

Stolen Lives



*Morgan
Chai*

Stolen Lives



by

Morgan Chai

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This is a work of fiction.
The events described herein are imaginary.
All of the characters are fictitious and not intended
to represent living persons.



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I am especially grateful to Bruce Harris in Latin America, www.Casa-Alianza.com; and to Rob Nicholson in Canada, <http://rwnicholson.com>. Both of you gentlemen gave me an eye-opening education on pedophilia, child pornography, human trafficking, sexual tourism, and other scourges endangering the world's children, especially those in Central/Latin America, and those in Canada; as well as the thousands who are trafficked through Canada into the United States.

I thank those dear friends around me who assisted me in cooling my rage, anger, indignation and shock at the injustices inflicted on the children of the world.

Carol Rawle, I still cannot say enough thanks for her support, encouragement, and willingness to tackle my books. It isn't an easy task, I guarantee.

I owe Monica Violante a ton of thanks also. After she read *Retrieved* she started hounding me for a sequel. Then she got upset that I had already written it but had stashed it away because I didn't think it was good enough. I let Monica read the draft, and I must admit, that I really appreciated her for pushing me around a bit to make me realize that both *Retrieved* and *Stolen Lives* have got to get 'out there'.

As I've said before, I have lived in amongst the children I write about and what I write is the truth, but hopefully this time I've tempered it enough so that people will not be offended by it so that they will want to know more, and perhaps get more involved.

A special thanks to Dagny for still supporting me.

Lastly, as always, I thank everyone who's had a hand in encouraging and supporting me. Thank you, thank you, thank you.



Dedication

I dedicate this book to Lance Corporal Jose Antonio Sirin Gutiérrez, who on March 21, 2003, was one of the first two soldiers killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He said he had a dream to do something great with his life—quite a task for the former homeless Guatemalan street kid who ended up as an honored American Marine.

He wrote the following words that encapsulates this book into one short but powerful sentence: *“I come from far away where the angels live on the streets, dress in filth, and they eat their dreams.”*

Until you read this book I doubt you’ll understand the message in that sentence, the message of the trials and tribulations facing the world’s homeless and street children. Until you read this book, I doubt you’ll understand how Jose’s dream is being fulfilled, because unbeknownst to him, his life’s dream of doing something great, even through his death, has facilitated the emergence of the truth about the plight of the world’s homeless and street children.

Jose Antonio came to the United States with a will to succeed in life, although he said he came here without anything and that America gave him everything. With his eyes set firmly on the future, on March 25, 2002, Jose Antonio joined the US Marine Corps. He said he was proud to be able to give back what had been given him. Sadly, less than a year later, his life came to an abrupt end.

I pray with all my heart that his life story, that of the millions of homeless and street children in the world, “Is not lost to the world’s indifference.” (Quote by Bruce Harris). Thank you, Bruce Harris of Casa Alianza, for introducing me to this remarkable man.

Jose Antonio Sirin Gutiérrez’s short life’s story can be found at www.Casa-Alianza.org.



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Prologue

I am Mateo Rafael Sanchez-Perez and I am thirteen years old and this is my story because it had to be told. In some of the books I've read, now that I finally know how to read thanks to my new life and family, I am always interested in the dedications. My dad says they are written to be politically correct, and although I don't really understand that right now, I just know that I want my story to be told right, because my mom says there are over one-hundred million other kids who have gone through or are going through similar to what I have. I never wanted to be part of the problem in the first place, it wasn't my choice.

I love Mexico City. It is rich in heritage and beauty, but it is also very crowded and dangerous because there are over thirty million people in the valley. I heard that the valley of Mexico is about the size of the Los Angeles basin, but there aren't even ten million people who live there. So, yes, my beloved city is huge and crowded, and it is estimated that nearly three million here in the valley are homeless and street kids like I used to be; I mean before I was adopted and rescued from the hell of living on the streets.

It was a nightmare every minute of every day. It's terrifying to approach a stranger to beg for a peso or food, because many of those strangers are mean, cruel and violent and take their rage out on us, the street kids. Then when the night comes, it is always scary to figure out where to sleep. Many of us sleep in the sewers and drainage pipes. It's not that we like to sleep and live there, it's because we have no choice, and it keeps us safe from the predators—human predators.

I would have given anything to have a normal childhood, but circumstances took that away from me. It's interesting how people say that I am so grown up and yet only thirteen. Why shouldn't I be grown up? I never had a childhood. I don't see the world through innocent eyes. I am not innocent. I am tainted and dirty, although it wasn't my fault, and I am trying to understand that still. So, yes, I see the world from a different perspective and when I get older I will be in a better position to do something to help my friends, although most of them are dead already, and probably none of them will be

alive when I turn eighteen. But again, if there are one-hundred million kids like me in this world, then in a handful of years I will have plenty to do once I figure out what and how to do it.

Since this is my story, I want to dedicate it to everyone like me. I also dedicate it to Ciara and Ramon, Gregorio, Jak Warking and his men, and to Juan, Caitlin and Luis because they all willingly jeopardized their lives for me and the others. I especially dedicate this book to Victor and Claudia Velásquez, the parents of Elena. Elena was one of us who didn't make it. I even dedicate it to my new brothers and sister, Jaime, Antonio, Bonita and my new baby brother, John Ramon, because they don't really know or understand what happened to me, so they don't look at me with questioning eyes that force me to constantly relive my past. I dedicate it to my grandparents, Emilio and Ramona Perez for letting their ranch become a home to orphaned kids.

And finally, I even dedicate it to those people who prey on us. Why? Because I believe in heaven and hell, and that the predators of the world will pay for what they have done, and will do. Mom says no one gets away with anything they do, and I believe it. I have to, or I just couldn't live anymore.

I pray that more people open their eyes to what is really going on right under their noses, and that maybe they will get involved and do something about it. We kids, all kids are the world's tomorrows. Please help us make it a better tomorrow than today was.

Mateo Rafael Sanchez-Perez



Chapter One

Stolen Lives

*"Tears are the mind's lubricant,
that ease memories
into their proper place
in our souls."
Morgan Chai*

It was a lazy, peaceful summer evening. The sound of children's laughter drifted out from one of the back bedrooms. Ramon was stretched out on the couch with his head in Ciara's lap. On his chest lay their sleeping baby, born two weeks earlier on the anniversary of the disastrous earthquake that had brought all of them to where they were now.

Ciara stared out over the lights of the valley of Mexico City and allowed herself to once again return to the memories of a year earlier. *It had been a roller-coaster ride of a year*, she mused, as she remembered how the most destructive earthquake to ever strike Mexico City had impacted so many lives.

