

A CHRISTMAS JOURNEY HOME

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DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this book
to the One who came to pay a debt He didn't owe...
because we owed a debt we couldn't pay. Thank You.

And to my husband, Al,
and my children and grandchildren,
thank you for your gift of sharing my earthly journey.

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 midautumn, 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 ALCÁNTARA 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 Constanica, 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 Constanica 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 Constanica 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, Constanica? 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 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 Constanica 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 Constanica'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. The faces of her beloved parents, as well as her little brothers, Antonio and Miguel, and her only sister, Teresa, danced in front of her eyes. Constanica'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 Constanica 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 *bebito*, 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. Besides, both you and Francisco have learned

enough English through the years to get by north of the border, so it only makes sense for you to try to go."

"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 Señor* 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. "*Sí, 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 *bebito* 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 they 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 a 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, five-foot-eight 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 any more 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 lowlife 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.



CHAPTER 2

ON ALFREDO HAD PASSED THE NIGHT IN COMMUNION WITH GOD. Since his wife had died nearly fifteen years earlier, *El Señor* had been his constant companion. Pouring out his heart to the faithful One and listening for His response had become such a habit to the old man that he could not imagine living any other way.

The early hints of morning light were just beginning to tease the sky and infiltrate the window beside the bed where he had once slept with Esmerelda, often lying awake to listen to her even breathing and to marvel that he would be so blessed as to share his life with such a beautiful woman. Even now, these many years later, the memories of their life together sparked a melancholy longing in his heart that only increased his yearning to leave this world and go home to be with *El Señor*.

But it was not so much the thoughts of Esmerelda that had kept him awake throughout the long, dark night, but rather concerns for his precious *nieta*, his granddaughter Isabella, and her *esposo*, Francisco.

And their bebito, he reminded himself. A tiny life, fashioned and purposed by El Señor Himself. Surely, Lord, You will protect that helpless little one, that entire family that is only now beginning their life together. Mercy to them, Father! Protection and blessings, por favor! Please, Señor, guide and provide for them this day. Do not let their trip be in vain.

With yet another prayer for his loved ones echoing in his heart, the old man ignored the arthritis that complained as he pulled himself from the warm comfort of his bed and rubbed his heavy eyes. Perhaps he would sleep later, dozing in the noonday sun in his favorite chair in front of his *casita*. It was his favorite place to pass the day, as he caught up on sleep he often missed during the night and greeted an occasional friend and neighbor as they passed by. Once in a while, one or two of them stopped to visit and to share a cool drink with him on a warm day, but mostly they just nodded and called out a greeting or offered a word of sympathy or consolation as they went about their business. It was enough. Don Alfredo did not need a lot of companionship, though he dearly missed his son and daughter-in-law, not to mention their three younger children who were killed along with their parents in the senseless attack.

Thank God that at least Isabella was spared! If she had not already been married and living elsewhere with Francisco, she too would undoubtedly have been listed among the dead. Don Alfredo's faith was strong, but he could not imagine enduring an even deeper level of grief than was already his to bear. He rejoiced to know that he would certainly see his family again, as they had all been dedicated to *Jesucristo*, but oh, the pain of waiting until that time!

Isabella, he thought, rummaging through his nearly bare icebox for a couple of leftover tortillas to warm and have with his reheated coffee from the day before. My beautiful nieta, the only one in her family whose faith was not steadfast as the others, the only one who sometimes questions the truth of El Señor and His Word and never gave her heart and life to His Son. Of course she had to be spared! The others' destiny was sure; Isabella's was not. May it be so very, very soon, Father . . . regardless of the price.

He flinched at the implications of his own prayer, not because he doubted that *El Señor* would answer, but because he was certain He would. Don Alfredo was well acquainted with the faithfulness of God, but he also knew that the road to fulfillment of His purposes was nearly always costly to those who traveled there.



Isabella awoke to the realization that her *esposo* was no longer wrapped around her, though she recognized immediately that his jacket was spread over her shoulders. She opened her burning eyes and wondered just how dry and scratchy they would get before they became permanently like the gritty dirt and sand they trudged through during the day and slept on at night.

Her stomach heavy and devoid of movement, she lifted herself to a sitting position, leaning on one arm while she searched for Francisco in the morning light. She did not have to look far. As she had seen him more than once these last few days, she observed him now, shivering in his shirtsleeves as he knelt on the ground and mumbled his petitions to God. Her heart contracted with love and gratitude to think that he was praying for her and their child, and she hoped above all reason that *El Señor* would pay more attention to her *esposo's* prayers than He had to hers when her family was killed.

Standing carefully on shaky legs and still aching feet, she hobbled to Francisco's side. When he did not look up or acknowledge her presence, she laid a whisper-touch of her fingers on his shoulder. Still he did not move but continued to pray, though she could scarcely make out his words. She took his jacket from her own shoulders and spread it across his back, and at last he said "amen" and lifted his head. His smile warmed her heart more than the sun that even now began its steady climb into the heavens.

