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PEBBLECHILD

A Thesis

by

BRENDA OCHOA

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2020

Major Subject: Creative Writing

PEBBLECHILD

A Thesis
by
BRENDA OCHOA

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Christopher Carmona, Ph.D.
Chair of Committee

Britt Haraway, Ph.D.
Committee Member

George T. Díaz, Ph.D.
Committee Member

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Ochoa, Brenda., Pebblechild. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2020, 110 pp., references, 5 titles.

This collection of short stories depicts life moments for people that are connected through the city of Peñitas, Texas. This manuscript begins as an origin story set in the Rio Grande Valley. According to local historians both in the past and in present times, the city of Peñitas was founded by a priest and five other Spaniards. This idea is integrated into the storyline but with a focus on the impact of a young girl, Tala. She suffers immensely through the actions of a group she refers to as the Long Beards. She has to go through a series of discoveries in order to discover her purpose. My goal for Pebblechild is to portray a magical interpretation of life in South Texas through the incorporation of creative elements that also pay homage to factual tribes that inhabited the Rio Grande Valley Area.

Reading Pebblechild is like traveling through a time machine. It begins in an ancient era where humans and supernatural forces roam the land. It proceeds to time warp to the 1990's and then shifts to capturing moments during the 2000's. The manuscript concludes in present day with Takoda, a descendent of Tala. He unlocks his powers throughout the plot which leads him in the direction of finding the hero within him. After he receives his powers, Tala returns and begins to assemble her descendants with the intention of reestablishing a new safeguard around the city of Peñitas.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the city of Peñitas. Without this connection to the past, Pebblechild would never have sprung from my mind and placed into words. It has truly been an inspiration to have walked these lands as a child and now as an adult. I am honored to have grown up in a city preserved in time. With continuous gratitude and love, I am honored to call the city of Peñitas my home.

I also dedicate this to my family because the completion of my studies would not have been possible without their unconditional love and unwavering support. My husband, Rudy, my daughter, Loren, my son, Branden, my mother Belia, and my father Juan, wholeheartedly motivated, cheered, and supported me from day one.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to my committee and the professors at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. I would especially like to thank Dr. Christopher Carmona for inspiring me to write, write some more, and continue writing until my stories were complete. Thank you Dr. Carmona, for your leadership in my project and for supporting my vision for this piece about a tiny city in the Rio Grande Valley. Through his direction, I was able to construct the origin story that was once dormant in my thoughts. Thank you to Dr. Britt Haraway for continuously guiding me since the day I applied for acceptance into the UTRGV Creative Writing Program. Dr. Haraway, thank you for shining a bright light through the academic system and for always having the answers to my questions, and for gifting me your unwavering advice through the course of my work. Thank you to Dr. George Diaz for joining me in this journey. I appreciate the historical expertise and insight he contributed to the creation of my work.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

It was the spring of 2017 when I found myself scrolling through information, submitting paperwork, and making decisions that would set me onto a path that would alter my life. By the time I began my graduate school adventures at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, I had already accumulated 10 years of educational experience and amassed district- wide recognition working as an elementary teacher for La Joya ISD. In order to zone in on my personal history as a writer, the first section of my critical introduction will focus on my influences and experiences as a child, a mother and a teacher. These reflections are essential to include because they provide explanations of my work. After contemplating, I now understand that my life experiences influence my style of writing. The words, characters, and messages I weave together are influenced by my past, present, and future. The second part of my introduction will focus more specifically on my thesis manuscript, *Pebblechild*, which is a collection of short stories that depict life moments for people and animals that are all connected through the city. It begins as an origin story for the city. *Pebblechild* is a reimagining depiction of South Texas with creative elements woven into the foundation of the stories.

In the spring of 1907, Mark Twain delivered a speech in Elmira. He said, “Now, isn’t imagination a precious thing? It peoples the earth with all manner of wonders, strange beasts and birds, angels, cherubim and seraphim. And it has to be exercised. No child should be permitted to grow up without exercise for imagination. It enriches life for him. It makes things wonderful and beautiful” (Jerome & Wisbey). Twain’s explanation about imagination captures the sentiment of

my childhood. For example, the mesquite filled woods surrounding my childhood home was like a magical portal that would transport me to an array of quests. The trails left by the heavy paces of my father's cattle would swirl and wind around the brush filled land. I would follow the trails to new adventures where my imagination would engulf the woods with fairies, elves, and other magical creatures. Standing in the middle of the land was like walking on a rippling green and brown ocean. The flaming red hair of our cows would glisten among the ripples of brown and green. I would breathe in the air of the monte and it would be like an energy surge prompting me to explore the vastness far and wide. Scanning the perimeter of the land, I could see multiple families of cacti sitting closely as they nestled amongst the brush. I would shield my eyes from the Rio Grande Valley sunlight as reality and imagination accompanied me in my exploration escapades. I would catch glimpses of my father carting around bales of hay as my mother watered her plants. That was her happy place. By being outside and watering her plants, my mother was relaxed in her haven. I have vivid memories of both my parents being upbeat and happy when they were both outside either working on projects, caring for our animals, or enjoying the vastness of their land. All of this while green jays, sparrows, and chachalacas created symphonies of tweets and chirps.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of growing up with two brothers and two sisters, somehow the days didn't feel rushed. Thoughts and flashbacks of my childhood are lovingly tucked away in a bright, lit up space in middle of my mind. In order to understand my writing, you must understand where I come from. Throughout the course of reflecting and constructing my thesis, I've had to enter that bright space in my mind, untuck the memories of my childhood, extract bits and pieces, and sprinkle them within the words of my sentences. To enter these memories, I close my eyes and visualize myself walking through the caliche road that leads to my childhood

home. I can hear the crunch of the gravel as I walk through the road. I can see my home at a distance, but thankfully in my memory, I count a second or two, and I'm there- instantly transported to the front of my doorstep. This home, which I endearingly call, The Red Brick House was built far away from the vicinity of neighboring homes. It was constructed with a combination of red and maroon tinted bricks that was unlike the color of other homes in the city. The red color combination of my childhood home was like the red heart of the land. It provided the beat of life and represented a sort of life source for my imagination. The land in Peñitas, The Red Brick House, my imagination, and my family were all contributors to helping spark the ideas for my manuscript. Having our home set apart from other homes that were nearby wasn't a setback at all. In my eyes, this was a luxury because it meant taking my portable radio outdoors and cranking up my Madonna, New Kids on the Block or Debbie Gibson tapes loudly. The music would swirl around and capture the sentiment of the day in combinations of beats and lyrics. The sway of the pecan tree branches in my front yard would match the tempo of the music. I would snap my fingers, bop my side ponytail, tap my LA Gear tennis shoes to the rhythm, and dance around without a care in the world. My childhood home and its wooded surroundings, nestled in the heart of a tiny city named Peñitas represents an immeasurable sense of love and mystical sentiments.

Growing up in Peñitas, I always felt like I was in a magical place shielded away from the rest of the world. It was like living in a bubble- a floating bubble that would spin around at its own pace. A shielded place that was content with steering clear from the happenings of the rest of the Rio Grande Valley. The concept behind *Pebblechild* evolved from this feeling. Peñitas, for me, feels like a place where the supernatural could exist, even if it means existing in stories. When I look back now, I know why animals mean so much to me. We were a family that always

had dogs, cats, rabbits, ducks, chickens, a goat or two and cows. At one point, we even owned an emu. However, amongst all of our animals, the most important ones to me were our family dogs. Through the course of my childhood, we had several dogs that we loved, laughed with, protected, and grieved for. This could explain why as an adult, with a family of my own, we own 11 dogs. In my story *The Grip of Tweedle Fear and Tweedle Dread*, I want to capture the feeling of love an owner has for their pet as well as the unfathomable sense of fear that consumes an owner when losing their pet. People who have lost their pet can relate to what the main character, Victoria undergoes, or even if a person has never lost a pet, the thought of it possibly happening is enough to understand the stages of helplessness throughout the story.

Animals were a pivotal part of my childhood. We each owned a cow including my parents. My cow's name was She- We, and I have a vivid recollection of grasping a handful of grass from the ground and feeding it to her from my side of the fence. My child hands would continue to pluck a series of grass clumps to feed her unwavering appetite. There were days where I would gather the mesquite bean pods from the ground in my backyard. There were so many to gather, but I would try to scoop them up in my hands as rapidly as I could. I would try to fill my bucket before my brother.

When my family and I would venture into town, a stop was most likely always made at the Mission Feed Store or any other local feed store for supplies. When back to school season would roll around, my father would load up his trailer with calves. Time would pass so much slower during these times. He would drive to the Edinburg Livestock Auction and sell the calves to the highest bidders. There were years where we must have tagged along because the voice of the auctioneer speeding through the bids is imprinted in my memory. I can still hear my father saying, "Don't raise your hand." When I asked why, he went on to explain that if I raised my

hand, then the man announcing the number would think that we wanted to purchase the cow that was being paraded back and forth. My brothers, sisters, and I would get an allotted \$100.00 each to spend on our back to school clothes and supplies. There are animals mentioned throughout the span of Pebblechild. Because animals were major contributors to my happiness, sadness, and life in general, I could not visualize my work without including them in my stories in different roles.

In his *Letters on Life*, Rainer Maria Rilke expresses the importance of a childhood. He says, “To have a childhood means to live a thousand lives before the one,” (Rilke 77). This quote captures the power of imagination. Rilke explains the large array of possibilities that swirl around a child’s thoughts. Childhood is like a magical kingdom where the word impossible does not exist. My childhood meant there were mud pies to bake, rock collections to gather, trails to explore, and animals to feed. The Red Brick House along with the mesquite engulfed monte surrounding my home was my playground. One day, on one such escapade, I set out in search of unique rocks for my collection. I recall stooping down and investigating a jagged stone protruding from the dirt. I scraped it out with a thin mesquite branch. When I freed it, I held it up to the sunlight. It didn’t look like the typical rocks I was used to collecting, but something about it stood out for me. I placed it in my pocket and continued exploring. I didn’t remove the stone until later that evening when I was able to speak to my father about it. “Look what I found in the monte today,” I said as I handed the stone to him. He took it and held it up. What he explained next fascinated me immensely. He explained that what I had found was an arrowhead and that it was made by the ancient Indian tribes that lived in this area long ago. He went into The Red Brick House and came back out with a few more arrowheads from his collection. My father revealed that he had been collecting arrowheads in our land since he was a child. I told

him that the one I had discovered was pointing out from the ground and that I had to dig it out with a branch. He shared stories of how he had found the arrowheads in his collection and that one of them was found by his grandfather Carlos and given to him. My father shared his knowledge about the Indian tribes that inhabited the land hundreds of years before our time. This piece of information was interesting because I remember going into our living room and heading straight to the shelves that held our encyclopedias. I took my arrowhead to school for show and tell. I remember asking my teacher for permission to go the library. I wanted to find more about my new discovery, and I wanted to find out what my school library had to offer. I couldn't read enough about the arrowhead I had found or about information about Indians from Texas.



Figure 1 - Arrowhead Discovery

This is a picture of my father's arrowheads discovered throughout his youth and in recent years. They were discovered throughout the span of his land in Peñitas.

The memory of my arrowhead discovery and the unveiling of my father's personal collection played a vital reason why I maneuvered *Pebblechild* in the direction it went. In my first story, I knew I wanted Tala to own an arrowhead as a way to pay tribute to my arrowhead memory. When Tala loses her loved ones, I made sure she finds her arrowhead and keeps it safe as she goes through her journey of self-discovery. From the moment I discovered that arrowhead I knew there was a story to be told. I would think about how it came to be left there, embedded in the dirt for years and years until the day I released it from its captivity. Who left it there? Why was it left there? Did its creator lose it there? How was it used? Questioned swirled within me, immeasurably like bees that circle a hive. This was around the time I wanted to be an archeologist, so of course, I was intent on reading more information besides what the school library offered at Memorial Elementary. My tia Mary was my source of adventure into avenues in town I rarely went to with my parents. When she came to pick me up for a weekend escapade to McAllen, I asked to also go to the Speer Memorial Library in Mission as well as Waldenbooks, a bookstore located inside La Plaza Mall. These were the years before internet and online data bases, so in order to quench my thirst for more information, I had to step foot into a public library or book store. To this day, that quest for knowledge continues as I find myself once again searching for information on early Indian tribes with an emphasis on the tribes that made the Rio Grande Delta their home.

During my 5th Grade year, I remember being fascinated with books written by Stephen King. Even though we were a family of seven and at times money was scarce, my mother never denied my Stephen King obsession. For example, when Saturdays rolled around, we often drove into town (town was our code for the Mission or McAllen area) where our first stop was Texas State Bank. My mother would cash her checks. She was a daycare owner who took care of

children from Monday through Friday. This was a time before debit cards, so parents would either pay in cash or a written check on a weekly basis. Next, we would venture out to complete errands. My favorite stops were places that I knew had sections devoted to books that were for sale. Places like Walmart or H-E-B often sold books written by Stephen King. While my mother shopped for groceries, I would walk to the book aisles, scan them, and choose a Stephen King novel. I would walk around until I found my family, casually place the book into the grocery basket, and perhaps, during days when I knew money was tight, I would try to cover the book with items in the shopping basket. I tried to hide the book, but I believe deep down, I knew my mother always suspected it was me. The characters, plot and spooky elements always interested me, and by reading the novels, it was an escape from my normal 5th Grade life. The elements from King's novels offered alternative gateways and sparked my imagination to new heights. "Go to sleep! Stop reading," my mother would say during evenings when the plots were too intense to bookmark and put away for the next day. I would flick on my flashlight and read under the covers of my Bart Simpson themed bedspread. This was my routine often straining my eyes in the dark. The result being a strong case of nearsightedness and glasses for life.

Nowadays, I often tell my students that while I was growing up there were absolutely no incentives, field trips, colossal trophies or any reward for students who would read. I read books because I loved reading them. There was no reading requirement I was trying to fulfill in school. There was no school announcement from the principal when I read over a million words. No one took my picture and placed an 8 x 11 portrait of me outside the school library for everyone to see. In fact, there was no system in place where it would calculate word count and there was no reason for celebrating the reading of books outside what the teacher was asking for. I read

because it was a way of learning, escaping, and becoming more than who I was. I existed through the characters I read about. I learned the lessons, asked the questions, laughed out loud, and did all of the wondering in the world while reading. During this time in my life, I understand that reading can influence my writing and spark new ideas. For instance, Joyce Carol Oats says, “Reading is the springboard to writing.” She believes that reading can inform and elevate your own style of writing. How does reading help me become a better writer? Oats says, “Writers are shaped by other writers. The books we read as children influence our tastes and impact on our writing style as adults. The writers who shape us are like unofficial mentors,” (Masterclass 2019). Upon reflection, I am glad that I had developed a love for reading since an early age. Whether it was a Nancy Drew mystery book, a Stephen King thriller, or informational books about the Loch Ness monster, Big Foot, or UFOs, I now realize that these books were setting the foundation for my future writing endeavors.

This semester, while in my Form and Theory of Short Fiction Graduate course, one of the assignments was to pursue Stephen King’s, *On Writing- A Memoir of the Craft*. I was overjoyed because of my early fascination with anything Stephen King. I had no idea he had written a book that zoned in on giving his advice about writing. This notion appealed to me primarily because of who he was. It was already a credible source for me as a writer because it was written by Stephen King, and secondly because I’m a writer. He gives integral advice that made me think about my own writing while compiling my manuscript. I loved the writing toolbox analogy to his Uncle Oren’s inherited toolbox. I appreciated that Stephen King compared the tools to a familiar object and memories. This is why King comes across as relatable because we all know or might even have our own versions of an Uncle Oren in our own lives. The descriptions of the levels, the unique qualities, such as the flowered fabric, made this object stand

out for King. One of my favorite sentences in this section was, “To my child’s eyes they looked like the latches on a giant’s lunchbox.” This made me visualize how big and amazing it was. It represented a source of magical quality for a child’s imagination, and now as an adult, he uses it to compare an internal writing toolbox. Everything about the description represents the wonder of possibility for Stephen King as a child.

I liked the piece of advice his uncle offers him. When King becomes puzzled, he asks his uncle why he had carried Fazza’s toolbox all the way around the house, if all he needed was a screwdriver. His response, “Yeah, but Stevie I didn’t know what else I might do once I got here. It’s best to have your tools with you. If you don’t, you’re apt to find something you didn’t expect and get discouraged.” When I read this piece of advice, I immediately thought of the supply bag I often carry around. Within my supply bag, I have a collection of different colored flair pens, a few highlighters, a glue stick, and a mechanical white out. I most often will always use a black flair pen when I teach or if I have to write anything down. There is something about the lush bold color of this particular brand of flair pen. However, I completely understand what Uncle Oren was trying to convey to his young nephew. I can connect to this sentiment in my life because, even though I will always use the black colored flair pen, I still need tend to carry around a whole bag of different colored pens because I will never know if I will need one to teach a concept, compare and contrast characters, or highlight a math question. I can totally relate to Uncle Oren.

The best part of this analogy is when King zooms into his whole concept by providing an explanation. “To write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle you can carry it with you. Then looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work.” This is great

advice because there has been more than once when I get discouraged. There were several enlightening moments for me as I read King's writing tips. For example, one important level in his analogy is reserved for the most common utilities in writing such as vocabulary, conventions, sentence structure. I learned that one, "of the bad things you can do to your writing is to dress up the vocabulary, looking for long words because of being ashamed of short ones." He compares this technique to way some people dress up their pet in ridiculous outfits. He gives more examples of how authors use the high order vocabulary, but his examples come across as humorous, so I can see King's point in restraining from looking through a thesaurus to substitute words. The most informative point was when he dives into the grammar advice. I learned that by writing a simple sentence, I can clearly get my point across versus an array of complex and compound sentences. This struck a chord with me immensely because my opening sentence in Pebblechild is a simple sentence. It starts off with, "The sun scorches." I've come to terms with that simple sentence, because of Stephen King's reassurance, so yes, I agree, sometimes the most impactful sentences are the simplest ones.

Another factor that contributes significantly to my style of writing is my job as a teacher. I'm an elementary teacher at JFK Elementary located in the heart of Peñitas. Whenever I was asked what kind of profession I wanted to pursue when I was younger, not once did I ever say I wanted to be a teacher. I never imagined myself as a teacher. Growing up, my response to that question was: archaeologist, lawyer, or television news broadcaster. Depending on what year it was, those were my answers, but never in a million years did I visualize myself as an elementary teacher. My life didn't go as planned and that is perfectly amazing because I have my daughter, Loren, my son, Branden, and my husband Rudy. It was only after I had these three-integral people enter my life did I complete my bachelor's degree in Communications with an emphasis

in Public Relations. Sure, it took me ten years to complete, but I never gave up. In 2007, Branden was born in February and when the summer months rolled around, I graduated from the University of Texas Pan American. Loren was set to begin her Pre- Kinder year that school year so what better way to be employed with a newborn son, than pursue a job in substitute teaching. I filled out the necessary paperwork at the La Joya Independent School District Human Resources. I waited for the school year to begin.

