

Chapter One

Diego knew the dragon was alive the moment he touched it. Even though only a statue, and only eighteen inches tall, Diego felt a pulsing heartbeat when he accepted it from the author. The fiery blood racing through the sculpture almost burned his hand when he took hold of it.

Oddly, the man who gave it to him didn't seem affected by the life force surging through the statue. He was nice enough; after all, he had come to his school, stayed there all day and given him a cool dragon. Diego could tell the man loved the statue; he stroked the scales as he told the students so more than once during his talks. If he had felt what Diego had when he first touched it, he never would have parted with it.

The author shook Diego's hand, congratulating him in front of everyone in the library. Being a shy boy at heart, this startled Diego somewhat. However, he held his breath, looked the man straight in the eye, and thanked him with a smile. He reached forward, grabbing the statue at its base. A second later, he felt the energy rush forth from the dragon's legs. He looked at the author one last time and saw the man wink once before turning away. He walked to the desk to speak with the school librarian and the library tech. Diego found himself surrounded by a swarm of interested students.

"Diego, can I hold him?"

"Mijo, let me check it out."

"He's awesome! What will you name him?"

Diego set the handsome dragon down on a table in the center of the library. Two dozen hands reached out to touch the perfectly cut scales, the sharp teeth, the fanned wings. He allowed his classmates to touch his new prize, but he stayed close nonetheless. He felt a strange attraction to the dragon.

The eyes seemed to follow him wherever he went. Although none of the other students mentioned the dragon's gaze, Diego watched as the stunning, black eyes stared back at him with increasing interest. He moved in and out of the students swarming around the table, just to see if the tiny eyes would track him. As he stalked his prey, he watched to see if his dragon might wink at him.

He ran right into Racquel Carrillo, the prettiest girl in the whole school.

"I, I'm s-sorry," he said, stumbling over his words. Racquel's delicate brown eyes swallowed him whole. He lost the capacity to think. He looked at her, trying his best not to look foolish.

"That's okay, Diego," she said, looking at him playfully. Her smile nearly made him pass out. "He's a very fine dragon. Have you decided what his name will be?"

He recovered quickly, standing strong before her. "No, it will have to be a great name, so I want to wait a while and see what pops into my mind."

"How about Magnifico?"

He stared into her eyes, saying nothing.

"It's okay, Diego," she said, "just do me a favor and tell me his name when you figure it out."

"I will, I promise."

She waved and smiled. Diego felt his knees turn to jelly all over again. He wanted her to look back. He watched her so intently he barely heard Mrs. Coble calling to him.

"Diego!" she yelled for the fourth time. "Come over here with your dragon. We have to get some pictures. Aren't you excited? You'll be in the newspaper."

Diego reached through the crowd of students, wrapped his fingers around the dragon's body, and left a crowd of unhappy admirers in his wake. Some of them left the library; others followed him over to the desk.

"Now, we want to get a few pictures of you alone with the dragon," said Mrs. Coble, "and then of course some pictures of you with Mr. Sullivan."

The students began ribbing Diego about his sudden stardom. He took it well, but now that Racquel had left, he just wanted to go home. He couldn't get her out of his head.

"Smile, Diego," said Mrs. Coble, alarming him. "Hold your dragon up. Good, now once again, smile for the camera."

The picture session seemed to drag on for a month, first by himself, then with some friends, with Mrs. Coble, with Mr. Sullivan and Mrs. Coble, and finally a few with some other students. Diego began to get bored until he stood next to Mr. Sullivan for a set of pictures.

Unlike before, when he gave him the statue, this time Diego heard disturbing sounds that were either coming from his dragon or from Sullivan. He couldn't really tell which. He heard many dragons crying out close by, some happy, some terrified, some even wailing with anguish. The roars were light enough so that only Diego and Sullivan could hear them. When his picture session ended, Diego looked up at the man's face. He swore he saw flames flickering within his eyes. He stared, bewildered, as Sullivan smiled down at him.

At last, Mrs. Coble dismissed him.

Grabbing his backpack, he ran through the building and out into the quad. Moving from sunlight to darkness, and then to brightness again, Diego pushed through the gate that led to the street. He peered into the crowds of students waiting for their parents to pick them up. Then he looked through the windows of all the cars waiting in line.

He didn't see Racquel anywhere. He stood on the sidewalk with the dragon in one hand and his backpack in the other. He looked one last time and then backed up toward the gate. Leaning his body against the warm bars, he looked down at his new friend.

"If you can make her talk to me again, I'll keep you forever."

