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Opening extract from

The Prison Runner

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To those we keep in cages

CHAPTER ONE



December 31, 1999

'You're wasting your time,' Mamá said.

Diego looked around the tiny cell. Clothes and blankets were all piled together on the floor. Nothing could be left behind. They'd need every one of their few belongings to get started again in their new life.

He spied Corina's rag doll, momentarily abandoned while his three-year-old sister crawled under the bed to chase a ball of wool that had rolled away from their mother. In a flash, he tucked it into the pile.

A screech from her told him he hadn't moved

quickly enough. She dived in, looking for her toy and messing up his work.

'No, Corina, leave that there.' Diego tried to pull his sister away from the pile, but she screeched again.

'Shut up!' yelled the crabby woman from the cell beside them.

Diego dropped his sister's arm. She shut up, giving him the defiant little smile she wore when things went her way.

'Give her the doll,' Mamá said.

'But everything will go faster if I pack it now.'

'Give her the doll,' Mamá repeated. 'I don't want to be knitting for nothing again.'

Mamá knitted to make money to buy food and pay rent on their cell. If Corina made too much noise or Diego misbehaved, Mamá had to appear before the Prison Discipline Committee. That meant paying a fine or doing an extra chore.

Diego wanted to say it didn't matter if they got fined. In a very short time they'd be out of there, far away from the prison, back to their bit of land where Corina could scream her lungs out among the coca bushes and no one would say

anything. But he didn't. He reached into the pile and pulled out the doll.

Corina grabbed the rag toy out of his hands and turned her back on him.

Oh, yes, be mad at me, Diego thought. Stay mad, for years and years. Stay mad and don't bother me.

He took another look around the cell. The narrow bed they all shared took up most of the space. That's where his mother now sat, her multi-layered *pollera* skirts and petticoats spread out around her. It annoyed him that she looked so calm, her long dark plaits hanging smoothly against her shoulders.

'Is there anything left to pack?'

'Your common sense,' Mamá said, clicking away on her knitting needles. Mamá knitted from morning to night, sometimes not even stopping to eat.

'Why not pack your knitting now and save time later?' Diego asked, without any hope that she'd actually take his suggestion. He got the old raised eyebrow for an answer. The needles kept clicking.

Diego gave up. He only hoped she'd move fast

enough when the time came. Corina he could carry, even if she was squawking and fighting him. He wouldn't have to carry her far. Just a few steps.

He bound up the pile of belongings in an *aguayo* and tied all the corners together. Could he carry it *and* his sister? He hefted the bundle over his shoulder, then bent down and grabbed Corina. She kicked and swung at him, hitting him in the face with her doll.

He could manage both. He put Corina back down.

'I'm going to say goodbye to the place,' he said. He had too much energy tonight to stay in the cell. It was against the rules for children to be out of their mothers' cells at night, but this was New Year's Eve, and some of the rules were relaxed. 'But don't worry—I won't get into trouble.'

'See that you don't,' Mamá said.

Diego popped his head back in the cell.

'Don't go to sleep,' he said.

'I won't.'

'Promise me?'

His mother looked up at him and smiled. 'I promise. But you're wasting your time.'

Diego darted out again. There was no point

arguing with his mother, and if he hung around, Corina might forget she was angry with him and insist she go with him.

Diego's mother had a cell on the second floor of the San Sebastián Women's Prison, where women arrested in Bolivia's Altiplano came to serve their sentences. Officially the prison only had two floors, but the place was so full of women and children that more cells had been built on top of and behind the regular cells. The cell Diego shared with his mother and sister was tucked in behind other cells. This cushioned it a bit from the noise, but made it hard for a fresh breeze to find them in the summer.

Diego reached the balcony and hung over the railing. As always, drying laundry stretched from one balcony to the next. Some of the prisoners earned money by doing laundry for people on the outside. Diego looked between the rows of clothes and sheets. Below, the courtyard was busy. The guards were relaxed, letting people enjoy the holiday. Some guards bent over plates of beans, rice, and plantain, prepared at one of the prisoner-run restaurants. Diego was sure they hadn't paid. Guards never paid.

Women with bundles passed by him, heading for the staircase. Diego leaned further over the railing so he could see the entranceway.

It was packed! More than two hours to go until New Year's Eve, and women and children were already lining up at the door.

In a flash, he was back in his mother's cell.

'Come on!' he urged. 'They're gathering at the main door. We have to go down there and get a space if we're going to get through. The doors will be open for only five minutes!' He picked up the bundle and lunged for his sister, but she scurried under the bed.

'Diego, that's enough,' his mother said. 'The doors are not going to open. Things like that don't really happen. And if they did happen, they wouldn't happen to people like us.'

