

A CHRISTMAS JOURNEY HOME

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PROLOGUE

Isabella shivered, her teeth chattering as she huddled against the frigid night air, doing her best to burrow her backside into Francisco's embrace. How could her *esposo* sleep in such harsh conditions? She and her husband had not eaten in nearly three days, they were almost out of water, and now she felt as if they would surely freeze to death before morning. And yet his even breathing, blowing warm against the back of her neck, assured her that her beloved had indeed escaped their dilemma for at least a few hours.

Isabella wished she could do the same. During the daylight hours, when her feet burned with each tortuous step, she imagined that she could fall asleep in an instant if given half the chance. But when the desert sun, still hot in mid-autumn, finally sank below the flat, dismal horizon and the night winds blew mercilessly upon them, sleep eluded her. True, Francisco did everything he could to protect her from the elements, even using his body to shield her as they sought meager shelter under a small rock overhang or behind a sand dune, but it was never enough. They were going to die; she was sure of it. She and her husband of eleven months would perish in the middle of the Arizona desert, with only the scavengers to dispose of their remains.

A slight flutter in her stomach reminded her that death would come to three of them, not just two. The baby that had been growing in her stomach for seven months and that less than a week earlier had kicked with strength and determination now grew weaker by the day.

Perhaps it is best, she told herself. It was a foolish dream to think we could escape the violence and poverty of our home country and find a new life here, north of the border. My abuelo meant well, but we should never have listened to him...should never have taken his money and given it to the coyote....

The ominous glare of the *coyote*, the man who had promised to take them safely to the United States but who instead had stolen their money and left them to die in the desert, danced through her memory, but she pushed it aside. Instead she focused on the beloved face of her grandfather, her *abuelo*, and fought the hot tears that stung her eyes as she wished yet again that she and Francisco were back in Don Alfredo's *casita*, sharing a simple meal of *tortillas* and *frijoles* with the leathery-skinned old man Isabella had adored since she was a tiny girl.

Despite her discomfort, the memory of her *abuelo*'s face brought a smile to her lips, as she snuggled closer into her *esposo*'s embrace. But then another memory, the horror of what had driven Don Alfredo to the point of pleading with them to flee across the border, wiped away her smile and once again brought tears to Isabella's weary eyes.

Chapter 1

Newlyweds Francisco and Isabella Alcantara had lived in their tiny one-room home on the outskirts of Ensenada, Mexico, for about six months when their world exploded around them. Isabella had just begun to suspect that she might be pregnant, though she had yet to break the news to her *esposo*. It was important to be certain before speaking such life-changing words, words that would bring both joy and concern to Francisco's heart. As it was, he scarcely found enough work to pay the rent and keep them supplied with the most meager rations of food; a newborn would only add to the pressure he already felt to provide for his family, as well as his frustration at wondering how he was to do so.

Had they made a mistake getting married so young, particularly at a time when unemployment was rampant in their native country and violence from the drug wars encroached on their humble existence? Isabella had just turned nineteen a couple of weeks before the wedding, and Francisco had celebrated his twenty-second birthday a month later. On their wedding day they had been so hopeful, with Francisco having found what seemed to be steady employment at a small factory within walking distance of their

home. But the job had ended less than a week later, and he had been scrambling for any sort of day-labor jobs he could find ever since. Some days he found them; other days he came home empty-handed.

A baby, Isabella mused, her mind racing even as her heart melted at the thought. A child, born of our love, as I've dreamed of almost from the day Francisco asked me to be his bride. But now? How will we manage? What if Francisco can no longer find enough work, or—?

The pounding at the door had interrupted her thoughts, jolting her into a fearful state that warned her of evil tidings. The cries that accompanied the pounding could mean nothing but bad news. But how bad? Had something happened to Francisco? To her parents or siblings? Or perhaps to her dear old *abuelo*, who was in his eighties now?

Her heart beat a frightful tattoo against her rib cage as she approached the door with trembling, scarcely able to lift the latch and pull it open. When she did she was shocked to see Constancia, her parents' nearest neighbor, leaning against the doorjamb and wailing as if she had just peeked into hell itself.

"What is it?" Isabella whispered, surprised that her voice worked at all as she stepped back to let Constancia inside. "What has happened?" Before the woman could speak, Isabella knew the news somehow involved her family and that it was even worse than she had imagined.

