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CHAPTER ONE



The guinea pigs were loose.

Diego didn't notice at first. The light in the little hut was dim, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust when he walked in with an armload of firewood. The first hint that all was not right was a sudden movement, a flicker of something at the corner of his eye.

He put the wood down on the drying rack and looked around. Nothing. Just the simple stools, the pallet beds in the corners, the small table and shelves.

Diego had only been living with the Ricardo family for a week, but already their hut felt like home. That was partly because of the way the family – except for Bonita – had welcomed him.

Mostly it was because his old home had been just like this. It was a long time ago, but he still remembered.

"I'm seeing things," he said to Santo. Little Santo giggled, which was his usual two-year-old response to everything, and added his own small stick to the woodpile.

Then Diego saw it again – something darting out from one dark corner to another. After that, it was as if all the guinea pigs had permission to show themselves.

It's only Diego, they seemed to tell each other with their grunts and squeals. He doesn't know much about us. He's too slow. He'll never catch us.

The message spread from one furry creature to another. They dashed and ran and slipped right by Diego, who knew he'd be in big trouble with Bonita if he didn't get them rounded back up. The guinea pigs, an important part of the family's food supply, weren't really his job, but she was always looking for a reason to criticize.

"Close the door," he said to Santo. "In here we have a chance. Out there they have all of Bolivia to run in and hide."

Santo shut the door of the hut, but he was too short to reach the latch. Diego had to do it for him.

When Diego first arrived at the farm, he was too weak to do much farm work, but at least he could look after the little boy. They had become good friends in a short while. Diego had had plenty of experience with Corina, his own little sister.

"First we'd better see if the pen is broken," Diego said. "Otherwise they'll run right out again when we put them back."

Diego bent down to look under the stove where the guinea pigs were kept in a little pen. One of the clay walls had collapsed in the middle.

"It's also pretty dirty under here," he said. "Santo, get me the broom."

The Ricardo family used a broom made from cornstalks tied together. Santo carried it over to the stove, looking very proud of himself since the broom was much taller than he was. Diego was able to get some of the mess out, but not all.

"We need a better system," he said. But first they had to get the guinea pigs back into the old pen.

He took some sticks from the woodpile, bound them together with strips of vine that were drying on a peg to use as string and blocked up the hole in the wall of the pen.

The family had a dozen guinea pigs. They weren't used to being hunted or handled, and they didn't realize that Diego just wanted to put them back where they would be comfortable. Fortunately they didn't climb or jump, and once Diego had herded them into a corner, they were fairly easy to grab.

Santo didn't help much. He was pretending to be a jaguar, leaping and growling.

Ten caught. Diego put his finger to his lips and the two boys went silent, listening for scurrying or squeaking. It was squeaking that gave number eleven away, in a corner of one of the beds.

"Eleven!" Diego triumphantly dumped the stray back in the pen. He tried to listen again, but Santo was too busy growling, and there was also a lot of squealing going on in the pen.

"Number twelve will have to wait," he said. He held out his hand, and Santo cheerfully took it. They left the hut, being careful to latch the door.

The rest of the Ricardo family were all off in different directions. Mrs. Ricardo was in the forest looking for wild herbs and root vegetables to dig up for a stew. Bonita, who was twelve like Diego, was at the village school with six-year-old Martino, who had just started going to school, a forty-five-minute walk away. Mr. Ricardo was helping a neighbor repair the thatch on his roof.

Diego stood outside the house perched on the side of a hill that looked out over more trees and valleys and hills, everything green and growing.

He pretended, just for a moment, that this was his farm. The neat gardens of potatoes, beans and onions, the few rows of hardy corn, the thick green of the coca bushes beyond that. Mrs. Ricardo liked things to be neat, just like his mother. Large stones outlined a footpath to the door. Also like his mother, Mrs. Ricardo kept flowers by the door. Diego's mother's flowers had been red. These were orange.

Other than that it was the same, right down to the well-scrubbed step by the door.

"Mama's in the forest gathering herbs and

roots," he said. "Papa's taking coca to the market. And Corina..." Out of habit, he was going to say, "Corina's been stolen by monkeys," or something like that, because she was always so annoying. But he stopped himself. He and his mother and four-year-old Corina had lived together in a small prison cell back in Cochabamba, and that would make anybody annoying. Out here, though, she'd be too busy helping out and running around to be a bother.