I was a substitute teacher who enjoyed the freedom of going into a classroom to teach my heart out when I chose to, or simply staying home with my son Branden who was enjoying the first year of his life, or staying home and spending the day with my mother. Awe! The wonderous glory of substitute teaching. I loved it! That was my routine for one year until I chose to apply to the La Joya Independent School District as an elementary teacher. I enrolled in an Accelerated Teaching Program and took the necessary educator exams for attaining my teaching license. Since I had primarily substituted for my daughter, Loren's Pre-Kinder class at JFK Elementary, the principal hired me as a Kindergarten teacher. Well that adventure didn't last very long because at the end of the year, the principal beckoned me to her office and lo and behold I got moved. I got moved straight into the 4th Grade. From teaching Kindergarten my first year to teaching 4th Grade, a state testing grade- that might have been a dreary transition for some teachers, but for me, I internalized the transition and accepted it with stride. I had concluded that this new adventure in 4th Grade was my interpretation as a promotion.

Fast forward to the year 2020, and now I find myself in the midst of my twelfth-year teaching. During the span of the 12 years, I have taught one full year of Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Grade. The rest of the 8 years have been in the 4th Grade. In 2013, I was bestowed the highest honor attainable for an elementary teacher. I was recognized as Elementary District

Teacher of the Year. Every training or district meeting I attended, I was recognized as the teacher who was District Teacher of the Year. Suddenly, I didn't feel like a normal teacher content with sitting on the back table at a meeting and not worried about whether being recognized or judged. That feeling was gone after that year in 2013. It is sort like walking around with a huge "I am La Joya ISD" billboard in front of my arms. The recognition was immense because even today, seven years later, I can't escape from the award. The perception from the community is what I emulate as a teacher, co- worker, and family member. My job has played a contributing role upon my style of writing because when I write I'm primarily thinking that my number one audience are my 4th Grade students. I have accepted the idea that my choices, my words, my ideas are impressionable to these young adults. I choose my words and weave them into sentences. I breathe life to my ideas by placing my sentences together- one after the other. There were moments when I was writing the stories within *Pebblechild* and I wondered what potential audience I was writing it for, and I would lift my hands from my Mac computer and pause. Ultimately, I acknowledge my style of writing has been influenced by the magnitude of my profession, so I've learned to accept this whole-heartedly.

When contemplating potential platforms for my project, I recognized what the relevant components in my life were and sought out a way of making them link. I knew that my goals for writing would revolve around themes that were based loosely on my personal experiences. The framework of *Pebblechild* consists of a series of fictional short stories that depict life moments for people that are connected through my hometown, the city of Peñitas. From the moment I discovered the arrowhead embedded in the ground, I knew that there could be a story to be told. This is what helped spark the idea behind my origin story for the city. That small arrowhead was the igniting link between reality and the imaginary elements throughout my origin story of the

city of Peñitas. My goal for *Pebblechild* is a reimagining depiction of South Texas with creative elements that also pay homage to factual Indian tribes that inhabited the Rio Grande Valley area. My first story sets the framework for the collection of my pieces that follow. According to a 1949 article that appeared in the Valley Evening Monitor, *Peñitas Lays Claims to Founding in 1529*, a leader in the research work on Peñitas has been conducted by Mrs. Elena Zamora y Moreno O'Shea of Dallas. This article explains that the city of Peñitas was founded by a priest and five other Spaniards. Mrs. Zamora is a descendent of one of the five original settlers in Peñitas. The Spaniards were part of the Panfilo de Narvaez Expedition that were sent into Mexico after Hernando Cortez. Under the subheading *Narvaez Banished*, I learned: Panfilo de Narvaez, a member of Ponce de Leon's Florida expedition, raged that fate should pick Hernan Cortez to conquer Mexico and attain the riches and fame that went with it. Narvaez decided to overthrow the Cortez regime, but Narvaez and his troops failed in the attempt. Cortez defeated Narvaez, banished him to prison, and took most of his army away. When Narvaez was released from prison, he and his men decided to return to the Everglades in Florida. He and his men began the long journey across Mexico over mountains and into the dry regions that border the Rio Grande River. As long as their trail followed the river, the drinking water was plentiful.

According to the article, the travelers had to leave the river and cut across the dry land of the Rio Grande Delta: "Over miles and miles the band wandered. Game was scarce and water completely gone. Their food source consisted mainly of prickly pears which brought on fevers and dysentery among the men" (pg. 1). This article explains that there were two priests: Fray Zamora and Fray Lopez who were with the group. The priests urged the group to have faith. I was aware of Father Zamora and his role through stories I had heard from my father and articles I had read about, but I was never aware that there was information that reveals a second priest,

Father Lopez, within the group. Eventually they met a group of Indians who led the travelers to their camp by the river. Father Zamora named the spot El Baluarte, The Haven. It was at this place that the group divided. Narvaez and some of the men continued their journey and traveled toward Florida. Father Lopez and ten men returned to Mexico and Father Zamora with five officers decided to stay. After some time, the Indians made plans to travel toward the Gulf of Mexico, and the remaining Spaniards joined them. It was during this new traveling phase through the Rio Grande Delta that the Spaniards were introduced to the Calero Indians. The article further explains that these Indians lived in dugout type houses and thatched huts. My favorite sentence from the article is, "The Spaniards settled here and with their knowledge and the Indians' equipment, a village of rock huts with white- washed walls began to rise out of the wilderness." Father Zamora gave instructions on planting, weaving, and brought the Catholic faith to the Indians. In return, the Calero Indians taught the Spaniards their customs and culture. The Spaniards decided to settle on the borders of the Rio Grande. Father Zamora and four of the Spaniards made the journey into Mexico to secure the proper title grant and sanction. The original grant is the city of Peñitas. (F-381 General Information- Hidalgo County- Peñitas Lays Claims to Founding in 1529)



Figure 2 - 1965 Newspaper Clipping

In my quest of discovering more information on the origin of the city of Peñitas, the next piece of information presented itself in the form of a newspaper clipping. The newspaper clipping shows a photograph dated March 4, 1965. It was featured in The Mission Times newspaper. The caption below the photograph explains that the city of Peñitas was recognized as the “oldest settlement in Texas.” The people featured in the photograph were La Joya School Superintendent, Murry Garner, principal, Elodia Chapa, Dan Hall, who contributed to the marker and Louis Bolling, president of the Hidalgo County Historical Society. The caption on the bottom of the photograph reads, “In dedication to Peñitas (“Little Pebble”) the oldest town settled in Texas- 1625.

The Comecrudo Indians are featured in the beginning of *Pebblechild*. Gabriel Saldivar, in his *Los Indios de Tamaulipas*, explains: The Comecrudo (Spanish for "raw meat eaters") Indians were a Coahuiltecan people who in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lived in northern Tamaulipas. In the second half of the eighteenth-century part of the Comecrudos lived along the south bank of the Rio Grande near Reynosa, and it may be inferred that they hunted and gathered wild plant foods on both sides of the river. At times the Comecrudo Indians were also referred to as Carrizo, a Spanish name applied to many Coahuiltecan groups along the Rio Grande below Laredo. In 1886 the ethnologist A. S. Gatschet found a few elderly Comecrudo near Reynosa who could still speak their native language. Gatschet's Comecrudo vocabulary and texts helped to establish the linguistic affiliations of many Indian groups of southern Texas and northeastern Mexico. (Saldivar 1943)

In *Pebblechild*, I included specific vocabulary that I learned originated from the Indian tribes I included in my story. J. R. Swanton, in his, *Linguistic Material from the Tribes of*

Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico, noted that six groups of Coahuilteco speakers referred to the Rio Grande as “ganapetuan”, a large body of water. They, it might be said, were the “People of the Ganapetuan.” In another vocabulary of terms collected by Albert S. Gatschet in 1886 and reported in Swanton (1940) we find for the Comecrudo people who lived near the mouth of the Rio Grande the term “Atmaú pakmaú” for the river and “Somná-u” for people or human-being. Thus, we might also say Somná-u Atmaú pakmaú for the People of the Rio Grande. (Swanton 1940)

In my first story titled, *Pebblechild*, the Carrizo Indian Tribe of the Rio Grande Delta inhabits the area. They harbor eleven-year-old, Tala a powerful Indian princess with supernatural abilities. They believe that she is the heroine in their legend and will protect them from danger. Through Tala’s story of anguish and love, the creation of the mystical setting for the wilderness and surrounding areas of Peñitas is transformed. Through the help of her adopted Comecrudo tribe as well as the mystical beings that protect her, Tala casts an invisible dome of protection that safeguards the city of Peñitas and its descendants for centuries. Within the city, mystical beings and supernatural powers are a part of the normal day to day life. The invisibility cloak shields the magical elements from people of surrounding cities and non- descendants. However, as each generation thrives and perishes, the protection spell over the city grows thinner. It will take the power of a modern day descendent to unleash the protection safeguards and secure the mystical dome once more. While thinking of potential plots for this specific story, I never lost sight of the notion that Tala’s story was years in the making. It was because of my experiences of growing up exploring the monte around The Red Brick House, that Tala was able to spring out of my mind and come to life through my words. If I hadn’t freed that arrowhead from the ground that fateful day, then perhaps, Tala’s story would have taken a different route. I want to

convey to my reader that the feeling of despair is a monumental hurdle to go through. The power of the Sadness entity in this story is dark and dismal. Feeling sad can be frightening especially after surviving the catastrophic events Tala endures, but the message is clear as her story unfolds. Through support, and facing the problem that plagues her, she finds that she can prevail over the obstacles set before her. She discovers her purpose and the power of her magic.

In *Crimson*, the setting takes place in Peñitas in the 1990's. The primary teenage character, Carolina is a descendent of Tala. She has the power to sense the supernatural magic surrounding her. This is revealed through her dialogue and thoughts stemming from Carolina. Carolina befriends an elderly neighbor. Their friendship grows over the summer and forges a bond. However, the elderly neighbor overcome and haunted by the entity Loneliness succumbs to heartbreak when the teenage girl starts school. Carolina can't seem to bring herself to make time for visiting the elderly woman, and soon, this wedge becomes the reason why Guilt, in the form of a monster consumes Carolina. The main character in this story avoids confronting what ails her, and in essence, it manifests into the reason why Guilt hunts her down and takes her away. There is much to learn from putting off obligations and ignoring the loved ones that are in our lives. Even though Carolina recognizes what she must do to ease her internal guilt, she decides to brush it to the side hoping her feelings will numb. She never recognizes that she must face the monster of Guilt and it proves to be a devastating decision.

Within *The Choice*, Alejandra's story is highlighted. She is mentioned briefly in *Crimson*. Alejandra is Carolina's younger sister. She grows up plagued by her sister's mysterious disappearance. When she learns that she has a chance to give her baby a chance to live, she agrees to an experimental type of procedure. The procedure involves raising two identical children where she will never be given the knowledge of which one is genuinely hers.

Years pass when one of the twin girls, Victoria has moved back to her hometown in Peñitas. Victoria and her family move into her grandparent's residence which is Carolina and Alejandra's original home in *Crimson*. This is the beginning exposition in *The Strong Grip of Tweedle Fear and Tweedle Dread*. Victoria learns that her beloved dog has gone missing. Victoria takes the reader through her journey of loss as she desperately searches for her dog. The mystery of her dog's disappearance is soon solved when it magically shows up at her mother's home. Victoria soon discovers that her dog has gained supernatural powers. This is the key to activating Victoria's hidden abilities.

My project will conclude with *The Emerging*, a coming of age story for Takoda, Victoria's son. Victoria was never sure whether her son would inherit her abilities. Although she hoped he would, she would look for pivotal signs that his powers had manifested. Soon, by befriending two supernatural wolves, Takoda will learn about the mystical dome that covers the city of Peñitas. He unlocks his powers throughout the plot. After he receives his powers, Tala returns and begins to assemble her descendants with the intention of reestablishing a new safeguard around the city of Peñitas.

CHAPTER II

PEBBLECHILD

The sun scorches. The heat shows no sign of remorse as the sun's rays spread brilliantly across the vastness of the delta. Swirls of dust cling to Tala's limbs and deerskin clothes. She tries to shield herself from the intensity of the sun's power, but she is powerless. She is a lost eleven-year-old. She is alone and defenseless against the danger of her natural surroundings. She clenches her legs up to her torso and continues to hold her crouching position quietly. Tala leans her back against the bark of a sturdy mesquite tree. The tiny source of shade it provides serves as a sanctuary. She yearns for the comfort of her mother's embrace. She craves for an opportunity to glance at her father's smile. Tala aches for a shred of hope. Her throat throbs. It had been hours since she had gulped the last drop from her water jug. She is parched, but she ignores the throbbing pain. The sensation had gradually started to build a sense of hollowness that felt like a hornet's hive within the crest of her throat. With shaking hands, she hugs her mother's leather water pouch as a source of comfort. Tala pushed the sensation of thirst to the edge of her mind and focused on the memories of her family.

She wraps her arms across her knees. She is careful with her shoulder wound as she somberly lowers her head. Shoulders shaking, a massive sob begins to build from the melancholy infused pit of Tala's soul. Tala pounds the ground forcibly. She scratches, clutches and tears open the ground around her. Allowing desperation and grief to guide her as she accepts her loss, Sadness seizes on the opportunity to slither forward wickedly. Sadness pounces upon

Tala. It casts an ominous shadow upon Tala's body as it proceeds to wrap a series of vile tentacles around her child body. It deceives Tala as it strokes her long raven black hair. Beastly eyes cast a smoldering invitation and lock into Tala's almond shaped eyes. The deplorable presence of Sadness provides Tala with a non-existent sense of comfort. The rhythm of her heartbeat quickens. She has heard the tale of powerful Deceivers that roam the land in search of prey. However, Tala ignores the preconditioned warnings that had been embedded in her mindset since she was a toddler. She ignores what is happening to her because she is hypnotized by the powerful embrace of Sadness. Voices escape from the guttural tomb of its throat. Tala recognizes the voices of her father and of her mother. She can't wipe away the flowing tears. She is paralyzed to its power. Its pitch-dark eyes are hollow and limitless as they zone in on feeding off of Tala's energy. The voices stop. The grasp tightens and Tala remains paralyzed. While Sadness silently consumes her, Tala's shoulders slump as she grasps her hands together. The sob builds and builds until the only notion left is for Tala to lift her head upward and release the howling sob into the brightly sun infused South Texas sky. Sadness catches the sob with one of its dismal gray tentacles. It holds the sob for a second or two and manipulates its sound. A blood curdling cry escapes from Tala's parched throat.

Fragments of what had transpired the night before create haunting snippets of horror in Tala's mind. The visions become blurry as fresh tears crowd the perimeter of her eyes. With nowhere else to go, they collide into one another as they trickle down Tala's mournful face. Tala lays her body down onto the ground in defeat. Sadness takes hold of her throat, and it proceeds to open its mouth widely revealing misshapen fangs that protrude in countless rows. It begins to devour Tala head first.

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Her tribe was a community of hardworking people. They were a small Coahuiltecan Indian tribe that was close knit and dependent on each other. Her father, Eagleclaw was the chief. Coahuiltecan is not the name of a single tribe. Eagleclaw and his tribe knew that it was a name given collectively to as many as 120 different groups that lived alongside the Delta. For hundreds of years they lived off the land accepting one another and working through differences. Tribal history and knowledge was passed down through the elders. Tala's Coahuiltecan tribe were nomadic, and they didn't usually build permanent homes. They roamed the land following the patterns of the animals they hunted. The quests for adventure was instilled in their way of life for as long as they could remember. Tala's tribe believed that the heavens, elements, and natural phenomenon were the various faces of the Great Spirit in which they believed in. Every rustle of a leaf, every thunderstorm, or even the occasional rainfall was the Great Spirit expressing a sentiment through the influence of nature.

Tala's tribe didn't barter with the neighboring tribes, so they mostly relied on hunting and gathering to support themselves. A wide range of soil types that surrounded the Delta fostered wild plants yielding such foodstuffs as mesquite beans, maguey root crowns, prickly pear fruit, pecans, acorns, and various roots and tubers. Mesquite bean pods, abundant in the area, were eaten both green and in a dry state. Tala's mother, Rayen taught Tala to pulverize the pods in a wooden mortar and store the flour, sift and place the seeds in woven bags. Deer was a widespread and available large game animal for Tala's tribe. They often enjoyed roasting deer as well as using every source of its body for nourishment and supplies. Smaller game animals included the peccary and armadillo, rabbits, rats and mice, various birds, and numerous species of snakes, lizards, frogs, and snails. After gathering together, Tala's tribe would proclaim their gratefulness to the Great Spirit that watched over them day after day. They would thank the

animal's spirit by offering up a customary prayer. The animal's body would offer its last dance as it twirls around the fire. Flames lick its skin into crispy layers of delightfulness. During this time, herds of buffalo roamed the vastness of the lands. It was during a buffalo hunting expedition venture that Tala's tribe found itself in the midst of doom.

Eagleclaw had led a successful hunt through the span of a wide grassy field. The women had ignited the grassy field on fire leading a herd of buffalo into a dense woody area. The wooded area was thick with mesquite trees, thorny lotebushes, and prickly shrubs. There was also a variety of cacti that covered the land. Barbary figs and purple prickly pears were in abundant supply. The men waited anticipating the herd. The men, concealed in the wooded area, were invisible to the buffalo. It wasn't too long before the men carried a young buffalo's body. The freshly killed animal still smelled of a combination of bison musk and sweat. It had put up a worthy fight for its life as it galloped across the span of the lands into the mesquite woods. Its determination to stay alive was erased when an arrow pierced its heart. The tribe trailed behind. The women gathered herbs as they walked. When the pace halted, the tribe's attention focused to the front of the procession. Herbs floated in the air for a second or two, baskets and belongings clattered to the ground, and a unified sense of dread shook them. An electrical surge of panic had filled the air.

The women clutched any child that was near them. The men that had been carrying the buffalo's body dropped it and reached for their weapons. The tribe prepared themselves for defense. Eagleclaw immediately sprung into protection mode. His war cry engulfs the air and animate the tribe into action. Tala's heart swelled with a rhythmic beat.

ThumpThump ThumpThumpThump!

She opened her hand to release the sunflowers she had gathered. Her intention was to give them to her mother who was walking behind her with the rest of the women as a token of love and appreciation. When the chaos ignited, she let the flowers go as she clenched her tiny leather pouch. She reached into the pouch in search of her large arrowhead. Her eyes scanned the perimeter of her surroundings. She wanted to protect her tribe from the danger they were in. She wanted to fling herself in front of her father who was defending the tribe at the front of the trail. Tala looked behind her in search of her mother. The sunflowers she had picked for her had scattered and were now crumpled due to the scrambling feet. She spotted her mother laying on the ground. Her body was not moving. Tala's heartbeat accelerated as she let out a cry of anguish.

“Mother!” she yells as she runs toward her. Her father must have registered what was happening because when Tala glances back at him, she sees that he is running their way as well. Thump!

Thump!

The cries of her tribe rose up and deafened the surroundings. The screams of pain and anguish strangled Tala making it difficult for her to observe what was happening. The Long-Bearded Men were ruthless. They showed no remorse as they invaded Tala's tribe. From a distance she witnessed the torture of a tribeswoman and her child. Their screams were drowned out due to the magnitude of horror around them. Tala forces herself to see the woman and her child as they are dragged by three Longbeards. She extends her right arm toward them in a plea of desperation. A cry of agony swells and escapes from the pit of her stomach. Her fingers clench and unclench as the three Longbeards began to spin as they are lifted into the air. Her eyes locked with the woman as she crawls toward her silent child. When Tala turned in the direction

of her mother and father, she clutched her chest as a sword's blade plunged into her right shoulder blade. Thump!

