

Chapter 1

Hector Mendez could hardly believe his good fortune, for on this lucky day he was being paid—well paid—simply to drive a truckload of furniture for a few hours. It was so much easier than picking green beans in Belle Glade, he thought he would ask for more work later, even though the man who hired him seemed to have *amenaza*, a menace, about him.

The truck was loud and the steering wheel vibrated nervously from every seam in the concrete interstate. Almost to his destination now according to the map, he took the next exit off I-95 and went east toward the ocean on Speedway Boulevard, felt the immense weight of the truck behind him as it leaned on the turn like an overloaded bus back home.

He checked his side view mirrors. The black pickup was still behind him, same speed, same distance. Everything the same.

Already the beach traffic was thick and slow, but he did not mind driving the truck into the clogged heart of Daytona Beach. He would get to see the *chicas* wearing their bikinis on the sidewalks outside the big hotels. The American *chicas* in heat, slim and sunburned, with their yellow hair.

Like the man in the pickup who hired him said, it's an easy job. Drive to the Tropical Fiesta Hotel, help unload the furniture, drive the truck back to Jacksonville, and he would be paid double to ensure the truck's return. Double! Two hundred dollars for such easy work. It was his luckiest day yet since he waded across the great river into America.

Yet the day had started out the same as so many others. Up at dawn, dressed and out the door in minutes. Hurrying to the front of the trailer park, he jumped over tire ruts in the muddy driveway near the main road where, beside the Laundromat, the gravel parking lot was already filled with young men. Then the waiting began, the milling about with other migrants in the gray light, sipping coffee from the convenience store, hoping for a *gringo* to drive by who needed workers.

Every day except Sunday it was the same way. Dozens of Mexicans, mostly new arrivals, gathered outside the Laundromat and store, waiting in the parking lot for hours, all wanting the same thing, all hoping for a job to appear. Some days, a few of them got work digging septic tanks or picking up trash, stacking lumber, perhaps working on a roof with a hammer.

Most days, nothing, but today was different.

The pickup had appeared a little after eight, a black Ford with dark tinted windows and big tires. Fortunately, it stopped alongside Hector when no one else was nearby. He had stopped near the road to tie his shoe when the driver's side window buzzed down a few inches, and Hector saw a man inside wearing a cowboy hat and sunglasses. The cowboy had reddish, freckled skin and old scars around his mouth.

Hector looked up and the man spoke first. "*Hola, amigo.*"

"*Hola.*"

“Habla Ingles?”

Hector said, “Yes.”

“You got a driver’s license?”

“Yes,” Hector lied. “Here.” He patted his hip pocket to make the point. Some of the other young men were already moving toward the truck.

“You want to make some easy money?”

“Yes.”

“Then climb in.”

Hector jumped into the bed of the pickup and sat down, his back against the cab, happy to beat the others to the job. Since he came up from Belle Glade to stay with his cousin in south Jacksonville, he’d had very little work, had no cash to send home to his mother in Coahuila. His cousin said he could get him a job busing tables in the restaurant where he worked, but before Hector even arrived his cousin had been fired for fighting. So far, all Hector had was a place to sleep, sharing the trailer with eight other men.

Twenty minutes later, the pickup pulled into a self storage center and rolled slowly past the long buildings of aluminum to the back where boats and RV’s sat in rows, parked in an area surrounded by a high chain-link fence. The pickup stopped at a truck with huge letters on the side, which Hector could not understand completely because he did not know the word “Haul” but he knew it was a rental truck from the bright orange color of the body. The truck was about ten meters long with double wheels in the rear, built to carry a heavy load.

“Can you drive this truck, amigo?” The man spoke to him through the open sliding glass window at the back of the cab.

“Yes, I can drive.”

“Okay, amigo.” The voice was slow and calm, the way white men sounded near the border in Texas. Something about the man’s authority made Hector wary of him, same as the bosses in the vegetable fields who cheated you at every opportunity, but to Hector’s surprise the man passed him fifty dollars, keys to the truck, and a map through the tiny window in the rear of the cab. Hector took them and stood, looked inside the cab, but all he could see was the back of the man’s hat.

“Just drive slow and steady to the hotel. It’s all marked on the map. Don’t stop or pull off the road. The gas tank’s full and the back has a heavy duty lock on it, so you couldn’t get in there even if you tried. I’ll give you the key to open the back when we get there. Got all that?”

“Better if I follow you, then—“

The man’s voice cut him off like a blade.

“We’re going to do it just the way I said, amigo. I drive right behind you the whole way, make sure you do what you’re supposed to. Stay on the route that’s marked on the map. Any problem, just turn on the emergency flashers and we’ll pull over together. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Hector jumped to the ground, looked at the keys in his hand. The driver’s window slid down a few inches and the big sunglasses moved closer to the gap.

“One last thing, amigo.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let me down.”

Hector understood his meaning. Do it right, and I’ll give you the rest of your pay, maybe more work. Do it wrong, and there will be trouble. Something about the man’s voice suggested trouble, but that was okay by Hector. He would do it right, would not give the man cause for

anger, would not have to pull the knife he kept taped to his lower leg underneath his pants. He went to the orange and white truck and unlocked the door, started it with no problem and swung the rig in a big arc out of the storage yard.

Two hours later, Hector took a long bridge over the Intracoastal and found himself in the midst of the beach district. He turned left on A1A in front of a turquoise building with a roofline curved to look like ocean waves; palm trees grew close against the walls. In his mirrors the black pickup was still there, same speed as Hector, everything the same since they left Jacksonville.