'Maybe not usually,' Diego said. 'But tonight is different. It's the new millennium. You've heard people talking. At midnight, the Angel Gabriel is going to unlock the prison doors everywhere, and keep them open for five minutes. Not even the strongest guards will be able to shut them, and then—'

'Every prisoner who can get through those

doors in those five minutes will be free,' Mamá finished for him. 'It's not going to happen, and I don't want you to be disappointed.'

Diego knelt before his mother and put his hands on hers to stop her knitting.

'But what if it does?' he asked. 'What if the Angel Gabriel *does* really come to Cochabamba and opens the doors, and we're not there?'

His mother smoothed the hair out of Diego's eyes.

'And how do you suppose the Angel Gabriel can go to all the prisons in the whole world in the same night, in the same moment?'

'He's the Angel Gabriel, isn't he? What's the point of being an angel if you can't open a few prison doors?'

Mamá looked at him for a long moment. Then she said, 'Corina, come out from under the bed. We're going downstairs to wait for the Angel Gabriel.'

Once his mother decided to move, she moved fast. The knitting was put away, Corina was hauled out from under the bed, and within minutes, they were heading out of the cell.

Mamá went first with Corina. Diego followed

with the bundle. He stopped in the doorway and took one final look at what had been his home for nearly four years. It was small and dark, a naked bulb hanging from the low ceiling their only light—when the power was working. He could cross the cell in five steps.

He'd grown in four years, but the cell hadn't. He wouldn't miss it. What was there to miss?

He hurried after his mother, past the cell where the crabby woman lived, past the cell with the woman who cried all the time, and down the dark, narrow staircase to the courtyard.

Mrs Sanchez waved them over. She wore blue jeans, not traditional clothes, and had been the first woman to be kind to them when they arrived at the prison. She was there for killing her husband, but that didn't stop Diego from liking her.

'I've saved you a spot,' she said, moving her bundles so Diego and his family could sit on the floor behind her.

The courtyard was filling up quickly. Diego counted ten families ahead of his. He couldn't see behind him clearly enough to count the people who were there. They didn't concern him,

unless they moved a lot faster than his mother and sister and pushed them out of the way.

'We'll have to stick together,' Diego said. 'Mamá, maybe you should go first, with Corina. I'll be right behind you with our things.' It might be safer to push his sister than pull her. If she got mad later, he could claim someone else had shoved her.

'Papá is going to meet us by the fountain,' Diego reminded his mother. 'I hope he's packed and ready. I hope he's in line already.'

'Don't you worry about your father,' Mamá said. 'If there's a way out of prison tonight, he'll find it.'

'And what about after that?' Mrs Sanchez asked. 'What will you do when you meet up?'

'We'll go back to our farm,' Diego said. He knew it wasn't really their farm. They just lived on it and worked on it, but it felt like theirs. 'Papá thinks the house will need some repairs since it hasn't been looked after for so long. I'll help him with that. Mamá will pull the weeds from the garden, and plant beans and potatoes, and Corina . . .' It was hard to imagine what Corina would do. She'd never

seen the farm. 'Corina will stop annoying me,' he said finally.

'Keep that line straight,' Guard López bellowed out, her sharply pressed green uniform in contrast to the rumpled clothes of the prisoners. 'People still need to pass by, and I don't want any problems.'

'Guard López,' he asked her, 'you won't try to stop us tonight, will you?'

'No, Diego, we won't,' Guard López replied. 'But we don't like it one bit. Our job is to keep prisoners in, not let them out. But we have orders from the Bureau of Prisons in La Paz not to interfere with the Angel Gabriel.'

'See, Mamá? Even the government thinks we'll get out tonight.'

'The government has been wrong before,' Mamá said, but softly.

'You have a fine son,' the guard said. 'Always polite. How old is he now? Nine?'

'Twelve,' Mamá said.

'Nearly thirteen,' Diego said.

'Prison children are always small for their age.' Guard López shouted out to the whole line. 'When midnight comes, there will be order at

this gate! Anyone who shoves will be yanked out of line, and you'll lose your chance at freedom.'

Mamá took out her knitting and settled down to wait. Corina crawled into Mamá's lap, sucking on her doll's foot. Diego was disgusted, but at least she was quiet.

Not all the women in the prison were lining up to get out. Some had opened their little shops and restaurants around the courtyard. Diego smelled onions frying. A woman he often ran errands for was sitting by her big sack of coca leaves, hoping for customers. Other prisoners were hanging over the balcony, looking down at the scene below.

'Here he comes! I see the angel!' one of them jeered.

'You think things are any better out there?' another one called.

Diego looked up at them, then realized something.

'Mamá,' he said, 'we're sitting in the same spot where we slept when we first came here!'