Santo was looking at him and giggling, since it was clear that Diego was talking to himself.

"Santo," said Diego, "let's make those guinea pigs a new home."

A plan was forming in Diego's mind. He saw his mind as a sort of notebook, where he could make notes and do calculations. He began to see what the new pen could look like.

"We need to be able to pull the pen out for easy cleaning," he said.

There were some odds and ends of boards, and Diego knew where Mr. Ricardo kept his hand tools. The tools were old but well taken care of. Diego was surprised that he knew how

to use them. He'd never made anything from wood before but he had watched his father. The men's prison in Cochabamba had a woodworking workshop where the prisoners could make dog houses and furniture to sell and earn money for food. Diego hadn't been allowed to do anything except sweep up the wood chips, but he'd learned a lot by watching.

Joining the corners was difficult. The old boards were a little uneven at the ends, and Diego couldn't figure out how to hold the boards together at right angles. He finally solved the problem by hammering a small piece of wood into one of the larger ones, which gave the other board a larger surface to attach to.

"I think this will work," he said as the new pen began to take shape. It was good to be useful. He liked to work, especially when the people he was working for were kind.

"Of course he can stay with us," Mrs. Ricardo had said that very first evening Diego appeared out of the jungle – filthy, scared and hungry.

"Who is he? We know nothing about him," Bonita said. They knew he'd been in the coca pits, and that his parents were in prison in

Cochabamba. Beyond that they hadn't pressed.

"He's a boy in trouble," her mother said.

"Or he's a boy bringing trouble," Bonita said, clamping a glare on her face as she watched him gulp down her mother's good soup, his first food in ages. He spooned it in so quickly that he nearly missed his mouth one time, and soup dribbled down his chin. "We should make him tell us what he is running from or send him on his way. He'll just eat up everything we work for."

"I can work, too," Diego said, as her parents told Bonita to hush. Bonita stopped talking but she didn't stop glaring, her face full of suspicion and scorn. "I can work," he said again, but he was weak from hunger, fear and thirst, from being lost in the jungle and spending so long in the coca pits.

Diego worried that Bonita might be right, that he wouldn't be able to earn his keep. There were times in the first few days when it seemed as if fatigue and grief would overwhelm him, and he'd never surface again.

Mrs. Ricardo seemed to understand this. Whenever he felt about to go under, she would give him something small to do. "Diego, help me

peel the potatoes," or, "The eggs need gathering," or, "Let's spread all the blankets in the sun to air them out."

Work helped. So did food, and many cups of hot coca tea, and the regular family life that went on around him. It even helped that Bonita didn't like him. It made everything more normal, somehow.

With each day he grew stronger. His fingers remembered how to dig down into the earth, how to tug out the weeds by their roots and snap the beans off their stems. He remembered how to act around the animals, how to feed and water them and keep their pens clean. The donkey seemed to like him. The llama seemed to hate him, but the llama hated everybody, so Diego fit right in.

"Diego! Come help me!" Mrs. Ricardo called from the edge of the clearing.

Diego hid the pen behind some bushes. He'd finish it later. He swung Santo up on to his back and ran toward the sound of Mrs. Ricardo's voice. She was standing by a whole pile of anu – giant tasty roots with little green leaves and small yellow flowers still attached.

"We'll have salad, and we'll have stew," Mrs.

Ricardo said. "Can you help me carry this back? We have work to do."

For the next couple of hours Diego helped Mrs. Ricardo wash and chop the roots and greens. She wore a bowler hat and pollera skirts like his own mother, although the patterns were different. Diego could easily pretend it was his own mama he was working beside, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the day.

The beauty faded a little when Bonita came home early. Her long dark hair was gathered in thick braids, and she wore an old shirt and trousers of her father's, arms rolled up and legs hemmed. She had the none-too-happy Martino by the wrist.

"I wanted to play football," Martino complained as soon as he saw his mother.

"You're too young to stay in the village by yourself," Bonita said. "I told you that."