Thump!

Thump!

Thump!

Tala fell. She felt as if she was falling for a long time, so this moment of suspension mid-air created a sense of time loss. When she finally landed across the bodies of a group of tribeswomen, she grew comfort in knowing that she lay amongst her people. The massacre of Tala's tribe was swift. In an instant, she loses everything as her tribe is brutally demolished. Tala loses her sense of reality as she coped with the tragedy that had befallen her people. The massacre would leave no one in her tribe alive. She closed her eyes in agony. She opens them for a second. A dizzying blurriness swirls in front of her. Her face lays flat across the grassy gravel encrusted ground. Suddenly, she can visualize flashes of violent scenes. In her mind she can see the grassy fire her people had set. The light illuminating from the fire had attracted the Long Beards. She can visualize them plotting her tribe's demise, laughing around a campground, and the procession of hunting them as a sort of sport. Finally, her eyes focus in on the reality around her, and the last thing she sees are the piles of bodies that stretch out before her. The buffalo, now- not so freshly killed, is slid away. Its scarlet red blood leaves behind a splattered trail. Darkness prevails, and Tala succumbs to her injury and loses consciousness. The moon watches over her and the lifeless bodies of her people.

The early morning sun rays do not bring a sense of hope. Even though the day looks bright, a thick air of somberness hangs over Tala's tribe. She is jolted awake in a panicked state. A dreadful sense of realization sets in. She looks around at takes in the tragic scene. She lifts

her head up toward the heavens. Tala knows from her listening to the elder tribal stories and lessons that the Great Sprit always watches and listens from everywhere.

How have you allowed this to happen to my family... my people? We were innocent against this. Please, Great Spirit! Have you abandoned me too like you abandoned my family?

Tala's eyes fill with tears as she begins the difficult process of lifting herself up. The pain in her shoulder hinders her as she tries to stand. She walked over to where her mother's body lay and crumples herself to the ground against her. Tears fall and sprinkle her mother's still face as Tala wraps her child arms around her. Flashbacks of the sound of her mother's laughter when Tala would act silly imitating a javelina, memories of her mother's comforting presence when she felt somber, and the unconditional gestures of love that a mother bestows upon their child prompt Tala to cry out desperately.

"Mother!" "Mother!" she beckons for her mother to open her eyes. She tries shaking her gently at first, and then she shakes her mother's body forcibly. Tala's anguish is unbearable. She begins to scan the bodies for her father. She finds him nearby. He is face down. His spear lays near his right hand. The eagle's feather strapped to the end of the spear moves gently in the breeze. Through sobs and painful anguish, she manages to crawl toward him and places a trembling hand on his chest. Tala places her arms around his broad shoulders and lays her head gently across his chest. She places her ear against his heart in hopes of hearing a trace of his heartbeat. She lifted her head when she noticed a trail of blood leading into the dense woods. Tala raised her arms and stretched her hands toward heaven where she knew the Great Spirit often resided.

“I am lost Great Spirit. I’m lost without my Mother and Father. I’m lost without my tribe. I am alone. Sorrow and agony are my family now. Why have you not claimed my spirit too? Why have you chosen me to wander the land without the people I love?”

Tala managed to stand. She recited a prayer for each member of her tribe as she checked on each person endearingly. The mother and child she had tried to protect were nowhere to be found. When she discovered the human remains amongst the ashes of a fire, Tala falls to her knees and plummets her face to the ground. Her shoulders begin to shake. The woman was Quispe. Her son was Quidel. She recites a prayer for them as she fights back tears. She remembers extending her arm and sensing the spin and lifting of the Longbeards, But she cannot explain it. She sits up and looks around at her surroundings. The place had become an open graveyard for her people. Tala lifts herself up and walks toward Rayen, her mother.

She took special care in brushing her mother’s hair from her face with her fingers. She doesn’t have to stray too far before she spies a cluster of sunflowers.

Thank you. Your sense of calmness will accompany my mother as she finds her way toward the Great Spirit in the heavens.

She pressed the plucked handful of sunflowers onto her mother’s hands. She walks around searching and gathering the first set of flowers that were intended for Rayen. She sees her large arrowhead on the ground and places it back into her leather sling pouch. A tingle of electricity tickles her hand at the touch of the arrowhead. Tala carefully picks up the crumpled sunflowers and walks back toward her mother. She begins to cry as she kneels down by her mother and explains that these were flowers she had been picking along the trail as a gift for her. Tala places them around her.

Tala proceeds to stand and begins to gather materials she believes she needs to survive. She places the materials into her mother's keepsake leather bag. She walks to where her father's spear lay. She knew that it was too heavy for her to carry along in her journey. Instead, she picks up the spear and begins to unravel the sinewy tie that clasped her father's eagle feather. She holds up the feather and whispers a pledge of love and honor. She places it into the leather bag and begins her journey into the dense woods. The early beams of light escaping from the morning sunrise illuminated the buffalo blood trail. Tala begins to place one step after the other. She wipes her tears away with the palm of her hand. The pain was unbearable, but she was determined to begin her new journey.

The intensity from the heat had no mercy against Tala's ordeal. Soon, she had no more water left in the leather pouch she had carried away with her. The buffalo's bloody trail had disappeared, and now she wandered through the woods aimlessly for hours. The sword wound on her shoulder hurt beyond words, and she was beginning to go into shock again. As her knees buckle, Tala stretches her arms and extends her hands as a way to calm the dizziness that swirls around her. She drops to the ground somberly. She crawls under the shade of a magnificent mesquite tree. Around her, there were plenty of mesquite beans, but hopelessness had taken a hold of her. The love she held for her mother and father as well as for her tribe gave her a shred of comfort. However, Sadness had been tracking her for hours and remained on her trail with every intent to consume her whole. Sadness had revealed a dismal display of endless rows of disfigured fangs as it opened its mouth widely. It stood over Tala. Its tentacles lifting her into its nightmarish wide mouth.

Suddenly, Tala feels a pelt of fur brush against her skin. She feels the combination breathing and sniffing against her face. She opens her eyes, but the intensity of the sun causes

her to squint. A wet tongue licks her across her face. She continues to feel the animal's breath against her cheeks as it continues to sniff her. The words: *Wake up! Don't give up!* pop into her mind. Tala hears a powerful rumble. It sounds like thunder. Loud growls and signs of an enormous struggle inspire her to lift her head up and open her eyes. She lifts her hand toward her forehead as a shield against the sun.

An enormous silver colored wolf had taken hold of the Sadness entity and is tossing it around and around. The size of the wolf astounded Tala, for she had never seen a wolf this massive. It was size of three Eagleclaws. The tentacles that had once gripped Tala's neck were now being chewed off and flung in the air by the wolf. A wolf cub, its fur the color of autumn leaves, is standing guard over her. She knew it was a cub because it was the size of one Eagleclaw. The cub glances back at the silver colored wolf ravishing the dark entity. Tala starts to sit up. She steadies herself by leaning against the mesquite tree. The wolf cub proceeds to sit right by her. It turns and looks back at Tala. It gets up and begins to yip and howl in a congratulatory tone. The wolf cub sits back down. This time, the cub sits closer to Tala. Its fur tingles her bare legs. A shield of protection surrounds them.

The silver colored wolf unclenches its massive jaws from the grip of the dark being. It backs away and allows Sadness to slither away. The entity slides across the terrain gripping its hanging intestines. The silver colored wolf turns and looks at Tala.

It tells her: *You are safe now. We will protect you.*

Tala accepts the promise and musters enough strength to climb onto the silver-haired wolf's back. The wolves thread across the land. Tala leans close and rests her head against the comfort of the wolf's silvery fur. She doesn't know if they travel for days or if it was just hours. She does know that they traveled for a long time through lands of tall brush. They pass endless

rows of spiny hackberry trees until their trots begin to slow steadily upon deep rich soils. The wolves soon enter a mysterious embankment near the Rio Bravo.

A tribe of Indians stand by the river. The Carrizo Indian Tribe had been expecting Tala. There had been a prophesy handed down through the course of their history. A young girl would emerge from the woods. The girl was prophesized to one day yield infinite power. This power would provide the Carrizo Tribe and their land the protection they will need to survive the threat of the Long Beards and the Dark Robes.

The Carrizo chief carefully lifts Tala from the wolf's back and sets her down. "Welcome, we have been waiting for you. We are the Somná-u Atmaú pakmaú. This means we are the People of the Rio Bravo." He extends his arm and waves at his people and the river.

Tala's sandaled feet create crunchy noises as she tests her wobbly legs. The noises from the pebbled ground beckon Tala to think of the word that means: small pebbles. *Peñitas*. The Carrizo Tribe welcome Tala with open arms.

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The nomadic tendency that had been chiseled within Tala's mindset creates a deep crater of emptiness. There were some days when the sorrow she felt for her tribe was so great, she would refuse to join the Carrizos in their day to day tasks. The Carrizos tried their best to distract Tala by instructing her in their ways, but they knew that ultimately the only way to ward off the desolation in her heart was to give her time. The ache to walk would convince Tala's sandaled feet to enter the woods. She would wander aimlessly through the dusty trails. The south Texas mesquite trees would shield her from the heat of the sun.

On one such day, her hands brush lightly across the top of the hedgehog cactus flowers that cover her path. Her wolf protectors, Silverfur and Littleluke would follow closely behind. They knew that the Sadness entity hovered near the outskirts of the Carrizo embankment. As she strolled through the paths of honey mesquite and ebony trees, the wolves protective warnings would pop into Tala's mind and would remind her to steer clear from fully embracing the dismalness that hovered near her. She was heartbroken and missed her tribe immensely, but she knew deep down she had survived through the most traumatic event in her life. After her rescue, Tala knew better than to surrender and invite Sadness near her.

While she strolls, she hears the natural sounds of the South Texas wilderness. A slight breeze makes it way toward Tala. She extends her hand to move a mesquite branch that hung low in front of her. At that moment, she finds that she has caught the breeze with her palm, and she finds that she can harness it with the flick of her hand. She feels a tiny swirl of electricity that lingers on the crest of her palm. Her eyes gaze upon the tiny swirl that is pulsating from her palm. It turns into a combination of silvery and scarlet hues. The hues of color interweave as Tala steadies her feet and practices her new discovery a few more times before she continues moving forward. She now knows that she can move objects in front of her with the power of the wind. As she walks, she occasionally extends her arm and waves her hand to the side. Low hanging tree branches sway to the side.

In another not too distant part of the wooded land, Sadness would extend its hellish tentacles and expose its endless rows of yellow and gray pointy fangs when the wolves would run near it. The wolves understood that Sadness was a part of the life balance, and they could never completely eliminate its existence from the world. They would protectively bark with a vicious rhythm. The barks and growls would translate, "Stay away from her! Pester someone

else! Gooooo Awwayy!” With a horrific movement, Sadness would twist its massive heinous head to face away from the wolves, but its body lay rooted to the ground. For some time now, its unearthly body had been excreting mounds of sweat. The surrounding desert lantana flowers would sizzle after the trickles of sweat would touch them. The surrounding brush and dirt were already drenched with a black tar like substance.

Silverfur and Littleluke would never linger too far from Tala for long periods of time. They would create a terrifying commotion of warning with their howls, barks and yelps and rapidly race toward the direction of where Tala was. On one of these occurrences, they discovered Tala near the riverbank. Kneeling near the edge of the river, her child hands would comb through her straight jet- raven colored long hair. Her almond shaped eyes locked with the wolves as she moved her locks to the right side of her shoulder blade. With a flair of gracefulness, Tala begins braiding her hair as she continues to speak a dialogue the wolves cannot hear.

They trot closer to her to listen in on her words, “Great Spirit, I am so grateful for my wolf protectors. Silverfur and Littleluke are always by my side. They have shielded me from the fearsome darkness that wishes to consume me. This heartache pulls at me. As I sit here by this great blue ganapetuan, I cannot help but think about the questions swirling in my mind. What is my purpose in this world?” Tala extends her arm, and her fingers touch the coolness of the river water. Her fingers linger in the water for a few seconds. After her discovery with harnessing the wind, she is now curious to see if she had any power controlling the water element.

Within a few seconds, she notices a color change ripple across the top of the river. What was once a greenish blue hue, now has streaks and swirls of violet. An electrical surge of energy

engulfs Tala. Her eyes scan the river. The water begins to flow rapidly. The water current causes a series of small waves to splatter the riverbank. Common sense tells her to withdraw her fingers from the water, but the dynamic energy that flows from the mini waves feels comforting to her.

A sparkly, blue hued hand extends from the river. Silverfur and Littleluke have now moved even closer to Tala. They sit right by her. Their bodies squash the tall sawgrass that had once surrounded Tala. In an instant, the small blue hand ripples toward Tala and clasps her hand. She feels a powerful pull. A large water wave forms and proceeds to rise dramatically. The wave performs an elegant bow for its audience and covers them with its powerful surge. The water spreads onto the land. Within seconds, stems sprout from the land and wildflowers of various colors bloom radiantly.

Tala's head turns toward her protectors. Silverfur reassures Tala by raising her mighty wolf chin. This was a signal meant to inspire and remind Tala to be brave and channel her inner strength. Littleluke crawls toward Tala. He sniffs the air for a few seconds and proceeds to nudge Tala gently. Tala responds by turning her attention back toward the wave infused river. The water begins to part as a young boy who appears to be her age emerges from the river's depth. Tala's body begins to tense as her hand continues to be pulled. The boy is clothed in a bright gold and turquoise garment that sparkles in the sun's light. His bluish tinged hair turns iridescent shades of blue and green. His lash-fringed, emerald green eyes gaze down upon Tala.

"Do not be afraid, my name is Coyotl" the waterboy says. He proceeds to release Tala's hand. "The Great Spirit has felt your pain. He has heard your words. He has sent me to reassure you that all will soon be well. Your existence is the key to a great future for this land. Stand, up. I have the power to release your sorrow, but first, you must accept and prevail over a challenge."

The waterboy extends his arms outward in a sweeping elegant motion. The movement releases hundreds of monarch butterflies with a stroke of his opened palms. A vibrant combination of black, white, yellowish orange winged colors blanket the sky. A few fluttery butterflies linger around Tala. The flaps of their wings release a synched whispery lullaby that comforts her. Their song is the same lullaby that Tala's mother would sing to her. Tala clasps her hands together and raises them on the bottom of her tiny chin. It quivers as she hears the sparkling butterfly chorus whisper her mother's soothing lullaby. Flashbacks of her mother's comforting embrace and unconditional protective presence enter Tala's mind. The lullaby brings back loving memories. She uses her memories as a source of strength. She takes a step forward.

Silverfur and Littleluke raise their chins and let out a synchronized howl of affection.

AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

They howl contently, and Tala waits for them to end their yelps of approval before responding.

"Hello Coyotl. I am honored by your presence. I am ready to hear about the challenge you will set before me. I ask that Silverfur and Littleluke remain by me. I have grown to love them and could not bear to be without their companionship." She gives each wolf a tight hug.

I also ask that no harm befall upon my newly adopted family, the Carrizo tribe. They have taken me in as one of their own and have been patient with me through my grief stages."

Coyotl displays a toothy smile. He is genuinely pleased that Tala has accepted the proposed challenge. The monarch butterflies hover around Coyotl. They look like flying flowers in the air. He reaches into the surging river water and pulls out a metallic colored bow. The bow shimmers in the sunlight. At that very moment a massive reddish gray animal emerges from the depths of the river water. It wasn't as big as Littleluke, but nonetheless, it was fairly

large. It was evident that it was a master swimmer because it was expertly mastering the flowing current. It swims toward the riverbank toward Tala with elegant speed. It places its huge paws onto the land. A loud cat like call escapes from the creature. It was a combination of a screech, a purr and a roar. What appears to be a glistening leathery pouch is strapped across the creature's back. Specks of water splash onto the air as it begins to shake its fur.

"I am Leopardus, the Ocelot King," it says. It reveals a grin and then begins to lick its left paw. Instantly, the ocelot's extensively marked fur begins to dry in the South Texas heat. Its solid black markings on a creamy, tawny pelt gleam brightly. It stops licking its paw to say, "I have been carrying this quiver around for years. Let me just say, I am so very glad that you are here to accept your challenge. Your weapons are a vital role in your destined success."

"Leopardus is right," Coyotl says. "But before you accept your weapons, you must hear about your challenge. Leopardus' furry pelt begins to glimmer and change colors. He trots over closer, joins the wolves and sits next to Tala.

"Tala, one part of your challenge is to prevail over the Sadness entity. We are aware that it hovers near this land and refuses to leave because it yearns for an opportunity to hunt you. The feel of its last taste of you has become its obsession."

Tala begins to shiver.

The painful memory of being fully devoured scares her. Littleluke senses her fear and turns her way. The look in his eyes calms her.

Tala regains her composure and continues to listen to Coyotl's words.

"It will linger near you for the span of your lifetime until you decide to confront it and demolish its presence from your life. Your protectors will continue to chase it off, but you cannot be fully free from its clutches until you accept this magical bow, arrows and quiver

weapon. Use them to face Sadness.” He hands the bow to Tala. “The quiver has the ability to replenish limitless arrows at your command. Pierce Sadness with one of these arrows and it will be banished away from your vicinity. The trick is to say what you would like the arrow to do and it will obey your command.”

Coyotl reaches over to Leopardus and proceeds to remove the quiver from its fur. He hands the quiver to Tala. Leopardus reacts by playfully leaping into the air and landing back into the water. “You almost forgot! Coyotl, don’t forget to tell Tala about the river.” Large splashes of water splash onto Tala. She feels a replenishing energy instantly.

“Yes, this river is a power source for you. Tala, you have an important purpose to the people of this area. If you find that your strength is diminishing or you are losing sight of what is important, make your way to this river. It is my home as well. If you need someone to talk to, I am here as well. I know that you have your wolves, but I am on your side as well.”

“Thank you, Coyotl. I appreciate your offering of friendship. Is that all I have to do for my challenge? All I have to do is face the Sadness entity and prevail over it?”

“There is more Tala. We need you very much. Everything will be revealed soon. Magic will soon be threatened, and you will need to find the power within you to protect this land for the people that live here as well as the magical beings that exist. This way of living, with all of its supernatural elements will soon be a way of the past. With your help, you can preserve this way of life for future generations here in this area”

Tala’s feels a surge of purpose wash over her.

This what the Great Spirit has in mind for me...

She accepts every detail, every instruction, every cautionary warning. She feels a surge of ease and determination wash over her. Leopardus leaps in and out of the water covering them

with great splashes of water. The wolves join in the playfulness. The three of them begin a game of chase. Coyotl and Tala walk the perimeter of the river. She tells him about her family, her tribe, and the tragedy that unfolded in front of her eyes. He listens intently as hundreds of wooded animals emerge from every domain in the land. Hundreds of ocelots, jackrabbits, deer, squirrels, javelinas, horned lizards, green jays, and many other creatures have come to greet Tala. A large Texas tortoise is last to arrive to the gathering. He speaks the loudest.