Four years ago, Corina hadn't been born yet, and Diego was only eight. He and his mother slept on a mat in the courtyard for the first year

because Mamá didn't have enough money to rent a cell.

Diego closed his eyes. If he tried hard, he could still imagine the feel of the wind, cool and soft as it came down from the mountains. The green of the farm was so deep he could almost taste it. He'd helped to plant their small vegetable garden, plunged his fingers into the good, dark earth, and gathered eggs from their chickens. Up the hill from their small stone house were their coca bushes, whose little green leaves they chewed when food ran low, and sold for money for clothes and Diego's school books.

But the good memories were always pushed aside by the one bad memory—the day when everything changed.

Diego and his parents had been riding the *trufti* to the Saturday market in Arani with other farmers, to sell their vegetables and dried coca leaves. The man across the aisle had a bag that kept squirming. He let Diego look at the guinea pigs inside. Diego was so absorbed in stroking their soft fur, he didn't notice that the police had stopped the minibus until his arm was grabbed and he was dragged off.

People and vegetables everywhere, chickens flapping out of banged-open cages, sacks of coca ripped open, the leaves swirling over the ground like green snow. For a long and terrible moment, Diego couldn't find his parents. Then his father found him, and everything was OK again.

But not for long. Small packets of coca paste were found taped under the seat where Diego's family was sitting. It wasn't their paste, but they were arrested anyway. His mother ended up in San Sebastián Women's Prison in Cochabamba. His father was across the square in the men's prison.

'Ten minutes to go!' someone called out. Diego opened his eyes. Everyone stood.

'Come on, Mamá, put the knitting away!' Diego picked up the bundle and tried to move forward.

'No shoving!' the guards yelled.

Diego helped his mother stand up. Corina had fallen asleep and was dead weight in her mother's arms.

Around him, women started praying the rosary. Others sang 'Ave Maria'.

'Thirty seconds!' someone yelled.

The crowd moved forward.

Then, 'Twenty seconds!'

'Goodbye, prison!' someone yelled.

'Ten, nine, eight, seven!' Diego joined in counting down the seconds. 'Three! Two! One!'

The crowd surged forward again. But only a little.

The prison doors did not open.

'Maybe the time is wrong,' someone suggested.

The guards were laughing. One of them flipped on the radio in the guard station and turned up the volume.

All of Bolivia was celebrating the New Year. 'Welcome to the year 2000!' the announcer exclaimed. 'Happy New Year!'

Still, the doors didn't open.

'I guess the Angel Gabriel passed you by,' one of the guards said. 'Party's over. Go back to your cells.' They herded the prisoners out of the courtyard.

'Are you all right?' Mamá asked Diego quietly.

Diego wiped his eyes. 'Papá is probably out in the park, waiting for us by the fountain,' he said.

'The Angel probably didn't know there are two San Sebastián prisons in Cochabamba.'

'Then we can be happy for your father. And we can go to bed.'

It took a while to get all the women, their children, and their bundles up the little staircase. Diego heard some of them crying. He just felt numb.

'Unpack tomorrow,' Mamá said. 'Sleep now.'

The three of them climbed onto the narrow single bed. Corina went against the wall so she couldn't get out without Mamá knowing. Then Mamá went in the middle, and Diego on the outside.

It took a long time for the prison to get quiet that night. Women were crying, and some were fighting with the guards. The night was all sobs and screams and anger.

Diego slept, but woke up a few hours later. His mother was crying, very quietly.

'*Madre de Dios*,' she prayed, 'how will we survive?'

Diego kept still, so she wouldn't know he'd heard her.

CHAPTER TWO



April, 2000

'Taxi!'

Diego's feet took him out of the cell before his ears were completely sure what he'd heard. The thing to do was to move fast. He couldn't run on the steps—that would mean a fine for his mother from the prison committee—so he walked down them as quickly as he could.

He made it to the bottom floor, and now he could run. He wove past the shopkeeper who sold biscuits and around the plastic tables where some inmates were eating.

'Taxi!' Diego heard it again.

In the next instant, he was standing in front

of Mrs Morales. Two other boys got there almost at the same time. They were fast, but not quite as fast as he was!

'Diego, you are here first, so you get the job.' She handed him a letter. 'Take this to the post office. It's to my brother in Canada. Bring me back a receipt, and I'll pay you one Boliviano.'

'The post office is quite far,' Diego said. There were no fixed rates for jobs, but after years of being a taxi, he knew what a task was worth.

'Two Bolivianos,' Mrs Morales conceded. 'But bring back a receipt or you get nothing. How will I know you didn't throw the letter away and spend the money on sweets?' She handed Diego fifteen Bolivianos to pay for the stamp and waved him on his way.

