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CHAPTER

One

Just two,” Antonia whispered. “I will just use two this time.” Glancing around furtively for watching eyes, the tired mother reached up and picked two perfect orange blossoms. Their pungent smell quickened her movements as she briefly pressed the flowers to her bosom and then dropped them into the leather bag at her side. “I am not stealing. It’s not for me; it’s for our baby!” She had done this six times before, and early this morning she had vowed to do it again. “My baby Ramón is going to his baptism smelling like orange blossoms!”

She smiled as she recalled her frantic attempts to make Olaya, her last baby, smell fresh. Why, she had picked and dried the blossoms a good six moons before that darling girl had made her appearance. The orange water had smelled slightly different than fresh blossom water, but who cared? All six of her babies had smelled fresh and clean when she unwrapped them after the long day on the road. It was important to present her newborns to the priest as perfectly as she knew how.

She climbed the last weary steps to her yard. The baby was crying; he was hungry. She took a moment to stir the outdoor cooking fire and set a clay pot of fresh water on the red-hot embers.

Then she took the infant from eight-year-old María's arms. "Did he cry long?" she asked.

"Ah, no, Mamá. I can take good care of him, you know!" María's eyes twinkled.

Antonia smiled. "Thank you, *mi hija*." Sitting on the log seat against the adobe house, she settled the hungry baby for his overdue feed. Then she pointed to the leather bag she had set on a nearby stump. "Open that carefully. Inside are two orange blossoms. Can you find them?" María's eyes flashed with delight as she held the spicy flowers to her pretty nose. "Bring them over and let me smell them again." She sniffed appreciatively. "There, now drop them into the boiling water."

"Why, Mamá? I would like the blossoms in my hair!" Mischief and delight played on her features as she twirled her slight body in a circle.

"You saw me wash the tiny baptismal robe this morning? As soon as I am done feeding your little brother, you can help me put the robe into the orange water. We will let it soak till the sun is high. Then we will let it dry again, and tomorrow when Papá . . ." her voice trailed off as her eyes grew pensive.

"What, Mamá?" María lifted the lid from the boiling kettle, then came to stand beside her and gently rubbed the tiny baby's forehead.

"Your Papá will take baby Ramón to Batopilas tomorrow for his baptism. All new babies need to be baptized, you know."

María nodded wisely. "I remember when you took Olaya." She motioned toward the feed pile where the two-year-old slept soundly. "You cried when Papá carried her into the house."

Now Antonia wiped a tear. "Oh, it's hard to take my newborns away for a whole day when I am so tired myself. That's why I cried, I suppose, but also because I had done what I needed to do and felt relieved."

“But, Mamá, why do the babies need to have holy water sprinkled on them? What is holy water?” María folded her arms across her chest as she sat down on another piece of wood. She turned sideways to avoid the smoke from the clay stove.

Antonia drew a deep breath as she lifted the sleepy baby to her shoulder for a burp. “I really don’t know. But it’s important.”

María frowned. “Why? I don’t really like school, but I need to go so I can read. You need to cook so we can eat.” Her brow furrowed.

“Baptism is so we don’t have to burn forever,” Antonia spoke with sudden fervor. “So that when we die, we can be safe.”

“Burn?” María’s eyes widened in horror.

“Yes, so I have been told. But let’s not think about that right now. Here, please help hold the hammock.” She entered the low doorway and lay the sleeping infant into the woven hammock, then wrapped its ends several times around a wooden beam that jutted into the small room. This raised the precious bundle up near the low ceiling of their tiny home. “I think Ramón will sleep for a long time. Now, let’s finish preparing that robe for him.”

Late that evening after their six older children were sleeping soundly in their mat beds, Antonia whispered to her husband Ramón. “You will take baby Ramón tomorrow as planned? Oh, I want to go along! But I know this time I have to stay here. I am just too weak to make the trip, and we can’t put it off any longer, can we?” She sneezed as the dust of the covers tickled her nostrils.

A flickering candle lit his rugged features. Forty-one years had been hard on his strong body. But Antonia looked more than her thirty-eight as well. He shook his head. “We did it for the others. My namesake needs it too. Now. Better not put it off.”

She agreed, but somehow the tears would not stay away. “I wish I could go along. I have watched all our babies being blessed, being

baptized. Promise me, Ramón, promise you will bring him back safely!" She kissed the baby's black head.

"Well, Antonia, you know I will do my best." Worried surprise laced his answer. "The old mule is steady on her feet. You know I drive mules for a living."

"I am sorry for worrying. I know it will be alright. It's just hard. Sometimes I wonder why we even do this. But we have to; oh, I know we have to. If our little Ramón should die . . ." She drew the small face even closer and cuddled him till she fell asleep.

Early the next morning she dressed the tiny baby with extra care. "The white robe is in this package." She pointed out to Ramón. "Along with the boiled milk. You will feed him if he cries a lot?"

Ramón shrugged and nodded. "Well, of course. You know I will. You put the milk in a glass bottle I can tip into his mouth, right? And I will take him to my sister's place first. She will clean him all up and change him for the ceremony. I will hurry him home to you as soon as I can. Tell me, Antonia, did I ever fail to do my best for our babies? For you? Why are you so upset?"

"No! No! Now just go. Hurry back!" She helped him tie the baby's cradle board securely to the front of the saddle. And then he was gone.

It would be nearly evening till her baby came home. Of course, she knew he would be safe. This wasn't really what was bothering her. None of her babies had ever really suffered from their first excursion. Yes, he would cry a lot tomorrow, and maybe even turn away from her a few times when she offered him milk, but he would get over it.

She took a clay water jug from the stone shelf beside her door and walked slowly to the river. The early morning air did little to lift her troubled spirit. It was guilt she was feeling. Why? Why did it bother her so much, when this was what she had always known?

This ritual had been repeated in their family for generations. Ramón would do his level best in his manly way to describe every detail of the baby's baptism to her. In her mind's eye, she saw it all. She could even smell the dank odor of the old cathedral. The priest would chant some Latin phrases. He would ask Ramón whether he, Ramón Chaparro, father of this beautiful child, wished to have his son baptized into the Catholic faith. Her own name, Antonia Gastelùn de Chaparro, would be mentioned as well. Then, dipping from a clay vessel, the priest would sprinkle a little holy water on the sleeping child's forehead. A blessing would be spoken on little Ramón Gastelùn Chaparro.¹

She hoped he would be quiet and not scream. She shuddered. It was said that babies who cried at their baptism were not as blessed as the quiet ones. Was it true? What could the tiny innocent children know about what was happening? Nothing. But she knew it must be done, and her husband did too. It was their duty.

But what was the purpose? Was it true that her perfect infant would burn forever if he would die en route today? The terrible thought made her breath come in gulps. She crossed herself and begged the virgin Mary and the saints to protect her loved ones. Then, forcing her morbid thoughts to fly away with the morning breeze, she filled the jar with fresh water and climbed slowly, wearily up the rocky trail to the tiny house.

Ramón dismounted and checked the baby before beginning the first descent into the canyon below. The infant was still sound asleep and appeared comfortable, and the leather thongs that held the cradle board in place were secure. He whistled as he led the mule around a bend and then down the steep grade. The sun was just glistening on the upper canyon wall, so there was still some time before the full force of its heat would hit him and his precious

1. In Mexico, the mother's maiden name is attached before the surname.