“Tala, I am Nahuatl. I will speak for all creatures gathered here and for all those who are on their way. We will stand by you in your time of need. The Carrizo tribe has respected the life balance for as long as we have existed. For lifetimes we have lived together in harmony, but it is known that a great change is coming. Our animal cousins across the river have warned us of a horde of Longbeards traveling in this direction. We must unite, before it is too late. The magical side of our existence is in jeopardy.”

At this moment, the elders of Tala’s Carrizo’s tribe emerge from the wooded area.

Even though they were silent, their gaze spoke volumes. They looked at Tala with an unspoken endearment.

Nahuatl steps forward a few feet. His tortoise shell begins to change from a taupe, earthy hue to a glimmering ultramarine. The brightness from the blue color is unexpected, so Tala begins to shield her eyes. Silverfur, Littleluke, and Leopardus have left the river and have now joined Tala, the crowd of animals, and people. It only takes a few seconds for Tala’s eyes to adjust to the blue brightness. Nahuatl takes a few closer steps. His tortoise shell begins to lift up from the side in an unhinging movement. A pink orb floats from underneath the shell. The orb lingers in the air. As it makes its way toward Tala, the shell begins to close.

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“With this power of protection, you can be unstoppable. You can choose to protect yourself during a time of need, you can place a protective shield over others or the people and animals you care about. This is a powerful ability, and now it is yours to keep as a safeguard against danger. The orb is now floating above Tala. It floats down and is directly in front of her eyes. The orb floats upward and collides into her back. Instantly, Tala’s shoulder blades, and back become rigid with the power of the protection orb. Tension is released when Tala straightens her shoulders and shakes off the initial feeling of anxiousness. The rigid sensation evaporates when she turns to the tribe elders and nods her head. She places her right hand over her heart as she tells the creatures and her tribe of her intention.

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“Do not stray from your path. Pierce Sadness. Never allow yourself to be removed from it. It will roam its lifetime with you plummeted in its hide. You will serve as its reminder to steer clear away from me. Banish it far away from where I am always. I do not ever want to see it near me or know that it is nearby.” Tala whispers these words to the arrow she holds. She stands in front of Sadness. Shoulders back, feet apart, legs steady, her child hands grip the bow and arrow and prepares herself for battle. Sadness, unaware of Silverfur and Littleluke, due to a protective spell, stand right next to Tala, one wolf on each side of her. Sadness begins to move forward. With one flick of her free hand, Tala captures the winds and uses it as lasso to push Sadness back twenty feet. Growls escape from the wolves, but they remain by Tala’s side. She raises the bow, the determined arrow is in place, ready to complete its mission.

Thwwwwwwiiiiiiiiisssssshhhhhh!

The arrow zips through the air until finally hitting its target.

THUNK!

It buries itself into the hide of the entity.

Sadness is lifted into the air.

As it is lifted, trails of tar fall from the folds of its hide. It knew it was defeated and leaving any sign of its remorse was its defense mechanism. The wolves let out howls. Tala locks eyes with the entity and does not blink twice. With a stronger sweep of her hand, she sends it flying forward. The wolves emerge from their invisibility protective cloak in a celebration commotion. Tala hugs them both.

She had been practicing her new-found powers for days. She was relieved and happy to have confronted the factor that was set upon hurting her. Finally, she felt like a large burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She didn't want for the entity to linger close to her or the Carrizos because the negative energy was dangerous to have around. The feeling of relief was only temporary. Tala was distracted with this new sense of celebratory accomplishment.

While hugging the wolves and joining in their howls of victory, they did not notice the axe plummeting through the air straight at them. It only took a few seconds for the wolves to catch the danger and sniff the air. Their heads turn in the direction of the threat. When they realize what was coming straight for them, they leap into the air to shield Tala. It's Littleluke who gets hit with the axe. He stumbles to the ground. His blood gushes as he makes an injured yelp. Silverfur senses Littleluke's pain and immediately runs in the direction the axe was thrown from. A deep inner sense of fury builds within Tala's soul. She is not the frail girl from before. Something was different. Her life experiences had made her a different person. She was not the helpless girl she once was.

A loud scream escapes from the pit of her stomach. This wasn't a scream of pain, sadness, worry or remorse. This was a scream of war! Littleluke had been hit with an axe, and she was ready to unleash a fury of rage onto whoever had hurt him.

The scream vibrated the land. It shook the trees, created cracks in the soil, moved boulders, infuriated the river. Every single creature leaped up into action. The Carrizos dropped what they were doing and ran in the direction of the scream. Coyotl and Leopardus skyrocketed out of the river and ran in Tala's direction.

This was it.

The time was here.

Every single creature had vowed to stand by her side. Every Carrizo, young and old were on their way to stand in her defense. In that one single scream, they could feel all that she had lost from her past life. They could feel the fury in her tone. By the end of Tala's scream, Silverfur had the axe thrower in her mouth. In one single crunch, Silverfur bites down on the Longbeard's waist and snaps him in half. Suddenly, a horde of Longbeards appear from the distance. They saw what had transpired and were running toward Tala and the wolves.

Tala kneels down next to Littleluke and cradles his face. She strokes his head a few times before standing back up. She looks around as she notices every creature, every person, every magical entity had arrived. They were there in defense of their existence and for Tala's support. Silverfur runs back to where they are at and is nuzzling Littleluke. She takes the axe into her mouth and pulls it out of his shoulder. Tala places her hand on Littleluke's wound. She didn't know she had healing powers until that moment. An energy flows through her, and it begins to heal Littleluke instantly. She turns back at the approaching horde of men. She raises her arms and spreads her fingers. In one sweeping motion, she extends her outstretched arms to

the right and then to the left in a circular motion. She repeats this multiple times. A surge of energy pours and gravitates toward an invisible dome that is now surrounding them. The dome has now blocked the Longbeards from reaching them. However, five Longbeards and one Blackrobe are standing inside the protection of the dome.

“I have sensed pureness in their hearts,” Tala announces while turning back to face her people. “Not all of the Longbeards had intentions to hurt us. These men in here with us right now will not hurt us. I can see goodness within them. They are not like the rest of them. I will give them the choice to stay here under my protection and learn our ways, or they can rejoin their group and move on. The horde of Longbeards outside of our dome will not reach us. I have placed an invisible barrier that will prevent them from reaching us. Soon, any memory of what they have seen here today will fade from their minds. They will not remember us, and we will be able to live in peace. Gather around our guests so that they can tell us who they are and why they were traveling with the Longbeards.”

The chosen men explain that they were from the distant country of Spain. The Blackrobe, whose name is Father Zamora tells them that they were part of a failed expedition. Under the direction of their leader, Panfilo de Narvaez, they had orders from their king to arrest Hernando Cortez, conqueror of Mexico, who was accused of disloyalty to their king. One of the Longbeards named Rodolpho further explains that they were not able to defeat Cortez and that they instead were defeated in battle, imprisoned and held there for years. They had managed to escape and were on their way to the east. The men had become a group of savages without mercy. As they traveled through the land, they showed no compassion or ounce of respect toward the native people they encountered. They thanked Tala for saving them from their inevitable fate. They agreed that they felt they were not going to remain alive with the

Longbeards if they remained with the group much longer. They would stay under Tala's protection, keep their magical existence a secret, and learn their ways.

Centuries pass, and the sun continues to scorch the city of Peñitas with its intensity. People have long forgotten about the mythical components that once roamed the land. However, Tala's invisible dome still remains. The mystical component of magic and supernatural creatures have survived. They live tucked away within the protective dome disguised from the outside world. To people driving through, or visiting Peñitas, it may seem like a simple, ordinary place. Tala made sure of that. The truth is that hidden within the protection cloak of the city, magic still exists.

CHAPTER III

CRIMSON

As she gradually raised herself to a standing position, her body afflicted with arthritis creaked and ached like an aged wooden floor. She grasps the handle of her chrome walker for support. Her hands familiarize themselves against the handlebar for a second before she begins to hobble toward her kitchen. Wheels sluggishly roll across the linoleum as the voice of Tony Danza from the show *Who's the Boss* surges and bounces off the frame of her small living room. The light radiating from the television was the only source of illumination in the room. What always seemed to captivate me was not the way her teeth would clench and grit as in intense pain but how she somehow sustained the elevation of her chin. At these moments, I would catch a glimpse of the lovely youth she once was.

“You come for the food plate, Carolina?” she said.

I nodded my head. My raven black curls bounce with each nod. I wondered how anyone so old could be so graceful. The Old One continues to clench her walker gently as the veins entwined in her crooked hands stand out like a dismal drawing of blue streaks. Bit by bit she rolls her way into her tidy kitchen. As she continues to dawdle her way, my thoughts float to the past events of the summer.

I remembered the phone ringing and my mother's voice echoing through the halls. “Alejandra, tia Rufina called. She is asking for you to take out her trash!” (We were taught to call our neighbor tia even though she was not our aunt. It was more like a term of endearment.)

I envisioned my little sister scurrying across the grassy field that separates the Old One's house from mine. Throughout days that followed, she repeatedly called upon either my sister or my little brother to aid her. Perhaps she thought I was too busy. Or even worse, what if she'd forgotten I existed. At that moment, I was determined to win the favor of the Old One.

I kept busy reading and rereading the pages of my Teen Bop magazines, sketching, and daydreaming. I waited patiently, and when her pivotal call rang the next day, I sprung at the chance to volunteer to go next door with my sister. Alejandra's bike sped across the caliche road raising the dust to the beaming sun. The cacti that spread across the field were like green freckles that sprawled across the face of the city of Peñitas. Enthralled in my thoughts, I chose not to follow her and instead aimed my direction toward trekking through the shortcut. I walked briskly remembering to elevate my feet a little to prevent the *cadillos* from piercing my pink jelly sandals. The south Texas heat was intense, so we were both enormously relieved when we walked up to her door. With a raspy voice, she welcomed us kindly, and almost as if to apologize for being poor, she gave us a bag of crimson red apples along with a food plate. (As part of a senior citizen program, she would receive daily delivered food plates which she despised. Her good deed for the day was completed when she passed on those plates to us.) It was curiosity that usually led me to accept them, but most of the time, it was due out of politeness.

As the sluggish summer days of 1995 progressed, I was soon the only member of my family who would walk across the dense field and accept the Old One's food plate. There were days when I thought I would see a dark hovering figure looming around the Old One's home. I would still be at a distance, but as I neared the home, it would turn its head and look my way. As I approached, it would scurry away. "Certainly, the South Texas heat is intensifying my

imagination,” I would mutter to myself. I would continue trekking forward, pausing at times to remove any *cadillos* that would pierce my skin. I would ask the Old One about the ominous figure, but she would either ignore the question or quickly change the subject. Soon, the shadowy entity became a normal part of my routine. There were moments where it would scurry away rapidly and run into the mesquite tree woods. Some days, it would hide, linger around, and peer at us through the Old One’s windows.

I knew all about the supernatural elements that lived amongst us in Peñitas. Since my family were direct descendants of Tala, I grew up hearing about mystical forces as well as the invisible dome that safeguarded the city. I understood that without the dome, the original magical elements that once roamed the lands would be exposed. According to the legends I heard growing up, if this were to happen, magic- real magic would become a threat. Mankind, fear, ignorance and power would attempt to destroy every magical creature, entity, or force. This would lead to catastrophic results. Every story would warn of disaster if the dome would cease to exist. This was our way of life, and it must remain the same for future generations.

In my earlier years of growing up, my parents must have noticed that magical elements were drawn to me. There were moments when I believed that I could understand what animals were thinking. I was accustomed to seeing shadowy figures every now and then, so the creature that stalked tia Rufina was not a big surprise for me.

I developed an obsession. I wanted to find out why the creature was so fond of the Old One. Well, it didn’t take long for me to realize that the Old One’s family would rarely visit her. *Could this be a reason why she lives with that thing hovering around her?* I thought about for a day or two before I decided to ask my mom for her insight.

“How heartbreaking. Why doesn’t her family make more of an effort?” I wondered out loud. It was a Sunday morning, and I was mixing the batter in preparation for pancakes. I scooped up a handful of blueberries and tossed them into the mixing bowl. I began to gently fold them into the pancake batter. My mother cracked an egg on the side of the counter and skillfully released its contents onto a skillet. It began to cook within seconds.

My mother turned to me and smiled. “Are you wondering about tia Rufina? I am happy that you make time for her. Yes, her family must be very busy.”

Sizzle! She had already switched skillets and was diligently placing strips of bacon onto it. The savory aroma of the bacon infused our kitchen. I didn’t respond as I continued to swirl the pancake batter.

Finally, I said, “It’s just really sad because I think she is really lonely.”

“You are right, mija. I think you are doing an honorable thing by going over and spending time with her,” she responds. I hand her the mixing bowl and watch as she pours the pancake batter onto a pan. I place my mother’s favorite spatula on a pineapple themed kitchen towel and eagerly await breakfast.

Days passed. My routine did not change. It was a sense of obligation that would prompt me to walk across the field and spend time with the Old One. Our friendship grew in our meetings. I recall one day when I stayed for what seemed like hours. I remember she had me hammer a loose piece of linoleum to the edge of the wall. I kneeled down, smoothed down the dust coated curled up edge, and gripped the hammer.

Pound! Pound! *This is got to be the craziest thing I’ve done. Here I am hammering a piece of paper-thin linoleum tile to the wooden floor.* I looked for the Old One’s approval when I thought I had completed the task. She nodded contently. I rose from the floor, walked toward

the kitchen, and placed the hammer on the table. I pulled out a sturdy wooden chair as she pushed her walker toward the table. We sat and conversed about current events. She shared her concerns with the dilemmas concerning the youth of the world. My mind must have blanked out for a second or two because I don't remember how our conversation led to the unveiling of a new twist.

Time stood still that summer afternoon in 1995. The Old One told me about her seven children. Gradually she uncovered one of her darkest memories. Her tone resonated a glimpse of sadness, fear, and regret. Her youngest son's story had a tragic toll.

"My son- well he is in prison now."

"Why?" I asked curiously.

"You are too young to hear about it," the Old One responds.

After insisting that I was not too young and explaining that I was nearly 18, she revealed her family story.

As we sat on the tiny but sturdy chairs that protect the round table, I could visualize the pain and sorrow in the Old One's eyes. Her eyes were a refuge for desolation and heartache because they had twisted and buried themselves into her pupils long ago. She told me about her youngest son and how he and his wife were engaged in a temper infused argument. The wife pleads and pleads for a divorce, but her son refusing to admit defeat continues to argue. I could almost hear the sound of the trigger as a gun is fired toward the direction of a door. In a fit of blind rage and violence, her son had fired a gun, and it had shot through the door piercing the innocent body of her grandson in the heart. Her son had killed her grandson instantly.

When the Old One concluded her story, she let out a long sigh of relief. Immeasurably, as if a massive and unbearable veil was lifted from her eyes, the sigh released some of the

heartache she clearly carried on a daily basis. Staring at her at that moment, I didn't glance away like I usually did. All at once, I understood why she seemed to look so sad. At that moment she appeared beautiful.

From then on, I kept visiting the Old One that summer. I'll always remember a set of words that I cherish in my heart. "You make me so happy Carolina."

The summer days pressed on, and soon it was now the middle of September. With school and all of the afterschool activities I stay for, I felt like I didn't have the time to visit the Old One anymore. It seemed like there was always some project due and between the mountains of homework I felt too busy to go over.

One late afternoon while walking home, I happened to glance at her home at the right moment. An eerie fog blanketed her residence. Even though the area around her home was misty, I could clearly see the figure of a hunched over creature enter her home through the front door. I paused and stared for a few moments. The creature had left the door open. I couldn't sense any movement or words from the Old One's home. A feeling of remorse crept up within me and made me shiver. I knew that I had started to develop an immense sense of guilt because I hadn't visited the Old One since school had started. Seconds dwindled before my legs began to work again. I didn't turn back once. Within minutes I found myself at home. I tried to shake off what I had just witnessed. I turned on my Walkman and listened to the Cranberries. I tried to tune out the possibilities of what just might be happening to the Old One, but I knew deep down that I had to discover a solution.

It was still September, and I was coming home on the school bus. My mind replays the snippets of instances from the summer. The school bus was approaching my stop just as an idea

sprung into my head. I jumped as the bus screeched to a halt. I had made up my mind to visit the Old One.

Instead of walking toward the caliche road that lead to my home, I turned toward the vast field that surrounded the Old One's home. I knocked on the paint chipped wooden door. I was glad that I could not see the shadowy figure hovering around. I must have looked full of life with my practice clothes on and the word: Cheerleader draped across the front of my t-shirt in bold red because when she pried open the door, the Old One's chin trembled, and I thought I glimpsed tears rolling down her pale, translucent cheeks. I had never expected our reunion to be anything like this. I could feel the warmth of her fragile body as she embraced me tightly.

"I missed you so much. How are you?"

She didn't wait for a reply because she whispered softly, "I love you."

This was jumbled, but nonetheless, I heard the "I love you" clear as day. The Old One moved her walker into the kitchen as she offered me candy.

"I am so sad, Carolina. Maybe you can come over when you are not busy with the homework. I am so lonely. I have not been feeling good. I need someone to talk to. I wait and I wait some more. No one bothers to come see me." She chokes back tears and grabs her walker tighter. With clenched knuckles, she says, "Not even you want to come see me no more. I have no choice lately. I only have Loneliness to talk to. Loneliness has been creeping up on me for a long, long time now. There are days when I don't want to get out of my bed. I'm only telling you this because you are the one here now. When I do open my eyes, sometimes I see Loneliness looking down on me."

She pushed her walker in the direction of the living room and settled herself into her favorite chair and was now looking down at the floor. Her chin quivers.

“I have seen the figure you are talking about. I just didn’t know how to bring it up or even to tell you. I will try to make more time to stop by and check on you.” These words were all I could muster.

When I departed and started the trek across the field of lofty scratchy grass, my eyes became watery. Tears fell serenely down my face. I carried the bag of crimson red apples she had given me. I was alternating the bag from my right to my left hand and so on when an epiphany struck me like an arrow to the heart. I loved the Old One. It was then that I realized that my veil was lifted from my eyes. I had been so blind before. Guilt over not visiting the Old One was what was transpiring into a heavy transformation that was weighing me down. Somehow or another I didn’t need anyone explaining how I can get rid of my guilt. Deep down inside I knew what to do. I have to try to visit the Old One more often.

Days tumbled and collided into each other. There was always something to do that would distract me from showing continual compassion for the Old One. I didn’t go back to the Old One’s house the next day nor the day after that. I kept thinking that it wouldn’t matter because I would make time to visit her the next day. At the end of the day, and I didn’t go over, I would reassure myself that tomorrow would be the day I would make time to visit. This pattern continued and continued. I even considered calling her so that my conscience would feel better, but I would quickly erase the notion from my mind. I thought of telling me mom about what I had seen and what she had been going through. I even thought that maybe my mom could go over and check on the Old One.

Soon, there were moments when walking across her home, I would hear the Old One’s home call out my name. At first, it would whisper, but after quickening my pace, the whispers would get louder morphing into loud bellows in my ears. I thought I would catch sight of the

dark figure of Loneliness hovering around her home. It was unsettling to see, so I would quickly glance away and quicken my pace when I would see Loneliness turn its distorted head and stare at me. In the summer, I do not remember feeling scared of it, but at these moments I remember being shaken.

