



Chapter One

Miguel Morales awakened when the sun cooked the cardboard over his head and heated the box he was sleeping in until even a lizard could not have taken it, and he knew, suddenly, it was time. This was the day. He would make the crossing today.

Juarez, Mexico, was never quiet. As a border town it was made of noise - noise filling all the hours of the day - but the noises changed, and he listened to them now without thinking. Honking horns, the market starting to fill with people trying to get fresh goat cheese or the thick coffee, people yelling insults and curses at each other - a hum of noise. Mornings were the best time, not a good time - there were no good times for him - but the best. He lived on the street, moving, always moving because he was fourteen and had Blond hair and large blue eyes with long lashes, and there was danger if he did not move - danger from the men who would take him and sell him to those who wanted to buy fourteen- year-old street boys with blond hair and long eyelashes.

So now he rolled out when the sun warmed the cardboard of his lean-to, wiped his mouth with a finger, and stood to begin moving for the day. Another day in Juarez. But this time it was different. This day he would change it all; he would leave. This day he would cross to the north to the United States and find work, become a man, make money, and wear a leather belt with a large buckle and a straw hat with a feathered hatband.

Hunger was instant, had never gone. He went to bed hungry, slept hungry, awakened hungry, had hunger every moment of every day, and could not remember when he did not have hunger. Even when he was small, a baby in the back of the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow where his unknown mother had left him in a box and the sisters had tried to feed him, there was hunger. It was almost a friend, the hunger, if something could be a friend and be hated at the same time, and he set out now to find the first food of the day.

He tucked the T-shirt into his torn pants and ran his fingers through his hair. It did almost no good - his hair was long and loose and full and resisted any attempts at straightening - but it

was an automatic gesture, and he jammed in the loose ends when he put the baseball cap on. Across the front of the cap it said Ford.

Miguel moved through the alley in back of the church and made for the back of the Barandas Bar and Cafe, near the strip of Santa Fe Street where the bridge crossed over from El Paso into Juarez. Most of the bars and clubs and places with women were for the tourists and soldiers who came over from Fort Bliss and were not open yet. But the Barandas was open early to catch the people who were going to the market, had been open since three o'clock.

It was a simple place to eat. In the front was a large gas grill with pipes filled with tiny holes for the gas to burn in rows of blue flames. Past this rotated a rack with whole chickens on steel rods.

On a stove to the side was a large pot of beans – frijoles - and at four booths were bowls of salsa with seeds and so hot even Miguel, who had a tongue of iron, could not eat it. In the rear of the cafe was a large steel drum with a flame in it and a flat piece of steel on top for cooking tortillas. At the drum stood Mia - Miguel thought of her always as Old Mia although she was not so old - taking the corn dough in small pieces and slapping it flat with her palms, slapping it to drop it on the hot tin, flicking it over with her fingers when it was smoking, cooking the other side until it was done and brown and adding it to a stack of tortillas never seeming to grow because people ate them with the chicken and salsa as fast as she could cook them.

If he stood long enough and smiled in the shy way, Old Mia would sometimes hand him a tortilla and he could get some beans from the pot if he was lucky, cutting away the hunger for a time. Once a drunken soldier had believed his limp when it was dark and he was begging and had given him five American dollars, which none of the larger boys had seen and so he had managed to keep it. At the time he was only five or six - he did not know his true age - and five American dollars was a fortune. He had taken it to the Barandas and bought a chicken and tortillas and Pepsi Cola and had eaten and eaten until nothing but bones remained.

That had been a time, that day. He had not gotten full, but there had been something close to it, and he could still close his eyes, eight years later, and remember the taste of the grease and the garlic on his face, the feeling of his stomach rumbling with food and not with hunger. He had spent over half of the five dollars just on food and would have spent it all had a larger boy not seen him eating and known he had money and taken the rest from him. Even so, with just half of it, there had been much food - a whole chicken and a stack of tortillas.

He arrived at the back of the Barandas and stopped outside the screened alley door. It was hot in the alley and the garbage smells were getting strong, but still the odor of the cooking chicken and the scorching tortillas rolled through the screen and took him. His stomach rumbling, he looked through the screen to see Mia standing by the metal cooker, and he smiled the shy smile.

