

Miguel Abrano's family owns a horse ranch in Arizona that has been passed down from the times of the conquistadors in 1535. Raised a Catholic, when 12-year-old Miguel suddenly learns that his ancestors were Jewish, his world seems to turn upside down. Rushing from the house, he becomes lost in the desert. Miguel is captured by a band of Apaches and, after a daring escape, meets Rushing Cloud, a Tohono O'odham youth who is running away from a mission school. As the boys travel toward home, Miguel learns to survive in the desert, but more importantly, he begins to see his heritage in a new light.

"A tale of a rite of passage for a young boy in the Desert Southwest as he embraces the knowledge of other cultures to overcome challenges to his sense of self-identity. Should serve as an inspiring lesson for us all."

—Angelo Joaquin Jr., Member, Coyote Clan, Tohono O'odham Nation

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WALK TILL YOU DISAPPEAR

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CHAPTER 1

Making Plans

“That’s a stupid story, Berto. You’re just trying to scare us,” Miguel said, buffing the silver incense burner until it gleamed.

Alberto put two fingers up against his head as if he had sprouted horns. He loomed over Miguel and scowled. “Beware of Israelites with devil’s horns,” he intoned in a deep voice. Miguel squirmed as his friend’s lanky body towered over him.

“You made that up,” Miguel insisted.

“It’s true, I swear,” Berto protested. “My father told me he’s seen them.”

“I don’t believe you, either,” Luis said with a nervous laugh. He looked toward the altar at the front of the church. “Let’s ask Father Ignacio. He’ll know.” The three friends approached quietly as the priest

swept sand from the floor around the low altar.

Miguel set the polished incense burner on a small table. “*Padre*,” he asked hesitantly, “is it true that Israelites have devil’s horns?”

The priest stopped in mid-sweep. “Where did you hear such a foolish tale?” he asked, his eyes widening a bit. He leaned against the handle of the straw broom and gazed at the boys from under his heavy eyelids. His face was long and thin, and creases ran from the sides of his nose down toward his drooping mouth. “While nonbelievers will be denied entrance to Heaven, they are not devils on Earth.”

Miguel punched his companion’s arm lightly. “I told you!” he exclaimed.

Berto shook his head. He lowered his voice and said ominously, “My father told me that he has seen them with his own eyes, *Padre*.”

“If your father saw such a thing, Alberto, it must have been in a dream. In any case, you have nothing to fear, for Jesus will protect you. Now, if you’ve finished your work for today, go on home—and no more tales.” The boys shuffled between the pews toward the church’s open door.

Stepping into the sunlight, Miguel gazed back into the cool shadows. Wooden statues of saints lined

the walls like silent sentinels. Miguel knew each familiar carved and painted figure, and felt each had its own personality. The saints always seemed to listen to every murmured prayer, standing in the haze of incense that burned inside the adobe mission.

Father Ignacio followed the boys outside. A small knot of Papago women walked along the plank sidewalk on Tucson's main street. They bent forward against the weight of the rope baskets that hung from a band across their foreheads and rested against their backs. The woven burden baskets were filled with earthen *ollas* to sell. The women's barefoot children followed behind, each carrying one or two of the empty water jugs. They would have many eager customers, since all the settlers in the territory depended on the clay jugs to keep water cool and fresh each day.

The women wore ragged, mismatched clothes, and the children were half naked, their skin coated with a thick layer of red desert dust. Miguel thought it seemed as if they, too, were made of clay. He pulled the brim of his straw hat lower over his eyes, trying to protect himself from the dust kicked up as they shuffled along the dry dirt road.

"*Hola, señoras,*" called the priest. "When the church bells announce Mass this Sunday, please come

and worship with us.” He forced a smile, but Miguel couldn’t help noticing that even when Father Ignacio smiled, his long face looked sad. The Papago women trudged past without a word, and the children stared at the boys with their round, dark eyes.

“Do you think they will come, *Padre*?” asked Luis.

The priest rubbed his thumb absently over the thick wooden cross that hung against his brown, cowled frock. His gray-streaked beard seemed to quiver. “It’s difficult persuading the natives to come to church. I must admit there are times when I begin to despair.”

“But you’ve already converted lots of them,” Miguel noted.

“Many of the peaceful Papago tribe have been baptized,” the priest agreed, “but they keep their heathen practices even while proclaiming their Christian faith.” Then he brightened. “But you are right, my son. At least they listen, and we will try to build a stronger devotion until they give up their superstitious ways.”

Miguel had heard Father Ignacio preach that non-believers were destined to spend eternity in the fires of hell. Prickles raced along the back of his neck. Still, he was certain that more and more of the

native people would accept the church's teachings. Those who did would be saved. *In this earthly life, they are heathens*, the priest often repeated, *but they have a chance to go to heaven in the next life.*

"I hope that someday I will become a priest," Miguel blurted out. "I can teach non-believers the truth." Berto and Luis exchanged a look of surprise, but Miguel knew they wouldn't dare tease him in front of Father Ignacio. It was time that his friends knew what Miguel hoped for.

Still, he couldn't escape remembering his father's discouraging words. *You don't belong in the church*, Miguelito, his father argued. *When you're older, you will understand.*

Miguel already understood what his father wanted from him. Papá only wanted Miguel to help run their horse ranch. As much as he loved the excitement of raising horses, the work was never-ending. Somehow, the quiet calm of the church drew him in. He imagined the satisfaction of saving souls. Why couldn't his father see that was more important than training horses?

