

## Chapter 1

# Maribella

Maribella Chicata Gomez sat with her back against the rock. She came to this rock every day. She liked to sit there because she could see the mountain on the other side of the valley. She liked to look at the trail that climbed to the top of the mountain. Sometimes, after rain, a rainbow appeared above the trail. The beautiful colours of the rainbow lit up the sky. *One day I will walk up that trail, she said to herself. I will walk to the top of the mountain and into the rainbow.*

This was Maribella's dream.

The sky was becoming dark. Maribella stood up and walked down the hill. The sheep were eating grass. She called to them. They heard her and began to move towards home.

Maribella walked slowly behind them. It took ten minutes to walk home. She opened the door to her house. It was not a big house. There was only one room. The floor and the walls were made of earth. There were two chairs, a table and one bed, where Maribella and her mother Luz both slept. A lamp hung from the ceiling. At one end of the room was a fireplace, where Maribella and Luz cooked.

Maribella sat down at the table. She took some potatoes from a bag and began washing them in a bowl of water. Her mother had made a fire in the fireplace and was making soup in a large pot. Maribella began cutting the potatoes with a knife. Luz turned to look at her. Maribella could see that her mother had been crying.

'I want to leave this place,' said Luz. 'The people here are bad.'

Maribella knew what had happened. She often heard her mother talk like this.



‘What did they say?’ asked Maribella.

‘Señor Ninantay said that I must be a bad mother,’ Luz replied.

This wasn’t all that Señor Ninantay had said. He had said that Luz must be a bad mother because she had an ugly child. But Luz kept the last part to herself. She didn’t want Maribella to hear that.

‘Mama, you know you’re not a bad mother.’

‘I know, but it makes me angry and...’

Luz was cutting an onion. She threw the onion into the pot. She had tears in her eyes.

‘Onions always make me cry,’ she said.

Maribella went to her mother and took her hand.

Maribella was thin, and she was much shorter than other fourteen-year-old girls. It was her humpback that made her short. Her back was not straight like other children’s backs. It looked as if something was growing out of it.

The other villagers thought Maribella was ugly. They said she was cursed. They said she had a humpback because her mother was bad. Why did Maribella’s father leave one morning to work in the fields and never return? It was because Luz was a bad wife and mother. This was what the villagers believed. They said Luz had put a curse on her own daughter.

Luz knew it wasn’t true. When villagers said these nasty things to her she replied, ‘My daughter has a big heart. That is why her back is like that. One day she will do something special. You’ll see.’

Luz and Maribella sat at the table and ate the potato soup. Luz thought about what Señor Ninantay had said to her. ‘It will be good when your ugly child dies,’ he had said. ‘Maybe the curse will die with her.’

Luz looked at her daughter across the table and began to

cry again. *What if Maribella does die?* she thought. *Will the villagers stop saying nasty things? Will life in the village be better?* These thoughts made her cry harder. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps she was a bad mother. She took Maribella's hand and said, 'You are my only child. I don't want anything to happen to you.'

'Nothing will happen, Mama.'

'You are very special. You know that.'

Maribella did know it. Her mother had told her many times. Her big heart and her humpback made her special. She could do things that no other children could do.

Nothing more was said that night. They went to bed. Luz held her daughter close to her and they fell asleep.