

ALAMO WARS



RAY VILLAREAL

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DEDICATION

For the 1992-1993 fourth grade teachers and students
at Rosemont School in Dallas

“Remember the Alamo!”

CHAPTER ONE

The problems started when Miss Josephine McKeever died.

Miss Mac, as she was called, had taught English at Rosemont Middle School for fifty-one years, almost as long as the school had existed. She never married and refused to use the title Ms.

"Sounds like a mosquito buzzing in someone's ear," she would say.

Although she had become eligible to retire seventeen years earlier, Miss Mac continued to teach, despite growing health problems that any seventy-three-year-old woman could expect to have. So devoted was she to her profession that her coworkers sometimes joked that Miss Mac would die in the classroom.

One afternoon, during her planning period, while she sat at her desk grading papers, a sharp, fiery pain zipped up her left arm. It exploded in her chest. Miss Mac jerked her head up, clasped her hands over her heart, and collapsed in her chair.

When her students arrived a short while later, they discovered their teacher slouched in her seat. Her head was tilted back. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was wide open. The kids giggled, thinking she'd fallen asleep. Several times before, they'd come to class, and discovered her sleeping in her chair.

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Raquel Flores urged Marco Díaz to nudge Miss Mac awake, but Marco refused. He didn't want to be the one responsible for waking her up to a classroom full of laughter and humiliation.

No one tried to wake her up. Instead, the kids took their seats. They pretended to work on their book reports, all the while trying to stifle their laughter.

Billy Ray Cansler, who sat at the front desk of the third row, wadded a sheet of notebook paper. He handed it to Luther Bowers who sat across from him. Billy Ray dared Luther to toss it into the teacher's mouth.

"Come on," Billy Ray whispered. "Five bucks if you make a basket."

Luther giggled nervously. He glanced up at Miss Mac's open mouth. It was certainly an inviting target. From where he sat, he was sure he could sink it.

Two points!

Luther imagined the teacher waking up, gagging, with a ball of paper stuck in her mouth. It would be a laugh riot! He'd be the talk of the school for days.

But Miss Mac would know he'd done it. Even if none of the other kids squealed on him, which was unlikely, especially with Myra "The Fastest Mouth in the West" Coonrod in his class, she'd know. Just like she'd known that he and Billy Ray were the ones who'd been flooding the boys' bathrooms.

Luther and Billy Ray had been cramming toilet paper rolls down the commodes and then flushing them, spilling streams of water onto the floor and out into the hallways.

No one had seen them do it; Luther was almost positive of it. Because even after Mr. Rathburn, the principal, announced that he was offering a twenty-five-dollar

reward to anyone who could help him catch the person or persons responsible for flooding the bathrooms, no one came forward to collect the money.

Yet somehow Miss Mac knew he and Billy Ray were the culprits. Even in a school with almost seven hundred potential suspects, she zeroed in on the two of them. She didn't come right out and accuse them of flooding the bathrooms. But when she addressed the problem to her seventh graders, her wide, hazel eyes bore down on Luther and Billy Ray the whole time she spoke.

"Mischievous minds, like idle hands, are the devil's tools," Miss Mac proclaimed, delivering one of her trademark fire-and-brimstone sermons. "The vandals think they are clever. They think they have gotten away with their misdeeds, but . . . 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!'" She wagged a long, bony finger, like a conductor's baton, first at Billy Ray, then at Luther.

After that, Miss Mac moved them to the front desks in the second and third rows. And neither one of them was allowed to go to the bathroom alone, not even if they claimed it was an emergency. They had to wait until class was over to do their business.

"Ten bucks!" Billy Ray goaded, hiking the offer. "Ten bucks if you can knock it in." He held out ten fingers in front of Luther's face.

Luther was giddy. Ten dollars was a lot of money, and he knew Billy Ray was good for it.

Luther stared at Miss Mac. She looked as if she was leaning back in a dentist's chair, with the dentist standing over her, telling her to say *ah* while he got ready to yank out her tooth.

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Luther squeezed the paper ball tightly in his hand. His tongue slid out of the corner of his mouth, like a snail peeking out of its shell.

"Do it, Luther!" Billy Ray commanded. "C'mon, do it. Do it now!"

Whether Luther would have actually shot the wadded paper ball into Miss Mac's mouth, Billy Ray never got the chance to find out. Because at the moment he said, *Do it now!* Mrs. Frymire, the science teacher, stepped into the classroom. She had spotted her unconscious colleague from the hallway.

As soon as she entered, the class roared with laughter and pointed at their teacher.