"Good morning, *mi amor*," he said, standing to his feet. "Did you sleep well, my love?"

She nodded. "*Sí*," she lied, knowing he did not believe her.

He stood nearly a head taller than she, and as she looked up into the face she loved so deeply, she was shocked to realize how much weight he had lost in such a short time. Did he see the same thing in her? The way her clothes had begun to hang on her, even around her middle where the baby should be filling them out, convinced her that he not only realized how thin she had become but had been praying about the situation as well.

"We will find food today," he whispered, pulling her close. "I am sure of it. I have prayed, and *El Señor* will answer."

Isabella wanted to ask why *El Señor* had not answered when both she and Francisco had prayed the same thing the day before, but she clamped her mouth shut and leaned into her husband's chest, relishing the feel of his strong arms pulling her close. But how long could he remain strong if they did not find food very soon?

She sighed and closed her eyes, letting Francisco bear her weight as she relaxed in his embrace. Better not to say anything, she thought. After all, her husband's faith was so much stronger than her own—nearly as strong as her parents' had been and her *abuelo's* was even now.

Her *familia*—mother, father, brothers, and sister—all gone now, except for her *abuelo* . . . and Francisco and the *bebido*, of course. But *Abuelo* was old and would soon go to join his *esposa* in heaven—at least, that is what he had told her many, many times. And unless things changed quickly, she and Francisco and the baby would all die together, miles from anyone who knew or cared about them. It seemed a sad and pointless way to have lived and died, she decided, not yet ready to let go of the tiny thread of hope that *El Señor* would hear and answer—and rescue them before it was too late.



Davey was glad there was no school that day. The first-grader liked his teacher and enjoyed playing with his friends at recess, but a day at home was always better than a day at school. He just wished his father were still alive so they could do something together.

Bouncing out of bed, he slid his feet into the scuffed cowboy boots that were his constant companions. His dad had bought them just before he died, and Davey had been so proud. Now he had boots like his father! When they rode the horses across their thirty acres under the Arizona sun, he knew he wanted to be like his dad when he grew up. But it was the last time they had ridden together. His mom took him out occasionally, but he knew she didn't share his passion for horses the way his father had.

He pushed and squeezed until his feet were jammed into the pointed-toe contraptions that his mother insisted were too small for him to continue wearing. But there was no way he was going to give them up. He'd wear them until there was absolutely no way to get them over his feet, and then he'd make a special place for them on top of his dresser so he could see them every night before he went to sleep and every morning when he woke up.

Blinking away tears at the thought, he clunked his way across the hardwood floor from his room to the kitchen. His dad had been the first one up when he was home and not working the night shift, and he always made coffee for himself and Davey's mom, and hot chocolate for Davey. No hot chocolate awaited him this morning, though. The kitchen was cold and empty, and Davey was pretty sure he knew why. He had heard his mother roaming around during the night, no doubt making coffee and going out to sit on the front porch to drink it. Now she was catching a little bit of sleep. The only thing that bothered Davey more than his dad being gone was how angry his mom seemed to be since it happened. He pushed the thought aside and climbed up onto the counter to reach the cupboards. Before he could open them, he heard a voice from behind.

"Hey, sport."

Davey turned and grinned. Mom might still be catching a little shut-eye, but at least Grandma was up. Her short, reddish-gold hair was as neat as it ever was, though the gray streaks looked shinier under the kitchen lights. Davey wondered why her hair didn't stick up in frizzes and cowlicks like his did when he woke up.

"Hungry?" she asked.

Though he still felt a pang of guilt when he admitted to being hungry, somehow believing he shouldn't be thinking about food since his dad died, he nodded. "Starved," he admitted. "I was looking for some cereal."

Carolyn Sinclair smiled, her green eyes twinkling, and Davey thought again how much his grandma and mom looked alike—but how different they were inside. He loved them both and was really glad his grandmother had come to live with them after his dad died. But Grandma Carolyn was so calm and peaceful, while his mom—at least since his dad died—seemed ready to spin around the room and spit and scream if he said the wrong thing. As a result, he reserved most of his talking for his grandma, unless his mom seemed in a rare, quiet mood.

"Forget the cereal," his grandma said, wrapping her arms around his waist and lifting him down from the countertop. "What we need this morning is some nice hot chocolate and pancakes with lots of syrup. What do you say?"

As she set him down on the floor, he looked up and nodded, once again blinking away the tears that came at the reminder of the father he missed so very much. "That would be great. I love hot chocolate and pancakes."

Carolyn laughed and ruffled his already mussed brown curls. "I know you do," she said, and then bent down and winked. "Don't tell anyone, but so do I. So let's get busy, shall we?"

For a brief moment the ever-present ache in Davey's heart lightened and he giggled. Even without his dad here to share it with him, this was going to be a good day.

