

[Note: This was Salma's original introduction. In this version, she had asked Luis to speak at her school's Career Day in exchange for her building disguises for Nora and her family. Some content was moved to other chapters.]

## 14

*“The United States’ decade-long experiment in privatised primary and secondary education continues... Average spending per student is now second lowest among member nations... Student educational achievement as measured by standardised tests continues to fall for children whose families occupy the lowest 90% of incomes, while lavishly funded academies for children of the upper 10% produce results comparable to those of Korea, Sweden and Finland...”*

*-- Education at a Glance 2031, Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development*

### **WEDNESDAY, 5 MAY**

McPherson School reminded Luis of the place in Chula Vista where he'd served his grade-school sentence: the standard 1960s California arrangement of boxy single-story buildings fringed with wide awnings supported by metal posts, all knit together with concrete walkways and pine and eucalyptus trees. Except he didn't remember yellowed paint peels hanging like eucalyptus bark from the walls at his school, shattered asphalt in the parking lot, heavy-gauge mesh over all the windows, and all those portable classrooms the size and shape of construction-site field offices lined up on what used to be the playing field. He reminded himself this was supposed to be a *good* public school.

An armed security guard escorted him to Salma's classroom. His shoulder patch had the nested-triangles logo of the company that ran what passed for Santa Ana PD. “Body armor? Seriously?” Luis asked.

“We got eighth graders,” the guard said.

Salma stepped past the classroom's blue, reinforced steel door to give Luis a huge reunion hug. A Salma hug would be the high point of anyone's day. She was just the right combination of

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plush and firm, warm and cool, and always smelled like she'd walked through a forest. If he was ever stupid enough to cheat on Bel, it would be with Salma. She had a lush figure and one of the best smiles he'd ever seen. Over the years Bel had learned to use her smile like a weapon; Salma used hers like a blanket, making anyone who saw it feel warm and safe.

She turned on that smile for him when they broke their hug. "You look tired. Everything okay?"

"It's been a bad couple days. You look great."

Salma scowled at him. "Oh, please, in my schoolmarm costume? Wish I could've worn something more fun." Her "schoolmarm costume" was slacks, flats and a loose-fitting, tunic-like rusty red *kameez* that draped over her hips. The outfit masked but didn't hide her assets. "Come on, they're waiting. There's someone after you, then recess. We can talk then."

He followed her into the classroom—and froze. Five dozen or more ten-year-olds crammed a space that used to be two small classrooms. No teacher's desk, no shelves, no tables, just plastic chairs and lap desks. Nearly all were thin, worn, semi-ragged, their tired red-rimmed eyes gazing at him with too little curiosity or interest. And so small. A buzz of asthma-based wheezing overlaid the funk of not enough recent baths.

What could he possibly say that would matter to these kids?

Luis turned back to Salma at the front of the room, standing under the obligatory pictures of the President and an Anglo-looking Jesus and the American, Californian and Texan flags hanging from sticks. Texan flag?

Salma clicked up her shoulders—*what can you do?*—and called out, "Class, this is my friend Luis. He's going to tell you about being the manager of a garage. Please be polite."



Luis gestured to the vinyl banner they passed on their way out of the school. "What's all this 'Welcome New Patriots' thing? It's everywhere."

"A Texas company bought us in December." Salma's rolling eyes told him what she thought of that. "Patriot Learning Systems. That's why I'm in a burqa."

"Guess that explains the Texas flag, too. Are all the classes

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that big?”

She nodded. “I just wish I’d thought of it first. I only had fifty last year, that wasn’t nearly enough. Then Patriot laid off half the teachers and doubled the class size. I started this year with eighty-eight, but I’m down to only sixty-seven now. That works a lot better. And hey, their stock’s up.”

“Careful. Your sarcasm is showing.”

“You used to like looking at my sarcasm.” She glanced over her shoulder, then flashed Luis a conspiratorial smile. “You know what’s great about all this? Learning new stuff, like our new curriculum. Did you know Jesus wrote the Constitution?”

Luis checked her face. She still smiled, but her eyes told him she wasn’t joking. “Um...”

“And George Washington fought the Civil War to cut taxes. You knew *that*, right?”