Ciara ran her fingers through Ramon's thick, wavy, brown hair almost absentmindedly as she continued thinking about the happenings of the previous year. Ramon Perez, the love of her life, was probably the most kind and gentle man she had ever known, yet he would march into hell to protect a child or anyone he loved. And now, wrapped in his arms was his own flesh and blood, their newborn son, John

Ramon. She wondered if he would have the same personality as Ramon. Would he grow up to be unafraid of showing his soft underbelly, yet still be a strong man? Hopefully, John Ramon's yearly birthday would be more important than the remembrance of the disastrous earthquake.

Interesting, she thought, only Ramon and the baby are actually who the official records indicated they are. Does that mean that the other four kids and I are now misfits? When she and her three children left the United States the previous fall, it had cost Ramon a small fortune to not only adopt them, but to completely erase their true identities forever. Because the kids were so young, they thought it was cool that they were allowed to change their names, just like their mom had. Now her ten-year-old Jeffrey was Antonio, her nine-year-old Paul was Jaime, and her beautiful little seven-year-old Rebecca was Bonita. They spoke Spanish more and more, and English less and less, and she wondered if they would eventually forget the past altogether.

She wondered if they would ever learn the truth behind their new identities. Would they ever learn of the botched CIA drug deal that her now deceased husband had caused? Of the deaths he caused? She hoped not. They knew he died from a brain tumor, but because of Steven's madness in the months before his passing, it made it easier for the kids to forget him. Not only that, but Ramon's love, encouragement and support had enabled it to happen even easier.

Mateo, their oldest son, who had recently turned thirteen, and had previously been one of Mexico City's nearly three million street and homeless kids. After she returned to Mexico City with her kids, she and Ramon were married and immediately afterwards Mateo announced that he was ready to be adopted along with the other three. Mateo Rafael Sanchez eagerly chose to add Perez to his name like a title of honor, which also he hoped would help him move quickly away from the past as he could.

Adopted, she thought, it means acquired as one's own by free choice. Did any of us have free choice in the matter? On the surface it would appear so, but the truth of the matter was that they didn't. None of them did. Steven's madness had endangered all our lives. As for Mateo, did he have free choice when his birth mother died and the city's streets became his cold, uncaring guardians? Did he have free choice when forced to live in a cold, dark underground parking garage? "Damn," she groaned softly. If it wasn't for him living in that garage I would've been dead a year ago. My children would have ended up only God knows where, Ramon would probably still be a single man, and Mateo would be on the streets yet—if he had lived that long.

"What's wrong?" Ramon whispered as he pulled her hand to his lips. He kissed her fingers softly.

His words brought her out of her memories, out of the questioning. "Nothing's wrong," she whispered back.

"Mi amor," he again whispered, hoping not to wake the baby, "eventually the past will disappear—or at least the parts of it that you want to, will disappear."

"What makes you think I was thinking about the past?"

He couldn't help but grin at her. "Because that's all you've been thinking about lately. And I know it's because of the anniversary of the earthquake, but each year the memories will lessen."

The anniversary of the quake? she thought. *No, it was more than the earthquake. It was the reminder of how my deceased husband slipped into the bowels of evil before he died. It was the memory of the perverse drug lord Joseph Aragon telling me that Steven, my husband, had arranged for my murder, and my partner Tom Johnston's murder. It was the memory of Tom's blood trailing across the concrete floor. It was the memory—*

"Ah, ah, ah, you're doing it again," Ramon teased. "Maybe you should stop dwelling on it."

Ciara gently slid out from under Ramon's head on her lap and carefully lifted the baby into her arms. "I'll put the baby to bed."

Ramon shook his head good-naturedly as he got up and followed her down the hall. "I'll get the other kids into bed."

Dwelling, she thought, as she covered the baby in the crib. *Am I dwelling on the past? Is it dwelling when it seems the past won't let go? Oh well, at least Steven paid for what he did. "An eye for an eye,"* she whispered.

"What's that mean?" Mateo asked, startling Ciara. He had a habit of sneaking up on people, although he denied that he did it purposefully.

Ciara nearly jumped out of her skin. "Good God, you scared me. Son, you have to stop doing that."

"I'm sorry, mom," he apologized as he tucked the baby blanket around John Ramon. "But what's that mean? An eye for an eye."

She thought of a simple way of explaining it. "It means that what people do gets done to them."

Mateo thought about it as he continued gently tucking the blanket around the baby. Ciara couldn't help but grin, and wondered if John Ramon would ever be able to move during the night. But it was what Mateo did, every night, and John Ramon didn't seem to mind it a bit. In fact, the baby seemed more bonded to Mateo than anyone else.

"I don't think so," Mateo finally answered.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It sounds good, but I don't think that what people do gets done to them. I've seen too many people do bad things and they just keep doing it. It just goes on, and on, and on."

Ciara was impressed at how well Mateo spoke proper Spanish now, instead of the street slang he grew up with. He was working so hard on changing himself and the rewards were showing. "It might seem that way, son, but people do pay for the bad things they do. We might not ever see it, but they will be held accountable at some

point in their life. And don't let them stop you from doing the good things you do for others."

The somber mood was broken when Bonita shrieked, daddy, daddy, daddy from the hallway. Ramon had hoisted her over his shoulder and was carrying her to her bedroom. Their laughter faded into Bonita's bedroom, but it left smiles on both Mateo and Ciara's faces.

Mateo shook his head, "Ramon spoils her."

"He spoils all you kids," she agreed. She knew that Mateo loved his family, but she could never figure out why he wouldn't call Ramon 'dad.' The one time she asked, he explained that he just needed more time.

Mateo pulled her arm around him as he continued making sure the baby was securely tucked in. "Do you dream of the earthquake?" he asked thoughtfully.

"A little bit."

"Yeah, me too. I wish it would stop. Do you think it ever will?"

Ciara hugged his skinny body and noticed he had grown a little thinner. "You've lost a little more weight."

"Yeah, I know. I haven't had much of an appetite lately."

"If you expect to keep up with John, you need to keep your health up." Ciara walked him out into the hall and toward his bedroom. Mateo would probably always be small for his age and more than likely skinny all his life. Years of malnutrition were guaranteed to leave lasting marks on him.

At the door to his room she stopped, turned him to face her, then answered his last question. "Honey," she whispered as she kissed him on the cheek, "I don't know when the dreams will stop, but I have faith that they will."

"Well," his soft voice reflected his thoughtful mood, "it sure seems that faith is a slow mover." He tiptoed to kiss her cheek. "Good night, Mom."

An hour later Ramon entered his room and found Mateo lying on the floor, still sketching by a small night-light. "Son, it's time to turn in."

"In just a few more minutes, Ramon."

Ramon smiled more to himself than to Mateo. He considered himself to be a good dad and had read many books on the subject, but Mateo was more of a challenge than any book ever addressed. When dealing with Mateo it was more a matter of finding the right balance between being a good parent and a big brother. "Ok, son, in a few minutes I want the lights out and you in bed. You've got a full day tomorrow and need your sleep."

Mateo groaned as he got up from the floor. "I sleep more now than I ever did in my whole life."