Miguel snapped back from his concerns when he heard the priest's voice. "Becoming a priest isn't an easy decision. You must be patient," Father

Ignacio advised. "If God calls, you will know it in your heart."

Miguel watched the Papagos disappear around a bend in the road, their clay *ollas* clinking as they shifted in the burden bag. "I'll light a candle on Sunday and pray for their salvation," he offered.

Father Ignacio put his hand on Miguel's shoulder. "My little *padre*," he murmured. "Perhaps you do have a calling." Miguel fought a fleeting surge of pride. Still, Papá was not proud of Miguel's plans. It seemed he was always disappointing his father.

The priest smiled and stretched his arms wide, as if enveloping the three boys. "I am blessed to have such reliable altar boys. Be sure to come early on Sunday. There will be plenty to do before Mass."

"I—I don't know how early I can get here," Miguel stammered. "My brothers, or a ranch hand . . . that is, I have to wait for someone to ride with me."

"Why don't you bunk with me this weekend?" Luis offered. "Then you'll already be in town and we'll get to church early."

"But today is Friday," Miguel explained. "You know Mamá makes a big dinner on Friday nights. I have to be there." He shrugged. "You can't imagine how Mamá fusses if one of us is even a minute late!"

Father Ignacio looked intently at Miguel. “So, Fridays are the big meal of the week,” he said evenly.

“With silver candlesticks, a lace tablecloth, and our best dishes,” Miguel added. “Mamá and our housekeeper Carmella cook and bake on Friday mornings as if it was a holiday. By Saturday, my mother is so tired that she just rests on the porch, and we eat whatever is left over for dinner.”

Miguel untied his chestnut mare from the hitching post and rubbed her nose gently. “*Vámanos, Alma,*” he said, leading the horse by the reins. “*Adiós, Padre.*”

The boys walked briskly along the rutted road. “You’re so lucky to be able to ride every day,” Luis said. His brown eyes sparkled beneath his floppy hat brim. “I wish I lived on a ranch, instead of over a store. The only time I get to ride is when my father sends me across town on the mule to deliver a sack of chicken feed.” He scuffed his boot against the ground, kicking up a small mound of sand.

“But my father never lets me ride alone,” Miguel complained. “He keeps telling me that when I turn thirteen I will be a man, but I’m almost thirteen and he still treats me like a baby. I’m already too old to have someone riding shotgun every time I leave the ranch.”

“I guess your father’s worried about Apaches,” Luis said. “That’s why my family opened their store inside Tucson’s walls.”

“Being in town is much safer,” Berto said emphatically, but Miguel thought the horse ranch was safe enough. Apaches were only interested in stealing stallions, and they certainly wouldn’t want Alma. The mare barely plodded along.

“I’m not afraid of Apaches,” he boasted. “I could outride them anytime.”

The boys continued along Main Street, skirting the low adobe buildings that all needed a fresh coat of paint. Soon Berto turned in at his family’s café, its faded gingham curtains shading the lower portion of each window. The door to the café was open, and heat radiated from the wood cooking stove inside. A hand-lettered sign on the door read, “No Indians Allowed!” Miguel wondered if Berto’s father would keep out Israelites too.

“*Adiós, amigo,*” Miguel called, lapsing back into the comfort of Spanish.

Luis loosened the top buttons on his shirt. “I hope it’s not this hot on Sunday,” he said as they continued on. “It’s stifling for April!”

The boys kept to the side of the road as wagons

loaded with supplies rattled past. Women in long skirts and wide-brimmed bonnets bustled in and out of the few shops along Main Street, carrying their purchases in straw baskets. Before long, Luis climbed the outside stairway that led to his family's rooms over their feed store.

He waved down to Miguel. "*Hasta Domingo!* See you Sunday!"

Miguel swung his leg up over the saddle and settled on his mare. He pushed his knees against her flanks, but Alma wouldn't be hurried. She plodded past the Park Brewery saloon, seemingly deaf to the raucous laughter and tinkling piano music from within.

"Eh, Miguel, what you think?" called a gravelly voice. Miguel pulled Alma to a halt. "Whoa, girl," he said.

Charlie Meyer stood on the edge of the street scrutinizing his shop window. Doc Meyer had moved to Arizona Territory from Germany and was the town's pharmacist as well as its justice of the peace. Although he wasn't really a doctor, everyone in Tucson willingly gave him the title for his ability to mix a potion to ease almost any ailment.

Miguel stared at the apothecary shop. Two large glass globes filled the window and reflected the

bright sunlight. One ball was rosy red and the other a deep sky blue. The mysterious globes captivated Miguel. “They’re beautiful, Doc. What are they?”

“Blown glass,” the pharmacist said proudly. “They came all the way from Cally-for-nya in a wagon train without so much as a little crack!” He hooked his thumbs into his vest pockets. “It’s a new idea to bring in the business. Once word gets around, people will come to my shop just to see them.”

“But you’re the only apothecary in Tucson,” Miguel chuckled. “Where else could people go if they get sick?”

The pharmacist shrugged and stepped up onto the sidewalk so he was face-to-face with Miguel as he sat astride his horse. “Your Papá invites me tonight for dinner. Don Miguel says Friday night is your Mamá’s best cooking of all the week.” He flashed a mischievous grin beneath his bushy moustache. “Maybe a little poker we’ll play afterwards, eh?”

“*Excelente!*” Miguel said, falling back into Spanish. It would always be his first language and came out whenever he got excited. “*Hasta la vista*—see you later!”

Miguel wondered how Fridays came to be the festive meal of the week at his home, instead of