CHAPTER 1

SARA

The Fort Stockton Detention Center was an elementary school not too long ago. Some of the sayings meant to encourage the children are still on the walls. I was in a line with twenty women all dressed in blue jumpsuits when I read one of them:

It's nice to be important but it is more important to be nice.

Yes, but I wouldn't mind feeling a little more important to the United States. Even just a tiny acknowledgment from the government that I existed and that I was not lost in a sea of asylum petitions.

I counted the number of women ahead of me. Nineteen. There were so many of us in this school-turned-detention-center that there was always a line for everything. The worst line was for the showers, which we all needed to take at the end of a hot day. There were fourteen showers for two hundred and twenty women. A week ago, the private company that operates the detention center solved the toilet-line problem by installing ten portable toilets behind the gym, but now our outside time stinks.

Another sign. This one on top of a row of yellow lockers. The picture of an angry bull inside a circle covered with a red X. Underneath it, the words:

This is a no-bullying zone.

Tell that to La Treinta Y Cuatro, the guard who made everyone's life harder than it needed to be. Yesterday she asked me if people from Mexico used toilet paper. I felt like reminding her about where her ancestors came from. She sees herself as different from the rest of us. And not only different but better. And as my luck would have it, La Treinta Y Cuatro was up ahead, doling out job assignments. I was hoping to get one of the jobs that was advertised by the pro bono legal firm representing many of the detainees. They had put up a notice for someone who spoke English and Spanish who could help them with the interviews. But with La Treinta Y Cuatro deciding? My chances were slim to none. She didn't like me. She didn't like anybody, that was true. But she seemed to have a special something for me. Did she know what I did before I got here?

Three weeks ago, I was a reporter in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, writing about the hundreds, thousands, of girls who disappeared from the city's streets. Most were discovered dead weeks or months later, but some were never found. My editor received an e-mail threatening me and my family if I wrote about Linda Fuentes. Linda, my best friend, had disappeared months before. I investigated the source of the e-mail and eventually discovered where Linda and other young women were being held captive. The State Police, with the help of the FBI office in El Paso, located Linda and freed her and the other women.

Before Linda was freed, she sent me the cell phone belonging to Leopoldo Hinojosa, the man responsible for her enslavement. Hinojosa set out to retrieve his phone and to kill me and my family. We left our house a few minutes before it

was destroyed by machine-gun bullets. My mother went to live with her sister in the interior of Mexico, and my brother, Emiliano, and I had no choice but to cross illegally into the United States, where I planned to seek asylum while Emiliano went with our father to Chicago.

I kept the cell phone in the hope of finding someone in the U.S. who could open it and use the information to help other women still in captivity. I can only imagine all the connections that phone will reveal between Hinojosa and other corrupt government officials or cartel members. Two of Hinojosa's men attacked us in the desert after we crossed into the United States. One of the men ran away and the other was wounded in a struggle with Emiliano. We couldn't let the man bleed to death, so I went to look for help.

On my way to get help, I ran into Sandy Morgan, a park ranger. She brought me to her father, attorney Wes Morgan, and together we decided that I would plead for asylum at the Fort Stockton Detention Center. Emiliano stayed with the wounded man until help arrived and then set out alone with Hinojosa's cell phone.

The school was transformed into a prison by the simple act of enclosing the buildings and part of the grounds with a twenty-foot chain-link fence with rolls of razor-sharp wire on top. They brought in a trailer with eight commercial-size washers and dryers and they built three cement-block isolation cells with small windows on the top where detainees who misbehaved could be kept. Oh, and they also installed cameras every twenty-four feet. Lucila, my new friend from El Salvador, liked to tell me that as prisons go, this one wasn't so bad. And it was

at least safer than what awaited Lucila in San Salvador . . . or me in Juárez. And besides, this was a temporary stay, no? No one knew how temporary, but sooner or later we would be free. That was our hope.

So far, Lucila had been detained three months and I only ten days. Lucila hoped to be reunited with her four-year-old daughter, who was with a foster family in Indiana. She still believed that this country would look upon her suffering with compassion. And I too had faith in the United States and its laws. I remembered what I told my brother, Emiliano, as we were deciding to cross: For all its flaws, the United States justice system was as good as it gets on this here earth. But after ten days here, my faith was beginning to crack.