Ramon smiled back. "Mom told me how much you're helping her now that the baby's here, and she worries that you aren't getting enough rest."

Mateo slipped into bed and reluctantly pulled the covers over himself as he laid back against the pillows. Ramon picked up the night-light and clicked it off as he sat it on the drafting table beside the bed.

“Good night,” Mateo added.

“Good night and sleep well.”

Mateo cringed as Ramon left his room. It was going to be one of those nights. He could feel it. He hated dreaming. He hated the idea of closing his eyes on nights like this, but he was simply too tired not to sleep. His last thoughts were of asking Jesus if He could please not let him dream. It didn't work.

* * *

“Hey, psst, Mateo!” the cook whispered loudly.

Mateo had been hunkered down behind a dumpster for several hours waiting for the cook to come out on the back steps of the restaurant with the usual bag of food and a bottle of water. For a year Mateo had been sketching for tourists but at night he always traded one of the sketches for the food and water. He was a gifted artist and he knew it, just like he knew he could make more money by selling the sketch during the day to tourists. But, to him money didn't matter much, because as a street kid he wasn't allowed into the neighborhood stores or eateries to buy food and water. And he was afraid of getting lost if he ventured out to other neighborhoods, so, he traded the sketch for food instead.

“I'm here, señor,” Mateo called out softly, hoping the owner of the restaurant wouldn't get wise to the nightly routine. He dashed to the steps and handed a rolled-up sketch to the cook.

The cook's cigarette dangled out of his mouth with an abnormally long ash still tethered to it, until it fell down onto his fat stomach. His apron was greasy and dirty as was his sweaty, white, grimy T-shirt. The cook unrolled the sketch and grinned as he re-rolled it. *It's gonna bring a nice price at the art dealer tomorrow, and Mateo ain't gonna know it. Stupid shit,* he mused. “Here, kid.” The cook handed a rolled up newspaper to Mateo and nearly tossed a small bottle of water at him. “Now get outta here before the boss comes out!”

Mateo darted off into the night as usual but tonight the paper felt a little heavier than usual, but then again, there was no usual. Every night it was the same. The cook scraped several plates' leftovers either into a paper sack or onto a newspaper, rolled it up and gave it to Mateo. But what the cook didn't know was that the bottled water was worth more than any food he gave Mateo. Living on the streets was fraught with dangers, but drinking the water was the most detrimental. It was one thing to be starving, but it was quite another to be starving and suffering from a bad case of

dysentery. It was almost guaranteed that it meant death, and although the street kids knew it, they had no choice but to drink whatever water they could get their hands on.

Mateo ran through the streets as fast as he could, hoping he could get to his friends in the sewers before the newspaper got too saturated and began falling apart. He streaked across the plaza of the Palacio Nacional, the National Palace, nearly leaped down the stairs that led to the underground train station, then ran across the tracks to the opposite side of the tunnel where he shimmied through a narrow opening in a chain-link gate. From there he would be in total blackness for several hundred feet. The sewers were large, usually ten to twelve feet in diameter, and only during the rainy season were they too full to walk through. Holding the wet newspaper to his chest with one hand, he followed the sewer walls with the other.

Two more turns and he finally saw the hint of an overhead street light dimly reaching into the end of the chosen sewer. That particular sewer was closer to the surface than the other tunnels and half as large, and a grated opening to the street above allowed in what little light there was, even when a car parked over the grate. It also allowed breathable air to enter.

One of the seven waiting kids heard Mateo approaching, and he quickly shook the shoulder of his buddy. "Hey man, wake up, he's here. He brought some food, man. Come on, wake up, man."

It was pointless because the boy's lifeless body was saturated with the fumes of Activo, a cheap solvent, a deadly solvent the street kids bought to get high on. It was the only way of dealing with their dire situation. Mateo never tried it; he didn't want to because he saw too many meaningless deaths as a result of using it.

This night was no different from any other. The kids, both boys and girls, whose ages averaged from six to twelve, shifted positions to allow Mateo to basically sit in the middle of them, directly beneath the grate. That way they could see well enough to discard the few cigarette butts that would occasionally be mashed into the leftovers. The real find in the meal would be when someone scooped up a small bit of meat. And no matter who was the hungriest, the morsel of meat would always be offered to Mateo first, but he would never accept it. It wasn't that important to him because he had his own treasure, the bottle of water hidden beneath his tattered shirt, stuffed safely into his pant's pocket.

One by one the kids would scoop one or two grimy, filthy fingers into the food and lick them clean. There was no fighting over who got what, or how many fingerfuls of food they took, because there was a code of honor to their ritual and it all seemed to even out amongst them.

"Shit!" Mateo yelped as he swatted at a rat that had just nipped his elbow. "I hate those goddamned rats!"

"Ya oughtta try sleepin' with 'em," one of the boys answered, still licking his once grimy fingers. He leaned back against the wall of the sewer and sighed a satisfied sigh.

"And thanks, man, the food was great." He pulled out a small filthy rag and squirted some Activo on it, then held it to his nostrils and breathed in deeply. "One of these days, man," he nearly gagged, "I'm gonna make it right with you. Yeah man, one of these days. . . ." His voice trailed off into the same drunken stupor his mind had whirled into.

Mateo kicked at a rat scampering quickly over the unconscious boy's legs. "Get off 'im, you son of a bitch!" Minutes later he saw that the kids were beginning to cuddle up to keep warm during the night. "Ok guys, I'll see ya tomorrow."

"Yeah, man," another boy answered as he put his skinny, dirty arm over his little girlfriend. "And thanks for the food, man. Someday we'll all repay you."

"Sure, man," Mateo answered as he slid out of the sewer and started his return trip to the plaza. *Repay me?* he thought, *that's one of the most stupid remarks they always say. Ain't no one gonna repay no one down here. Most of them kids are gonna be dead before they can repay anything. That's the way it is,* he grumbled, as he felt his way out of the sewer system. *Ain't no one ever grows up here. They all die young. But not me, man, I'm getting off the streets one of these days. I ain't gonna be like them.*

A street kid's life span was perilously short, and probably for the best. But he was determined to make it. Determined to get off the streets. Determined to survive. He wasn't going to be like the others. He had hopes and dreams; something his mother gave him before she died.

Finally up at the plaza, he scanned the area for an old cop who always hounded him. When he didn't see him, he dashed across the plaza and dunked a rag into the beautiful marble fountain and was trying to wash his arms off when the cop spotted him. It was bad for tourism to let the street kids hang around the better parts of the city.

"Hey you!" the cop yelled. "Get outta here!"

Mateo groaned to himself. All he wanted to do was to wash off some of the sewer and street grime. He didn't consider himself to be one of the usual street kids, but unfortunately everyone else did.

"Get the hell away from there!" the cop screamed as he ran across the plaza toward Mateo.