C'mon, it's not there anymore. Just don't look over there. Turn around. Turn Around Walk faster. My thoughts accompanied me home.

After school practices would take place daily and there was no end to all of the homework I would get. Soon the Old One became a dim and distant memory. If I found myself walking across her home to reach mine, I would deliberately listen to Vanilla Ice sing *Ice Ice Baby* within the highest volume range my Sony Walkman allotted. I vowed to never dare take a peek at the Old One's home because the guilt I felt for ignoring her had become a jagged mountain growing over my heart. The events of the summer got pushed to the back of my mind as the months passed. High school became a whirl wind of obligations, projects and essays to turn in, practices to attend. Each day that I checked off of my Lisa Frank themed calendar was a day further from that summer, and my continual absence only added a larger gap between the Old One and myself.

When my mom told me the news of her passing, I was stunned. It was closer to the end of January because I remember clenching my jacket-clad arms across my chest. Suddenly, the cold January South Texas air felt like a suffocating vacuum. I hadn't yet realized how fragile life can be and how quickly a loved one can be gone from one day to the next. My parents wanted me to go to the funeral. I told them I didn't want to go. I had never been to a funeral, and I didn't know how to cope with the loss or even the motions of saying goodbye. A day passed without my parents mentioning the memorial service or the Old One's burial. However,

on the day of the service, my mom tried one more time. I believe deep down inside she knew it was the right thing to do.

“Today is tia Rufina’s funeral. Your dad and I both think you should pay your respects and go.”

“I did think about it, Mom... and I already told you and Dad that I don’t want to go. It’s just that I feel weird about the whole thing.”

I had time to change my mind because my parents didn’t leave right away. I guess that jagged mountain of guilt was too thick for me to push to the side and walk through the path I should have taken. That dismal mountain of guilt held me back from attending the funeral. At the end fear and guilt won, and I stayed home.

When my parents came back home, I didn’t ask about the funeral nor did they bring it up in my presence. In the evening, I could hear them talking about it, but I didn’t want to have anything to do with the situation. I could feel that they were disappointed in me, but I just wanted to block everything from my mind, forget the fact that I had not done a very caring deed by not attending the Old One’s funeral. I wanted to yell out my frustration, but I stayed quiet. I just wanted to move on. I tried reading a book, but it didn’t help. I picked up my Teen Bop magazines that interested me so much over the summer. I opened one up and found an article about the Saved By the Bell cast members. I continued to read and flip through a few more pages before I gave up on reading. I lay in bed and closed my eyes, but that didn’t help in stopping my thoughts from swirling around in my head.

Suddenly our house phone rings. I get up to go answer it. It was my friend Luz. Thankfully, we owned a long phone extension cord that allowed me the freedom to run it through the bottom of my door. I closed the door and sat on my bed. We talked about random

things: our Government AP homework, cheer practice, fundraising ideas for our end of the year trip. I laid back. My head finds sanctuary on my pillow. Luz keeps talking, but my eyes begin to close. I try to keep the conversation going, but my exhaustion was catching up with me.

“I’m sorry Luz, but I’m going to have to hang up now. I’m feeling tired already.”

“Alrighty... I’ll see you tomorrow in school.”

I hung up the phone. I lay awake in a drowsy state wondering whether I should get up to place the phone back at its place in the kitchen. My eyes were gradually starting to close. Just as they were closing, I could distinguish an obscure mass floating through my curtained window. The shadows of the pecan tree branches continued to sway in the January night wind. The shadowy entity floated above me. I wanted to get up, move or turn away, but I was completely powerless. The black shadow floated down and settled upon my stomach. My chest started to hurt as the gloomy shadow pushed me down. My heart raced as the shadowy figure revealed its true form. It was still a figure outlined by grey shadows, but I could see patches of fur, visible sections of oily skin and scaly yellowish arms that were too many to count. Upon each arm were hands that dripped tar. The tar dripped and dripped but none of it never splattered on me or my bed. The figure’s crimson red eyes lock with mine.

I’m powerless! I try to scream, but I can’t open my mouth.

I can’t move! can’t move! I can’t move!

I felt as if I was suffocating. Panic sets in as the shadow continues to paralyze me. It casts a sideways look as it proceeds to unlock long leathery textured nails from its many hands. I try to harness a shred of courage, but the need to close my eyes or hide was too great. I wanted to fight against the shadow, but I couldn’t move. My entire body was frozen. The only part of my body that worked was my mind. I started to pray to God, but no words escaped my mouth.

Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

I kept repeating and repeating and repeating the prayer in my head as the dim shadow continued to press me down. The shadows of the pecan tree branches continued to sway back and forth during my ordeal. Finally, the entity released its hold over me, and I was able to gasp for air. I ran out of my bedroom. I had allowed Guilt to control me. I was so scared knowing that it had gripped me, and as I wiped away an immeasurable amount of tears, I didn't want to wait around for it to come back. I ran across the hall to my parent's room. The hallway seemed to close in on me as I ran.

"MOM! DAD!" I pounded their bedroom door. "Something came in from the outside. It came from my window!" I was already crying and shaking because fear was sabotaging my sense of reality.

My parents took a few seconds to answer.

"Mom! Dad!" Something was pushing me down. It came from outside through my window!" I repeated.

My parents woke up and started to investigate. My dad even went outside with a flashlight and looked around. My mom comforted me and advised me to say a prayer before I went back to sleep. I told her that is how I think I was able to make the shadow go away. I kept saying the Our Father prayer over and over. I told her that I didn't want to sleep in my room and that I would rather sleep with Alejandra.

I curled up next to my sister, prayed several times, and closed my eyes. I hugged my sister's My Little Pony bedspread and pulled it over my face. My heart was still racing when I heard footsteps in the room.

"Caro, are you asleep? Caro? Wake up because I want to show you something."

I heard my mother's half whisper as she gently pulls the blanket. I open my eyes and sit up. She beckons me to follow her. I leave Alejandra's room and follow her into the living room. She's already sitting on the couch waiting for me.

"Mom, I already said my prayers. What is going on?" I ask as I sit right by her.

"What happened to you tonight reminded me of something that happened to Tala, our descendent. Your dad and I have always known that you are prone to magic. We've known that you have the magnetic pull that attracts the supernatural. As you know there are beautiful elements that live in our city, but just as there are good creatures, there are also bad things, very bad things that live amongst us. In ancient times, supernatural beings were a part of everyone's lives, but as the years passed they ceased to walk the lands and live alongside humans. To outsiders, they exist but only in their imagination, stories and in movies. We know the real truth."

My mom stopped talking as she placed her hands on an old looking box. She lifts open the top and I peer inside.

"I'm the family historian. I believe it is time to share our family keepsakes because I think that by keeping them close they will protect you. The only place that supernatural beings can roam freely is within our city because of the protective spell that hides their existence to outsiders. Take the box and keep it close to you as you sleep. It will keep you safe over the being you saw."

I stood up as my mom closed the lid of the box. She hands it to me just as I was starting to make my way back to Alejandra's room. Instead of entering her room, I turn to the left, enter my bedroom, and close the door. I hear a gentle knock as my mother asks if I was okay. I respond with a confident yes even though the memory of what had transpired earlier was still rattling me. I sit on my bed still holding our family heirlooms. I sigh as I place the box at the foot of my bed.

Open the box Carolina.

The words popped into my mind. They were spoken in an ancient language, but I pictured the letters unscrambling and shifting into English.

Do not be afraid. Open the box Carolina.

My heart beat pounded against my chest. This was all too much for me. After what I had survived, I refused to open the box. My head started to ache. My right arm became numb. I didn't want to worry my parents, so I decided to leave the box in my room. I got up, closed my bedroom door, and made my way to Alejandra's room. The pulsating throb in my head began to increase, so I made rhythmic swirls around my temple with my fingertips in hopes that this massive headache would subside. My eyes caught a glimpse of how peaceful Alejandra looked as she lay asleep. I pulled her My Little Pony comforter over my head and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, it was morning. I began to get ready for school. As I was brushing my teeth, I looked in the mirror. I caught a glimpse of my reflection but paused momentarily when I stared into my right eye. There was a patch of bright red on the edge of the eye. There was a small streak of blood that had leaked onto the white of my eye. I could feel my heart beating faster. *Could this popped blood vessel be a result of what had happened with the shadowing presence?* My thoughts immediately brought me back to the trauma I had undergone.

I didn't want to show my parents what happened to my eye. Hoping that it would clear up, I finished getting ready, propped on my neon green sunglasses, tied my hair into a pony tail, and walked out the door to catch the morning school bus.

As I walked through the caliche road, puddles of a black substance caught my attention. I bent down to investigate. I picked up a medium sized granite rock and carefully dipped it into the liquid. Half of the rock became coated with tar. I heard the sound of whispered words hovering around me. I stood back up and looked around. I tried not to make a noise in hopes of understanding the whispered words. Masked under the protection of my sunglasses, I caught the sight of the Old One's home. I immediately dropped the tar coated rock and gripped my backpack when I saw a lacy curtain move to the side. I could make out a someone staring directly at me, but since it was a distance away, I couldn't clearly see who it was. I glanced away because I was about five seconds from my bus stop. My bus stop is across the busy main road. I begin to cross the road, so I instinctively look both ways before lifting my feet onto the road.

"Carolina... Carolina," I turned my head and followed the direction of the whisper. It was coming from the direction of the Old One's home.

"Why don't you visit anymore? I am so lonely, and I don't have anyone to talk to."

The whisper shook every rock on the caliche road. The ground became unsteady. My knees felt like buckling, but I managed to steady myself. I gripped my backpack harder.

Now my entire body turned and stared at the direction of the home. It's almost as if I had no choice but to turn. I lifted my sunglasses in case they had somehow misconstrued my perception. The home seemed to radiate in the early morning sun, and the tall grass that

surrounded the home bowed down. The whisper was unmistakable. It was like the home was beckoning my presence as well.

Instead of crossing the street and getting on the school bus, I turned back and started walking toward the Old One's home. My mind was yelling out internally.

NOOOOOO! DON'T GO!

However, my body was set on working independently because it ignored every shred of warning from my mind. The noise from the morning traffic and the school bus driving off was on the background of my attention. I arrived to the front of the door. My hand lifted with the intention of turning the knob.

Too late.

The door was creaking open.

The rolling wheels of the Old One's walker could be heard from the kitchen.

I set my backpack down on the porch and lean it across the door frame. I lift up my sunglasses, and I proceed to enter the dimly lit house.

One.

Two.

Three.

Three steps in and the door closes behind me.

I could hear the voice of the Old One coming closer toward me.

"I am so glad you are here. I have some things for you to help me out with. Soon the food plate truck will stop by. You can have the food plate.

I don't need it. I never did."

The undeniable push of the walker was loud as an ominous figure appears in the hallway.

I gulp and take a step back.

This thing in front of me is not tia Rufina. This doesn't feel right. It was a mistake coming back here. I have to get out of here!

Instantly, I turn and grab the door knob. I try to twist it open, but it doesn't budge. I start kicking and pounding the door.

I turn back.

Panic sets in

I could feel a presence breathing behind me. I look down to see the edge of the linoleum around the perimeter of the walls starting to curl up and unattach itself from the floor. A crimson colored apple rolls across the floor of the kitchen and hits the frame of the door. I kick it away, and it ricochets to the living room wall.

"Please, let me go" I plead.

"I'm sorry I never came back to visit you."

Pound. Kick. Pound.

My body shakes with fear as I start to cry. I turn back and I open the palm of my hand.

I lay it across the door. I could feel a heartbeat through the door.

"Please. I'm sorry. I always meant to come back. I'm so sorry."

I turn around to see the shadowy gloom of Guilt in front of me. The horde of arms wrap around my torso. Black tar is everywhere. I begin to choke as the tar drips...

Drips.

Drips.

Guilt presses across my chest. Its long leathery nails extend toward me. They continue to grotesquely extend and proceed to coil around my neck. I'm being pulled.

“You are staying with me Carolina.”

These were the last words I heard before I am lifted and taken.

Disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHOICE

I remember leaving the bed for the floor because I couldn't deal with the bombarding spurts of pain that consumed me in rhythmic patterns. Streaks of searing pain pulsated across the perimeter of my belly. I was crunched up, doubled over. My arms tightly cradled my knees. I tossed and turned on the bed. No position offered a relief from the shooting pains that tortured me that September night in 2002. Silent sobs made my body quiver in agony. Zach lay asleep on the bed next to me. My fists closed and opened in desperation as I reached for the comfort of the carpeted floor. I remember thinking that I really needed my mom and that this was the craziest gut-wrenching pain I have ever experienced.

When the morning light radiated into Zach's bedroom loft, my situation hadn't improved.

Something is really wrong with me and the baby.

I don't know exactly when Zach and I decided to drive me to the Peñitas Emergency Hospital, but I wish we would have made the decision sooner.

"Don't worry. Everything will be okay," Zach says as he zooms through the outskirts of Tom Gill Road. At that moment, his optimistic reassurance did absolutely nothing to squash the feeling of dismay that was sprouting from my gut. At that moment even the seat belt felt like it was weighing me down.

I gazed out the window. Endless rows of colossal sunflowers stretched out to the right of the road. The sunflowers looked so tall. All of them faced upward at the shining south Texas sun. The perfectly arranged array of sunflowers continued on for a mile or two before we neared the St. Anthony Emergency Hospital. It was a small hospital, but it was closer than the one in Mission or the two hospitals in McAllen. Just as Zach turned into the parking lot, I had an urge to look back at the field of sunflowers. I'm not sure whether it was a voice I heard or just a weird feeling that made me turn my head and glance at them once more. Without a doubt, thousands of sunflowers turned their heads from facing upward toward the sun and turned all at once in a single rhythmic swoop in my direction. I didn't want to alarm Zach, so I chose not to tell him about the sunflowers. Since he didn't grow up in Peñitas, he was still getting accustomed to the supernatural elements that happen every so often.

"I'm pregnant. Something is wrong. This ache doesn't feel right. I'm in so much pain. I think something is wrong with my baby," I managed to tell the lady at the emergency room lobby.

Everything else happened in a blurred whirlwind. I placed one foot after the other. I had only just found out I was pregnant. I figured that I was only 2 to 3 ½ weeks along, but I knew that my upcoming scheduled doctor's appointment was going to give me a clearer indication as to how far along I was. I prayed silently that I was going to be able to make it to that scheduled doctor's appointment.

For now, it was an unbearable sinking feeling that consumed me. I was scared out of my mind. I could barely walk down the long hallways. I followed the nurse assistant into a small room. I turned back at Zach and tried to smile. I know that I probably looked more scared and that he could easily see through my charade. I turned back toward the lady who was waiting for

me at the end of the corridor. She stood in front of an elevator. I remember that she received a page on her beeper. She removed it from her pocket and read the message. Instead of going up the elevator that had sprung open, she changed her mind and started to lead me through a long hallway with bright lights. She pushed open two bulky doors and escorted me to a tiny space. I can sense that the room was packed with people, and I can recall thinking that my space only had an ivory colored curtain as defense against curious eyes.

“Someone will be with you shortly,” she says curtly as she walks away rapidly.

After a while, a nurse pushes the privacy curtain, walks into my domain, and pushes it back in place. She introduces herself as Oren. After she took my vitals, I decide to tell her something that was pestering me urgently.

“I really need to pee. Do you think I can use the restroom?” I asked her. “Alejandra, do you think you can wait a little bit only until the doctor sees you?” she responds.

My eyes pleaded with her and exchanged a look of dismay.

“It’s because I really need to go,” I said.

She pointed to the personal restroom door at the end of my tiny room. She retracts the privacy curtain and walked out of my tiny examining room all the while placing the curtain back in place.

I didn’t feel any pain as my urine gushed out of me. It was an unusual plopping sensation that I felt next. This noise made me separate my knees, open my legs, and peer

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into the depths of the pristine white toilet.

A tiny, pink, curled up figure was slowly sinking into the bottom of the toilet.

Time stood still.

Slowly....

Slowly...

The tiny pink little one swirled in my urine infused hospital toilet. As it reached the depths of the bottom, I clutched my stomach. My stomach was full of knots and nausea kicked in. I stood up, turned around, and bent down. I was scared, but I mustered enough courage to peer into the toilet once more.

Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!

I wanted to yell, but no sound came out of me. I shriveled to the floor. I knelt there for a moment. As I tried to stand up, I managed to steady my shaking knees as a tsunami wave of anxiety chokes and drowned me. Panic had now permanently set in and had no intention of leaving me.

My baby.

Please help me.

Oh no.

What did I do?

My baby.

The pain that had once tortured me the night before was now replaced by a sensation of helplessness. As this feeling of powerlessness devoured my insides, I felt like I was moving in slow motion. Every step, every breath, every blink proved difficult. I walked out of the restroom and entered the tiny examining room. I grasped at the privacy curtain. I remembered

that my hands were shaking as I managed to push the curtain to the side. I entered the hustle and bustle of the emergency room. My arms entwined across my stomach. My eyes scanned for someone that could help me. My shoulders began to shake. My knees felt weak. I want to fall to the floor and scream to the top of my lungs. I want to punch my chest and tear my heart out.

“I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe,” I mumble neurotically. My eyes locked with Oren, the nurse that had checked my vitals earlier.

“Please, help me.”

My body shivered continuously. I clench my arms around myself. The room begins to spin.

“I think my baby is in the toilet. Please help!”

I followed her back into my tiny waiting room. “We don’t know anything for sure,” she says walking out of the bathroom.

Her words pierced me in the heart. She pushed the privacy curtain to the side and left the room.

I felt so alone.

Silent tears made wet trails of desperation and heartache across my face.

Why hasn’t Zach been allowed to come in here yet? I really need my mom right now.

Oren swayed the privacy curtain to the side and reentered my examining room. Her hands were covered in purple latex gloves. She gingerly holds a prelabeled plastic bag. No words she utters can offer any reassurance or hope.

I know that my baby sat on the bottom of that toilet.

“Dr. Fénix will be in shortly to examine you,” she seemed to emit with a shimmery glaze in her eyes. As she blinks, I thought I recognized a glimmer of silvery gears twirl within the pupil of her left eye.

“Can my boyfriend be let in now? I really need him.” I plead with her as she strides out carrying my two-inch baby in its plastic tomb. Her gloved hand pushes the privacy curtain as she leaves me to deal with my heavy sense of gloom. I let my back fall across the hospital bed. I didn’t care if I tore the white parchment paper that drapes across the crisp bed sheets. I was distraught. My knees curled up to my stomach and I hug them tightly. My request must have been ignored because after 20 minutes Zach was never allowed to come see me. Instead, the privacy curtain swayed to the side and I heard a pair of voices. The pair of voices enter my tiny room. I followed their directions, but I felt disconnected. I’m physically there. I knew that I was alive, but a part of me feels a massive sense of loss.

I turned away during the examination and choose to stare at my hospital bracelet clasped around my right wrist as Dr. Fénix conducts his examination.

“Well Alejandra, your uterus is closed already. You will not be needing a D & C procedure,” the doctor’s prognosis reaches my ears. Slowly, I begin to grasp the reality of what happened. I’m handed a piece of paper containing a scrawled phone number to an obgyn doctor to see as a follow up.