"Your parents," the woman sobbed, nearly falling into the house, her wide, horrified eyes fixed on Isabella. "Your whole family," she cried, collapsing into Isabella's arms and weeping warm, wet tears that quickly soaked the plain cotton cloth

that covered the younger woman's shoulder. "They're dead—all of them! They killed them all. They came with guns and—"

Isabella's heart froze. What was Constancia saying? Guns? Who came with guns? Surely she was mistaken. Who would want to kill her family? Why?

Taking her former neighbor's arms in her hands and pushing back so she could look into the woman's face, Isabella forced herself to breathe deeply and then asked, "What are you saying, Constancia? What has happened to my family? Calm down and tell me. Surely you are wrong. They cannot be dead. It is not possible. I just saw them this morning when I went to visit."

Constancia paused, and Isabella could see that she was struggling to calm herself. It was not working. "They are dead, I tell you," she repeated between sobs, her voice slightly softer this time. "I wish...with all my heart that...that they were not...but they are. They have to be. The men in the car drove by and...and they shot and shot and shot...until there was not a spot in the walls without bullet holes. They have to be...dead, Isabella. No one could have...survived that. No one."

Isabella tried to focus, tried to make sense of the woman's words, but all she knew at that moment was that she needed to go there, to the home where she had grown up and where she had gone that morning to visit. She had to see for herself that Constancia was wrong, that her *familia* was alive and all was as it had been when she left just a few hours earlier.

As if the woman's flesh were on fire, Isabella released Constancia's arms and spun toward the door, hurrying out into the afternoon sunlight and increasing her pace as she scurried along the familiar pathway toward her family's home, just a few blocks

away. Constancia's screams to stop only spurred her into a dead run, as she prayed to an impersonal God she did not know very well but whom she hoped was listening and would somehow answer.

Isabella's memory skipped the horror of what she had found at her parents' home, confirming in the worst possible way that everything Constancia had told her was true, though to this day she had no real answers as to why. Some said it was because her father refused to bow and scrape to the *bandidos* and *criminales* who had invaded their neighborhood; others said it could have been a mistake, the wrong house; still others said *los malos*, the bad ones, needed no reason—they killed because they were killers. Whatever the reason, Isabella's family was dead, the police had made no arrests, and the grieving young woman was certain her heart would never be whole again.

Now, still shivering in the bone-chilling cold of the desert night while her husband held her in his sleep, she forced her mind past the carnage at her family's home to one of the last times she had sat at the rough, round table in her *abuelo's casita*, sipping his strong coffee and sharing a piece of *pan dulce* as she searched for reasons to turn down his stunning offer. The memory of that small piece of sweet bread made her mouth water, as her stomach growled at the thought. What she wouldn't give to have just one *pan dulce*—or even a plain *tortilla*—to share with her husband right now!

"I...we can't do it, *Abuelo*," she had argued that day just a few weeks earlier, still reeling from the revelation that her grandfather had somehow managed to save several hundred dollars over the years and that he would now offer it to her and Francisco.

“You must,” he had countered, his lined face and gnarled hands tearing at Isabella’s heart. How could she even consider leaving this beloved man and fleeing with Francisco to a strange and foreign land where they scarcely spoke or understood the language? Even if they were successful in their attempt to cross the border and find employment on the other side, what would happen to her *abuelo*, Don Alfredo Montiel, the respected patriarch of their *familia* who had held them together for so many years, long after the death of his wife?

“If not for yourself and Francisco,” Don Alfredo continued, “then you must do it for your *bebuto*, who will be born before you know it. Since the murder of...” His voice trailed off, and his rheumy eyes watered as he fought for composure. “Since that horrible day, the violence has only become worse, and it will continue to do so. Do you really want your little one exposed to such danger? And you cannot argue that Francisco is having a more difficult time finding work every day.”

“But what about you?” Isabella too was fighting tears. “We cannot leave you here to face such dangers by yourself, especially if you give us all your savings. How will you live, *Abuelo*? Who will care for you?”

Though his eyes still shone, Don Alfredo smiled and reached across the table to cover Isabella’s small hand with his own. “*Gracias a Dios*,” he whispered. “Thanks to God, I don’t have to worry about that. He is the One who has cared for me all these years, and He is the One who will see me safely home when my days here are finished. You do not need to worry, *mijita*. Just as you are my little one and I wish to care for you, so *El Senor* considers me His *mijito* and wishes to care for me. You must always remember that, wherever you go.” He paused. “*Comprendes*? Do you understand?”

Isabella doubted that she did, but she did not want to hurt her *abuelo*'s feelings or cause him any undue concern. She nodded. "*Si, Abuelo*. I understand."