Mateo dashed across the plaza away from the cop. Just before leaving the plaza, he snatched a newspaper out of a trash bin, then jumped into traffic. Horns honked, drivers cursed, and tires screeched as Mateo made it to the other side of the street. He turned back and waved at the cop who was by now huffing and puffing from the workout.

The cop hated street kids, but deep down inside he admired Mateo, and had for several years because he saw something in Mateo, in his beautiful drawings. But his job was to keep the street kids out of the tourist areas, and that was all there was to it. He shrugged his shoulders as he watched Mateo cheerfully walk away.

Minutes later, Mateo was standing across from the entry into the underground parking garage of the Sun Pyramid Insurance building. Once he made sure that the security guard wasn't watching, Mateo bolted across the entry like he had been shot out of a cannon, and nearly flew across the first level of the garage. Trying to control his breathing, he hid behind a pillar and listened for any sign of the guard. Once again he had made it. He'd made it into the safest place he had ever found. There were no rats, no other kids, no sexual predators, no one. He would be safe for another night.

The daytime in the life of a street kid was filled with dangers and hazards, but the nighttime was even worse because the perils of surviving were compounded by sexual predators looking for kids. All the kids knew about child slavery, the child sex trade and such, so they knew the importance of a safe haven at night. Granted these things went on during the daylight hours also, but not near like what happened at night. And there were those kids who willingly allowed themselves to be used and bartered like trinkets, because to them at least they felt they were being loved. And there were those kids who were even paid for it. A few measly pesos wasn't much but for the most part it kept them in drugs or Activo which numbed them to the whole rotten situation.

Mateo stealthily snuck down to the dimly lit second level of the garage and to his favorite corner. He quietly laid out part of the newspaper to sit on, and maneuvered the bottle of water out of his pant's pocket. It was more precious to him than anything else. He gently twisted off the lid and took a small sip. If he could've he would've guzzled the bottle dry, but that meant that he would have to urinate before morning, which also meant he either did so in the garage, where the guard would eventually find him, or go out to the street again. Neither was an option to him, so he limited himself to about three sips during the night.

In the near darkness, he shook out the damp, grungy rag and drizzled a few more drops of water on it then slowly, methodically washed his face. First his forehead, then his nose, right ear and cheek, left ear and cheek, mouth, and finally his neck. The rag was filthy to begin with and even more filthy when finished, but Mateo didn't care, he was still washing himself. His mother had always told him that cleanliness was next to godliness. Although he didn't fully understand it, he connected it to his mother's promise of her sending an angel to watch over him. His mother had died from cancer three years earlier and because there were no relatives, Mateo was forced out onto the streets.

"An angel," he whispered as he rubbed at his charcoal-embedded fingers. No matter how hard he rubbed, he was never able to get his fingers to look clean. It was the pitfall of sketching with charcoal all day, and it didn't really bother him that he could never quite get his hands clean. "Someday, my man," he told himself, "you've gotta find some soap."

He laid the rag on the cold concrete floor beside him and took another sip of water then capped it for the night and sat it on the rag. He leaned back against the concrete wall and looked up but his thoughts weren't confined to the concrete ceiling. He saw a beautiful warm summer night sky that was filled with glittering stars. It took him back to before he was forced out onto the streets.

After a deep sigh he crossed himself with the sign of the cross, and still looking up he whispered in the usual, heavily laden, street-slang Spanish, "Mama? I still ain't done no Activo. I still ain't done no drugs. I ain't even messin' around with sex like the others do. And I try to keep clean, but it's damn hard to do out here. Oh, uh, sorry 'bout cussin', mama, but it's just damn hard not to do. But it don't make me a bad boy, mama. I do all I can to help my friends, too. I ain't a bad boy, mama."

He pulled the other part of the newspaper across his front and tucked the ends around him, and between his shoulders and the cold concrete wall. "Jesus, my man," he whispered as he again looked up beyond the concrete ceiling, "you keep an eye on my mama up there, and don't you worry none about me. I can make it. I'm doin' just fine, man."

Mateo's thoughts drifted back to his mom and three years earlier, and it was like each passing day he forgot more and more of how she looked. And now, instead of seeing her emaciated, pain-wracked body he could only hear her distant voice promising that she was going to send an angel to take care of him.

"Mama" he whispered, still staring up, "where's my angel? I hope you ain't forgotten your promise." Mateo shook his head slightly. *No, he told himself, she ain't forgotten. God's really busy, I know, but she ain't forgotten.* "Patience, my man," he whispered. "You gotta be patient."

Mateo closed his eyes for what he thought was only minutes when suddenly he heard several cars entering the garage and parking across from him. He forced himself deeper into the corner and tried to listen to who was in the garage. *Shit. It's Sunday. The garage is supposed to be closed.* He peaked out to see a huge white limo and two large black cars. He wasn't close enough to hear them talking but something felt wrong so he decided to stay down and out of sight.

Minutes later, another car entered only this time he was not able to stop staring at one of the occupants. A woman. *Is she my angel?* he wondered. *Its gotta be. Shit, it's my angel!*

He watched as the people talked for a few minutes. Then, without warning, a shot exploded and the tallest man, the one who was with the woman, toppled to the concrete floor. He was dead. Mateo couldn't move, he was paralyzed with fear. He had been watching the man when suddenly his face disappeared at the sound of the gunshot. Mateo fought to hold back the vomit but couldn't, and quietly the vomit eased out of his mouth and down the front of the newspaper. It took every ounce of strength

he had to hold back the tears of terror. He tried to wipe off his mouth and quietly pulled the newspaper off of him, desperately trying not to make a sound.

When the woman began talking, he scooted out of the corner just enough to watch her. Suddenly, one of the gunmen hit her from behind and dropped her to her knees. *No!* he screamed to himself. *Not my angel! She came for me! Don't hurt her!*

Again the man hit her across her head. She was bleeding a lot and Mateo tried to think of what to say or do to stop the beating. As he watched her struggle up to her hands and knees he could sense her anger and tried to encourage and support her, if only in his mind. *Now she's angry,* he thought. *She's really getting mad. She knows she came here for me but they won't let her find me. What's wrong with them?* He couldn't take his eyes off her. *What's that? Oh, the guy in charge called her Ciara.* To his horror he saw another man aim his gun at her. *Oh no! Ciara! Turn around! That other guy's gonna shoot you! NO!!*

* * *

The noise from the gunshot was an unnaturally long, lingering sound that echoed in slow motion through the underground parking garage. As it echoed and resounded off the walls and massive concrete pillars that supported the prodigious Sun Pyramid Insurance building, Laura strained to turn and look at Tom, her friend, her partner, her mentor. Movement was as slow as the sound of the gunshot was long, and she couldn't understand why. She found herself staring down at the body lying face down in a spreading pool of blood. She realized it was Tom; his life ended with a bullet in the back of his head.

