were alive. Rojas tells me that all of these are *ofendas*—that's what they call these offerings. Well, the folks who place them want the spirits of their dead relatives to come and spend time with them. I think it's creepy, but I do what I am told. On the counter, I see a platter loaded with candy skulls.

"Are these the *calavaras* you all made last week?"

"Sí, nosotros las hicimas también. El señor Greeter, las señoras Rubenstein and Brisbane are going to bring in photos of their loved ones and place them on the altar *también*. Also I am baking their favorite pan dulces to put there." He points to the lowest level located on the floor. There is a long multicolored cloth in orange, blue, yellow, and green resting in front of the altar.

"Por favor, ponga las velas así." Señor Rojas demonstrates. He places a glass candle at the end of the fabric and another closer to the altar. He points to the box of candles, and I get started.

"Cuándo termines, ponga los flores al lado de las velas." Again he demonstrates and places the marigolds in between the candles. It's like it's leading people to the altar. "Después vamos a poner los panes dulces y fruta."

"OK." I get to work. Doing this is a lot more interesting than sweeping and wiping counters—boring! Even so, I've already made thirty dollars toward my return to Mexico.

I hear the Panadería door swing open. I look up and spot Dave. And right behind him come Hoarse and Madge. They flap their way in and dive-bomb Rojas and Dave.

"Ay caramba...you bring birds? Vaya...vaya...vaya." Rojas flaps his towel in the air and screams, "Geeet out. Ahora."

I watch him race around the shop after the birds. He jerks Dave into the action. Madge and Hoarse are having the best time. They hover just above Dave and Rojas. Dave is swinging a broom and Rojas a towel. Hoarse and Madge take off and sit on the counter, and then they go perch on the rafters. They've got Dave and señor Rojas running in circles. I bet they run into each other before they are finished chasing the birds.

OK, this is my moment. I head for the door to the back room. Inside, I see ovens and worktables but no trapdoor. I'm disappointed, but then I see another door. I try the knob, and the door swings open. Inside, there's a bed, a table, and some strange-looking thing hanging on the wall. I look closer. It's like some sort of holder with burned candles, weird-colored shapes looking

like pan dulces, and a chicken foot. I haven't a clue what it is, but it's scary. I turn to leave and trip on a rug. It's covering the trapdoor! Goose bumps and a tingling spine warn me to get out. I fix the rug. Just as I'm closing the door, señor Rojas comes into the baking area.



"¿Qué haces aquí?"

"I was looking for...pan dulces."

"No están aquí. Vaya. No tienes permiso para estar aquí."

"I'm sorry, señor, but I was also afraid of those birds. Are they gone?"

"Sí, salieron. Vaya, we have work to do." He twirls his mustache in that funny way, and suddenly I remember where I'd seen that same gesture. It was in the Calle de Las Brujas in La Paz.

"Vaya, vaya...Traiga los panes dulces."

"I am, and I have the cakes." I want to tell him to hold his pants.

I walk back into the bakery, and boy, what a disaster. Dave is messing around with the altar, trying to get the highest level back in place. Brilliant job, Hoarse and Madge.

"Don't say anything," Dave snarls. "I did not bring the birds into the bakery."

"Silencio. Trabaje solamente!"

Dave and I glare at each other. I whisper, "I know you messed with my stuff." Then I silently go about cleaning up the mess. I work fast. I want to get to Dylan and tell him what happened and that I found the trapdoor.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

OCTOBER 28

OK, I am done! These last three days have been three days of awfulness: school, school, school, home, home, and home. No talking on the phone, no TV, no NOTHING. MeMar delivers messages from Chaco saying no word about my mom. So depressing.

And let me tell you about having birds as your only companions—birds who cock their heads to look you in the eye and give lectures about your behavior, about your responsibilities in the world...blah, blah, blah, blah, and end with, "If you had left a note, you could be doing

your job." They rehash how they demolished the Panadería with a blow-by-blow account, over and over again! I ask them a million times to find out where all the tunnels lead and to check out the locked cabinets and the writing on the wall. I even show them the etching on the discs. All they tell me is that I have to figure it out for myself. How can I do that if I am grounded? What a butt ache this is.

