



CHAPTER 1

Estado de Chihuahua, México

Santiago watched Tío Ysidro walk by him and the three toddlers as if they were nothing more than rocks in the yard. Not that the toddlers even looked up from their mud pies at the arrival of their *papá*. Just as well, or they would have seen an expression like a lightning storm ready to strike on their *papá*'s face.

He jumped to his feet as the front door slammed behind Tío, ready to urge the kids to safety before the storm broke. Except he wasn't quick enough.

"What do you mean you got fired?" Tía Roberta's voice came clearly through the closed door.

"Have I told you the story of the singing *zanate*?"

Santiago whispered excitedly as he pointed to a fence post. He whistled at the bird perched on top of the rotting wood, ready to make up a story on the spot. The children—Jesús, Apolo, and Artemisa—who normally loved hearing Santiago's stories, were too interested in their mud projects to pay attention to anything else. Including the shouts from the house. But the mud wasn't enough to keep Santiago from hearing everything.

"I mean, you insulted the boss's wife, and now I'm fired," Tío Ysidro shouted back.

"When have I met your boss's wife?"

The *viejita* from next door opened her window a bit wider. Since she did not have a TV, her main source of entertainment was eavesdropping on everyone up and down the *calle*. Santiago would have given anything to be entertained by a TV instead.

"Apparently you met her this morning, while she stood in front of you waiting for the bus."

"¿*Patas flacas*?" Tía retorted. "That was her?"

"¡*Patas flacas!*" Artemisa screeched, as if calling someone "skinny legs" was the funniest insult in the world. For a two-and-a-half-year-old, it probably was.

"You called her that? To her face?" Tío exclaimed.

"She cut in front of me!"

Tío Ysidro let out a string of bad words, which Santiago covered up by splashing his hands in the mud and getting the kids to follow suit.

Still, Tío's next yell remained completely audible. "How could you say that to her?"

A crash like a pot being thrown to the floor erupted from the kitchen. This time, Jesús and Artemisa looked up from the mud.

"Great, that was our dinner." Tía Roberta's accusations came out so loud and clear the *viejita* next door must have been grinning at the great reception. "Unless you want to pick up the rice from the floor, we have nothing else to eat tonight, and we're all going to starve."

"How can there be nothing to eat? I gave you money for groceries two days ago."

"Yeah, and it's gone. You barely gave me enough for one meal."

"Fine. You go look for a job and see how much you earn after working twelve or fifteen hours a day." The door banged open and slammed shut after Tío Ysidro. If Santiago and the toddlers were invisible before, they were nonexistent this time. Tío stepped on a stray shoe one of the kids had taken off and didn't notice it under his foot before he crossed the street in the direction of the local bar.

Santiago waited for Tía to run after her husband, but the door stayed shut.

A stray curl fell over Apolo's eye. Santiago brushed it away, careful not to get mud from his own hands onto the boy's face.

"Too bad these mud pies won't taste as good as they look," he said softly to his charges. "Maybe we'll just need to gobble you guys up instead." He smeared mud on Jesús's bare belly and got a giggle in reply.

Apolo and Artemisa wiggled their hands at Santiago and did the butt-bounce dance. He tickled all three of them until they were pushing themselves up on wobbly feet to run away with shrieks of laughter, only to slip and land back in the mud.

"Why are my children playing in the mud like some *huérfanos*?" Tía Roberta stood in front of them with her hands on her hips and a scowl across her red face.

Santiago ignored the orphan comment, like he did most of the insults his *tía* sent his way. Sure, the kids were dirty, covered from head to diaper in mud, but they were happy, entertained, and safe. A rarity in this house.

"It's so hot, I thought they might enjoy it. Don't worry, I'll clean them up." He picked up Artemisa to head to the outdoor water pump, but Tía blocked his path.

"You don't have time, the last bus is leaving soon." She reached into her apron pocket and handed him some peso coins, just enough for the bus fare. "We can't afford to keep you anymore. Give your grandmother our regrets."

Regrets didn't even begin to explain it. Santiago let the toddler slide down his body, leaving a trail of mud on his own bare chest and pant legs. His hand absently rubbed the burn marks still visible on his arm as he remembered the pain of the cigarettes from his last stay with his grandmother.

"But what about the babies? Who'll take care of them?" Santiago spoke without thinking. A shadow darkened Tía's eyes. He jerked his head back, and in that split second her hand missed contact with his cheek. Missing her target only raised Tía's anger.

"I'm their mother. You think I can't raise my own *hijos*? I got along *de lo más bien* before you got here."

This time Santiago kept his mouth shut. They obviously had a different understanding of "just fine." He remembered the last family wedding, during which the three kids had yelled continuously, been dragged out of the church kicking and screaming, and broken free to shove six greedy hands directly into the wedding cake, all while Tía had cried, swearing to Dios that she couldn't take it anymore. Yes, she got along *de lo más bien*.

It was *she*, biologically his grandmother but better known in his mind as *la malvada*, the evil one, who thought up the golden solution: send Santiago to his aunt and uncle's house to take care of the toddlers. Tía (though technically a second cousin, and not Santiago's aunt) had jumped at the idea of having a free babysitter, and *la malvada* marveled at getting rid of the grandson she despised.

Santiago hadn't complained. Honestly, this suited him just fine. Sure, Tía blamed him for everything—the kids getting chicken pox, lice, diaper rash, runny noses, still not talking in full sentences, waking up in the middle of the night, not eating, eating too much—but at the end of the day, it didn't compare to the abuse of living with *la malvada*.

"Please, let me stay." Santiago held out his hand to return the bus fare, but his *tía* ignored it. "I'll take care of everything tonight; you relax. I'll bathe the kids, feed them—"

"There's nothing to eat, *idiota*," she reminded him.

"What if I get a job?"

"What job are you going to get when your uncle has no work?"

No answer came to Santiago. No one had work to offer; no one had spare money to pay someone for work.

Tía folded her arms across her chest and nodded to the *calle*. "*Lárgate*. Unless you want to walk the two hours all the way to your grandmother's house, you better go."

Santiago stared at the house that had been his home for the past seven months. In the room he shared with the three kids were clothes too small for him. His one possession, a small pocketknife, had been found in the road. The blade was dull, the scissors didn't open, and the

toothpick and tweezers were missing, but it was his. Like all good pocketknives, it remained with him at all times.

He washed the mud off his hands and chest at the outdoor pump and pulled on the T-shirt he'd taken off before playing in the mud. Apolo stood up and lifted his arms, expecting to be carried, but Tía stepped in front of her children, blocking them from their babysitter. Artemisa scooped up a particularly gooey handful of mud and flung it at her mother's shoe. Tía didn't notice. Her attention remained on Santiago.

Santiago looked into the faces of each of the kids, faces that had worked their way into his heart. He raised his hand in good-bye. "Listen to your *mamá*, *chiquitines*."

No longer able to look at them, he turned down the same road his *tío* had traversed moments before. In perfect synchronicity, the three kids broke into cries.

"Tago, Tago, *ven*." Jesús called out the nickname he'd made up for his babysitter.

Apolo and Artemisa didn't say his name but kept up with the cries. Santiago slowed his pace, waiting for Tía to call him back, to say she would figure something out, just as long as he quieted the kids.

But his *tía* said nothing. Next door, the *viejita* shut her window.