Everything was crystal clear, as though she had all the time in the world to take in what she was looking at. She could see every little wrinkle in his clothing, every abnormal fold of the material as he lay on the cold, bare, concrete floor. Frames from a movie progressed through her mind, keeping time with the bright, reflective flash of the razor-sharp machete as it severed its way through Tom's wrist, and within those same long, drawn out moments his hand was placed in a plastic bag. The mutilator was smiling at her—a smile that framed dark, tobacco-stained teeth glaring at her like evil, indescribable, apotic, monster eyes.

The young boy across the garage, the one she had seen upon entering the structure minutes earlier, screamed at the men surrounding her and pulled her attention away from Tom. *Was it really a scream?* she wondered. No voices, no audible voices are heard; yet they echo in her mind. *What's going on? What's happening?*

The disgustingly fat, butcher-of-a-drug-lord Joseph Aragon points at the boy. "Kill him, too!" he orders. His voice is distant and indifferent; a droning tone that could have emanated from an empty 55-gallon drum.

Everything is in eerie slow motion as the shooter, another monster, turns to face the boy. His clothes follow him as though he's moving through water. He slowly, too slowly, raises his gun and points it toward the little boy, and she can't help but stare at the heavy gold ring on his muscular finger as he slides it into the trigger.

Laura, she groans to herself, *Laura, stop him. Stop him now!* But she cannot move. She tries to scream but is unable to make a sound loud enough to distract the shooter. *Scream!!* she orders her subconscious. *Scream, now!* No matter how hard she tries she cannot get his attention. It's as though an invisible force prevents her from making a sound—that same invisible force that physically immobilizes her. She tries again with no success. If only she could scream, it would save his life, but nothing comes. The gunman's thick thumb cocks the hammer, and the sound echoes as loudly as a solitary clap of thunder across a still, silent night.

NO! She tries to scream, groan, make any sound at all. *Grab it*, she thinks. *Grab the gun, his arm, anything, but don't let him shoot that boy!*

She tries to move toward the gunman but is held back by the heavy, large black case that she's handcuffed to. She stares blankly for a moment, then realizes it's the case that is filled with their drug bait, fifteen million American dollars. It's much too heavy to move easily, but her intense stare and concentration brings the adrenaline-boosted strength she needs.

My God, what's going on? Why can't I move? she wonders, as she struggles to bend over and grasp the thick leather handle with the same hand that it's handcuffed to. Her slow motion movements seem to provide time for the molecular strength to build within her body, and she effortlessly, miraculously lifts the case and her body starts its movement toward the shooter. It glides along as though it is now weightless, and flows upwards with her arm. Her hand leads it, ever so slowly, out in front of her and toward the gunman. She's aware of everything—acutely aware. Her teeth are clenched, her jaw muscles tight, and she's conscious of every muscle in her body as they work in concert to heave the case and stop the gunman.

The boy is standing in sheer terror, as if caught in the beam of an invisible force field, and the split second the trigger is pulled, it starts the chain reaction of the hammer striking the primer, igniting the gunpowder, and propelling the bullet through the gun barrel. Laura cannot only supernaturally see it, but she hears everything. Seconds are eons. Click! Flash! Boom! Zoom! But, thank God, the bullet's path veers off course—deflected by the heavy, money-laden case slamming into the shooter's arm. A deafening *crrrrraaaaaaacck!* thunders through the garage, through her mind, through every cell of remembrance. The case meets the arm but doesn't stop, and its weight and momentum is now pulling her across the shooter.

NO!! she screams.

* * *

Ramon is awakened by Ciara's terrifying scream and the crash of the lamp and night stand slamming into the large glass door by her side of the bed. Trapped within the nightmare, she had literally thrown herself out of bed, knocking over the night stand and lamp as she went.

Ramon quickly jumped out of bed and dashed to the floor beside her, pulling her to him. "Ciara! Ciara, wake up! You had a nightmare."

Ciara, still in a daze, grabbed his pajama shirt and tried to push him away from her as she screamed again.

"Mi amor, it's okay," he whispered, lifting her up into his arms and out of the broken glass. He gently lowered her to the bed, but in her anguish she wouldn't let go of him and buried her head in his shoulder, hoping the nightmare would soon disappear.

"Oh, God, Ramon," she cried. "This has to stop."

"It will. It will, sweetheart." All he could do was to hold onto her until she was ready to let go. He glanced at the clock on his night stand. It was only four in the morning. *Still two hours to go before daybreak*, he thought. He noticed that when she grabbed him, she tore the shoulder seam of his pajamas. Whatever she did in that parking garage a year earlier, she still summoned the same incredible strength in her nightmares.

"Mom?" Jaime asked. "Mom, are you okay?" Jaime was standing in the bedroom doorway, almost afraid to enter the room. He had heard his mother's scream and the crash in her bedroom. All the kids had heard it. In the last week they had been awakened by her nightmares every night, and none of them understood why she was having such terrible dreams.

Mateo had nightmares of a different sort. He didn't scream. He didn't thrash in the dark. Instead, he crawled into his bedroom closet and hid there until dawn; until the morning's light showed him that he was in the safety of his home and not in the parking garage or the mountain drug camp.

"It's just a bad dream," Ramon answered. "Son, turn on the light." Ramon motioned for Jaime to turn on the light on his night stand. "That's it, now come closer." Ramon put his arm around him and pulled him closer. "Remember the earthquake last year that we told you about? Well, mom's been having dreams about it lately. She'll be okay though." Ramon's voice was soft and consoling. It was a voice Jaime loved to hear. All the kids did. It didn't matter if Ramon talked in Spanish or English, his voice had a quality to it that Mateo once described as a soft, soothing embrace, like the sun enveloping you with its warmth.

Little Bonita slid in between Jaime and Ramon and gently brushed her mom's blonde hair to the side. For a seven-year-old, her Spanish was as good as her older brother's. "Mama, are you okay?" she whispered.

Ciara gently wiped the tears off Boni's cheeks and pulled her up onto the bed and into her arms. "I'm fine, sweetheart. Mama just had a bad dream, that's all."

"You have them a lot lately. Maybe you should sleep with my teddy," Bonita offered. "He'll keep an eye on you at night."

"Mateo needs Teddy," Antonio interjected as he joined the others by the bed.

Although Ciara's children didn't know everything about what had happened to her and Mateo a year earlier, they each suspected that it was not good. And now, with the anniversary of the devastating earthquake, Ciara and Mateo were having more and more nightmares. Ciara knew it was the anniversary triggering her memories, and she knew that it would soon be over with, at least for another year. Mateo's nightmares of the parking garage and of the drug camp had caused him to become almost obsessive about keeping an eye on the new baby. He had grown to be outright overly protective of all his siblings, especially the baby.