Diego was slightly insulted by that remark. He was not a child, wasting money on frivolous things. He was nearly a man, and he had a family to support. Mrs Morales should know by now that he could be trusted.

Word travelled fast in a world as small as a prison.

'You're going out?' gentle old Mrs Álvarez asked him. She'd been arrested after a lodger at

her house had hidden coca paste in her shed. 'You will light a candle for me in the cathedral?'

'Of course, Mrs Álvarez,' he said, accepting her fifty-centavo coin for the candle. She asked him to do this almost every day. He never charged her for these trips. Sometimes it was good business to do things free, although he always wanted to tell her to save her money. All the candles she had lit, and she was still in prison.

Diego put the money and letter away in his special pocket. His mother had made one of his pockets very deep, so things wouldn't fall out, and so thieves could not rob him in the street. Fifteen Bolivianos was a lot of money. It could buy them two days' worth of bread and fruit. But he wasn't tempted to keep it, not even for a minute. His mother would have to pay Mrs Morales back, and he would be finished as a taxi. For half a day he'd be rich, but poor for ever after that.

He went up to the first door to get out—one of the two doors that the Angel Gabriel had failed to open on New Year's Eve. The guards on duty had worked there for years and barely acknowledged him as he went through the door.

But between that door and the outside door was a small foyer, with a desk and another guard. This guard was new.

'Who are you?' she asked, without a smile.

Who are *you*? Diego wanted to ask in return, but he'd learned long ago that guards were always right, especially when they weren't.

'My name is Diego. My mother is Drina Juárez.'

He waited while she looked his mother's name up in the prison records. It took a long time, because she wasn't really sure where to look.

Finally, she found it. 'And what do you want?'

'I am a taxi,' he said.

'You want me to get you a taxi? That is certainly not part of my job.'

'No, I *am* a taxi.' He dug the letter out of his deep pocket, careful not to spill the money onto the floor. 'I have an errand to run for Mrs Morales.'

The guard took the letter, held it up to the light, squeezed it, ruffled it between her hands.

'I don't know,' she said.

'It's just a letter. I do this all the time,' Diego blurted out. He should have held his tongue, but how much nonsense could he be expected to take?

The guard frowned, kept her grip on the letter and went to the inner door to call another guard.

'This boy says he's going to mail a letter.'

The guard who was summoned had been at the prison as long as Diego and had let him pass many times without even a lifted eyebrow. Still, guards had to stick together. Diego was questioned on who had given him the letter and what he was supposed to do with it, until finally, as if bestowing a great favour, he was given the letter back and allowed to go through the final door.

'I'm not a prisoner,' he muttered, once he was safely outside. 'You can't boss me around.'

It was a relief to be on the good side of the prison walls for the first time in more than a week. Protests over who controlled Cochabamba's water had shut down the whole city, including the schools, with *campesinos* coming from all over the district to take over the streets. The prison was shut for security reasons,

and because a lot of the guards couldn't make it in to work. Diego had to miss all the excitement. It felt good to be outside again.

The schools were still closed while the remains of the barricades were cleared from the streets, so Diego had the whole day to himself.

He looked around quickly. He wasn't noticing the flowers blooming in the park in the middle of the square, or the water from the fountain sparkling in the morning sunlight. He was too busy looking for friends and enemies.

He didn't look closely enough. No sooner had he taken a few steps away from the prison than he was surrounded by one of the gangs of older boys who roamed the city with nothing to do but make trouble for hard-working kids like Diego. Diego recognized them. They usually hung out at one of the video game cafés up near the Plaza Quintanilla. They had bothered him before. They weren't really dangerous, just bored, but Diego wished they would find some other amusement.

'What's in your hand? Anything you'd like to share with us?'

One of the guys snatched the letter out of

Diego's hand. He held it upside down, pretending to read it.

Diego reached for the letter, but the gang passed it around, too high and too fast for him to get hold of it again. He blamed the new guard. If she hadn't kept him waiting so long, he'd have remembered to put the letter back in his pocket. At least his money was safe.

'Give me my letter!' he yelled, even though he knew it would do no good.

Something pushed at the biggest kid from behind. Then another kid was pushed the same way. Diego's letter floated down to him. He grabbed it and ran.

'Saved you again,' his best friend, Mando, said as they darted in and out of traffic. 'That makes ten thousand times that I've saved your life.'

'Not ten thousand,' Diego corrected, yelling over his shoulders. 'More like eight thousand.' He checked to see if they were being followed, but the older boys were too lazy to run, unless they were chasing a sure thing or running from the police. 'Plus, I've saved you a few thousand times, too, so you're not that much up on me.'