Dylan, Nicholas, and I have used the whistles to communicate, and let me tell you, it's not the same as talking face-to-face. Our only opportunity to talk one-on-one to devise a plan is when we walk to school in the morning. And yep, we are always interrupted by one of Dylan's friends, or Dave, who swooshes by on his skateboard, making rude remarks about Dylan and me being boyfriend and girlfriend. Gag! Then today, at school, I pass Dylan a note, "Meet me at the far end of the lunch room." Dylan doesn't show. Instead, Dave comes in and tells me Dylan has to clean the boards in a really snotty way. Dave really is evil.

So here's what I have decided. MeMar won't be home until late tonight. I know this 'cuz she left me one of those frozen dinners that I can zap in the microwave. I just used the whistle to let Dylan know I'm sneaking out. One problem: I can't remember how to get to the glade, so he is going to guide me using the whistle. This should be interesting!

Fortunately, the birds aren't around, so I sneak out the back and cut through the neighbors' backyards. Undiscovered, I touch the tree for luck as I enter the forest. I've forgotten how dark it can be even with the sun still out. I touch my mom's disc to make sure it's there; I don't go anywhere without it now. Then I turn on my flashlight and blow into the whistle, "I'm in."

"Head straight and begin to count your footsteps."

"OK, but what's straight? There's a tree directly in front of me."

"Is it a really tall pine tree?"

"Yep."

"Stand on the right side of the tree facing the forest, take two paces to your right, stop,

now make a quarter turn to your left, and go forward, counting your footsteps again."

I count and count and count, moving forward, kicking up the leaves beneath my feet. "I'm up to four hundred. How much longer?"

"You have to take five hundred steps."

"Four hundred ninety-nine, five hundred. Now what? Wait, I see the ribbon. OK, got the trail. Don't go away. I have to find the end of the tunnel. I am at the glade. Are you still there?"

"Yes. Go to the tree."

The setting sun warms me as I cross the glade. I spot something glittering off to the right of the tree. "What the..."

"Aly, you OK?"

"This is so weird!"

"What's weird?"

"Well..." I kick the dirt. "Has Nicholas been to the glade recently?"

"No; ever since the birds helped him out of the tunnel, he has stayed pretty close to home."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"Nothing, just kind of curious." I kick the dirt again. There's no stone. It's disappeared! Or been covered up, I guess. But by whom? All I see is a small shard of glistening rock. I figure it's what caught my eye.

"Hello, are you still there, Aly?"

"Yep, sorry...OK, where do I go from the tree?"

"See the boulder a couple feet left of the tree? The entrance is there."

"And what do you think you are doing here?" Madge squawks.

I almost choke on the whistle and spit it out. "Go away and leave me alone. I'm going in to check out what's under the Panadería. Didn't you say I had to do it myself?"

I slip down into its coolness, flashlight on, and head toward, I'm hoping, the cabinets, leaving Madge alone and squawking. My stomach begins to growl. It's the aroma of the pan dulce, and it's pulling me toward the Panadería. Before I know it, I'm just below the trapdoor.

I put the whistle in my mouth and resume my conversation with Dylan. "I'm here. I'm going to

check out the etchings." I sweep the walls with my flashlight.

"Where have you been?"

"I got interrupted."

"How?"

"Never mind."

"Well, where are you now? Find anything?"

"I'm below the trapdoor. Wait." I pull the disc from my pocket to compare the etchings, but before I can make the comparison, I hear movement overhead. Quickly, I douse the light and flatten myself against the wall. The trapdoor opens, and a rope ladder slithers down.

"Con prisa, Dave. No tengo mucho tiempo."

"I'm going as fast as I can. Not my fault you don't have much time."