The other kids saw more of Mateo's private terrors than the glimpses witnessed by Ramon and Ciara. The kids saw the changes in his eyes, could feel the fear around him, and could sense his private terror. No one but Ramon, Ciara and Mateo knew what the problem was, and even then, Ramon and Ciara had no idea how deep Mateo's fears went.

As Ciara tried to calm herself, and ease the concerns of her children, she realized that Mateo had not joined them. "Where's Mateo?" With the feelings that only a mother has, she bolted out of the room and ran down the hallway into Mateo's bedroom, across from the baby's room. Even in the gentle, golden glow of the city lights, she could not see him in his ruffled bed. Blankets and sheets were in a state of disarray, and pages of his sketches were strewn across the room. As she had done several times before, she dashed for the closet and found Mateo crouched down in the corner of the closet, crying silently as he relived the unspeakable horrors of his past.

"Mateo?" she whispered, trying to focus in the dark closet as she cuddled down beside him amongst pages of his charcoal sketches. She gently pulled him into her arms and could feel his long, dark, tear-filled lashes squeeze against her cheek. "It's okay, baby, it's me, mom," she whispered. "You're safe. I'm here."

He allowed himself to be pulled tight against her warm, protective body. *If only I could get closer then the nightmare would get farther away.* As he held tight to her, he wondered why he could not stop thinking about his ordeal in the parking garage. He had never seen anyone shot until that morning in the garage. But it was only a precursor to the kidnaping and three months spent in a drug camp. He felt that all he saw for months was death and dying. Drawing in a deep breath brought with it the smell of the beautiful perfume she wore that lingered on her yellow silk pajamas. Interestingly, her favorite perfume was what he bought her for Christmas. Ironically, it was 'Ciara'. He tried to focus on the smells of home, the smells of safety—anything but the grimy, filthy odors of the sewers and drug camp that permeated the memory cells of

his body, mind and spirit. He held onto her, wishing she would squeeze harder, hard enough to squeeze the memories completely out of his mind.

As they sat in the closet, wrapped tightly in each other's arms, he felt an all too familiar feel. It was warm and sticky. It was blood. Feeling for the source, he discovered that she had cut the outside of her right hand, a result of the crash in her bedroom only minutes earlier. "You're hurt," he whispered, touching the sticky blood and applying pressure to the cut.

"It was an accident. I'm okay," she answered, ignoring the cut and concentrating on how he sounded.

"An accident?" he asked, trying desperately to shake the nightmare from his thoughts.

"I stumbled over the night stand and knocked the lamp over."

You didn't stumble, he thought, you had another nightmare. He had been awakened every night that week hearing her scream, NO! He recognized it. She screamed to stop the gunmen from shooting him. It was two little insignificant letters that saved his life.

Ramon turned on the bedroom light and walked to the closet where he saw two sets of feet protruding from beneath the hanging clothes. He quietly pushed the hanging clothes to the side and knelt down in front of them, wishing he did not feel so helpless. Since the baby's birth, Mateo had been having more and more nightmares, and now Ciara was joining him. Ramon knew what it was, or at least he did with Ciara—it was witnessing the brutal murder of her partner and cheating death herself when the building she was in collapsed around her. Mateo had been saved by Ciara's heroic efforts and had survived the earthquake's wrath unscathed. But he had endured so much more after that fateful day. After being kidnaped from the streets of Ramon's pricey neighborhood, he spent three long months in a drug camp hidden in the hills north of Mexico City; one of the twelve drug camps that the United State's elite Delta Force had infiltrated and rescued over two hundred children from. Having never seen the camps and never hearing Mateo talk about them, Ramon could only guess at the horrors endured by the children in them. Doctor Hidalgo knew quite a lot about what happened to kidnaped children, but it's difficult for most people, medical doctors included, to comprehend something that they have not personally endured.

What a sight, Ramon thought, staring down at his wife and son. What a pitiful sight. They're like two children hiding from the monsters of their subconscious.

The kids entered the bedroom and little Boni crawled into the closet, pushed her little teddy bear into Mateo's arms and cuddled against him. It was the only way she knew how to best console her brother. He too loved his petite, and oh so feminine, little half-sister and reached out to her and pulled her tight to him.

Mateo glanced up and saw everyone gathered in his room. Suddenly, his eyes widened. "Where's John Ramon?"

Ramon answered softly, "he's asleep in his crib."

“Jesus!” Mateo screamed, bolting out of the closet and past the others. “You can’t leave him alone!”

“He’s asleep, Mateo. Son, he’s all right,” Ramon called after him as he followed him across the hall, followed by Antonio, Jaime, Boni and Ciara. By the time Ciara joined everyone in the baby’s room, Mateo had already snatched the baby from the crib and was holding him tight in his arms. “Be easy, son,” Ramon whispered. “He’s just a baby.”

The room was lit only by the nightlight, but it was enough to see what was happening. Ramon didn’t want to turn on the overhead light in case Mateo was still dreaming. Mateo sat down on the overly large, hand-carved, wooden rocking chair beside the crib, and slid back into it as he adjusted his hold on the baby. “Never leave him alone!” he ordered. “All of you. Never, ever leave him alone!”

Mateo kissed the baby’s nearly bald head, and had flashes of Poncho, his friend from the drug camp, kissing his own shaved head. The smell of the dirty, tin hut where the kids were housed permeated his nostrils and overrode the smell of baby powder and lotion. It was the smell of rain-soaked dirt; damp grass and weeds; damp, smoky firewood; and even urine and feces. It was cold in the mountains. It was always cold and damp, and Mateo shivered as he pulled the baby blanket up over his and John’s shoulders.

“Mateo,” Ramon whispered, as he touched the baby’s head.

“No!” Mateo snapped as he yanked the baby away from Ramon and tucked him closer to his shoulder. “Don’t touch him! Don’t ever touch him!” he ordered.

Ramon was as stunned as everyone. Mateo’s eyes flashed with terror, or anger, Ramon wasn’t quite sure what it was. He glanced back at Ciara and signaled for her to put the other three children back to bed. “Son,” he whispered, “it’s me, Ramon . . . dad. Mateo?”

In spite of Mateo’s jostling, little John Ramon was quiet and calm. Of all the family members, he seemed to recognize Mateo’s voice the most. Even if in a full cry, Mateo’s soft, loving voice would calm him instantly. No one but John Ramon knew of his older half-brother’s protective vigilance throughout the nights, and his constant watching during the days. And although he was only a baby, he and he alone would ever know of Mateo’s constant promises to keep him safe.

“Mateo?” Ramon asked again, hoping to relay a feeling of safety to him.

“We’re okay,” Mateo finally answered, kissing John on the cheek and holding him securely.

“Son, we’ve got to put the baby back to bed. He needs his sleep.” Ramon could not think of anything else to say, but he knew he had to do something. Mateo wasn’t dangerous by any stretch of the imagination, but Ramon felt he had to take the baby from him.