I sit up, and my head hangs low. My arms clasp around each other. My left foot finds my right foot. My legs wrap around in a protective lock. I do all of this in hope of warding off the sinking feeling of calamity that had settled in.

The feeling feels familiar. A flashback into my memories reminds me that I have felt like this before. A familiar sense of loss and desperation has plagued me since my childhood. I can

still remember my mother's screams as she begins to register that my sister, Carolina had disappeared. She was there one day and gone the next. I remember waking up for a few seconds the night she disappeared. I squinted in the dark. I'm not sure what made my sister sleep with me that night, but whatever it was it had scared her deeply. A memory of Carolina shaking and whispering a prayer over and over is what I replay in my thoughts. The next morning, she took forever in the restroom, and I do not remember her saying anything to anyone when she departed to the bus stop. Another flashback takes me to a memory of being outdoors a day or two later. I was near my home. I can still remember my father yelling Carolina's name in the woods as he searched for her. She never came back home, and she was never found. Dread was not a stranger in my life. I had already experienced tragedy, so I prepared my mind for the news.

The doctor takes a seat on a wheeled stool across from me. I look up and catch a glimpse of the nurse that stood right by him. She looked like the same nurse, Oren who had carried off the plastic zip lock bag that held my baby. However, there was something a little different about her. I'm not sure whether it was because her hair bun was slightly higher or because she wore silver earrings instead of the gold ones I had seen her wearing earlier. The nurse cradled a metallic chromed clipboard and was busy jotting things down.

The doctor leaned forward. The lines on his forehead creased as he said, "What if I told you there is a procedure that can fix everything for you?"

What? Did I just hear him correctly?

I didn't know what to say. I simply stared at him in disbelief. How I wish it was that easy to feel like everything could be easily fixed.

After a moment of not responding, the Dr. Fénix breaks the silence. He says, "I know that you have already been through so much, but I am offering you a solution. There is a

procedure that you can undergo. My team and I are part of a new revolutionary genetic breakthrough. Our discovery gives us the ability to place your baby back into your uterus. You only have 48 hours to agree. This is the phone number and location of the private facility, not too far from here, where we will be located at. Your baby has already been transported. My team has already been notified. We are waiting your approval.”

“Wait- You have my baby?”

My hand shakes as I hold the information card.

The doctor stands up. The look in his eyes radiates a true sense of genuine concern. I truly felt like he was trying to help me. I picked up on a sense of urgency that flowed from his words.

“Yes, my associate here,” he looks over at the nurse who is still writing notes, “advised us about your condition. She took great care in transporting your baby to our facility this morning.”

The crease in his forehead relaxes as he turns to the nurse. He nods his head in her direction. She nods back. The nurse turns in my direction to make sure I was looking. She peers down at the pen she is holding. Her arm extends upward and holds the pen diligently. A radiating beam of light illuminates from her eyes. Suddenly, the pen disappeared from her hand. The nurse closes her eyes for two seconds. My heart races. The pen reappeared in my hand. I let it fall to the floor in disbelief.

“Remember, you only have 48 hours to make your decision. Choose what your heart tells you.”

The doctor’s words bounce off the walls of the tiny examining room because I keep hearing them replay over and over. They instantly depart from the room and leave me there

alone with only the sanctuary of my thoughts. I scrunch and tear the protective paper even more as I scramble off the examining table. I bent down and pick up the pen from the floor and twirl it around. I click the top repeatedly just to test that it is real. My thoughts are now engulfed with hope and the possibility of amends.

When Zach finally enters the domain of my room, his arms circle around me, and my head lays on the safe haven of his chest. My ears pick up the thumps of Zach's heart, and my thoughts dwell on the absent heartbeat of our baby. Telling him was easy. I described everything the doctor had offered. Zack look of dismay switched to a look of hope when I described the pen incident. I am broken as we depart from the emergency room, but a vast portion of me ached for the baby that lay in the middle of some science facility.

We drive back to Zach's loft. Soon, my mom arrives and offers comfort to all of my unwavering, "If only this and if only that..." doubts that swim around my head like a sea of fish consumed daily by my whale of a mind.

As a way of coping with my loss, I gathered things that I associated with the baby such as the hospital bracelet I wore as my insides were examined and probed, my tear stained blouse, my St. Anthony Emergency Hospital discharge papers and a folded letter I wrote to the baby. It's late into the evening when I tenderly gathered these things and placed them in a keepsake box. I sealed the lid and tucked away the box onto the highest shelf in my closet.

"You shouldn't be climbing ladders Alejandra."

I almost lose my balance. Thankfully, I had a firm grasp of the stepladder handlebars. My mother's voice had startled me a little. I turn around and tell her, "Mom, it is just a small stepladder, and honestly, I'm okay."

“Alejandra, I brought something with me that I believe will help you. Many years ago when we lost your sister, she didn’t listen and take my advice. There is a special life force within our family circle. You just need to accept and unlock the powers that lie dormant within you. Carolina didn’t listen, and her choices led to tragedy. I’m so sorry about what happened. I don’t want any more harm to come your way.”

Her eyes glisten with tears as she tries to smile in a comforting way. She nods her head sideways. This was her unspoken way of telling me she wanted me to follow her. She turns around and walks away. A mixture of curiosity and desperation swirl around in my thoughts. I feel like I’m walking through quicksand as I follow my mother’s footsteps through the hallway and into the dining room.

“I lived my years feeling helpless over what happened to your sister. You had no idea because you were still small, but your sister was plagued by a darkness so greedy that it snatched her from us. There are days when I can hear her. She is still out there completely lost to the Guilt that consumed her, but enough about your sister for now. I am worried about you, and so I come to you now like I did for your sister years ago. My hope for you is that you listen to me and embrace the gifts of your ancestor.”

She lifts open an old wooden box sitting on the kitchen table and peers inside. She whispers something I couldn’t detect and then turns my way.

“Many years ago I had a feeling that if Carolina accepted what she was capable of, she would still be here with us in this world and not in the darkness she is trapped in. This is our family box. Tala can be reached through the contents that are inside the box. All you need to do Carolina is to accept your worth and believe in the power that is within you.”

Her eyes reflect unconditional love. I reach for the box and peer inside. I can see various tribal keepsakes. The kitchen table begins to tremble slightly. An electrical surge tickles my fingertips as I reach into the box. I look at my mother for reassurance and she nods her head in approval. My hand clasps around a leather pouch with engraved markings around it. I hold it closer to inspect. Within seconds it begins to transform into a bracelet.

“Long ago, when Tala faced her tragic defeat, one of the things she got comfort from is her mother’s leather pouch. Before she journeyed into the wild by herself, she gathered some of these materials. Rayen’s pouch has chosen you. Put the bracelet on Alejandra. As you venture through your own journey, I believe that it will give you comfort as well.”

I place the bracelet against my left wrist. It quickly unraveled at the end and spun around my wrist in twirling motions. I sense of determination washes over me. I know what I have to do. *I still have time. I can fix this. I don’t have to be mourning the loss of my baby. I’ve been given the chance to grant my baby the chance to live and what mother wouldn’t want that?* The bracelet around my wrist twirls slightly.

An instant untamable wildfire quest for wanting to be a mom consumed me. I’m a 22-year-old unmarried undergraduate student with a part time job. A part of me feels incomplete, but Dr. Fénix had proposed a remedy that would alleviate my guilt. His procedure would grant me an opportunity to fill my sense of emptiness.

After dinner, I talked about the possibilities with Zack, and he was slightly skeptical. Ultimately, the hole in my heart outweighs any doubt, and I decide to go along with the procedure. I scribble a note for my mom explaining that she shouldn’t worry and that I would be back very soon. I leave Zach’s loft quietly and make my way to the parking lot. I call the number that was on the card and a voice advises me to wait outside. I gather my jacket and

purse and make my way outside. I see that there is a dark vehicle parked across the street. The dark vehicle crosses the street and heads in my direction. I freeze in my tracks. A part of me wants to turn around and run back into the safety of the loft. The window is lowered and Dr. Fénix beckoned me toward him.

The need to fix my broken heart far outweighed the strangeness of the situation. No words are exchanged. I get into the vehicle and we drive off into the night.

As we are drove down the curved roads toward a part of Peñitas I had never been to, a surge of nervousness hits me. With only the blanket of stars above me for comfort, my hands begin to shake again. I clasp them together for comfort. Eventually, after continuous curves and unrecognizable deserted roads, we arrive to the facility. It towers before me. Our feet make crunching noises as we walk throughout the gravel encrusted driveway. There are no lights visible or signs of people anywhere. Doubt has been waiting to creep up on me from the sidelines and it now recognizes its opportunity to pounce upon me.

“Dr. Fénix, I’m wondering if this is the right choice for me. Maybe I can have some more time to think about it. I can come back later today with my mom or with my boyfriend.”

“No, Alejandra. The time is now. You have exhausted your time to think about any more options. It’s either a yes or a no. That’s it. Your baby is running out of time. There is only a limited amount of time for us to work with. You can’t think about it some more.”

The crease on his forehead is prominent. He swiped his hand through his silvery colored hair in an act of impatience. I like to think that I am a pretty good judge of character, and at this very moment, I was still getting a sliver of genuine concern from the doctor. So that is why when my mind tells me to run, my heart overrules: *Be Strong!* It beats out rhythmically to the patter of my heartbeat.

Be brave Alejandra.

I hear the words spoken in a different language, but my mind can unscramble the letters and sort them into words I understood.

I am with you. I will not leave your side. You are protected.

I follow Dr. Fénix inside.

I look at him to see whether he too can hear the words, but somehow deep down I knew they were exclusively in my mind.

Be Strong!

Be Strong!

Be Strong!

Be Strong!

The rhythm of my heart seemed to thump out its own reassuring message. I clasp my bracelet with my right hand and respond to Dr. Fénix.

“Yes, okay. I understand,” I say as I followed him into the dim building. Only the light from the moon shines through several windows. As we begin to walk through a hallway, only a slight ray of light begins to slowly grow brighter. My eyes begin to adjust to the brightness. We arrive to an elevator. Dr. Fénix raises his right hand up. He looks back in my direction.

“Do not panic,” he says as he rolls up his sleeve. He clasps his left hand onto his right arm and began to twist. He continues to twist it until he pulls off the arm. What he reveals did scare me slightly. Hidden within is another arm. This arm was the color of a periwinkle blue. The color was a combination of white, blue and traces of a faint red. Three fingers with tawny beige colored curved nails that reminded me of eagle talons expertly tapped a series of coded patterns onto a wall device. A silvery scanner pops out from a hidden place in the wall. Dr. Fénix places his clawed paw looking hand in front of the scanner and a neon orange light escaped from the device. The light begins to scan his outstretched hand up and down.

Suddenly, the elevator doors open. The brightness of the light is brighter than the rest of the light in the building. I shield my eyes by covering them slightly. I follow the doctor in. The elevator doesn't move upward or downward. It begins to move forward at a rapid pace. I grab a side rail for support. It's only a few seconds that pass when the elevator ceiling opens sideways. I stare upward immediately. A recognizable face gazes at us from above. She is the same nurse from the hospital.

"Welcome Dr. Fénix. Welcome Alejandra. We have been expecting you." A beam of light escapes from her eyes and within a second or two, we reappear right next to her.

I hold up my hands and spread my fingers. I look down at myself on each side. Everything seems to be adequate and I seem to still be intact. "Woah! Did you just teleport us up here?"

"Follow us Alejandra."

I looked around and notice a purple-toned light sparkling in the room. Everywhere I turn there are nurses. They are all busy sorting things, typing, writing, solving equations, discussing mysterious words. The strangest factor is that each nurse has the same exact face. There are multiple clones of the same nurse Oren. When the Orens sense that I am staring, they halt their work and stare back.

The elevator door disappears. I follow one of the Orens and Dr. Fénix. This is getting weirder every minute.

It's too late now. You are in too deep now to back out. No I can still yell or run out of here. It's never too late. What about the baby? I can't leave this place without knowing about my baby!

“Alejandra, please take a seat here. I have great news. Your baby is doing well and thriving. I do have a proposition for you. You may think about your part in the agreement only for a moment because time is of essence.”

With a wave of his right hand, the wall slides open and a scientific laboratory is revealed. The purple hue still lingers in the light above and it reflects across the chrome colored equipment.

“My associates and I are from the future. Over time, our advancement in technology allowed the human species to attain enhanced capabilities. There were great strides in fusing animal, cyborg and human powers. In time, the cyborg side overruled our human qualities. This has proven destructive for the human species. We unlocked the portal to time travel with the mission of resolving the takeover. We were sent back in time to remedy the dominance of the cyborg side. What you need to understand right now is that our technology has made vast strides in making truly beautiful miracles occur. From the moment you knew your baby lay on the bottom of that hospital toilet, you thought all was lost. Alejandra, I’m here to reassure you to wipe despair away from your sentiments. All hope is not lost. Your baby is alive. It is still alive because it is thriving off of the life force of one of our baby beings. Together, they can grow to maturity in your womb. With our power and your collaboration, we can safely teleport them into you.”

I had initially decided to stand, but when Dr. Fénix revealed the news, I slumped down into the plush seat he had offered earlier. My heart beat diligently knowing that my baby still had a chance of surviving.

“How is this possible? What do you mean another being?”

The thought of something foreign inside of me was frightening.

“Victoria, relax. Our technology has allowed us to regenerate any lost organic material that may have been missing. Your baby is a perfect candidate for this procedure. As you can see, your baby is doing well.” His taloned right hand make a swiping movement again and a digital projection is now displayed.

The projection zooms in to a circular enclosure. I can see a clear iridescent dome around my baby and a thin purple tube extending into a matching lavender hued dome where a similar baby floated. A monitor close by picks up the rhythm of two heart beats.

“We have conducted many trials as well as calculated endless possibilities. However, we believe we have discovered the missing components. There are two factors involved. A mother’s love is the first factor. We need your nurturing love for this miracle. It is only with your unconditional love can both babies thrive, exist, and have the possibility to be born. The second factor revolves specifically around you. We are aware of your magical lineage. Are you aware that you a direct descendent of the magical being, Tala?”

He doesn’t wait for me to respond because he probably already knew the answer.

“We have chosen to conduct our studies here in Peñitas because of the protective dome that surrounds the city. Tala, your ancestor, understood that great power and knowledge should remain hidden from the potential fear and misconception of humankind. Your link in this puzzle is your connection to Tala. Through our calculations, we are counting that you have the supernatural sustainability to undergo the process. Will you agree? Remember, you cannot wait too long to make your choice. If you agree to this, you will harbor both babies in your womb. You will promise to care and love for your new addition in the same manner as your own child. They will be look identical in every way. You will never be able to know which child was originally yours. We are instilling the force of love into the foundation of our future. Our cyborg

side has diminished this in the future. With your powerful love, you can help your baby and our future human species. Do you agree to the procedure?”

Without hesitation and armed only with a mother’s love, my response resonated within the walls of the facility.

I am brave. I am strong. I am fearless. I will never give up. I am all of these qualities and more for my child- for my two babies.

I can feel electrical surges flowing through my left arms as my bracelet twirls around my wrist. I look Dr. Fénix straight in the eyes and respond, “Yes. Yes, I agree to the procedure.

CHAPTER V

THE GRIP OF TWEEDLE FEAR AND TWEEDLE DREAD

*"Buddy, I coulda gone that extra mile/
For an extra bark or an extra smile/
'Cause I never felt so free/It was just my dog and me"
-John Hiatt- My Dog and Me*

Something told me to wake up. I don't know if it was an instinctive feeling or a moment of uneasy restlessness that convinced me to open my eyes. My sleep had not been relaxing due to my family and I having to move out of our rental home in The Coves. Today marked our first night of sleeping in the family red- brick home in Peñitas. This home has been in our family for a long time. In fact, it was the house my mom had grown up in. I had mixed feelings about staying here because I knew it was the last place my mom's sister, Carolina was seen before she disappeared. However, I understood that building a home is expensive, so my husband Roberto and I had decided to move our family and dogs back to my family home as way to save money for the upcoming expenses. The first night felt like something out of the Twilight Zone- a nightmare. The perimeter of the fence that held our dogs was not secure. I kept waking up periodically because the dogs had already previously escaped twice within the span of two hours. Roberto tried to secure the fence by blocking the small openings with materials he found in the yard.

At 3:00 am a moment of uneasy restlessness had tied a short leash upon my mind and would not break free. My eyes opened and adjusted to the dark room. I looked around and zoned in on what chaos had delivered. Instinct prompted me to rise and check the front door. Sure enough my intuition was right. I looked down and spotted Zeus, our short-tailed poodle waiting loyally by the doorstep. Suddenly, I could make out flashes of white blurs, so I knew that my dogs had morphed into escape artists. They had managed to escape the fence and were now darting back and forth. Panic set in. This was a new city for our dogs. The dogs were not used to being let out to wander without supervision. Multiple things bothered me at that moment. The city of Peñitas is a rural establishment with a mix of South Texas countryside and a small grassroots city vibe. My dogs could easily be either attacked by wild animals in the woods, hit by a car or both. I was also aware of the supernatural beings that inhabited the city. My dogs were not accustomed to the strangeness, so that is why my body froze, but everything inside me quickened and went at an accelerated pace.

Have you ever had a moment where your heartbeat speeds up and races so fast? Have you felt your blood feel like it's being drained from your inside? This is that kind of feeling. I lose sensation in my legs- and a sense of dread creeps up my toes and infests my mind. A sense of pure rotten fear- with all of its setbacks- chisels a hole into my state of mind. The sense of fear must have been using a huge sledgehammer because I began to tremble. However, even with the thought of twins Fear and Dread wrapping their tentacle infested arms around me, I hadn't completely lost all sense of reality.

I knew that I had to act quickly. I pick up Zeus and encourage the dogs at that moment to follow me in. I close the front door and run toward where Roberto lay asleep. Holding Zeus

close to me with one hand, I begin to shake Roberto awake with the other hand, all the while explaining the predicament.

“Hurry! Wake up! The dogs got out!”

I didn’t even wait to hear Robert’s response. I place Zeus to the floor, and run back to the front door, open it, and let the rest of the dogs in. Instinctively, I start counting them.

“One,

Two,

Three,

Four,

Five,

Six,

Seven,

Eight,

Nine.”

I counted again.

“One,two,three,four,five,six,seven,eight,nine. Whoa! Whoa! Stop, moving! Settle down; relax. Stop moving!” I plead with the bouncing blurs.

The dogs are extremely excited to have been allowed into a new home, and as a result keep moving, sniffing, twirling and barking all at the same time. I begin to count again and again and again. Each time I get to the number nine, I wince because the realization sets in like a nuclear bomb.

“There’s one missing!” I exclaim. “But I can’t tell which one- they don’t stop moving. I know there is got to be one missing. Stop moving! Alright, woah! Let me count them again.”

All of my dogs share the same curly white fur with the exception of Starita who is a Chihuahua/Poodle mix. This is the reason why it was difficult to take inventory and figure out which dog was missing. In a decision of desperation, I glanced at all of their collars. They have different color-coded collars that helps set them apart. I realize that it was Ghost who was missing.