Dave jumps off the ladder and heads toward the cabinets. I hold my breath as I slowly edge away but not too far, 'cuz I don't want to lose sight of him. He takes a key from around his neck and opens the cabinet.

"Hey, señor, I can't carry all of these at one time."

"Muy bien, lleva lo que puedas."

"OK, I'll carry what I can," Dave says and then mutters something under his breath about Sr. Rojas and all the things he wants him to do as he struggles up the ladder.

"Aly, are you OK?" I hear Dylan through the whistle.

I tell him to hold on.

As soon as Dave disappears, I run to the cabinet and look inside. On the upper shelf, there are five vials, each labeled. I pull one out and shine my light on it. It's labeled Brisbane. As I grab the second one, I hear Dave walking across the floor. It sounds as if he is getting ready to come back down. I don't have much time. I turn the vial over in my hand. This time, the name is mine. My fingers tremble as I slide the vial back into place and slip away.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

OCTOBER 31

Today is Halloween, and MeMar says I can go trick-or-treating. Oh joy! Nicholas and Dylan are allowed to go, too, but we all have to be home by nine, which seems totally unfair. The boys are spending the night, 'cuz their parents are going out of town, and MeMar is babysitting. That means I have to clean up the spare room, pronto.

I don't know what my costume is going to be, and I don't know what the boys are wearing, and I don't really care, 'cuz I've got more important things to think about, like the tunnel

and what I found. With Dylan's help, I got back from the glade without further incident. I told him about Dave and the cabinet with the vials, but I didn't tell him about the one with my name on it. Somehow, I just couldn't.

"Aly," MeMar calls me from the stairs.

"Yeah." I walk out to the landing.

"I'm going to the store. I don't have enough candy for tonight. The boys will be over around two thirty. That's in a half hour. How are you doing with the room?"

"I'm almost finished. Could you pick up some peanut-butter cups and some sours, please?"

"OK, dear; I won't be long." With that, she walks out the door.

I hurry with the room: clean sheets—check; dust—check. I even put a smelly thing in the electric socket to freshen up the stale air. Done. Now over to the Jameses'. I jump onto the banister and slide down. Whoopee, free at last!

Mr. and Mrs. James are heading out the door as I arrive, suitcases in hand. They tell me to have a good time tonight but that the boys, who are standing at the door, have a strict curfew. I

know that already. I say good-bye and tell them not to worry. I also add that we learned our lesson. That should help put their minds at ease. Nicholas kisses his mom and dad, and Dylan kind of salutes good-bye. He's being cool. We watch as they drive away.

"Hurry, we have to get our costumes," Nicholas says. I can hear the excitement in his voice. He runs into the house.

"Aly, I've been thinking about what you told me—you know, what you found in the tunnel—and I think we should go back..."

"Go back where?" Nicholas asks. He appears at the front door with a paper bag in his hand.

"Go back into the house and get our costumes, silly. I still don't know what I want to be. I think maybe a soldier. I have fatigues and some old army boots. And you said I could use your camouflage makeup. Right, buddy?" Dylan wraps his arms around Nicholas, and they head inside.

As I wait for the boys to gather their stuff, I hear Nicholas complaining about how he can't find his night-vision goggles. They start rummaging through the house.

"Hey, you two, I'm going home. Come over as soon as you can."

The porch door is wide open when I arrive. "MeMar, do you need help?" I turn toward her car, but it's not there. "Hey, MeMar, where'd you park?"

"Hello, Aletrice."

I want to scream, "What are you doing here?" but the fear takes my breath away. Dave is standing not more than three feet in front of me in my living room. Finally, I pull myself together. "How dare you."

"How dare I what? The door was wide open."

"You shouldn't enter someone's house uninvited." I want to throttle him. "This is the second time."

"What about you getting into my stuff? You have my notebook, my mom's jewelry box and my disc. Don't you?"

"Why do you think I have them?"

"Then I can say the same thing. How do you know it was me?"

"You stole Dylan's ammo box. I know that for a fact."

