



Roots That Reach the Stars

A NOVEL

DEBUT NOVEL

DARLING JIMENEZ

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Palma and Ink, LLC



Prologue

Behind our two-bedroom house in Villa Mella, there was a mango tree that towered over everything else. It was tall and lush with leaves that glistened in the sun. From March through September, it produced mangoes that then became a staple of our diet.

I ate them at every stage. Green first, split open and dusted with lime and salt, sour enough to make me wince. Then ripe, when the flesh turned soft and golden, and the fruit couldn't hold its sweetness in.

When I was five, I learned to climb the tree carefully. Halfway up, I could pause and see the neighborhood below—dozens of colorful one-story houses stretching into the distance. From up there, the world looked endless, filled with possibilities.

The roots of the mango tree ran deep beneath the earth, cracking stones as if they were searching for space to breathe.

The mangoes were small, no bigger than my fist, but when you bit into one, sweet juice spilled down your chin like honey. That tree wasn't just part of our yard. It felt like part of the island itself.

Each morning, I pressed my forehead to the cool metal bars of my window, watching the mango leaves tremble in the breeze as if the tree woke with the sun. I dressed quickly in my uniform—a beige romper with a school patch and a light blue blouse—careful not to disturb the two pigtails my mother had secured with colorful bubble-bead ties.

Mami would often tell me stories as she worked my hair into submission. She'd talk about how the tree had been there before the roads, before the neighbors, before everything.

"These roots," she whispered. "They're older than our memories."

Quietly, slowly, the roots of the mango tree pushed beneath our living-room tiles. One morning, I stepped into the living room and felt the floor shift under my heel. A long ridge had risen across the room, like the earth itself was breaking through.

Papi paced back and forth, phone pressed to his ear, voice swinging between anger and worry.

"What do you mean, nothing can be done? There has to be a way."
A pause.

"Cut down the tree? I don't know..."

The contractor was steady. "A tree like that isn't easy to remove. You can trim the roots, but they'll return. The safest option is to cut it down, remove the trunk, and grind the stump."

The word *grind* landed like a stone.

"What about chemicals?" Papi asked.

The contractor paused. "We could use them, but they aren't safe. They kill the soil, and sometimes they don't even work."

A poison that might fail.

Papi's shoulders sagged as he hung up. The click echoed through the quiet room.

Mami stood by the window, arms crossed, jaw tight. “¿Y qué vamos a hacer?” she asked. *What are we going to do?* “No podemos dejar que destruya la casa.”

We can't let it destroy the house.

For days, they argued in hushed tones. At dinner, forks scraped against chipped plates, and the air felt heavy. We stayed quiet, tasting the tension with every bite of rice and beans.

In the end, the decision was made. The tree had to fall.

A few days later, trucks rumbled down our street. The contractor arrived with a crew carrying saws, axes, and loud grinding machines. The smell of gasoline mixed with the sweet scent of mango.

The chainsaw screamed. Branches crashed to the ground. Sawdust covered Papi's shoes. Mami clutched her apron so tightly her knuckles turned white.

When the last limb fell, Mami dropped to her knees in the dirt. With trembling hands, she gathered fallen mangoes into the fold of her skirt. One mango, golden and warm, she pressed against her chest.

A tear slid down her cheek.

“Estos serán los últimos mangos que comeremos de este árbol,” she whispered. *These will be the last mangoes we ever eat from this tree.*

I stood beside her, feeling her sorrow settle over the yard like evening shadow.

Inside, the house looked wounded. The tiles were gone, the earth exposed. Where the roots had cracked through, the floor gaped open — something broken that no one could quite explain.

Three months later, suitcases lined the hallway.

Mami checked my backpack once more, smoothed my hair, then kissed my forehead and took my hand as she looked out to the backyard where we had shared so many moments.

The tree was cut down, only the stump remained, its rings exposed like an open scar, counting the years of everything it had outlasted.

Mami hugged our father and then embraced us for a long moment before stepping out the door. I ran after her without thinking, but my father held me back.

She looked at us the way you look at something you are trying to memorize. Not the way you say goodbye. The way you say: "Remember *me*, and promised *I'll be back*."

But then she kept walking. The distance between us grew and grew until I couldn't read her face anymore. Until the tears made everything blurry.

I didn't understand it then. I am sure that I understand it now.