My thoughts get scrambled and collide with one another. Roberto and I step outside. The darkness swallows us as we walk up and down the cemented driveway. The full moon illuminates the black sky. My eyes adjust to the night. “GHOST! GHOST! GHOSTIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!” I yell out in desperation. I sound like a crazed banshee, but I didn’t care.

Suddenly, Ice Bear comes running from the outskirts of the gravel encrusted road. I scoop her up in my arms, and at that moment, I realize I hadn’t counted our dogs correctly. I thought I had already counted Ice Bear, but here she was now, lying safely in my arms. Ice Bear’s appearance should have been my clue that my count was off. I open the front door and place Ice Bear on the tiled floor. Her poodle pack recognizes her instantly and welcome her by

wagging their tails and enthusiastically shake their torsos from side to side. I begin scanning their faces, their collars, and counting them once again.

“Yes, it’s Ghost. He is still missing,” I tell Roberto.

He gets into his Ford Edge and drives slowly though the caliche road and onto Main Road. I yell for Ghost again and again.

For a few seconds I think: *Victoria, if someone is awake at this hour and hears a woman yell out for a ghost, they will probably think she has lost her mind.*

I used the flashlight from my phone to illuminate the yard thick with foliage. I walked around the perimeter of the fence curious to see where my Houdini- talented dogs had escaped from. Aha! I found the space they had squeezed out of. I saw that they had expertly pushed through the wooden boards that Roberto had previously secured. The boards lay on the floor. I stare at them desperately. If only I had the ability to animate them. I would make them sit up and tell me in what direction Ghost had headed toward. “Please! Please! Just tell me where you saw Ghost go toward.” I practiced how I would speak to these animated boards. My eyes, now adjusted to the evening, scanned the back yard for Ghost. There was a deep wooded area that encompassed the surrounding fields. The family goats did not let out any noises, so I assumed that Ghost had not entered the woods.

Roberto returns and tells me he did not see Ghost. I decide to join him and search the main road. First, he turns to the vehicle to the right, and I try with all of my heart to search the darkness for Ghost. I scan every house, front yard, and the side of the road that we drove by.

I'm completely silent until I let out a sigh of frustration. I couldn't wrap my head around Ghost's mysterious disappearance. How could he possibly be missing after we have called and called for him.

I wished with all of heart that I had some kind of super night vision. Why couldn't I have been born with my ancestor, Tala's supernatural abilities? It just wasn't fair. Growing up, I had heard my grandparent's stories about my descendants having magical powers. I wished that I could peel back the walls from each home so that I could see whether Ghost was being held by someone. I must have been passed up in the magical power department because no amount of wishful thinking made me sense where Ghost might have run off to.

As Roberto is driving to the part of the road where it leads into a Highway 83, we weigh the possibilities of whether Ghost could possibly have gotten this far. Roberto turns the vehicle back. This time my eyes scan the left side of the road, the houses, yards, anything within sight. Nothing turns up.

*"But we had all we needed and the rest we didn't need
Life was free and simple for Gypsy Joe and me
Now Gypsy was my little dog, I found by the road in a ditch
And so I named him Gypsy, cause that name just seemed to fit"*
-Dolly Parton- Gypsy, Joe and Me

Roberto and I continue driving down the main road. This time we are driving in the opposite direction of where we had initially started. An hour had passed; I keep digesting the surroundings in hopes of finding Ghost. Suddenly, I catch a glimpse of the tiniest white speck up ahead. We had just driven past the Peñitas Public Library when I exclaim, "Roberto! LOOK! He's over there!" Roberto swerves the vehicle to the right. I hurl open the door and without

hesitation jump out. I began to run. Running is difficult in flip flops. The blur of white is definitely my dog. My heart swells. There's a problem though. It wouldn't stop running. It seemed as if it was being magnetically pulled by some unseen force. *Oh, my goodness... just stop already.* I wanted to communicate with it in some superpower canine language mind control way.

How in the world did Tala even speak to wolves? This dog of mine will not even stop and listen to me.

I must have been quite a sight. Crazy hair, long nightgown, and flip flops pumping the side of the road, was what I looked like. Every time I would get close enough to grab my dog, I would kneel down, but then, it would run further. I almost fell multiple times during this ridiculous game. Within seconds, I realized that the dog I was running after was not Ghost after all. I knew for several reasons. First of all, Ghost would have recognized me immediately and would have stopped running. Another reason is that this dog wore a purple collar which meant that this was Cara, one of our youngest dogs. Cara is only nine-months old and free spirited by nature which explained why she kept running away from me. She must have thought I was playing with her. "Cara! Stop running!" I plead as my arms reach out for her. I turn back momentarily to see whether Roberto is witnessing my struggle.

Why has he not gotten off the car to help me?

By now, I was nowhere near the vehicle. I hadn't realized I had run forward quite a bit.

Roberto's truck is being splattered with the distinct colors of red and blue lights. A state trooper was parked behind him. I turn back and with a new-found determination managed to grab Cara. I flip flop my way back toward the vehicle hugging Cara closely. Walking back, I take in the scene. Roberto is being detained by a state trooper as well as a Peñitas police officer. This explains why Roberto never got down from the vehicle to help me. The officers are standing on the passenger side of the vehicle and stare at me as I open the door. I don't remember exactly what I managed to mutter but I do remember saying hello.

"Geez. What the hell are they thinking? What happened? Why are they just standing there?" I ask him as Cara shakes her torso back and forth and tries to lick my face.

"Victoria, they think we were in the middle of having some kind of fight," Roberto says.

An eye roll, and the crease in his forehead display annoyance. He turns the steering wheel and we are on our way back down the main road. We drive back the short distance to my family home in silence. It isn't until we are driving down the caliche road that we started talking again.

"Are you sure that it was Ghostie that was missing? Victoria, maybe Ghostie is there with the rest of the dogs all along," Roberto says.

"Yes, hopefully he's there. I probably counted wrong," I respond with traces of hope and despair in my voice.

I get off the vehicle and carry Cara into the house. I don't place her down until I count the dogs again. This time, Roberto counts them as well. Realization sets in. Somehow in all of the turmoil I had miscounted the dogs on several occasions. However, one factor still weighed heavily upon us. Ghost was still nowhere to be found.

*"All he asks from me is the food to give him strength/
All he ever needs is love and that he knows he'll get"*

-Cat Stevens- I Love My Dog

It was still early Monday morning, and I had to make a quick decision. Monday morning means teaching a shiny, bright class full of 4th graders. I had to act quickly and put in for a substitute teacher to cover my class before the timeframe runs out. I've learned throughout the years that it is best to put in for a substitute teacher as early as possible so that the chances of someone going in and filling the vacancy is increased. If the job is placed into the system too late, a substitute might not fill the vacancy, and the class would have to be dispersed among the other 4th grade classes. I've learned from experience that dispersing a class is not looked upon with joy, so I definitely needed a substitute teacher to cover my class.

The sun is now peeking through the horizon. I meet the early morning light as I walk into JFK Elementary. I unlock my classroom and set out to leave the schedule for the substitute teacher. I don't like to be absent, but finding my dog is my main priority. As I'm driving away from the school, I call my mom and fill her in on what had happened. My parents own a second home in Peñitas by the main road, so I knew she could help me by keeping an eye out for Ghost. Without thinking twice, I also text my twin sister, Luciana. She was an animal lover as well. She knows how much my dogs mean to me, so I needed her reassurance. Luciana has always had great intuition, and I needed advice as to how to go about finding Ghost. Next, I call

Roberto. He couldn't call in sick for the day because a VIP from corporate office was scheduled to visit his HEB. I remind him to call me as soon as the visit was over.

I arrive at my childhood home and place Zeus on a leash. My mindset was geared toward full blown detective mode. I will not rest until my dog is found. My plan was to walk with Zeus by the perimeter of the main road in hopes that his fatherly instinct or super sense of smell power will lead us to his missing son.

“C'mon Zeus, let's go find Ghostie. C'mon boy, let's go!”

Zeus is overjoyed that he gets to go for a walk. I tell him about his missing son and that I really need him to find Ghost just like he was able to find Ice Bear who had gone missing last month. The neighbor across my rental home had been kicking the wooden boards so that my dogs could escape from our fence. (This is another reason why we decided to move into the family home while our home was being built.) Ice Bear had gone missing during one of those instances, but Zeus was able to lead us to her location. So now I hoped with all of my heart that he would do the same for Ghost.

We walk all the way past the Peñitas Public library, the old cemetery, the canal where Luciana and I learned to swim, and all of the twisted roads that lead back to the main road. We walked, walked, walked, and walked. We stroll across the spot on the road where just a few hours before blue and red lights illuminated the dark sky. “GHOST! GHOSTIE! GHOSTIE!” I yell out. I stop and describe my missing dog to any neighbor I see. “He looks like him except he has a longer tail,” I tell any neighbor that would listen as I point to Zeus. Heartbreak and a sense of loss walk back with us toward the red brick home.

During this first day without Ghost, I looked for helpful tips online as to how to find a missing pet. According to the Lost Pet Advise section of the Pet Hub website, understanding dog behavior is a key factor when looking for a lost dog. The website sheds some light onto my situation: *In most cases, your dog doesn't mean to run away from home or leave you behind. They may even panic when they realize they've gotten themselves into a scary situation and can't easily find their owner. It's usually a simple case of instinctive canine behavior: the temptation to explore overrules all other thoughts.* This advice makes sense because I wanted to believe that Ghost was confused about finding his way back to us. We had just moved into my childhood home, so this could have also been another factor.

The first full day without Ghost was certainly difficult to get through. I called the City of Peñitas to inquire whether Ghost had been picked up by the city dog catcher. I gave a description over the phone and learned that the dog catcher had not come across my dog. However, during the multiple times I had either walked or driven down the main road, I noticed several dogs roaming. I didn't think the Peñitas dog catcher was very focused on wrangling up stray dogs. If he would have picked up Ghostie, I was geared up to protest because of the numerous dogs I had seen on the streets. Realization set in once again. Ghost was now officially a stray dog. According to the Wildlife Animal Control website: *There is no specific color, height, or weight for a stray dog. Dogs come in every shape and size, and the only factor that separates a stray dog from a house dog is the small issue of ownership. All canines, barring those few who bear genetic mutations, are born with four legs. Beyond that, there is little in the way of similarity.* I didn't want to accept it, but Ghost was now an honorary dog of the streets, and my heart sank even more.

While I was searching ideas on how to find a lost pet, I'm not sure how I came across a commentary article about stray reduction. Keely Lewis explains: *The Rio Grande Valley has one of the largest stray animal populations in the United States. This overpopulation is a crisis that affects Valley residents on a daily basis, whether they realize it or not. Tens of thousands of tax dollars annually are spent catching strays and turning them in, and the \$70 per animal fee the cities pay Palm Valley Animal Center doesn't nearly cover the cost of testing and treating incoming animals and getting them ready for adoption.* This was an eye opener for me. I had no idea that the city has to pay a fee per animal. I take this new piece of information and apply it to what I know about the city I live in. No wonder there were quite a bit of stray dogs in Peñitas. It probably isn't that the dog catcher isn't very efficient in his job. It was more likely that the city really doesn't want to pay the fees that the shelters impose. Regardless, I didn't want Ghost to end up in an animal shelter. I wanted him home safely. I called the local shelters and inquired about Ghost. Since he is microchipped, I knew it would be easy to claim him.

Luciana calls me and I spare no details in unfolding the dismal events. She tells me that ultimately everything will work out for the best. She believes that Ghost was meant to leave for a while, but that he will return soon. She suggests using the power of social media. I never place negative or disheartening posts through Facebook, but I was desperate. I knew that several of my Facebook friends live in the surrounding area as well on the same road that Cara was found. My Facebook post on February 1, 2017 read:

Friends & Family,

Our dog Ghostie got lost from my mom & dad's house early Tuesday morning in the Peñitas area. Ghostie is a white poodle & is wearing a red collar with white trim... We've been looking for him all day yesterday & today, but he is nowhere to be found... we are devastated. Please share and forward this to your friends & family... we have hope that Ghostie will be found and returned to us.

Along with my post, I included a photo grid of several pictures featuring Ghost. The response was quite amazing. People shared the post and recommended I post on groups dedicated to reuniting lost dogs with their owners. I learned that before I could post on these I had to become a member. There are several local online groups dedicated to reuniting lost dogs with their owners. Local Rio Grande Valley online groups such as the RGV Pet Alert Lost and Found group also helps spread awareness about fostering, adopting and caring for animals. By scrolling through these lost pet groups, I learned that what happened to Ghost was not an isolated event.

“So I chose you

Because you're sweet

And you give me lots of lovin'

And you eat meat

And that's how you became

My only man of the hour”

-Norah Jones- Man of the Hour

On the second day without Ghost, Roberto stopped at the city of Edinburg's Palm Valley Animal Shelter. He relayed Ghost's information, description and the microchipped data. However, to his surprise and mine, the workers already knew about Ghost's case. They had already seen his profile on the local RGV lost dog forums. Since Facebook friends and even complete strangers were sharing the post on their personal feeds as well as the multiple RGV lost dog online groups, it was amazing that the people at the Palm Valley Animal Shelter already knew to look out for Ghost. Roberto still walked through the endless aisles of homeless dogs in

search of Ghost. He even searched in a separate location where the Palm Valley workers explained was for more aggressive dogs. Even though Roberto knew Ghost was not aggressive by nature, he still wanted to check in that facility in case he was mistakenly labeled. On the way home, Roberto called me. He said that there were many dogs wagging their tails eager to be adopted as well as sad looking dogs who had given up hope of ever leaving their cages. I felt shattered for those dogs awaiting their fates. Just to think that any one of those dogs could have been Ghost made me feel helpless.

“Bow-wow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah
Bow-wow-yippie-yo-yippie-yeah”
-George Clinton- Atomic Bomb

It’s been three days and Ghost is still missing. It’s 9 am and I’m going over the answers of a STAAR prep reading passage. My 4th graders are checking their responses. Going to work has been efficient in taking my mind off of my detective work in finding Ghost, but the sense of loss- an empty void- still lingers over me. Even though I can’t see Twins Fear and Dread, I remember hearing stories from my grandma about the magnitude of pain they can unleash upon someone. So even though, they hadn’t physically shown up, I still felt like they had a strong hold over me. I imagined their tentacle infused arms over me, strangling me or tearing my heart out. In my imagination, their arms grip me tighter every time I drive down the main road home. I’m scared that I will find Ghost lying on the side of the road- dead- a casualty of the busy street and his lack of street-smart intuition. I dread the notion that someone- somewhere- has him and is mistreating him. Worries plague me, and sadness becomes a tsunami wave within me.

Being within the confines of my classroom- with the innocent happy go lucky 9 and 10-year-olds that I teach has helped me but not entirely. It was during this early morning reading block that I happen to glance over at my phone. I glimpse at a brief message from my mom

explaining that she has Ghost. My hands begin to tremble as I dial my mom's cell phone number. I mutter apologies to my students and explain that I have an emergency and that is the reason why I'm using my phone. It rings twice before she answers.

"Mom, what happened? Do you have Ghost?"

I was so anxious I could hardly spurt out the questions. My students are completely quiet. I never use the phone in front of them, so they knew this must have been a critical moment for me. My classroom and students disappear around me and suddenly, it's solely my mom's voice I concentrate on. I zone in on her as she explains that she had happened to be looking out the front window. (She is referring to her home that is across the main road.) She sees Ghost relaxing in the neighbor's yard. She immediately goes outside and walks across and enters the yard calling Ghost's name. She soon discovers that he was no longer there but had already crossed the busy main road and was now in the neighbor's front yard across from her home. She figured out that he had crawled under the hurricane style fence. In a fortunate turn of events, two neighbors who see her ordeal, stop and offer aid. The husband was able to jump over the neighboring fence, catch Ghost, hand him across the fence to his wife, who in turn hands him over to my mom.

My mom snaps a picture of Ghost lying on her couch and texts it to me. I'm overjoyed that Ghost has been found. The wife who had rendered aid to my mom uses the Messenger app to contact me shortly. She and her husband had seen Ghost's lost status social media post earlier in the week. They were happy to have offered my mom help in recovering Ghost. I offered words of gratefulness and thanked them for driving by at the right time that my mom needed assistance.

Meanwhile, my students figure out the situation and eagerly offer up their own personal stories of their lost dogs. They now know that I will go home for lunch to see Ghost, and they can't wait to hear all about the happy ending.

"Please take a picture of him, and show it to us after lunch," one of the students pleads. "That will certainly be my plan," I say with a smile.

As soon as I park into my parent's driveway, a voice pops into my head.

There you are! I have so much to tell you. I'm sorry I was gone for so long, but I really needed to go adventuring.

I remove the key from the ignition, and I look around in disbelief. I knew the voice was in my head because I couldn't hear it out loud. I open the door to my Mustang and allow myself into my mom's home. I scoop Ghost into my arms. I can't even begin to explain how excited I was to finally have my dog back.

I'm so happy to see you. I have missed you for so long.

The voice pops into my head again. I look around to distinguish where the voice is coming from.

It's me. Over here. I'm the one talking.

I look down. I stare into Ghost's eyes, and I realized what was happening.

It wasn't difficult explaining to my mom that I could hear Ghost's thoughts. She was staring at us intently holding on to the magical bracelet she never takes off.

"Mom, I can hear what he is saying. He is telling me about why he was gone. This is reminding me of the stories grandma would tell me and Luciana when we were younger. She would tell us about our ancestor that could communicate with animals. This is what is

happening right now to me. I'm not going crazy. You believe me, right mom?" I don't wait around to hear whether she believed me or not. The look on her face tells me that she did.

I hug Ghost tightly before I set him down on the couch again. He sits up and looks at me. He describes the quest he had gone on. The evening he disappeared a group of about twelve pixies aided in his escape. Pixies helped him lift the objects that were in front of the gaps in the fence. He could feel a strong force calling him. He kept moving forward in the direction of the call. When he reached the embankment of a flowing river, he heard his name and looked around. A boy named Coyotl emerged from the river, picked him up, and dipped him head first into the flowing water. He was submerged into the water for only a second or two. He was held the entire time, so he didn't recall being scared. When he emerged he remembers feeling different. Coyotl placed him back onto the embankment, and he was able to shake off the water from his fur. The water sprinkles that flew off of his shaking body floated around him. The floating orbs of water circled around him, and then fell back onto his fur. He decided to shake off the excess water again, and the water sprinkles repeated the same action of floating around him and then falling right back onto his fur. This cycle went on for a few more instance before he decided to simply let the water soak him and dry off on its own. Coyotl spoke to him and gave him the power of transformation. Right then and there, in my mother's kitchen, Ghost shows us the different creatures he could morph into. He would simply shake his torso from side to side and wham! He would transform into different animals. If there was any doubt that my mother had, it was now completely dissolved. Ghost had attained magical powers and we were witnessing this incredible discovery.

Coyotl said that I had to find my way back to you. I am to explain to you about your hidden abilities, but before I begin, I have to tell you a little about my adventure. Everything around me showed me the trail I must travel to get back to you and my family.