"Well, the only way you could know that is if you were inside my private place. Why don't you just give me back my stuff, and I'll be out of here."

"Fine...Wait here." I run upstairs, fetch Dave's notebook and disc, and throw them at him. "If I ever see you again, it will be too soon."

Dave grabs his stuff and heads out the door, shoving Dylan out of his way.

"Hey! Watch it," Dylan says.

"You watch it," Dave hollers back and is gone.

"What was he doing here?" Dylan comes inside.

"He wanted his stuff and..."

"Are we going to go trick-or-treating or what?" Nicholas asks, holding up his bag in one hand—which I gather holds his costume—and his night-vision goggles in the other. "Night is descending quickly, and Mother and Father said we have a strict curfew. I don't want to fail to get the best candy."

"Look, I don't have anything to wear. I'm going to run upstairs to see if I can find a costume. Nicholas, Dylan, go get dressed. You can use the spare room; it's all set up."

"May I search for a bigger bag?" Nicholas goes into the kitchen.

I rush upstairs and hunt through MeMar's closet. She's so organized. Everything is sorted and hung by color: whites, blues, browns, and turquoises, and in the corner, all her black clothes. I spot a long, black, silk cape she told me about. I pull it out and fling it onto the bed. It has a hood—cool! "I've found something," I holler. As I whisk the cape off the bed, something clinks on the hardwood floor. What was that? I search the floor. "It's a disc!"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

OCTOBER 31, LATER

MeMar's been taken! I run to the landing.
"Dylan!"

"What's up?" Dylan rushes up the stairs.

"Aly, I can't find any big bags. Do you know where they might be?" Nicholas hollers from the kitchen.

"Never mind the bags. Come here."

"What?" Dylan asks, climbing the stairs with Nick in tow.

"I found this." I show them the disc. "It's MeMar. She's been taken, just like my mom."

Just then, we hear a noise coming from downstairs. We freeze.

"Shhhh!" Dylan whispers. "Stay here. I'm going to check it out."

I begin to protest, "No, Dylan."

"Look, wait at the top of the stairs. Be my backup. If I need help, I'll holler."

Dylan heads down the stairs. Nicholas and I creep to the landing and listen. Nicholas is breathing so hard I can hardly hear a thing.

"Sr. Rojas. What are you doing here?" Dylan says.

Sr. Rojas, what's he doing here? we mouth to one another. Curious, we ease down a couple steps to hear better.

"Hola, Dylan. What are you doing here?"

"I am staying here. What are you doing here?"

"I bring *calavaritas* for Aly. *En verdad*, they are for the *Día de Los Muertos*."



"Hola, Sr. Rojas," I say, taking matters into my own hands.

"Que sorpresa; todos estan aquí."

I bet he's surprised, I think to myself...but not as surprised as we are to see him here.

"Entonces todos estan invitado a la Panadería. You can see the altar. Es bello perfecto. Teno tu torta especial, Aly." He hands me my special cake.

I'm wondering what's in it. Maybe the contents of the vial I discovered.

"Don't I get one?" Nicholas whines.

"*Sí, señor Nick. Come to the Panadería.*"

"*Muchas gracias,*" I say as Sr. Rojas leaves.

"That was beyond creepy. Sr. Rojas comes into your house without knocking, wearing a black cape, delivering skeleton heads, and talking about the Day of the Dead. We're getting out of here! Nick, come on. Let's go to the fort."

"Yeah, beyond creepy, but Dylan, Day of the Dead is real."

"Yeah, well, you can tell me about it later. Come on."

"I want to go trick-or-treating. Can't we put on our costumes?" Nicholas asks.

Dylan grumbles, "OK, but hurry. We've got to get a plan together now."

Everyone heads off to get dressed. I can't stop thinking about Sr. Rojas and the vials as I toss on the black cape. I hear Nicholas yelling for me to hurry as I stumble down the stairs.

"It's about time," Nicholas says, adjusting his wizard's robe. "Let's depart," he says, flashing a magic wand.