They passed through a one-way security gate into the parking lot’s milky sunshine. Salma stretched out her arms and threw back her head. “Ahhhh, free at last!”

Luis led her to a concrete bench on the parking lot’s fringe. “How long’s recess?”

“Fifteen minutes.” She scooted close enough to nudge his flank with the butt of the pistol clipped to her waistband below her *kameez*. “What’ve you got for me?”

Having her so close didn’t help Luis concentrate. He passed her a sheet of paper folded into quarters. “Here’s their numbers. It’s pretty complete, even underwear and shoe sizes.”

Salma scanned the list. At the end she said, “A man, a woman and two little ones. How old are they?”

“Thirties probably for the adults, four and six for the kids.”

“What do they look like?”

“He’s a little darker than me, soft, moustache. She’s thin, fit, my color, short dark hair, brown eyes.”

“She’s a B cup. Does she have a good figure?”

Luis had barely registered Nora as a woman, far less checked her out. He’d paid more attention to the gun she pointed at him. “Christ, I don’t know. She wasn’t wearing anything tight.”

Salma sighed. “You’re so helpful, Lucho. Can they pass as Latino or Indian?”

“Physically? Yeah. We’ll put Mexican names on their IDs. I doubt any of them speak Spanish, though.”

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“I’ll go for Americanized ones, then. Day and night, you said?”

“Yeah. Try not to make them too flashy.”

She nodded. Luis could see the gears turning behind her eyes. “Okay, I should have something by Thursday evening.”

He slid that into his schedule. The Cartel’s ID lab in Ensenada worked faster than the official state ones; the techs were paid better, and getting fired meant something worse than ending up in a soup kitchen. If he sent the photos and scans to them Thursday night, the lab could punch out the IDs in time to get them in the Saturday-night run north. That meant he could take the travelers south as soon as he paid off the guard. “Great. That works. You got a burner? I’ll call with the meeting place.”

“I’ll text it to you.”

“Great. Um...don’t bug Ray with this. He said he doesn’t want to deal with it.”

“I’d have to see him to bug him.” Her voice was almost wistful. She peered into his eyes. “Really, are you okay?”

Her eyes were full of warmth and concern. Was something else there? He couldn’t tell, or at least didn’t dare try too hard to figure it out. “Dad’s probably dying.” Salma winced. “A cop’s after me. And Bel’s pissed at me.”

“I’m sorry.” She slid her hand over his. “It’s about this, isn’t it? The travelers?”

He nodded. “How about you? How are things with you and Ray?”

Salma examined the sickly trees lining the school’s fence. “It’s been better. A lot better. He hasn’t been coming home much for a while.” She turned her gaze back to Luis. Loss and disappointment crept into the light brown. “He asked if I wanted to move into that big place in Newport where Tavo lived, but I could tell he wanted me to say ‘no,’ so I did.”

“So...did you guys break up?”

She shrugged and dropped her focus to their intertwined hands. “I’m not sure I’m cut out to be a cartel princess. It’s exhausting, you know? Waiting for someone to shoot Ray, or me, or both of us. And I look horrible in leopard prints.” Salma drew in a deep breath, then looked up with a dim smile on her lips. “That’s all I’ve got to say about that.” She glanced at her watch. “I’ve gotta go.” They stood; she didn’t let go of his hand. “Take

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care of yourself, okay?”

“You, too.”

She slid into his arms and held him, not exactly just a hug between friends. Salma felt far, far too good; his guilt fought with the pleasure.

Then she stretched up and kissed him; not a goodbye-friend kiss. After a moment she pulled back and smiled. “Come visit sometime. I miss you.” She arched her eyebrows. “I’ll make chicken *mole*.”

A wonderful, tempting invitation that Luis’ big brain could figure out was a bad idea, even with Salma’s body pressed against him. “I’ll see you Thursday.”

Salma sighed, stepped back, straightened her blouse. “Bel doesn’t know what she’s got.”

“Yeah, she does. That makes it even harder.”

As Salma walked off, Luis wondered what kind of idiot would let a woman like that get away. Ray was an idiot to shut her out. And Luis would have to be an idiot to let her get too close.