"Good. Then it is settled."

"No," she argued. "It is not settled. Even if we agree to take the money to pay the *coyotes* to take us across the border, what will we do then?"

Don Alfredo's eyes narrowed, and his face became serious. "You must trust *El Señor* each step of the way. Pray before approaching a *coyote*, as many of them are dishonest and even dangerous. And pray once you are there as well. God will guide your steps if you will let Him."

"But, *Abuelo*," Isabella had pleaded, "why can't you come with us? I do not want to go without you."

Don Alfredo patted his granddaughter's hand. "Francisco is your family now—and the *bebido* in your tummy. You must make a new life for yourselves while you are still young. I am too old to go with you; I would only hold you back. Besides, my days are nearly over. God has numbered them, and soon I will go to be with Him. It will be a glorious day, and I look forward to it, but until then, I must stay here and pray for you as you go on without me."

"But, *Abuelo*—"

"No more," Don Alfredo said, shaking his head. "It is finished. You and Francisco make your plans, and when you are ready, I will give you the money. Now go. Talk to your *esposo*. God will go with you, *mijita*. Remember that."

As the mournful howl of what Isabella hoped was not a hungry wolf echoed in the starlit sky, the young pregnant woman remembered her *abuelo*'s words but was having more and more trouble believing them with each passing minute.

Miriam couldn't sleep—again. This was getting to be a bad habit, but there seemed to be nothing she could do about it. When David was alive...

Her heart squeezed against the pain of remembering, and she blinked away the tears she refused to allow herself to shed. She had cried enough—rivers and oceans enough—and nothing had changed. David was dead, and that was that. Final. Finished. Futile. And all because of some slime-ball who wanted to smuggle drugs across the border.

When would the government learn? Worse yet, when would they do something to stop the illegal activity that had already taken so many lives? Deep down, Miriam suspected they already knew how bad it was, but for whatever reason simply weren't willing to deal with it. And that's what made her so angry.

The night was cold, but the stars shone bright in the Arizona sky, as a wolf howled at a sliver of the moon. Wrapped in a blanket and sipping the last of a once-hot cup of coffee, Miriam sat curled up in an old wicker rocking chair on the broad porch that nearly surrounded the old farmhouse where she and David had begun their married life eight years earlier. They'd had so many dreams then, so many plans. They just hadn't had enough time to see them come to pass—except for Davey.

Her long legs tucked under her tall, 5'8" frame, Miriam clasped the mug in her hands and stared out over the barely visible expanse of the small spread she had grown to

love but that now seemed so alien to her. If it weren't for her six-year-old son, who bore his father's name not to mention his good looks, she would sell this place for whatever she could get for it and move as far away as possible. But Davey loved it here; it was the only home he had ever known, and he had already lost too much in his short life. Miriam couldn't bear to take anymore from him.

And so she had stayed, after that devastating night when the news had arrived at her front door in the form of two border patrol agents, men David had known and worked with for years and whose wives were acquaintances of Miriam's. She had known the moment she opened the door and saw them standing there—maybe even before that, when she first heard the knock so many hours before daylight. David was gone, killed in the line of duty, murdered by some low-life drug smuggler who had no business crossing the border with guns and narcotics and no papers giving him permission to even be here. How she hated him for that! She hoped he rotted in prison and went straight to hell from there.

An owl hooted from the roof of the nearby barn, and she took a last sip of lukewarm coffee. David was never able to drink anything with caffeine late in the day if he wanted to get any sleep at all, but it didn't bother Miriam. Before her life had been ripped apart eight months earlier, she could drink an entire pot of strong coffee and go straight to bed and sleep like a baby; now she spent most of her nights tossing and turning and cursing the God who had abandoned her.

Miriam's mother, Carolyn Sinclair, had come to stay with Miriam and Davey when David died, and had seemingly dedicated herself to trying to convince Miriam that

God never abandoned anyone. “He has promised never to leave or forsake us,” she told Miriam, time and again. “He’s just a prayer away.”

But Miriam didn’t believe her. Even now, with no one to see, she shook her head as if to emphasize the thought, her long red-gold ponytail swishing from the movement. She might have believed it at one time, but not now—now that a so-called loving God had taken away the only man she had ever cared about, the finest man who ever lived, and for what? For a common criminal who wasn’t good enough to wipe the sweat from her husband’s brow.

Miriam loved her mother, but she no longer put any stock in anything the woman said. God had not only abandoned her, but He had betrayed her as well...and no one was going to convince her otherwise.