"Oh my," I say. "Since when does Harry Potter wear night-vision goggles?"

"Ah, the better to see you with, my dear." He bows. "And who might you be? Señor Rojas?"

"Very funny."

Dylan meets us on the porch. He's dressed in a black sports jacket, black pants, and a black shirt and tie.

"Who are you?" I say.

"Man in Black. Pretty cool, huh?"

Ignoring Dylan, I say, "Somehow all these discs are connected. Madge told me my mom was trapped in this disc. Do you think Dave's mom is in his disc, and what about the Greeter and Mrs. Rubenstein and Mrs. Brisbane?"

"Who's Madge?" Dylan asks.

"If Dave has a disc, how can he be evil? I'm so confused."

"Aly, who's Madge?"

"Madge is one of the ravens."

"Come on; it's time for trick-or-treating." Nicholas waves his empty bag in the air.

"Hey, watch that bag, buddy," Madge says, dodging it. She and Hoarse settle down onto the railing.

"Hey...what the..." Dylan jumps backward. "Uh...which one is Madge?"

"This is Madge," I point out. "And this is Hoarse. They won't hurt you."

"See, I told you, Dylan," Nicholas says.

"Your MeMar has been taken," Madge squawks.

"Do you know who—"

"Who is she talking to?" Dylan asks.

"I told you, the ravens," Nicholas says.

"But...how...Aly, what's—"

"Dylan, shut up a minute. Madge, do you know who's behind this? Is it Dave?"

"No."

I'm having a hard time concentrating, 'cuz I think I hear a voice whispering my name. I take a deep breath and shake my head to try to get it to stop. "Do you know what's going on?"

"Aly, what are you talking about?" Dylan says.

Hoarse squawks loudly, getting everyone's attention. "Here's what we know. We saw Sr. Rojas earlier this evening in his shop, adding a candle to the altar. He spotted us and came racing out. I thought he was going to chase us again, but he didn't. Instead, he scattered crumbs on the sidewalk and called for us to come eat. I thought this was great, because I was hungry, but Madge yelled at me, saying she had this funny feeling. You girls and your funny feelings."

"Hoarse, get to the point," Madge says.

"So I don't eat. Then Madge tells me we have to get on with our reconnoitering, so we fly over to Brisbane's, Rubenstein's, and the Greeter's houses, and everything looks normal."

"We're heading back to the Panadería now!" Madge says, and she and Hoarse disappear into the darkness.

"OK, but be careful, please," I yell out.

"What did they say?" Dylan asks.

"What about Halloween? I would like to go trick-or-treating," Nicholas says.

"We can't, Nick."

Nicholas removes his night-vision goggles and gets right up in my face. "I want to go trick-or-treating."

"OK, OK, but do you have your whistles?" I ask.

"Yes." Nick pulls the whistle from his pocket. "Can we go trick-or-treating?"

"Yes, but what did they say?" Dylan asks again.

"Look, Nicholas, there's a house. Hurry."

"You still haven't told me what the birds said to you," Dylan persistently asks again.

"We need to head over to the Panadería."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah, and we should check out the Greeter's house. It's on the way."

"OK, got some." Nicholas goes running off to another house.

When we get to the Greeter's house, a single light illuminates the front porch.

"Do you think he's home?" Dylan says and runs up to the front door. He looks in the window. "It's dark."

"Hey, look. It's him." Nicholas points across the street.

"Who?" I turn and see the Greeter heading toward town with Mrs. B. and Mrs. R.

Nicholas smiles, and off he goes to another house. When he returns he gives us each a handful of gooey candy corn, "For energy." I notice he gives himself two handfuls, but who's counting.

The Greeter, Mrs. R., and Mrs. B. are still within sight, and it looks like they are heading toward the town center.

"I wonder why all the street lights are out. It's a good thing I have my night-vision goggles," Nicholas says as he puts them on. "They're going inside the Panadería. I'm going to get a closer look."

"No," Dylan says, but before he can stop him, Nicholas slips off his pack and slides into the darkness.

