

A large, expressive red brushstroke graphic, resembling a heart or a splash of paint, is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the cover. It has a textured, painterly appearance with varying shades of red and pink.

D The
Dishwasher's
SON

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By
Mike J. Quinn

The Dishwasher's Son

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Part I

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To the Mexi-Quinns

This book is dedicated to my family, and all other multi-national families around the world who are struggling to preserve their family bond in a rapidly changing and often inhospitable political environment.

When I got married over seven years ago, it was to a Mexican citizen who had three wonderful kids. I had two of my own, so together we constituted a modern-day Brady bunch. Since part of my family was Mexican, and the other part Quinns, we became the Mexi-Quinns.

I love my family very much, but there's a small community of Americans that would just as soon split us up and send some of my family back to Mexico. Don't ask me why. They've never met us, and if they did they would never guess we weren't all Americans. We're just like everybody else.

The last estimate I read was there were probably 3 million other American families just like mine, living here in the U.S.A. We have been fighting to get permanent status for our undocumented family members for decades, but because our immigration laws are so antiquated and the people who are in charge of fixing them work so hard to keep them just as they are, there seems little hope of fixing this problem. Until we do, our families will be under constant threat of separation and destruction.

This book is dedicated to us.

"What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." (Mark 10:9)

A special thanks goes out to Lari Quinn and Leslie Waters for their tireless work copyediting this novel.

About the Book

The usual disclaimer: any similarity between a character in this book and anyone living or dead is purely a coincidence.

Although no one person was responsible for any character in this book, the characters and their experiences were not solely wrought from my imagination. Often, during the course of writing of this novel, a news event would present a better solution to a problem I had just been wrestling with.

Reality appears to be far more creative than I. (This may also explain the Reality TV phenomenon that has been sweeping the nation for the past several years. Hollywood script writers may have just given up trying to compete with real life.)

This has been quite a humbling experience. I have worked on this book for over two and a half years and I thought I knew where the story was going, but no sooner had I laid down a logical and realistic scene that moved to plot forward, I would hear in the news a situation that fit even better. Never mind that the news article sounded well beyond the realm of reality.

American citizens accidentally being deported? I never would have believed such an idea, had I not read about it in the news, and had I not actually Googled this piece of insanity to check its source and authenticity. I certainly would never have included it in the book. It's too far-fetched for even a novelist to present to an audience and still hope to have them find it remotely believable. As it turns out, this was the PERFECT way to get an Arizona border guard vigilante to the wrong side of the border, and since it had actually happened (apparently several times), I had to use it.

When I finished the book I sent it out to some proof readers to check for mistakes. When one of the readers told me they liked the story but it was too unreal a situation for him to believe, I was dumbfounded. So now I have to write this preface to explain that this in fact does happen. This book is chock-full of irony.

So, back to the disclaimer: So many perfect plot points were plucked from the press, I feel almost guilty in claiming this book to be mine. Just like a musician will compose a new song that has never been performed before, there is not one note that has not been played a million times—so it is with this novel.

Chapter 1

One quick jab and the blade slides in all the way to the handle. A spray of warm liquid soaks my hand and the front of my shirt, and the faint afternoon breeze cools it to perfection. That felt great.

I thrust again, and again, and again, and I am now soaked in wet relief against the dry Arizona desert heat. I move to the other side and this time I shove the knife in halfway, then pull, slicing a ten-inch gash along the side. It's like a dam has been released and I watch the greedy desert floor soak up every drop. Willie cheers me on. This is my first one.

"Consider yourself baptized kid." Willie says, filling up his canteen with one of the last of the uncut water jugs. When he's finished, he pours the rest over his chubby, hairless face, safari hat and extra-large olive drab shirt. We will both be dry again in less than five minutes, but for now, we are like kids playing in the sprinklers on a lazy summer's day.

This is the kind of thing I signed up for. Finally I am able to help protect my country from the invading hordes of freeloaders that threaten to ruin it. I'm gonna catch some of them before they get in and do their damage.

I hand the knife back to Willie, and he puts it in the brown leather sheath that hangs a little cockeyed from his belt. Shane slices open another water jug making the ground around this water station look dark and bloated. Note to self; next time bring a knife.

"This really gets me," Willie says. "Some stark-raving liberal not only put all these containers of water underneath this table, but then he covered it all up with this tarp so it wouldn't get too hot." He pulls out his knife again and slices up the offending tarp. "What, did they run out of ice or something?"