"You're back early," Mrs. Ricardo said, handing Bonita a knife to chop the anu. Martino scampered off to sulk among the chickens. Diego decided he would get him to help with the new pen, to cheer him up.

"There's a teacher's strike," Bonita said. "Miss Gravas wasn't going to join it, but no one did their homework and everyone was being bad, so she said, 'I'm not being paid enough for this,' and walked out."

"Teachers have the right to make a decent wage," Mrs. Ricardo said.

Bonita didn't agree or disagree. "I tried to keep order after she left, but everyone just ran out, as if some big holiday had been declared. Including Martino."

"Maybe the strike will be settled quickly," Mrs. Ricardo said.

"I need to go to a real school," Bonita said. "Miss Gravas is okay with the younger kids, and with the stupid ones, but I'm too smart for her, and she doesn't know enough."

Diego laughed out loud, then tried to cover up his laugh with a cough. He was picturing Bonita, her braids as stiff as her frown, glaring up at her teacher and making the teacher afraid to say anything.

"Do you have something to say?" Bonita asked, acknowledging him directly for the first time that day.

Diego held his tongue and bent low over his chopping. Bonita was skilled at reminding him he was just a guest – an unwelcome one, in her view – and not a member of the family.

"If the coca crop is good," Mrs. Ricardo said, "and if we all stay healthy, maybe we can find you a better school."

"There are good schools in Cochabamba," Diego said, glad to know something Bonita didn't. "You can get scholarships. That means someone else will pay your fees, if you're smart. I have a scholarship."

"Clearly it didn't do you a lot of good," Bonita mumbled.

"A scholarship!" Mrs. Ricardo exclaimed. "Wouldn't that be fine, Bonita? My little Bonita, an important scholar in an important school!"

Mrs. Ricardo had such a gentle way of poking fun at bad moods, it was impossible for even Bonita to be miserable around her for long.

Diego's spirits dropped, though, as he thought about his own school. The agency that ran a drop-in center for children of prisoners had worked hard to get him in there. Now he won-

dered if the school would take him back – if he ever got home again.

To distract himself, he left Bonita and Mrs. Ricardo to finish chopping the anu and called Martino over to work with him on the new guinea pig pen.

"What's that?" Bonita asked, coming over. "You shouldn't waste our lumber."

"Just old scraps," Diego said. "It's a new pen for the guinea pigs. An idea I had."

"It will never fit under the stove," she said, examining it. "Did you measure?"

"Of course," Diego said, although he hadn't, and he had a few nervous moments until Bonita grudgingly admitted that it would fit.

"Those boards aren't very good," she said.

"They're the best I could find."

"Well, they'll never work." She had to add her own stamp by mixing up some mud and straw and filling the gaps. Martino and Santo enjoyed helping with this part, even with Bonita bossing them every two minutes.

By the time Mr. Ricardo came home, Diego had the mud washed off himself and the two

little boys, and the new guinea pig pen was drying by the fire.

"This way we can pull it out to clean it," Bonita explained to her father, taking full credit for the project.

"Our guinea pigs will have the finest home in all of Bolivia," Mr. Ricardo said, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Ricardo asked.

Mr. Ricardo took out his pouch of coca leaves and slowly counted out some to chew before he answered.

"The army is destroying coca crops again," he said. "On farms just on the other side of the valley. Word is passing from neighbor to neighbor."

"Is our crop ready to harvest?" Bonita asked. "We could sell it before they come here." Diego knew she was thinking of school.

"We will have to work hard," Mr. Ricardo said. "We'll have to bring it in ourselves. All the families around here will be doing the same thing, so they will have no help to spare."

"I'll help," Diego said.

"Do you mind staying home from school for a few days?" Mr. Ricardo asked Bonita.

"There's a teachers' strike," her mother said. "Perfect timing. We'll all work."

Some of the worry left Mr. Ricardo's face.

"We'll start in the morning."

They had the anu root for supper, boiled up on the fire with purple potatoes and flavored with the mint marigold that grew wild around the house.

The family had no electricity, and their supply of kerosene for the lamps had run out. When the sun went down, Bonita tried to read by the light of the dying cookfire but soon gave up.

They all went to bed early. They would have a long day tomorrow.