We wait in silence, and I realize there's no moon.

"I should've gone. I'm supposed to take care of him. You wait here, Aly."

"No, I'm going with you." As we set off, we bump smack into Nicholas. "Whoa, that was quick."

"I used my magical wand." Nicholas giggles. "All the people we've been following, well, they went into a back room. I couldn't see anything after that."

"Really?" I yelp.

"Shhhh! Give me the glasses, Nick. Now!" Dylan demands. The glasses exchange hands, and we are silent again as we approach the Panadería and stare into the window.

I hear my name. "What?"

"What do you mean, 'What'?" Dylan whispers.

"Someone just called me."

"Wasn't me."

"Nor me," Nicholas says.

"Well, someone did."

"I'm scared." Nicholas grabs Dylan's hand.

"I heard my name. I know I heard my name. Now a voice is telling me to open the door."

"What are you talking about, Aly?" Dylan says.

"It's unlocked. Let's go." I lead the way, tiptoeing into the Panadería. Directly in front of me is the altar. "Dylan, shine your light." It's now completely adorned with strawberries and oranges

and marigolds, gifts honoring the dead. There's a miniature newspaper and a miniature camera and some photographs. I look more closely. I gasp.

"What's wrong, Aly?" Dylan sidles up next to me.

"Look at the faces in the photographs. It's my mom and MeMar."

"Hey, come here," Nicholas calls from the back.

"What is it? Where are you?" Dylan calls out.

"I know," I say and push in front of Dylan.

Nicholas yells, "There's a trapdoor in the floor, and it's open, and the rope ladder's been pushed over the side. I think they may have gone this way." Nicholas gestures toward the ladder.

"Shhhhhh!" I whisper. "We don't want them to hear us." I climb onto the ladder.

Dylan lifts Nick onto the ladder. "Take it easy, buddy. I'll be right behind you."

We gather in the tunnel and shine our flashlights on the walls.

"Yep, it's the same," Dylan says.

"What?" Nicholas asks. "What are you talking about?"

"When we...when Dylan and I were trying to find you...well, we took a wrong turn and ended here. I think we should go this way. Is everyone ready?" I answer.

We take off down the tunnel.

I'm feeling pretty scared, so I grab hold of the discs in my pocket. Three things I know for sure: We are headed for the glade. Someone keeps calling me. And we have to find Rojas. Hopefully, Rojas and the others went this way.

"Stay close." Dylan takes the lead.

"Hold my hand?" Nicholas whispers.

"Sure" Dylan grabs hold of Nick's hand.

"Look, I have no right to ask you to come with me. You two can leave, but...I have to see this through," I say.

Dylan kneels down to talk to Nicholas. "We're in, right?"

After a moment, Nicholas raises his hand in the air as if to high-five us and says, "Certainly."

"Look, one good thing: I have the night goggles." Dylan whirls the glasses on his finger.

"They are my night-vision goggles, Dylan."

"Right, Nick. OK, I'll be the leader; follow me. We'll figure this out."

"Yeah! And I have trick-or-treat stuff, so we won't go hungry. Who wants chocolate?" Nicholas hands out Hershey Kisses.

It's surprising what a little chocolate will do for your courage, I'm thinking as we make our way through the tunnel. I'm hoping we're going the right way. As we shine our flashlights on the walls, looking for anything familiar to guide our way, I feel a force pulling me, propelling me forward, and I want to take the lead. My body seems to know where it's heading even though I don't.

"Hold up, Aly," Dylan calls out.

I don't answer him and keep walking toward I don't know what. I'm conscious of my breathing but nothing else. We finally reach the glade, and I want to collapse. Now I hear nothing except the sound of the breeze rustling through the trees.

Dylan scans the meadow. "Hey, you two, I see Dave and all the others," Dylan whispers. "Come on. They're in a big circle."

