

# CHAPTER ONE

The day was sunny, but a cold wind was blowing. It had rained on Tuesday, and a sprinkling of snow lay on the distant mountains. David Morales wore just a sweater, and he wished he had a warmer jacket. He stood with the deputy sheriff looking down the road. He expected to see a pickup truck appear anytime.

David had been living for this day for two years, and many times he thought the day would never come. But now he was terribly nervous. His stomach hurt. He felt as though he could still hear the chains that he'd worn on his wrists and legs two years ago. He could hear them even in his sleep. He felt as though he'd spent years on an

alien planet. Now that he had returned to Earth, he felt like the alien. He wasn't sure what to say, how to act.

He was almost afraid to leave prison life.

"There it is," the sheriff nodded. He was a pleasant fellow, nicer than most of the officers at the prison. They all did their jobs with reasonable manners. They were dealing with convicts, not hotel guests. Some of the inmates had done lesser crimes than David's, but many had done much worse. The men who ran the prison had to be tough.

"So, you got everything?" the sheriff asked David, looking at his small duffel bag.

"Yes, thank you, sir," David replied numbly. He stared as the pickup grew closer. The deputy shook hands with David. Then he said what he said to them all as they leave. "Good luck to you, man. I hope I never see you again."

David managed a thin smile and responded, "You won't."

Paul Morales brought the pickup to a stop and jumped out. He grabbed his brother in a bear hug, and the brothers embraced for a long time. Then Paul tossed the duffel bag into the truck. He nodded toward the deputy, who turned and headed back into the gate. Paul and David climbed into the cab, David on the passenger side.

David's legs felt rubbery. He almost fell while getting in the cab. He pulled the door shut.

"Seat belt, dude," Paul reminded him.

"Oh yeah," David said, clicking it around his waist.

"Yeehah!" Paul screamed as they drove away from the prison. David looked at his kid brother and thought he hadn't changed. Then Paul made a suggestion. "Wanna get somethin' to eat? There's a diner down the road. Pancakes, sausages, nice hot coffee."

"I don't know if I could keep it down," David responded.

Paul looked over and briefly clapped a hand on his brother's shoulder. "You'll do

fine,” he assured him. “You’re thin, *hermano*. You and me, we’re the same height, and I think I got fifteen pounds on you at least. We gotta do something about that.”

David stared at the hills and mountains in the distance. He’d looked at them during all the days, the weeks, the months, and the years he was in prison. But they looked different now that he was free. They looked completely different, though he didn’t know exactly how. As they drove, David vaguely remembered the landmarks. But the grocery store he used to go to was closed and boarded up. There were no more gas stations on the corner where he remembered two.

They pulled into the diner lot, parked, and walked in. They sat down in a booth in the back. Paul ordered two big breakfasts of pancakes, sausage, bacon, with lots of syrup and butter.

“You look like the deer in the headlights, dude,” Paul remarked.

“Yeah,” David responded. “I feel like that.” He looked at the puffy light brown

pancakes. He opened the syrup containers and watched the golden river run over the melting pats of butter. He realized he was hungry. He had never been so hungry in his adult life. He wolfed down the pancakes, the fat little brown sausages, and the crispy bacon. He had to keep wiping his chin with a napkin.

Paul laughed. “Dude, you gotta brush up on your table manners. We’re eating with a real nice family on Sunday.”

“What?” David gasped. “Who—what are you talking about?”

“Ernesto Sandoval and his family,” Paul replied. “Remember me tellin’ you about him when I came to visit you?”

“Oh yeah, your friend,” David recalled, pitching another forkful of pancakes into his mouth. “His father teaches at Chavez. But why would he . . . why would *they*, I mean . . .?” David wiped his chin again.

“That’s who he is, David,” Paul explained. “There’s not a more decent human bein’ on this planet than Ernie. On top of

that, he's a fun guy. He has this other friend, Abel Ruiz, a great guy too. Those two are my best homies, man. Abel's gonna cook *carne asada* for us. Let me tell you, the kid is still only a senior in Chavez, but he's a genius in the kitchen. My chick Carmen is comin' too. You met her."

"Paul, won't that be like . . . awkward?" David asked. "I've spent the last two years talking to cons. What am I gonna say? What if they ask me what prison was like? Man, I'll freak."

"Don't worry, David," Paul assured him. "It'll be cool. Ernie has these two little sisters—little *muchachas*—cutest little trolls you ever saw. They'll be there too."

"Two little girls?" David groaned. "I'll probably scare the heck outta them! An ex-convict! They'll hide under the table and cry!"

Paul laughed. "Dude, would I get you into a bad situation?" Paul leaned forward as he spoke with his brother. "Listen up, *hermano*. You're all I got in the way of

blood, and I'm all you got. I got your back, David. Don't you ever forget that. Remember when we were kids and sometimes we wound up in the same foster home? Didn't I always have your back, even though I was younger? I'm a tough *hombre*, David. I'm not gonna let anything bad happen to you."

They finished their breakfast and headed for Paul's apartment on Cardinal Street. As they got closer to Paul's place, David spoke. "I hope you didn't go to much bother getting ready for me. Just a curtain'd be a fine room divider. I'll be fine on a sleepin' bag. Believe me, after sleepin' on that hard cot in prison, a sleeping bag's gonna feel like a real mattress."

"Nah, no problem, dude," Paul replied, grinning.

"What're you grinning about, man?" David asked.

"Nothing," Paul responded, pulling into the apartment parking lot. "I got a bigger apartment now. Not the little one we used to have."

The two young men went up the three steps that led into the downstairs apartment. David's eyes widened as he stepped inside. "Nice, man . . . hey, a bookcase for a room divider . . . lookin' good," he marveled.

"Room on the left is yours, David," Paul nodded. "Just stash your duffel bag. I bought some stuff for you to wear, nothin' much—tees and jeans, socks and shorts. They're in the chest of drawers. Got that shampoo you used to like, the shavin' cream, and other stuff."

"Paul," David gasped, "the bed! It looks so nice . . . like new or something! And the chest of drawers! You didn't go and spend your hard-earned dough—"

"It was all free, man," Paul explained, still grinning. "You know my chick, Carmen? Well, her sister's married to a rich dude named Ivan Redondo. I think you know him. Didn't Ivan teach your Bible class in prison? He's one of our homies now. His folks are rollin' in dough, and he



just borrowed some furniture they never use. He's high on you, man. He's kinda geeky, but he's my friend now."

They stood in silence for a moment. David was overwhelmed. Paul remarked, "Me and my homies fixed up the place. Nice job, eh?"

*"Muy bien, mi hermano. Muy bien,"* was all David could murmur.

David sat down on the chair next to the bed. He put his hand to his face and covered his eyes. "Bro, I . . . don't deserve any of this. I screwed up so bad. You were just a kid, finishin' high school. You were workin' like a dog at the burger stand and staying out of trouble. I was your big brother. I shoulda been lookin' out for you, but then me and my lousy homies started boosting laptops and cell phones. I wanted stuff I couldn't afford. I was a selfish creep, hanging out with scum and dating no-good chicks who just wanted jewelry to hang around their necks and stick in their ears."