Someone paid good money for this water. There must be fifty gallons of it here, and that idiot not only bought the water, but he had to drive all the way out here in the middle of nowhere to leave it for people who shouldn't even be out here in the first place. So what if those rats die of thirst. Serves them right. Maybe they should stay in Mexico where they belong. "Damn liberals." I say. "Why don't they buy them bus tickets while they're at it?"

"Yeah, it makes no sense. It's like going on vacation and leaving your safe open so a thief won't have to go through the trouble of picking the lock."

"And don't forget to leave a light on in the room so they don't trip on anything on their way to the safe," Shane says, staring into his iPhone.

"Yeah, ha ha! And tape a note over the safe that says, the car is in the garage," Willie grins, "the keys are in the ignition."

"And there's a credit card in the glove box," I add, "in case you run out of gas."

"You got that right. Haaaaa." Willie lets loose with one of his trademark laughs. "What good is using a desert as a natural fence if you're going to leave all this water out here?" He picks up his binoculars and scans the desert for signs of vermin.

I move closer to Shane to try and see what he's looking at on his iPhone. His thin face and two-day beard make him look at home in this inhospitable environment. "What is that?" I ask.

"It's called an iPhone kid, where you been—haaa!" Willie says, walking up to us, his constant grin leading the way.

"You need all the tools you can get out here." Shane adds, his thumbs working furiously on the small screen in his hands.

"Want to track down illegal aliens in the desert?" Willie grins, "There's an app for that."

"Really?" Hmmm. There are hundreds of thousands of apps for those things. . .

"Triple I" Willie says, as if anticipating my question.

"That's the name of the app?"

"Yep! We call it triple I, but the Mexicans call it, 'eye, eye, eye', haaaa." Willie says, laughing at his own joke.

Even Shane smiles at that one, and he hardly ever smiles. "Lets get moving," he says, picking up his Winchester lever-action 30-30, his eyes scanning the low rolling hills and miles of flat, open desert. His eyes are rarely on one thing for very long. You can almost see his mind working, calculating, asking questions and drawing conclusions.

I stand back for a second to get a better look at my two new friends, and get the strangest feeling, like I'm in the desert, tracking desperadoes with Clint Eastwood and John Candy.

Shane is the highest ranking person out here, so we do what he says.

I make sure my canteen is full, and Willie carves up the last water jug and sets it on the table, like an evil plastic Jack-O-Lantern. It definitely sends a message—Go Home.

"Hey Frank, why are you out here in the middle of this god forsaken desert instead of in your nice air-conditioned bedroom chugging Red Bull and playing video games?" Willie asks.

Shane glances back at me to get my reaction. "Because I want to help my country."

"You're just a kid. What do you know about helping your country?" He doesn't wait for an answer, he just shifts his attention back to the seemingly lifeless desert.

What a doofus! Why would I say that to an Iraq war veteran? "I'm doing for our country what our government doesn't have the balls to do."

"Hey, if he were a Miss America contestant, I'd vote for him—haaa!"

Shane looks over at his friend, "I bet you would."

"Shut up." Willie laughs and kicks a rock toward his friend.

Great, I'm coming off as a contestant in some game show. "I work with lots of these rats every day and what irritates me the most is having to fire them for using fake ID's, and then having to hire and train someone else to take their place, and they're probably going to have fake ID's too, so I'll have to do the whole process all over again—forever. It never stops."

"Purgatory," Shane says, nodding his disapproval and picking up his binoculars.

"Well, it feels like hell out here," Willie laughs, "I think you're moving in the wrong direction kid."

“Yeah, I’d rather be stranded on a deserted island and have to take a soccer ball to the senior prom, than have to keep doing this all the time. I swear I’m about to crack up.”

Willie’s forehead scrunches up, “Soccer ball?”

“Contact!” Shane says. We all freeze.

Chapter 2

Willie picks up his binoculars and looks in the direction Shane is pointing. Another note to self; get some binoculars.

“Yep, good eye Shane. I see about six of ‘em.”

“That’s what I counted. I’ll call it in.” Shane takes out his iPhone again.