He stopped at a red light and glanced at the map spread out on the seat beside him. Next, he would pass the signs for the pier, then take a right on Main. The light turned green, but the traffic barely moved. Everywhere he looked there were people clogging the streets, mainly students in their baggy shorts and caps, wearing sandals and tee shirts. They took their time in the crosswalks, ignoring the signals as if they were kings.

The young men mostly traveled in groups, paused at the bars and looked inside where music blared from the open doorways—the rap the black people made, with its thumping bass sounds and rhyming chants. He wished he could hear a Mariachi band at this moment, but he'd discovered the radio in the truck did not work.

The traffic inched forward and he watched the car ahead when it moved, but when the cars stopped, he turned his eyes back to the sidewalks. Oh, the *senoritas* were too much. Hundreds of them, on break from school. Young and smooth skinned, they wore tiny tops and showed all their bellies and legs, acting as if they didn't care, but oh, the strut they put on when they passed a gang of the young men told the truth. A few words and laughs passed between the groups, then the *muchachos* started to act up, make lewd moves with their bodies.

Hector oozed forward with the traffic and watched people go in and out of the beach shops, the shops with bathing suits and hats, sunglasses and plastic water toys. He wondered if he could make enough money to come back to this place later with his cousin. They could wander the streets, shoot pool and drink beer. Maybe some of the *gringas* would talk to them.

Then he saw it ahead to his right, saw the words Tropical Fiesta on the side of the hotel, then the parking lot entrance on Main appeared and he made a wide turn into the lot. The building was many stories tall, with glass walls and balconies. He had never stayed in such a place.

He drove down the rows of parked cars, looking for the loading dock, finally saw a sign that said “Trucks” and an arrow pointing toward a concrete ramp. Yes, the loading dock was over there, though it was mostly obscured by a wall of vegetation.

Beyond a row of palm trees and oleanders, he heard the sounds of a swimming pool, water splashing and loud music, hundreds of voices yelling and screaming their fun. An inflated balloon, shaped and painted like a giant can of Light beer floated over the area on a tether.

A deejay’s voice boomed from speakers, “—wet T-shirt contest coming at ya’ in a few—”

A quick blast from the horn of the pickup behind him broke his thoughts. He looked in the driver’s side-view mirror and saw the man who hired him motioning him to stop. The man’s hand extended through the open window to signal him—stop and come back here the hand waved.

Hector put the truck in park, left the engine running, opened the door and jumped to the asphalt. He hurried back to the pickup, looked into the opening at the driver’s window. The dark sunglasses and black cowboy hat appeared.

“Good job, amigo.” The man’s voice was low and authoritative as before.

“Yes. And now?”

The man passed a sizable key on a big chrome ring to Hector. “This key unlocks the back. Drive down to the loading dock and wait on a man to open the hotel doors from the inside. He’ll show you where to back up to the dock and he’ll bring help to unload the furniture.”

“Okay.”

“And amigo, don’t open the back of the truck till they come out. We don’t want anybody stealing this furniture. You stay with the truck no matter what. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, amigo, I’ll be over there in a few minutes. Now get rolling.”

Hector walked back to the cab and climbed up into the seat, put the truck in gear. He drove slowly up the ramp, decided to make the turn and back up to the dock himself. He knew how to do it. He swung the truck around, then backed up carefully to put the rear door square to the dock. He eased the truck into position using the side-view mirrors, got it good and close, then stopped and shifted into park. Good, he thought, better to get it done while the dock was clear.

Hector shut the truck down, looked over at the lot and saw that the black pickup was gone. He wondered if the cowboy had some drugs in the back with the furniture; the man was so careful about everything. No matter, the drive was over now. No police, no problems. The cowboy must have gone inside to get the help. Maybe Hector wouldn’t have to wait long. After all, this was his lucky day.

Five minutes passed and Hector sat with the window down and watched the oleanders, their white blooms swaying, their thick leaves blocking his view of the pool. He smelled suntan oil on the breeze. The laughter and shouts enticed him and occasionally he caught a glimpse of

bare flesh through the palm fronds. Oh, how he would like to be over there right now, with a beer in his hand, watching the *chicas* prance.

“Hey!” A voice shouted from behind the truck. Hector looked back, saw a man in a hotel uniform with a clipboard in his hand.

Hector pulled the door latch and climbed down. He left the door open, didn’t notice the wind snatching the map and paperwork off the seat and carrying them away in the hot, steady sea breeze. “Hello,” he said to the hotel man.

“What are you doing here?”

“Delivery. Furniture.”

The hotel man looked at his clipboard. “I don’t see that on the schedule. Who are you with?”

Hector did not understand. He climbed a set of concrete steps up to the dock, went to the back of the truck. “I have furniture.”

The hotel man kept his eyes on the clipboard, riffled through the papers on it. “I don’t get it. Where is it from?”

“Jacksonville.”

“I’d better check inside, but for now, you’ve got to leave the dock.”

“Wait.” Hector dug into his pocket for the heavy key. “I show you.” He inserted the chrome plated key into the lock on the back door. It opened easily. He removed the lock and grabbed the door handle, pulled up hard. The door flew upward on its rollers, and he heard a snap, an electrical sound.

For a split second, Hector’s brain took a photo of the things inside the storage compartment. Huge plastic barrels stacked to the ceiling on metal racks—blue barrels with

names of chemicals on them. Wires running between the barrels. Piles of nails. A row of batteries wired together.

“Que es—”

A groan, or perhaps a scream, came from the hotel man beside him.

Then Hector heard a sizzling sound, a small bang from the equipment. Next, he felt intense heat rush out in a blinding flame as it tore his molecules apart. He had no last thought as his brain and all of his body disappeared, incinerated to nothingness in a millisecond.