The dragon stared straight up into the sky, looking very much like a piece of molded plaster. The eyes no longer sought out Diego's gaze and the boy felt no heat coming from its body. Perhaps it was just a statue. In the excitement of the moment, Diego must have fed upon his own dreams and desires.

He saw his father's truck turn into the school driveway. Diego waved him over, walking toward the old Ford F-150 pickup. Unzipping his backpack as he went, he carefully stuffed the statue in the large compartment next to his books. He started closing the flap when he felt the zipper pulling against his hand. His backpack shook, quivering as if a cat was inside trying to escape. He tried slinging it over his back, but he couldn't maneuver it against the strange vibrations. As he neared his father's truck, he unzipped the main compartment again. The shaking stopped and the dragon sat inside the pocket, completely still.

"Mijo, qué pasa?" asked his father.

Diego lifted the statue out of his backpack and slung the loose bag over his shoulder. He opened the squeaky door of his father's truck and carefully climbed inside.

"What do you have there, Mijo?" asked his father.

"I won it at school today, Papa. It's a statue of a dragon. Doesn't he look fierce?"

"Si, muy furioso," he replied. "He is a very handsome fellow, as well, muy guapo."

"All of the students wanted it. A writer came to school today and gave out the prize for the best essay for the whole school district! I won. Can you believe it?"

As Diego's father pulled onto the surface street, he ruffled his son's hair. He felt so proud of him. "Really? That's terrific, mijo! You never cease to amaze your mother and me. First, you win the school math competition, then you make the honor roll, you bring home wonderful grades every year, and now this? Do you think maybe we should have a party, eh, a fiesta to celebrate little Diego's good fortune?"

"Papa, I'm not little anymore. I'm in the fifth grade. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Sorry, mijo," said his father. "You're my youngest child, my little niño. I don't ever want you to grow up."

"How come, Papa?"

"Because, you're my little Diego, don't you see? You're my son, but you'll always be my little Diego!" He rubbed his hair again.

Diego smiled. The old Ford rumbled down the road toward his neighborhood. He looked over at the man driving the truck. He felt lucky. He loved his Dad a lot.

Chapter Two

The day had started innocently enough. An announcement signaled Diego's winning entry from the month long, school-sponsored writing contest.

"May I have your attention, please? The winner of the author's dragon statue is Diego Ramirez!"

He'd written a gripping paper about World Cup soccer tournaments and how the competition instilled pride in the populations of countries around the world. At the end of his

essay, he shared a personal story about his family's love of the Mexican national team, and of how he hoped to meet the players some day. Diego's principal sent his story to the local paper with a personal request for an article to appear the day they announced the winner.

The buzz about which student would write the best essay had been building for weeks. Each time a new class entered the library, the students walked by the dark, smoky statuette. Whispered compliments shot forth as each student glanced at the prize.

"Cool!"

"Awesome claws!"

"I hope I win it!"

The dragon stood about fourteen inches tall. The scales coiled closely around the body of the beast. The wings, flared out to their fullest extension, created a sense that the dragon would take flight at any moment. The column of spikes on the back of its head revealed a line of imposing weapons. The dragon's gaping mouth, filled with giant, tapering teeth, seemed to be calling out to an unknown master. He struck a handsome pose, gripping his pedestal with powerful claws.

Diego recalled how the author, Nathan Sullivan, told the story of how he brought the statue to the district offices as an enticement for students to enter the contest. He explained that

it had sat on his desk the entire time he wrote his latest fantasy series. He'd considered it somewhat of a muse, for every time he got stuck he would always look into the dragon's frozen gaze and receive inspiration.

He told the children that the library services director had given him the idea to bring the statue along when he visited the schools. Diego remembered Mr. Sullivan talking about reading her email and the moment he'd caught sight of the fine-looking dragon. Sitting quietly on his desk, the black beast seemed to tremble with excitement at the prospect of traveling to meet the students.

He told them he'd left it up to his dragon. "You really want to go?" he had asked. "After all these years, do you really want to leave me?"

He said the dragon stared at him with an unwavering eye. The wings, although frozen on its body, appeared ready to come alive if he commanded. As he stared at his old friend, Sullivan had sensed something amazing. It looked alive, almost vibrating with anticipation. It seemed as though it was ready to fly to the schools on its own if he decided not to take it along with him.

"All right," he had said, showing the students how he'd stroked the scaly nose. "I'll miss you, but we'll see if some young writer can find inspiration with you on his or her desk."

He said at that moment the vibration ceased. The dragon's wings settled. It stared at him, and the author told them he'd seen a playful grin appear on its rigid face.