

Chapter 1

Charlie el Gritano

~Yaretzi~
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The first time I saw Charlie, or Carlitos el Gritano, as we often called him, was the summer that I was nine. El Gritano was one of the few white people in the neighborhood, with skin as pale as a corpse's, or so it seemed. His thick, ink-black hair fell down over his eyes and down to his shoulders. We certainly didn't perpetuate this image of him because he was one of the few *gringos* that lived in the area: it was because people hardly *ever* saw him, and no one had ever spoken to him or heard him speak. He was this gloomy apparition that haunted the streets, seeming to appear at random, mostly around sunset, some said, and his home was this run-down ranch house with chipped green paint and a yard of dried out grass and dirt patches. Tall, lean as a skeleton, he looked like a walking ghost, and no one had ever seen his parents. At least, that is what the mothers whispered amongst themselves. Some say he had murdered his parents and buried their remains under the house. Another rumor was that he had eaten them and drunk their blood. Rumor had it that howls could be heard from his house late at night, hence his nickname, El Gritano, or the Howling One. Either way, my sister Dayanara loved to dare me to walk down to his house at night, and that was all she needed to do to make my skin crawl with goosebumps.

El Gritano had been a chilling phantasm in my imagination as a little girl, but that night, the night of the family barbeque when I actually saw him, made him real. He was no longer a ghostly rumor. He was now an undeniable fact.

A whole pig was boiling in a large, bronze pot for the carnitas, filling the backyard with the sweet fragrance of its cooking meat. Papá and Tío Ignacio stood by the pot, laughing as they talked and drank Dos Equis. My sister Dayanara, my mother, my cousin Julia, and I were making the salsa, chopping homegrown tomatoes, cilantro, onions, and jalapeños. The song "*De Pies a Cabeza*" filled the air, one of my favorites songs ever since I was a little girl. Maná, the band that recorded this song, got their start in Guadalajara, where my parents are from, and so their music held a particular resonance for me.

Then, as Mamá was about to grind the ingredients together in a blender, I looked up and saw him. He was staring at us from across the chain link fence that divided the yards. His appearance was so sudden, so unexpected, that I let out a little gasp and dropped the knife. The gaze from his icy blue eyes was so intent, like those of a lonely, hungry ghost. I shivered.