He describes the magical creatures he met along the way. There were elves, unicorns, fairies, gnomes and goblins. The trees could speak as well as the animals he met throughout his journey. They helped guide him along the way. On his third day of adventure, he did sense an ominous entity on his trail, so he decided that he would allow himself to get caught by the first humans he encountered. When he spotted an older couple walking along the sidewalk, he did his best to appear lost and helpless. He wasn't scared about the journey because he felt that it was something he had to do. The woman thought she recognized him from one of the Facebook Rio Grande Valley missing pet groups. She lifted him up and brought him back to their RV. He knew he was close to my mom's house because he picked up our scents from an open window. He had used his new-found powers to transform into an eagle and fly away through the opened window. He doesn't know if the older couple saw him transform or fly away. He was very happy to be back and couldn't wait to impress the rest of the poodles with his magical abilities. I pick him up and hug him tightly. My thirty-minute lunch break is almost over. I hand my phone to my mom, stand outside, and hold Ghost up. We both smile for the picture.

Upon reflection, every time I spot a stray dog, my mind goes back to my personal ordeal. I feel devastated when I see dogs on the side of the road or at busy shopping areas. *What is this dog's story?* I wonder. *Is it abandoned? Did it wander off, like Ghost? What will happen to this dog? I want to take in these dogs, but I know that I can't due to the eleven dogs that I already love and care for.* I'm still a member of the multiple Rio Grande Valley lost dog online groups. I don't mind getting constant notifications and updates about dogs who have gotten lost or the

various pleas for help for stray dogs that live each day like it's their last. I think that reading, sharing and empathizing for these dogs is my way of helping.

For now I am content with discovering my new-found powers. My job is to teach, but when I'm not teaching I am learning about the supernatural abilities my city has harbored. On weekdays, Ghost and I walk alongside Coyotl. The Rio Grande River is a combination of blue and green. The sun's glow shimmers off of the water's surface. At times, we catch glimpses of some of the magical creatures looking at us from a distance. Coyotl is the link to my family history, and I am thankful for Ghostie's journey. Without his self-discovery, I wouldn't have been able to make my own.

Coyotl speaks about Tala returning to the present day. He warns about a time of great danger. The invisible dome that safeguards the city from revealing true magic to the outside world, will be jeopardized.

"She's never really been gone. Tala has always been here watching over us in spirit. She will return to our land in physical form soon. She's coming back because she will not abandon us in our time of need," Coyotl says as he walks across the river. Every step he takes causes monarch butterflies to explode silently from the water.

"I will stand by Tala's side," I tell Coyotl as he disappears into the depths of the river.

CHAPTER VI

THE EMERGING

It was a luminous and sunny afternoon in June. A twelve-year-old boy named Takoda Garcia stood in the sun- drenched corner of Main Street and Jasmin Avenue in the city of Peñitas and tried to fade from existence. He was tall for his age, so he tended to stand with his shoulders slumped. As he walked, his towering shoulders would pull close together as he hunched forward. Takoda fixed his eyes on the sidewalk as he strides across the ground. His hands, huge and thick were meshed into the sanctuary of his pockets as usual. Perhaps the most striking feature about Takoda was his thick, wild, jet black hair. Takoda's hair refused to be tamed no matter how well he strived to style it. In the mornings he would say, "Be still," as he worked styling gel through it. He would comb it carefully, but his hair refused to obey, and by the middle of the morning in the vast heat of South Texas, it would break free from the confines of any type of styling product and curl wildly.

The sound the vehicles make while driving through Main Street at 30 MPH kept Takoda company as he paced back and forth. The Fed Ex delivery driver was late again. Since Takoda's home was nestled within the lush wilderness of mesquite trees and cacti, he had to trek through a caliche road to receive his book packages and wait by the front of the main road. Today he is expecting a book about poetry. He could easily purchase the book through his iBook account, but he thinks nothing compares to the feel of a real book in his hands.

The screech of the Fed Ex truck's tires makes Takoda look up. He releases his hands from his pockets. He instinctively waves to the delivery man.

As Takoda walks back home, he clutches the package. The pathway that leads back to his home is speckled with gravel and creates crunching noises as he walked back home. Today the songs that the native South Texas birds sing gravitate in Takoda's mind. There is something soothing about the songs. For a moment, it's almost as if he can understand the chirps and melody. He slips on his aviator sunglasses to block the South Texas sun rays.

He arrives home in no time. His house gives off a combination of a gingerbread home/Little House on the Prairie vibe. He walks in, and glances over at his mom, Victoria in the kitchen. He absolutely loves when she makes her homemade spaghetti. She's patting the meatballs round and round. "Did the book come in?" she inquires. All of his mom's Pioneer Woman themed décor gleams in the natural sunlight. She drops the meatballs in the skillet, and the sizzle from the beef makes Takoda's mouth water. "Yes, it came in. I'll be back. I'm just going to go leave it in my room," he responds. As he turns around, he hears a different voice coming from the floor. "He's probably going to go up to his room and order another book. When will he stop? Ummm probably never."

Takoda turns around because he feels shocked. His mom and him were the only ones in the room. He knows that his mother could not have spoken those words. She is always so supportive and understanding of his needs to read and acquire books. What sort of backlash could that be? It just didn't make any sense. Plus, that voice didn't even sound like his mother's. Takoda scans the room and makes eye contact with everything on the hard wood floor. The only thing he sees is one of the family dogs, Gemma. Gemma is looking right at his

mother and even appears to be rolling her eyes. Victoria uses a spatula to flip over the sizzling meatballs and smiles back at Gemma.

What is going on? Am I hearing things now? Takoda wonders.

“Mom, did you say something?”

Takoda’s mom gives him a surprised look and shakes her head.

“Are you feeling alright, mijo?” she asks.

“Yes, Mom. I guess the sun is making me feel a little loco right now.”

Takoda crosses his eyes, sticks out his tongue, and twirls his finger in a circular motion near his right ear. Victoria laughs as he walks away. Takoda turns around, but first, he glances over at Gemma and looks at her for a second or two. She is now turned to him and looks as if she has some sort of half grin.

“It’s time to go outside. C’mon, everyone! C’mon.”

He could hear his mom calling the family dogs to follow her outside.

Takoda makes his way upstairs to his room. He props his package onto his desk and scrolls through his phone. He sees that his best friend Cleo had text him five times already. He doesn’t text her back immediately because he wasn’t sure he was eager to deal with any full-blown drama circulating around her this time. Takoda and Cleo had been friends since kindergarten, and he has been her listening shoulder to cry on whenever anything dramatic unfolds in her life. He decided to call instead of texting her. Usually, her explanations almost always involve some sort of plot twist, so he thought it was easier to just call her directly.

The call only rang twice before Cleo answers.

“Can I come over? I’m worried about our science project. I’m glad we persuaded Mrs. Jackson to let us team up. Oh, and I’m also glad that we decided on our topic, but we really need to get started Takoda.”

“Sure, you will be just in time for my mom’s sphage- “

“What! OMG! Your mom’s spaghetti is the bomb! I’m going to ask my brother to drop me off asap! Bye! Later! You better save me a plate! Bye!”

The click of the phone lingered in the air.

Suddenly, Takoda’s hearing perks up. He hears the sound of a loud gunshot. His heart begins to plunge out of chest. He turns his head in the direction of the window. He freezes. A few seconds pass before Takoda is able to move. The loudness of the gunshot still echoed in his ears. He makes his way toward his window. As he pushes the curtain to the side, some strange and unusual force beckons him outside. He felt like he was being pulled. He looks at the perimeter of his backyard and then gives a quick scan of the woods. He grabs his phone and plummets it into the back pocket of his jeans. He thunders down the stairs.

“Mom, did you hear that? Mom?”

Takoda’s mom was nowhere in the vicinity of the kitchen. He turned off the stovetop and went out the back door. He saw his mother clutching her chest with her right hand. She stared out into the woods. The family dogs linger by the porch pacing back and forth. Ghost is right by Takoda’s mom.

“Mom, what happened? Did you hear that? Why is someone shooting in the woods? Should I call someone for help?” He contemplated reaching for his phone.

Every question that spirals out of Takoda’s mouth is left unanswered for a few minutes while his mother scans the landscape of mesquite trees carefully.

“I’m not sure, mijó. I’m not sure who was shooting out there, but I think something is wrong with an animal,” she responds finally.

Suddenly, in a distance, the two turn in the direction of commotion at the side of the perimeter of the woods. A man dressed in a checkered navy-blue jacket was running toward the main road. He was running so fast swirls of dirt rose from the ground. At that moment, Cleo’s brother was also driving his way through the caliche road. He had to honk at the man loudly. The man clad in the navy-blue jacket was running straight toward them. The man responded by stopping and stepping out of the dirt road. It looked as if he knew them, but when Cleo’s brother didn’t stop, the man started running again in the direction of the main road.

“What in the world! Takoda, who was that? My brother almost ran over that wierdo!” Cleo was already scrolling through her social media page and updating her status. “I don’t know guys. I’m thinking I should go live and give everyone a glimpse of Takoda Garcia’s crazy afternoon.” Cleo giggled nervously as her brother’s car backed up out of the driveway.

“Text me when you are ready to be picked up!” he calls out to her. He makes the peace sign while he turns the steering wheel. He is a little more cautious as he drives away. He certainly didn’t want to hit anyone.

Victoria was still standing by the edge of the woods peering into the wilderness.

“Mom, is everything ok?” Takoda begins to scan the trees, the sky, and the forest ground. Suddenly his vision took on a super charged trigger of sort. It is almost as if every color and every sensation in the woods was enhanced and three dimensional. He could most clearly see a pair of amber colored eyes glowing and peering at him through the woods. The glowing eyes stared for a moment longer and turned away.

“Whoa! What are you two looking at?” Cleo is scrolling through her social media page. She looks up periodically to see what has captured their attention.

“What! I can’t believe this. Clarissa is already posting pics of the setup of her science project,” Cleo lets out a side sigh that pushes up her bangs. Her latest hairstyle reminded him of the antagonist from the movie *Conan the Barbarian*.

Victoria strides back into the house. The six inside dogs follow her inside while the five outside dogs peer into the dense mesquite filled woods.

Cleo stops looking through her phone and looks at Takoda with her serious face. “So, why was that man running like a wild beast through your road?”

“I’m not sure, but right before I came outside, I heard a loud gun shot. I don’t know if that man was shot by someone else or if he shot someone or something out there.”

As they were discussing possible scenarios, a Border Patrol van drove in through the dirt road. The Border Patrol agent was scanning the outskirts of the woods carefully.

“Well, I guess that settles it,” Takoda says. “He was probably an illegal, and now these agents are hot in pursuit of his trail.”

“Wowzers! Well, anyways. Let’s begin the setup of our project. We need to start somewhere,” Cleo says. The van continues its route down the road. It backs up eventually and makes its way back onto the main road.

The two friends work on their project until Victoria calls them in for dinner. After dinner, Cleo is picked up and Takoda helps his mother out a bit before returning to his room. He was eager to go back upstairs because he wanted to begin reading his new poetry book. As he was tearing open the mailing packet, Takoda felt the same urgent pull from earlier in the evening. He stands up and walks toward the window. The same orange glowing eyes that had

captured his attention stared back through the darkness, but this time they glisten brighter than before.

Please help me. My mother was shot. I thought she was going to be fine, but now I'm not so sure. If you can understand me, please help me!

How can he possibly be understanding this? Takoda's mind swirled, but at the same time, he also had a sense of clear understanding. He knew he had to help whatever was out there calling him. He knew that if his mother was in any kind of danger, he would do everything in his power to help her out. He made his way downstairs and out the door that led to the backyard. He strolled through the yard with only the light of the movement activator light fixture illuminating the darkness. The pair of glowing eyes was now at the edge of his yard. Takoda slowly approached while his five outside dogs follow closely behind.

What he envisioned was a majestic wolf. It moved into the light. Its large face peers directly at him. The wolf is a combination of black and silver. Its fur is glossy and thick. Its colossal paws seem to caress the earth with nimbleness and strength. Takoda breathes slowly. He estimates it to be the length of his mother's old Mustang. He knows he should be scared and run back into the house, but he captures the wolf's gaze with an equal sense of determination. In the half- light he wishes time would stop so that he could live in this moment forever.

I'm Amaruq. I'm glad you can understand me. I was hoping you would be able to help me. My mom is not too far from here. Follow me, please.

Even though, Amaruq didn't speak, Takoda could still somehow understand everything it was trying to communicate through a sort of mind telepathy. It was as if somehow, he woke up with a strange ability to understand animals. *This makes sense as to why I knew what Gemma was thinking earlier.* He thought back to when he heard the birds singing. He felt like he had

sort of understood what they were singing. Doubt still crept in Takoda's mind. A part of him wondered whether he was imagining the entire scenario or if this is truly happening to him.

He had grown up listening to the stories of Tala, his descendent. Both his mother and grandmother were master storytellers. He understood that magic and the supernatural abilities that Tala harbored existed around his city. He knew that his family wondered whether any magical gifts would become a part of his life. He had accepted that the magical hereditary gene had skipped him, but perhaps after today, he realized he was wrong.

Suddenly, Takoda sensed the rustle of movement. He looked down and sees Ghost, one of his dogs.

I see that your family powers have finally kicked in. It's about time.

The voice pops into Takoda's thoughts just as Ghost jumps into the air and transforms into a majestic eagle. Ghost flies in a circle above in one swooping motion.

Takoda followed Amaruq into the brush without hesitation. The wolf sauntered off in a brisk pace and soon picked up speed. With Ghost flying above, Takoda can now visualize his surroundings from the sky. He was slightly surprised with this new found ability, but instantly understood the advantages of being able to see two different places at once. Takoda, who was so used to slumping his shoulders, ironically, did not have any difficulty running through the woods. He looks down for a second or two sensing the rustle of movement. He notices that his five dogs are running alongside him enjoying the adventure they have just embarked on. As he ran alongside Amaruq, Takoda couldn't help but contemplate about his newly discovered powers. The enhanced vision abilities that had stricken him earlier kicked back in. He wondered whether he could communicate with all animals or only the canine family. Soon, Amaruq stopped. She raised her nose to the crisp night air. In front of them, sitting in a

nest of brush lied a silvery haired wolf. Her fur, short over her regal body and longer at her neck, is smooth and shiny. Her poise is elegant and her body is muscular.

This is my mom, Lilka. She was shot by a man who we sensed has no regards for living creatures. We had no intentions of hurting him. We had spotted him before he spotted us. He was crouched in the woods hallucinating in the heat. We don't think he had any food or water. We had already turned and were walking away when he fired the gun.

Amaruq sat down next to Lilka. Takoda's dogs sit around Lilka in a protective circle.

Hello Takoda, your mother helped me years ago when I was having trouble giving birth to Amaruq. I knew that someday you would be old enough to have inherited her powers. Your family has been linked to our wolf family for generations. I need your help. I'm not feeling well.

Takoda knelt down beside Lilka. The crunch of the leaves crackled. He wished his mother was there to guide him as to what to do. A part of him even wished for Cleo to be there so that she could document this moment. He didn't want to forget this magical ordeal, and she would have been the perfect person to witness. Takoda knew she would have been replaying every second out loud for days.

"I don't know how to help you," Takoda says out loud. "I don't know if I can even do anything to help. I can run back to get my mom, or I can call someone to come help you."

No, the power to heal is within you. You have to believe in yourself. You will know what to do.

He reaches for Lilka and holds her head with both hands. The moonlight weaves its way toward the canopy of the branches and escapes in front of them. The light creates a shadowy perception of their silhouettes. Amaruq's eyes glow their golden hue in the light. Suddenly, a

surge of healing power trickles out of him and surrounds the wolves. It created a violet illuminating bubble that shimmered in the moonlight. The bullet spills out of the left side of Lilka and falls to the ground. Amaruq lets out a loud and beautiful howl.

AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

The sound pierces the air. It was a howl of gratitude and loyalty.

I am forever thankful to you always. You are the greatest because you helped save my mother. Whenever you need us, we will be here to help you. Thank you, my friend.

Amaruq and Lilka run off. Their movements are fluid in the darkness. Another howl reaches the moon. The moonlight celebrates by creating a pathway for Takoda to follow home.

In the morning, Takoda's mother notices the dirty footprints and small leaves scattered through the walkway of the kitchen. Gemma sniffs the air and thinks out loud: *You've got a lot of explaining to do.*

Takoda's mother grins.

"I know. I know. I'm so glad this day is here. Now, where should I start?"

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The box whispers Takoda's name. He opens it and retrieves a multicolored arrowhead. "That was Tala's first weapon. It was with her through her lone descent through the woods without her family," Victoria looks at Takoda while she explains the significance of his chosen heirloom.

"She must have been very brave," he responds.

"Yes, it has chosen you. Keep the arrowhead with you as a reminder to be courageous as well."

They were sitting outside. The morning was slightly breezy. Suddenly, a movement from the box startles them both. Their dogs, initially intent on enjoying the morning air, were now either sitting up, standing, or curiously looking their way. Ghost was now standing by Victoria. A shimmery figure gradually floats from the interior of the box. It emerges right in front of them. Tala looks at her surroundings and smiles at the dogs who were staring at her. She looks at Victoria and Takoda and speaks an ancient Indian language. The letters seem to unscramble themselves into words they could understand.

Tala raises her right arm and reaches for something invisible above her. Her hand clasps around something Victoria and Takoda cannot see. Tala struggles slightly as she begins to pull. Suddenly a hand emerges from where Tala is pulling. Now visible, they could see that Tala has gotten a hold of an arm and is pulling it forward into their vicinity. Her feet firmly set, Tala bends slightly and pulls with a strong force. She pulls until a teenage girl dressed in a 1990's outfit breaks free from the dimension she was in. A leathery arm with tufts of fur and a hand encrusted with long, sharp, dirty claws manages to poke out of the hole the teenage girl had transpired from. Ghost begins to bark and growl. He transforms into a grizzly bear. He is ready to defend his family against the entity. The family dogs bare their teeth in response to the creature's arm. Instantly, Tala clasps her hand upon the creature's arm and snaps it off. The arm has been torn off, and Tala flings it high into the air. She unclasps an arrow from her quiver, whispers something to it, and aims it at the incoming monstrous arm. The arrow pierces it, and it sizzles in the morning air and disappears.

"Hello Carolina," Tala whispers as she turns and looks at the teenaged girl.

Tala turns back and looks at her family members.

“I’m going to need everyone’s help in making sure the protection over our land is safeguarded. Call out to the people in our family Victoria. We will prevail over the upcoming destruction of the dome. By working together, the land of Peñitas will keep its secret hidden from the rest of the world. True magic will remain protected.”

Hundreds of animals and magical beings were now emerging from the sanctuary of the woods. The day had finally arrived. They would stand by Tala and her descendants as the land becomes safeguarded once more.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brenda Ochoa holds an Associate Degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from South Texas College and a BA in Communication from The University of Texas Pan American, which she earned in 2007. She graduated with her MFA in Creative Writing from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in May 2020. Ochoa is an elementary teacher with twelve years of experience. She was recognized as the District Teacher of the Year in 2013. She has taught Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade at La Joya Independent School District. Currently, she is employed as a 4th Grade teacher at John F. Kennedy Elementary. She has worked under the instruction of accomplished writers and poets, including Christopher Carmona, Britt Haraway, Jose Rodriguez and Steven Schneider. She lives with her husband, daughter, and son at 1908 Jasmin St. in Peñitas, TX, 78576.