

Chapter 1

Someday I'll Show Them

Hate flooded Arturo Sandoval's bearded face as he leaped back from the rough, hand-hewn table to avoid the hot coffee splashing across his plate. With practiced ease, his right hand encircled one end of the heavy sisal rope lying on the floor beside the table. Massive knots segmented the cord every few inches. Evil flashed from beneath his heavy, scowling brows. He moved toward his fifteen-year-old stepdaughter, Flora. A snarl curled his lip. "Stupid, stupid girl! You are a lazy, stupid child."

Frantic, Flora glanced toward the niche in the wall that held a statue of the Virgin Mary, whispering a prayer for protection. Instead of the statue's smiling face, she saw only the vicious whip raised high over Arturo's head. Instinctively, she covered her face and head with her arms as the cord whipped across her shoulders. She screamed in pain and fell to her knees. Over and over again, the whip lashed her slight, quivering body.

"Please stop," she begged, her cries coming in short, painful gasps.

The tropical morning had begun routinely enough. Flora had completed her usual household chores when Doña Alicia, her mother, ordered her youngest daughter to help prepare the pupusas (a Salvadoran pastry) her mother would sell in town.

While Arturo, her mother's common-law husband sat at the table, drinking his morning coffee, the girl could feel his brooding stare as she shaped the cornmeal dough into round, flat tortillas. Flora's hands moved skillfully filling one half of the circle with the cheese mixture and folded the empty half of the tortilla over the cheese. As she pinched the corn tortilla edges closed, she tried to think how she could escape.

"Drowning a hangover again, I suppose," Flora mused to herself, "a common ailment for him." Since her mother was in an equally vile mood, the girl worked quickly and quietly.

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A brooding silence filled the stuccoed room. Even the statue of the Virgin Mary in the niche seemed to be holding her breath, waiting for the storm to break. As usual, there was no one to stand up for her. Flora's older brother, Marcos, had already left for work as had Rosa, her older sister. Ana, the oldest of the four children, lived on the other side of San Miguel with her husband.

In the old days Grandma Marta would have been there to intervene or at least to comfort her later. But Grandma had become sick with a jungle fever and died. Mysterious infections and cases of unexplained dysentery were common in the small El Salvadoran community.

"If I hurry I can leave for school before Mama leaves for the market, and maybe -" the girl reasoned.

"Flora," Doña Alicia interrupted her thoughts, "be sure to wash the dishes and the table before you leave this morning."

Flora's shoulders slumped. A sigh of defeat escaped her lips. Doña Alicia draped her multicolored shawl about her shoulders and picked up the heavy basket. Now there'd be no escaping Arturo's wrath.

Her mother had just stepped out into the bright El Salvadoran sunlight when Arturo demanded a second cup of coffee. At the sound of his voice, the girl froze.

"Well, get moving, estúpida!" he snarled.

Quickly, she grabbed an oversized hot pad from the table, hurried out into the courtyard to the cooking area, and retrieved the coffee pot. When she reentered the house, she avoided glancing at Arturo's sneering face. How she hated that sneer.

Her small brown hands shook as she poured the scalding liquid into his cup. When a drop splashed onto his hand, he grabbed the young girl's wrist. This caused the coffee to spill onto the empty stoneware plate in front of him.

Terrified, Flora backed away. As she moved, she stumbled on a chair leg and dropped the half-filled coffeepot. The dark brown liquid splattered across the earthen floor. Knowing what

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would come next, Flora raised her hands to her face for protection.

As Arturo reached for his sisal whip, he grabbed a handful of the girl's wild, tangled curls and yanked her across the room, then threw her to the floor.

The cutting lashes pummeled the girl's scarred flesh until her cries changed to bleating whimpers. A smile of satisfaction spread across the man's face. Having proved himself a macho, he swaggered out of the tiny, two-room row house.

Her body ached with every move as Flora crawled behind the burlap curtain that partitioned off the sleeping area from the main room. Dropping into the tiny space between two of the sleeping cots, she stared silently at the wooden rafters and dusty red tiles above her head. Her sweat trickled across the blood oozing from the ugly welts on her shoulders and back. Flora sighed and leaned her aching head against the cot.

She would never consider complaining to her mother about the beatings Arturo inflicted since Doña Alicia treated her in a similar fashion. Only her beautiful Grandma Marta would have helped.

"Oh, Grandma," the girl wailed, "why did you leave me?" It seemed so long since her grandmother died, and the beatings had become so regular. She wondered if such treatment was normal. Perhaps it's just a part of being a child. "Perhaps I deserve it," she thought. "Maybe I am stupid."

It hadn't always been so. She remembered a time before her mother started attending the witch doctor's meetings and before Arturo moved into the house. Back in those days Doña Alicia hadn't been so angry, so filled with evil. But now, those memories seemed more like a dream than reality.

"I can't stand it. I hate him. And I hate her for keeping him here! I wish my father would come and take me away, far, far away," she screamed into a handful of bedding hanging over the side of the cot. Within minutes she exhausted her anger. She struggled to her feet, staggering across the room to the wash basin. She peered into the mirror shard wedged on the wall between two nails. Picking up the family hairbrush, she

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tried to untangle her waist-length curls matted with moist blood from her back and shoulders. “My Papa, if he knew how they treat me, he’d come and rescue me,” she whispered in short staccato gasps. But no matter how hard she wished, her Papa never arrived.

Long before Flora was born, her father, Marcos le Fleur, Jr., the tall, angular son of a French coffee plantation owner, had become enamored with the beautiful thirteen-year-old Alicia. Attracted by the girl’s exotic honeydew eyes, a mixture of gold and brown, he arranged to have his father purchase the girl as a temporary wife until he could finish law school. Later, after Marcos passed his bar examinations, his father sent to France for a “proper,” upper-class bride, leaving Alicia and their children to fend for themselves - an accepted practice in the village of San Miguel. The problem arose when Flora’s mother made the mistake of falling in love with the man.