"We're okay, man," Mateo answered, reverting to his heavy street dialect and slang, and determined not to let go of his little friend in the drug camp. "I'm gonna stay with him, man."

Ramon had not heard the slang since they rescued him and it positively scared him to think that Mateo was losing control. He stepped back into the hallway to meet Ciara after she tucked the others in bed. "Mi amor," he whispered, "we've got a problem. Stay with them and I'll call Doctor Hidalgo."

"What's going on?" she whispered back.

"I'm not sure, but I think he believes he's back in the drug camp. If he had a nightmare, maybe he hasn't quite woken up from it."

She agreed and quietly entered the room, pulled a chair beside Mateo and the baby, and ever so softly drew her fingers through Mateo's thick brown hair, pushing most of it back out of his eyes. In the drug camp they shaved the heads of all the kids in order to lessen the lice problem, and after he had been rescued the first thing he wanted was for his hair to grow out. It rested on his shoulders now.

Mateo rested his head against John's face, closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to float on Ciara's touch. She was so loving, so kind. She was the perfect mom and he thanked God every day for her. He could no longer remember his own mom. He never knew his real father, but now he had a wonderful new father in Ramon and he treasured him, too. He just didn't know how to tell him. He allowed his thoughts to dwell on her fingers against his scalp and with each stroke it brought him farther away from the mountains and closer to home. When he did look up at her, tears had again soaked his lashes and his voice was barely audible, "Mom, I'm scared."

"Si, I know," she whispered. "Me, too." She gingerly slid off the chair and knelt beside Mateo and the baby and pressed her face next to Mateo's as she kissed his forehead.

"Will it ever—" He stopped himself and gently kissed his brother's cheek. John cooed back. Mateo so desperately needed to know if the nightmares would ever stop, but couldn't bring himself to admit how they bothered him.

"¿Qué, mi heroito?"

He loved it when she called him her hero. She called him many names but that one he really loved.

"¿Qué?" she asked again, hoping he would tell her what he wanted to say, but Mateo still didn't answer.

Ramon returned from his phone call and sat on the chair beside the rocker and Ciara, not sure if he was interrupting or not. "I put some coffee on." His voice was soft and comforting. "How about it, son, want a cup? It's good and strong, just like mom doesn't like." Ramon smiled at Mateo and saw a hint of a smile in return.

Mateo had developed a taste for strong coffee long before they found each other, and although Ciara did not approve of children drinking coffee, she at least understood.

Mateo didn't know what the fuss was about over drinking coffee, but made a point to not drink it in front of the other children.

"Son," Ramon began again, talking to Mateo but reaching to touch Ciara's shoulder. "I can't pretend to know what you went through last year, but I can and will guarantee that I'm here for you. Whatever it takes, you've got to know that I'm here for you. ¿Comprende?"

Mateo wiped at his tears and looked Ramon straight in the eyes. "I know. I know you are. I just need more time. That's all, just more time, Ramon."

Ramon rubbed at the month-old growth on his chin as he nodded back. The kids talked him into growing a goatee and it was just getting past the itching stage.

"Mom," Mateo interjected, "you've got to get a bandage on your hand."

"Good idea," she answered. "I'll let you two guys talk. I'll meet you in the kitchen when I'm done. Si?"

Mateo nodded and as she walked out of the bedroom he handed the sleeping baby to Ramon. They put him back into the crib, then went to the kitchen to wait for Ciara.

In the bathroom, Ciara reached for the baby wipes and as she did, she noticed one of Mateo's sketches stuck to a spot of blood on her pajama leg. It was one of the sketches from the closet. She plucked it off, sat it on the counter, and continued cleaning the cut on her hand. It was a bad cut and she wrapped gauze around it, knowing that Doctor Hidalgo would arrive soon. She had no doubt he would stitch it up. He was always prepared for anything.

Just before turning off the bathroom light, she glanced back at the sketch and realized that it was not one of Mateo's normal ones. He was a gifted artist, everyone called him 'el grand artista,' and he drew the most beautiful pictures—pictures that made people marvel at his abilities. But not this picture. It was a sketch of a child, but the face was distorted like it was half-melted wax. It was eerie and dark, and the pain and terror in the child's face frightened her. As shocking as it was, she was glad to have seen it and not left it in the bathroom where the other kids might have found it.

Back in Mateo's bedroom, the soft glow of dawn slowly entered the room. It looked like a normal kid's room, partly picked up, partly not, and his favorite hobby, that of drawing, was everywhere. She turned the light on and looked at the sketches taped to his walls, mirrors, closet doors, stacked on his desk, and pieces of paper peeking out of his dresser drawers. She couldn't help but smile at the room. Mateo was a cheerful young boy. He loved his artwork, loved playing with his brothers and sister, just loved everything in each and every day. Outside of the last couple of weeks, a smile never left his lips.

As she thought of him, his antics, his wild sense of humor, she picked up the sketches on the closet floor that were half hidden under a shoe box. To her horror they were all as pain-filled as the one that brought her back to his room. There were a few

sketches of the guards—strong, mean, cruel, threatening faces of the abusive guards—but most of the sketches were of the children in the drug camp. Children’s faces—filthy, mud-streaked, tear-streaked faces. Faces of terror, fear, aloneness. Faces crying out to Mateo. Faces crying out to the world for help. She wondered what must be going on in Mateo’s mind to be drawing such horror. They were all sketches from his tortured existence in the drug camp in the mountains near Acámbaro, northwest of Mexico City. Three months of hell that began one year ago.

Not knowing what else to do at that moment, she placed the sketches back under the shoe box and closed the closet door. First and foremost Mateo had to know he was not being violated—not him, not his room, not his personal belongings. He always had to know that he was safe, and for the moment she would ensure it. The right way to talk to him about his sketches would come to her. If not now, it would soon.

* * *

“There’s your coffee,” Mateo said pointing to the coffee cup on the table as Ciara entered the kitchen.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked Mateo, sitting down and glancing across the table at Ramon.

Mateo shuffled across the kitchen and sat beside her. He sipped the coffee then answered, “I’m sorry about the nightmare. I didn’t mean to get everybody so shook up.”

Ramon’s smile was meant to take the edge off the morning. “Actually, I think mom started it all.” They heard a soft rap at the front door. “That must be Doctor Hidalgo. I’ll get it.”

Mateo cringed at the thought of the Doctor talking to him and quickly dismissed himself. “I’m going back to bed.” Although Mateo was tired, he really didn’t want to be questioned by anyone else, not even by his friend, the doctor.

Ciara knew what was going on. “Honey, the doctor might want to talk to you.”

“I know, but not now. Please, mom, I just want to go back to bed.” Mateo kissed her on the cheek and quickly left the kitchen. Farther down the hallway, he paused, then quietly inched back to the kitchen doorway so he could listen to their conversation.