I catch my breath. "OK, lead the way, Dylan." I can feel the meadow's long grass embrace my

legs as I follow. Halfway across the meadow, I hear my name again. I stand up straight. I feel alert and excited. I move forward, wanting to see what is happening. I can hear Dylan and Nicholas calling, but another voice is stronger.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NEAR MIDNIGHT,

OCTOBER 31

I'm being pulled to a circle, to a place between Dave and Mrs. R. I try to stop, to turn around, but I can't. I open my mouth to shout out, but there is no sound! I have no control over my body; it won't do what I want it to do. I can use my eyes, so I look around. I see the Greeter and Mrs. Brisbane; they complete our perfect circle. Sr. Rojas is in the center, standing on a huge stone. He's waving his hands in the air, chanting something. I don't know what, but whatever he's chanting, it seems as if

the stone is moving. Yes, it's rising up from the ground, and there's this disgusting orangey-red vapor crawling out of the earth, slithering across the ground around the stone.

My pockets begin to vibrate. It's the discs. I slip my hands into my pockets and take hold of them. They feel warm and comforting. I take one in each hand and bring them close to my heart. I think they are talking to me, telling me that everything is going to be all right, not to be afraid, and to do what Sr. Rojas tells me to do. I close my eyes, still clutching the discs. I haven't felt this happy since before my mother disappeared. I feel her close to me now. I call out her name. I hear the others calling out names, too. Once or twice, I think I hear Dylan and Nicholas calling for me to come away from the circle, but I don't want to leave.

We begin swaying as Sr. Rojas's chanting grows louder and louder. He points to the Greeter, who steps forward and kneels in front of the stone. He lifts his disc. Sr. Rojas gestures for the Greeter to place his disc on the stone. There's a space for it. The Greeter does as he is

told and puts his disc in a slot. It's a perfect fit. As the Greeter stands to return to his original place, I notice a stream of the orangey-red vapor sliding out from under the disc. The stream of vapor follows behind him. As he takes his place, it swirls around his feet, moves up his legs, and then slips behind him to form the shape of a lady. What the heck is going on here? Not only has the Greeter got the image of someone standing behind him, but let me tell you, it's in the shape of a woman. I see her arms form and wrap themselves around his chest.

I hear my name, "Aly, Aly. Run! Run! Get away!"

I shake my head no as I wait for my turn. Each time someone steps forward, it's the same ritual: the person kneels, places their disc, and returns to the original position. Each time the stone Sr. Rojas is standing on rises higher, and another stream of vapor is released, follows the person back to their position, and forms a human shape behind that person. I wonder if the individual knows a human shape is standing behind them..

I notice no one turns around. We all just stare at Sr. Rojas as he rises higher on the central stone. I see Dave go forward and know I am next. I'm full of excitement, not at all afraid. Finally, Rojas's finger points at me. I walk to Sr. Rojas and kneel. He points to two slots for my discs. Holding my grandmother's disc with my right hand, I place her disc first. I peer into the vapor as it pours over me. I hear voices groaning and moaning and shrieking. I think I see hands and arms reaching out toward me. I hear wild laughter. It's Rojas.

"One more. It will all be mine."

I look up into the face of Sr. Rojas. His huge finger presses down on me, and his voice demands, "Now, the second disc."

Wild murmurings and shrieks blast from inside the earth. I can see figures pulling and shoving and screaming to get out. I can hear the boys screaming. "No...NO...don't do it!" But I have no control over my body. I can't stop. I raise the disc. The earth rumbles and shakes. The vapor is covering everything, and it smells rotten. I hear screams that sound like metal scraping metal so

loud, I want to clamp my hands against my ears, but I can't. It's like the world has gone crazy.

As I lean over to place the disc, I see a white flash. I feel something sharp plunge into my hand. Something warm oozes and slides along the top of my hand. I KNOW IT IS BLOOD. I hear the voice ordering me to place the disc, but my hand is so slippery, I can't hold on to it. I drop the disc. I scream in terror as I feel around, frantic to find it.

"The disc—now. Time is running out. You will never see your mother again."