Six children were born to Marcos and Alicia. Rafael, the oldest, died in infancy from tropical fevers. Then came Ana. A baby girl was the third child, but she died minutes after birth. A son, Marcos III arrived, followed by Rosa and Flora. Their father left for the city and his new wife when Flora was eighteen months old, leaving Alicia, barely more than a child herself with the four children to feed. A severe drought intensified the abandoned family’s desperation.

Occasionally over the following years, Marcos would come back to San Miguel to visit his children. During those visits, he had taken a special liking to Flora. Years after he ceased his visits, the child remembered the tall man in white who would bounce her on his knee and take her for walks to the town plaza. But always the man would return to his wife in the city.

And after each visit, the devout Doña Alicia would attend mass and light candles to the saints, praying that they would bring the father of her children back to her permanently.

In order to feed her growing children, Alicia made aprons and sold them in the plaza. When a major economic depression hit the country, Alicia decided to sell pupusas instead. Meanwhile her prayers for the return of her husband went

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unanswered. After one stress-filled visit, Marcos left, never to return. But Doña Alicia continued for months afterward to pray for his return. After a time, she became discouraged.

One day as Alicia wept to a neighbor about her loss, the woman suggested that she visit the powerful witch doctor, Carlotta, who lived nearby. Flora's mother hesitated. She'd heard about the woman's power to cast evil spells.

"Carlotta brought Juan Campos back to Elena, and she brought Tomas back to Noemi," the neighbor woman insisted. "I'm sure she can bring Marcos back to you too." Discouraged and lonely, Alicia decided that her only hope was to go to Carlotta for help.

When Grandma Marta heard of her daughter's plans, she warned of the fearful consequences of visiting the demon-controlled woman. Alicia began attending the daily séances. Occasionally, she dragged a reluctant Flora along.

Five-year-old Flora enjoyed the bus ride and the walk through the cool, canopied jungle beyond the famous Arbol de Fuego (fire tree). However, the child feared the wizened old woman, who chanted strange incantations in a high-pitched, crackly voice above her head.

One visit the witch predicted, "This child has strong powers. If those powers are developed properly, she can become a wealthy woman one day."

Flora barely listened as the two women discussed her powers. The girl believed she had unusual powers. After all Grandma Marta told her so. Flora's favorite story happened when the little dog, Perlita, fought off four wild dogs and saved her life. "God has a purpose for you," Grandma reminded.

Months passed. The witch doctor tried different kinds of love potions and cast a number of spells for Doña Alicia, yet Marcos did not return. During one visit, as Flora played on the floor at her mother's feet, Carlotta announced that Alicia needed to make Marcos jealous. "You must take another man as your lover. I have just the one for you. His name is Arturo Sandoval."

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Without questioning this advice, Doña Alicia agreed. Arturo moved into her small home. None of the children liked the growling, abrasive man, especially when he drank native beer.

A year passed. Still Marcos did not return to Alicia. When Alicia complained to Carlotta, the witch suggested, “The spirits have told me that to bring the father of your children back to you, you must give Flora to Arturo as his common-law wife.”

“Flora is only six years old!” Alicia exclaimed. “She has just begun school at the convent.”

“The spirits have spoken,” Carlotta stated flatly. In desperation Alicia agreed to the plan - to Arturo’s delight.

For Flora, however, a light went out inside her. The once vivacious child became a shadow that skittered about the house making herself as inconspicuous as possible. Though she didn’t understand what was happening to her, she felt dirty and ugly. An overwhelming sense of guilt grew inside of her, crushing her spirit, her confidence, and her intellect. Learning became impossible. Her attention span shrank. At home, the frightened child seldom spoke above a whisper; in fact, she never spoke unless first spoken to.

The convent school became the only place where Flora felt safe enough to reveal her real self to others. It was the only place she felt safe enough to release the happy little girl imprisoned deep within her bruised mind. No one knew or guessed the abuse she experienced almost daily. As the years passed, the child shifted back and forth between her two personalities.

And now, ten years of shame later, it was only by remembering the convent school that Flora could resist the temptation to curl up into a little ball and sleep the day away.

Flora flinched as she dabbed her cuts with a moist washcloth. As she slipped into her school uniform, she checked to be certain that the plaid jumper with the long-sleeved white blouse covered most of her abrasions. She glanced swiftly toward her face in the mirror then looked away. She hated what she saw.

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“Ugly! Stupid! Lazy!” she hissed. “Mama is so beautiful with her smooth, bronze complexion, her beautiful eyes, and finely shaped mouth. Rosa looks just like her. And brother Marcos is tall and handsome like Papa. But me? I am ugly, lazy, and stupid just like Arturo says; just like Mama says.”

Flora wrinkled her nose in disgust then dipped her hands into the water. She ran her dripping fingers through her waist-length, dark-brown hair, dividing the bulk of it into three heavy strands then braided them together into one braid. After tying a string around the ends, she tossed the braid over her shoulder.

The gong of the mission bell brought her to life. If she hurried, she could still make it to the school in time for morning prayers. And, if she prayed hard enough, maybe tomorrow would be better. Maybe tomorrow she wouldn't be so lazy and so stupid - and so dirty. And someday, she decided, she'd become a saint like the nuns at the convent. Then she'd no longer be dirty or stupid. She'd never again spill hot coffee on the floor or allow the hated Arturo to touch her. She'd be a saint. She'd wear a spotlessly white robe and feel clean, totally clean. She glanced up at the smiling idol and crossed herself. “Yes, Flora le Fleur will become a nun,” she determined as she hurried out onto the street. “I'll show them! I'll show them all!”