After the usual greetings, Doctor Hidalgo removed his white linen suit jacket and draped it over the back of Ciara’s chair, rolled up his sleeves, scrubbed his hands, slid on the surgical gloves then went to work on her hand. Nothing about him ever changed. He wore the same white suit, white tennis shoes, carried a black tie in his jacket pocket and always wore a straw Panama hat. Many thought his style suggested that he wasn’t paying attention, but it would always surprise them to learn that not only had he heard every word, he had probably catalogued the entire conversation. He was the epitome of a good listener.

He cleaned the cut on her hand, gave several small injections around the cut to numb the pain, then stitched it while they talked about the early morning's ruckus. He was especially interested in hearing what Mateo was now going through and listened carefully as he wrapped her hand, washed his hands and repacked his medical bag. He then poured himself a cup of coffee and sat at the table beside Ciara. "What you're describing is caused by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD."

"I thought so, too," Ciara agreed. "I think the anniversary of the earthquake triggered everything."

"Maybe for you," the doctor commented, still staring at Ciara.

"Maybe for me? Doc, I can deal with my nightmares. I know why they've come back and I'm going to see a therapist about it . . . probably this week, but we can't get Mateo to agree to talk to anyone."

"Rightfully so," he answered. "Even with me he's still guarded about what he says."

Ramon sat his coffee cup down. "We're worried sick about him. What do we do?"

Dr. Hidalgo nodded and sipped his coffee. "I knew this would be coming, but I didn't know exactly when it would happen."

Ciara glanced at Ramon, then back to Sebastiano. "You said yourself that it's PTSD. All we have to do is find the right therapist to work with him. Right?"

The doctor placed his hand over Ciara's and patted it reassuringly, just as a parent would do to a child. "The earthquake isn't what's triggered Mateo's nightmares. It's the birth of John Ramon."

Ramon and Ciara were speechless.

Mateo, quietly standing in the hall, leaned his head against the wall, sighed softly, and slid down the wall to the floor. He knew something had happened but he didn't know what, and now he was hearing that it was his little baby brother that was sending him out of control. It didn't make any sense to him. He loved John Ramon. He dearly loved him, and he would do anything in the world for him. *How could John be upsetting me?*

The doctor continued, "I've been watching Mateo for nearly a year now and I know what I'm talking about. You can't take a child, subject him to a drug camp, and expect him to come out of it unscathed."

"I don't expect that," Ramon snapped. "We've been trying to get him to open up about what he went through; trying to get him to talk about anything, but he won't. We know he's been hurt by the ordeal, for God's sake!"

"Ramon," Ciara chastised, "keep your voice down, please."

Sebastiano rubbed his forehead, then took another sip of the coffee. "Ramon, even I don't know everything that's done to those kids, but I do know that it's the birth

of your baby that's triggered him. Mateo now sees himself as the protector. He must've played that same role in the drug camp. Don't you see?"

Ramon understood the basics but he couldn't grasp all of it at once. What he still didn't know was how they were going to help him. "Sebastiano, I'm a good father. I know I am. And, Mateo knows it, too. How do we connect? How do I help my son?"

The doctor gently nodded as he stared at the table then back up to Ramon. "That's the hard part. Mateo's mind is running scared right now. My God, he's probably seen more mindless death and suffering than all of us put together. He doesn't trust anyone. He may consciously see you as his parent but his subconscious sees you as the same threat as the guards. It probably terrifies—"

"You're wrong!" Mateo snapped as he whirled into the kitchen, surprising everyone—everyone but the doctor. The doctor knew that Mateo would be eavesdropping. That's what abused children do. They listen to everything to make sure they're always safe. The doctor simply baited him to flush him into talking, but he baited him with the truth.

"I know they love me!" Mateo continued. "They aren't like the guards! Why is it that older people always think they know what we think? I'm sick and tired of it!"

Ciara wanted to hold him but she knew that he had to talk. She only hoped that he would open up even more.

The doctor nodded at Mateo in acknowledgment. "Si, you're right. I don't know what you're thinking, but the anniversary of any traumatic event is hard to deal with. Plus, the birth of a new baby in the family can sometimes be quite a change—"

"You're wrong," Mateo interrupted. "There's nothing hard about it." Mateo's eyes darted around as he tried to think of what he wanted to say. "We all wanted the baby. We're glad he's here. I'm glad he's here, he makes me feel like I'm—" He stopped himself from saying anything that would be misunderstood. He wanted to scream, wanted to blow up. He wanted to feel anything but what he was feeling, and he especially wished he knew what he was feeling.

Ramon handed him a cup of coffee and invited him to sit with them. "Mateo, this is a learning process for all of us. I'm learning how to be a dad just like you're learning—"

Mateo exploded and slammed the full coffee cup on the table. Hot coffee splashed everywhere as the heavy porcelain cup shattered into dozens of pieces. In his thin, tanned fingers was the handle of the cup with two razor-sharp ends pointing out. Before anyone had a chance to recover from the outburst, he pushed the ends of the cup handle to his neck.

"Mateo!" Ciara shouted. "Put it down, por favor!"

"Get away from me!" Mateo would've cried if he could have, but there were no tears left.

"Please, son," Ramon encouraged calmly, "please, put it down."

Mateo glared at the doctor. "Death?" he shrieked. "You said I saw lots of death, el doctor?"

Hidalgo could only nod. He was as shocked as Ciara and Ramon at Mateo's outburst, but he knew to keep things calm.

Mateo's hands trembled as the cup handle began to cut into his neck. A small drop of blood appeared. "Yeah, I saw lots of it! And I'd kill myself, too, if I could . . . but . . . dammit . . . there's nothing left to kill! They already did that! They stole my life!"

Tears streamed down Ciara's face and blended with streaks of coffee as she slowly got out of the chair and cautiously approached Mateo. She, like the men, was afraid of pushing Mateo too far, but she had to do something.

Mateo trembled as he lost all control. "They stole all of our lives!" he screeched, as the cup handle trembled against his neck and effortlessly pierced another layer of skin. "The other kids," he screamed, "everyone that was there, all of us who went through it. They stole our lives, and it's still going on!"

Ciara reached out and gently pulled the cup handle away from his neck, and without pausing, slowly moved in against him. The cup handle dropped from his fingers and shattered against the Sautillo tile floor.

"There's nothing left to die," he sobbed. "Nothing left to kill. All that's left of us, mom, are stolen lives in empty bodies." Tears that his memories had been holding hostage for a year had finally broken free and his shoulders heaved. He continued to cry as she wrapped him tightly in her arms.

Ciara and Hidalgo were calm but teary-eyed while Mateo sobbed almost uncontrollably. As for Ramon, he had been catapulted out of himself when Mateo shattered the cup. All he was aware of was the overwhelming urge to kill, to commit cold-blooded murder. To kill what or whom, he had no idea because his mind wasn't working. It was pure, raw, unabated hatred and he wanted to kill anyone who dared to do anything inappropriate to a child.