“Hello, beautiful lady. How is your morning?”

Mia looked through the screen and laughed. "I could set my watch by you if I had a watch. First the sun, then the heat, then Miguel Morales coming for his breakfast." She finished slapping a tortilla and threw it on the tin, flicked four of them over, then picked up some corn dough and started making a new one. Some hair had come loose from the leather tie-back and hung down the side of her face. It was rich and thick, and black but for a small streak of flour in it where she had used her hand to push it back. "I can let you have a tortilla but the frijoles aren't ready yet."

Miguel nodded. "I would be very grateful for a tortilla. Your tortillas are the best I have ever eaten."

"So smooth, so smooth. You are as smooth as my first husband when he came to talk to me of the moon and beauty . . ." She opened the screen and handed him a tortilla fresh off the stove, so hot he had to juggle it with his fingers to keep from burning them. When it was only slightly cool he rolled it expertly in a tube and ate it in two bites. One tortilla was small, and it really only served to make his appetite worse, but he held back on pushing for more. He had bigger thoughts.

"Later in this day I will be leaving," he said, lowering his voice as he thought a man would speak. "It is time for me to be crossing to the north and finding work."

She studied him through the screen. A dozen flies worked to get in, making a high buzzing sound somehow matching the talking sounds of the cafe in front. "You are too young to make the crossing."

Miguel shrugged. "It is not age. I am ready to make the crossing and so it is time. Age does not matter."

"But you are small."

"I am not so small." He bridled. "I have strength and I am fast and I know how to work hard. That is all that is required to cross to the north. They only wish you to work hard."

She sighed. Two tortillas started to burn and took them off the stove, then added some more corn dough to the red-hot metal. "The coyotes will have you. They are not good people, the coyotes who take people across the border. They will have you and they will sell you."

Miguel brushed the flies from the screen. "It cannot be worse than now. Every day I must watch for those who would sell me. Besides, I will not use coyotes. I will cross myself, alone. This night in the dark I will become like the night and I will cross and then I will find a ride in the back of a truck and head north. There is much work there. I will find work and make money and buy new pants and a new shirt with the silver snaps and a new belt with a large buckle and perhaps a new pair of boots. I will cross tonight and I will do all of this . . ."

Mia continued the rhythm of the slapping, the tortillas flowing in an endless stream from the dough, through her hands, onto the stove, and in to the waiting customers. "If you are so sure of all this, why do you come to tell me?"

Now he hesitated. What he wanted had to be asked for correctly and with courtesy. "I will go tonight, and there is much work to be had, but it is perhaps possible that I will not find work at once. I may have to go a day, I may have to go even two days . . ." He trailed off.

"And you want food," she finished for him. "You come to me for food."

He nodded. "If I had a chicken, one of those delicious chickens, and a few tortillas, I could go for days. It is possible that I can pay you. This afternoon I will go to the bridge and work the turistas, and there may be enough money to pay. But if not I wish to borrow a chicken and some tortillas."

"Borrow?" She snorted. "You wish to borrow a chicken?"

"Si. Yes. I will pay you later; send you money for the chicken."

And at first he thought she would say no. There was that in her mouth, he thought, the no was in her mouth. But instead her eyes took on a sadness he did not understand. It was a sadness for him, but more it seemed to be a sadness, a pity, for herself. She sighed again. "Come back this evening. I will still be working. Come to the back door just at dark and I will have a chicken in a paper sack for you. But wait until I am standing alone to knock. The owner comes in the afternoon and stays for the evening. He will not be pleased, if he sees me giving you food."

Miguel smiled. "I owe you much for this. Thank you. Thank you and know that I will find a way to pay."

"Don't talk of pay. You have nothing and will have nothing for the time that you live. But you cannot see this now. So cross tonight and I will help you and maybe it will be you are lucky, one of the lucky ones." She brushed the hair back. "Now leave. Just talking to you makes me feel old and tired."

Miguel thanked her once more and moved off the alley, heading for the bridge. It was still too early for the tourists to start flowing across, but he had to get his money-catcher ready and perhaps fight for a place beneath the bridge.

He had much to do to get ready, and on this day he did not have much time left.

He would cross tonight.