Now there were only four women ahead of me. Across from where I was standing was the room with the dozen or so telephones available to the detainees. They were operated via a card that you could buy at another classroom that had been converted into a small general store. The dollar a day you could earn at one of the jobs could be used to buy telephone time, or if you got desperate enough, you could spend your day's wage on a cold soda. I had an account where my father had deposited one hundred dollars when he visited me, so I did not need to work. Not for money anyway. I planned to give my dollar a day to Lucila so she could call her daughter. I needed to work for another reason: to keep my mind occupied and to keep away the nagging thought that no one in this country cared whether I lived or died.

I did not know how long a day could last until I came here. There was a round, white clock on the wall of the gym: The

longer you stared at its black hands, the slower they moved. One of the classrooms was a TV room where, depending on the guard on duty, we could watch telenovelas from a Mexican channel. Then there was the "arts and crafts" room, where you could color children's books with broken crayons. The day before yesterday, a group of ladies from the Fort Stockton Baptist Church brought yarn for knitting and pieces of cloth and thread for embroidery. When word got around, the line to get into the arts and crafts room was so long that the guards had to set up sign-up sheets and limit the time per person to one half hour.

As I stood by the door of the classroom that had been turned into the visitors' room, I could see the light blue vans that took women to El Paso for their asylum hearings before the judge. Those same vans also took women to the airport, where they boarded planes that would take them to San Salvador or Tegucigalpa or Guatemala City if their pleas were denied. If you were Mexican, then a green-and-white Border Patrol bus dropped you off at the nearest bridge to Mexico. If you happened to be granted asylum, you were on your own to find your way to freedom. Being asked to climb on one of those buses would be the equivalent of being taken to my death. But those light blue vans always made me think about Emiliano for some reason. Maybe they reminded me of Saturday mornings when Brother Patricio would come by our house with a van full of Jiparis on the way to a desert hike. Wes Morgan told me that Emiliano was rescued from near death in the desert by a rancher and that he was there now, waiting for Papá to pick him up. La prisión, as we liked to call the Fort Stockton

Detention Center, was still a safe place. Hinojosa could not get to me here. But I worried about Emiliano, out there with the cell phone. I was the one who decided to bring the cell phone with us, and now he was the one bearing all the risk.

"Number!"

La Treinta Y Cuatro sat behind a table, pen poised over a sheet of paper, glaring at me.

"What?"

"Your number?"

My number was written on a piece of tape attached to my chest. At Fort Stockton, we were called by the number assigned to our bed. "A-125," I said meekly. I knew from experience and from prison wisdom that submission was the best way to respond to La Treinta Y Cuatro. The *A* in my name meant that my bed was in the converted gym. The *125* meant that my bed was in the middle row of bunks where the air from the four corner fans never reached.

"Garbage."

"What?"

"You deaf? You sorda?"

"No. But I was interested in the interpreter's job. I saw the note outside the legal services room."

"Do you want to work or not? Because if you do, garbage is what we got."

I knew about the garbage job because I had seen women go around all areas of the FDC with giant, gray plastic garbage cans on wheels. I decided to try one more time. "There are very few women here who speak English. I could be more useful . . ."

"I could be more useful . . ." La Treinta Y Cuatro mimicked me. "Who do you think you are?"

"I don't think . . ."

"Work is a privilege. You want it or not?"

"I want it," I said, resigned.

"Go see Elva in the cafeteria. She'll tell you what to do."

That afternoon, Elva made the garbage rounds with me, and I became acquainted with the incredible amount of waste generated by people who do nothing all day except hope and wait and pray. My job encompassed emptying all waste receptacles in the facility, including kitchen, bathrooms, dormitories, and offices. I took the contents to a dumpster in the back. The strange thing is that as Elva showed me around, I couldn't wait to get started. I understood a little of what my brother must have felt back in Ciudad Juárez when he took off with his bike and trailer to collect cans on weekends. Yes, Treinta Y Cuatro, you were right, work is a privilege.

And work, I hoped, would keep my faith from breaking.