Mrs. Frymire smiled weakly. She gave Miss Mac's arm a gentle tug. "Wake up, dear," she called in a soft voice.

Miss Mac's head lolled from one side to the other.

The class howled.

Mrs. Frymire let out a nervous chuckle. "Miss Mac? Your students are here." She took her by the shoulder and gave her a firm shake.

When Miss Mac's limp body failed to respond, a dawning horror filled Mrs. Frymire's face.

"Miss Mac? Oh, my . . . Miss Mac!"

She recoiled, as if she'd been stung by a bee.

The kids' grins quickly melted as they finally realized, to their dismay, what had happened to their teacher.

Raquel Flores's face drained of color as she stared at the lifeless body.

Myra Coonrod sat at her desk, gawking, her eyeballs bulging out like goose eggs, her mouth as wide open as Miss Mac's.

Luther Bowers gaped in stunned silence. A wave of nausea swept up from the pit of his stomach. It rose up

his throat. Luther bolted from his seat and scrambled to the back of the room, sure that he was going to puke at any moment.

Billy Ray Cansler sprang from his chair and joined him.

Mrs. Frymire, having initially panicked at the grisly discovery, now regained her composure. Trying to hold back her tears, she told the class, "Boys and girls, I . . . I'd like for all of you to step into the hallway . . . and line up . . . outside my room."

"Is . . . is Miss Mac . . . ?" Raquel Flores started, but the words refused to come out.

CHAPTER TWO

Miss Mac's funeral service was held on Saturday morning at ten o'clock at the West Cliff Baptist Church. Hundreds of mourners, many of them former students, filled the sanctuary. Dozens more spilled into the foyer.

The pastor, the Reverend Jimmy Hodges, praised Miss Mac for her "many years of commitment and dedication to the Lord's work at West Cliff Baptist." She had served as church pianist, Sunday school teacher, and, more recently, head of the senior citizens' group, the ADM — Age Doesn't Matter.

A Power Point presentation highlighting Miss Mac's fifty-one-year teaching career was shown on a large screen set up in front of the baptistry.

Grieving soon gave way to heart-warming smiles. Tears of sorrow were transformed into tears of joy as pictures of Miss Mac flashed before the congregation.

There was Miss Mac, playing the piano during a seventh-grade Christmas program she directed. Miss Mac, helping her students into their costumes as they prepared to present an original play she had written called "Medusa's Bad Hair Day." Miss Mac, dressed as a giant pencil as part of a campaign to encourage writing. Miss Mac, at bat in a softball game between the teachers and the students. Miss Mac, posing with several Dallas Cowboys players when they visited the school.

After the service, Mr. Rathburn assembled the teachers in the church parking lot. "I'd like for us to do something special at school to honor Miss Mac's memory," he told the group.

"Absolutely," Mrs. Pruitt, the Texas history teacher, agreed. "What did you have in mind?"

Mr. Rathburn pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and took a couple of swipes at his nose. "Nothing in particular. I'm open to suggestions."

"How about a plaque with her name?" Mr. Watts, the math teacher, offered. "You know, in loving memory of . . . or something like that. We could hang it in the office or in the teachers' lounge."

"Oh, come on, Barry," Mrs. Frymire said scornfully. "We can certainly do better than that. After all, she did give fifty-one years of service to the school."

"Hey, don't jump down my throat, Doris. It was just a thought."

Mrs. Pruitt's face lit up. "I have an idea. Why don't we name the auditorium in her honor? I mean, after all those wonderful stage productions she presented in there, I think it would be very appropriate. We could call it . . . The Josephine McKeever Memorial Auditorium."

The teachers turned to Mr. Rathburn.

His bespectacled eyes twinkled. "I think that's an outstanding idea, Claire. I like it." He pulled the handkerchief from his pocket and blew a trumpet blast from his nose. "It'll probably have to be okayed by the superintendent and the school board, but I don't think we'll have any problems."

Rosemont School did not offer drama classes as part of its curriculum. Miss Mac had taken it upon herself to create an after-school theater arts program.

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"It's an extension of my English class, a visible expression of what the children are reading," she explained when she asked for permission to establish the program. Miss Mac had no formal theater arts background, but one would hardly have noticed. The year before, she presented Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The show was slated as a one-night-only performance. But due to the overwhelmingly positive response it received, it was presented twice more, to a packed auditorium each night.

"The Josephine McKeever Memorial Auditorium," Mrs. Frymire said. Her eyes grew misty. "It sounds beautiful."

"We could still hang a plaque on the outside of the auditorium," Mr. Watts said. "You know, in loving memory of . . ."