"I can't find it," I wail as I madly search the grass. My fingers are frantic, ripping the grass, tearing at the earth. I crawl to my right. My fingers touch something. It's the disc. "Look, I have it," I say as I hold it up.

Rojas screams and spontaneously combusts. The red vapor slides back from where it came, and the stone slowly settles back into its place. I look up at the sky and see the moon and the stars.

"Aly, Aly, where are you?" Dylan yells.

"Here."

"Over here, everyone. She is over here in the grass."

I feel myself being picked up.

"Take her to my house." I think I hear MeMar's voice. I fall unconscious.

So here I am sitting in the midst of a bunch of happy people. "Ugh" is all I can say. The Greeter is standing with his arm around his wife. She's as tall as he is, and she's resting her head on his shoulder. They've been apart a long time and have lots of catching up to do. Momentarily, I wonder what it would be like to have to search for my mom all the years he's been searching for his wife. I'm definitely not interested. Everyone knows I want my mother *now*, and I'm going to find her. Glancing at Dave, I hardly recognize him; he's smiling. Dave's dad looks happy, too. Mrs. R. is sitting on the couch with her son. She keeps kissing him on the cheek. He looks happy to be back. Mr. and Mrs. Brisbane keep smiling at each other as they help themselves to a plate of goodies MeMar set out. I'm glad I have MeMar

back, but she's not my mom. Anyway, I'm giving myself a big fat *F*—no mom. I look down at the weird bandage on my hand. I still can't figure out how I got stabbed. I spot Dylan, Nicholas, and their parents at the door and motion for Dylan and Nicholas to come over. Mr. and Mrs. James head over to MeMar.

"Holy moly, that's some bandage," Dylan says, giving me a really bizarre look. He leans in close. "Does it hurt?"

"Not much, but I do have a question for you two. Do you know how this happened?"

Dylan and Nicholas look at each other and then turn to me and nod their heads.

"Well?"

"Madge stabbed you. At least, I think it was her," Nicholas says, looking me right in the eye.

"What? Why? Why would she stop me from getting my mom back?" I squint. "She and Hoarse were supposed to help me. Wait till I get my hands on her. Do you know where she is?"

Dave joins us. "I overheard what you just said, and according to my mom and your

grandmother, she saved the world by causing you to drop the disc."

"Who invited you over here, anyway?" I say, feeling very confused.

"Hey, I just wanted to let you know I'm one of the seven, and I want to help you get your mom back."

"You've got to be kidding." That's it! I run upstairs to get the real story from Hoarse and Madge. They'll know. As I enter my room, Hoarse is sitting on the windowsill just outside my bedroom. Madge is not with him. She's probably avoiding me. I open the window. "Where's Madge?"

He drops something on the windowsill before flying to his regular branch. He looks so droopy and sad.

"Oh no!" I look at the tiny disc. "We'll get them back. I promise you."



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wendie Willson has her master's degree in theatre and English. She has enjoyed living and working around the world with her family. If asked, she will tell you about the sense of excitement she has when seeing people, young and old, discover their self-expression and creativity through acting, dance, directing, design, and producing pieces of art.

Mary Ann Eisenberg lives in Los Angeles but is known to take sudden trips to Hawaii to visit her grandchildren. She loves bringing stories to life and currently teaches theatre arts to elementary schoolchildren. She has a master of fine arts from California Institute of the Arts and has been

honored by the Bravo Awards for her work with the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Both Willson and Eisenberg are passionate about sparking kids' imaginations and reminding girls that it's OK to be tough. They hope Aly's adventures will encourage girls and boys to dream big, take risks, and count on their own smarts and bravery.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Luis Fausto is a graphic designer, artist, and small business owner living in the Coachella Valley. His artwork has been published in educational text books and he has illustrated several other book covers. As a graphic designer he works with corporate clients and especially enjoys collaboration and volunteering with non-profit organizations to better help define their branding. You can reach Luis by email at luis@creativoidentity.com