Wow! There’s cell coverage out here? Man, I gotta get a cell phone too. Why did that Minuteman recruiter-guy say all I needed was a hat, good boots, a bag lunch, and a big canteen? I guess I shoulda known he wasn’t very detail oriented when he didn’t question me about not having a driver’s license. Thank God Shane showed me the bandana under the baseball cap trick, or my neck would have been toast by now, even with my sweat-proof sunscreen. They shoulda been more specific about hats too. I’m lucky I even brought a bandana. I was going to just bring some Kleenex, but I didn’t think there would be any place to throw away the used ones. Thank God, my hay fever hasn’t acted up.

“Willie, they want to know if you see any guns?”

Guns?

“Nope. Hard to tell from this distance though.”

I look around for cover. If shooting starts, I’m gonna need some place to hide. The scrub around here is waist high at best, and loosely scattered. The ground is cracked and dry and it’s gotta be over a hundred and five degrees out here. How these small trees and bushes stay alive, I can’t even imagine. One thing is for sure: none of this stuff is going to stop a bullet.

“You see any packs, Willie?”

“Nope. Looks like a family.”

“They’re probably not armed. . . Roger that.” Shane slides his iPhone into one of the many pockets in his desert cammo fatigues. “ETA twenty minutes.”

“Here we go kid, your first capture.” Willie looks like he’s having the time of his life, but all I can think about is: am I safe out here?

“You think they’ll send out a chopper?” I ask.

“They only send out the big guns for drugs,” Willie says,

“Why is that?”

“Smugglers carry AR-15’s and AK-47’s.”

“Keep chatter to a minimum,” Shane says, taking a brief moment to scowl at us.

I've heard of AK-47's before, but I don't know what an AR-15 is. I bet Shane knows how to take them both apart and put them back together again—blindfolded. Maybe I should join the Army after I graduate high school.

"Keep an eye out for Immigration, kid," Shane whispers.

Willie holds out his arm and points. "You'll see a cloud of dust coming from the west."

I look where he's pointing and notice the afternoon sun is finally falling. It should be cooling off soon.

Shane starts running, and Willie and I follow after him.

"Shouldn't we wait for Immigration?"

"If we don't get on the other side of these guys before they see the dust from the Immigration truck, we may lose them," Willie says.

After a few minutes I see a small dust cloud coming from the west. "I see them."

Shane looks back to see for himself. "That's Immigration all right." He drops to one knee and looks through his binocular to monitor the illegals. Willie does the same. I drop to one knee and stay focused on the ever growing dust cloud. "If they were a patrol in Iraq, the enemy would be the last thing they'd ever see." Shane looks at his watch. "He'll be here in five. Spread out." He gets to his feet and runs even faster.

"Keep me in sight, but stay fifty or so yards behind me," Willie says. "We want to make a wide net so they don't escape around us." With that he's off on a sprint too. For a big guy, he can sure move. I have no problem letting him get ahead of me. This heat is draining me of energy. The only thing that really keeps me moving, is the thought of possibly getting separated and stuck out here all by myself.

Finally, Willie stops. He holds his hand out, telling me to stop too. The moment I stand still, I hear voices. They see the dust. Willie pulls out a pistol from his backpack. More guns. Great. I look around for a stick.

The sound of footsteps racing toward me makes me wonder what I do next. I heard on the news, about a week ago, a border patrol agent got shot out here. I have the overwhelming feeling I shouldn't be here right now. My legs are shaking. What if I can't do this?

To my right, the dust cloud grows larger, closer. I am suddenly hit with a question that turns my stomach: what if it's not a family? Most Mexicans are short. It could be a bunch of short Mexican drug runners. They could all have guns!

I hear some yelling and some guns cocking. A Mexican kid suddenly appears, running right at me. The fear in his eyes. The desperation on his face. He's a couple of years younger than me, and doesn't appear to have a gun. This is it: the moment I've been waiting for. The chance to stop these freeloaders before they get into my country, drain our economy, make us take care of them, educate their children and not pay a dime in taxes, not to mention get our women pregnant before running out on them and leaving them to fend for themselves while they go back to Mexico, and come back with new names and identities, ready to do it all over again. I can stop them right now before they have a chance to turn my country into the crappy one they're trying to escape.

I leap at him with all the hate and fury I possess, from years worth of anger, disappointment, and rejection; all the materials that a life without possibility of satisfaction can accumulate. We fall to the ground, but he pulls himself free. If I lose him, I'll lose the respect of Shane and Willie. I'll have blown my chance to help keep these

free-loaders out of my country. A thousand possible failures flood my brain, none of which I can possibly live with. I get to my knees and hit him hard on the chin. He rolls over a bit and before he can get away, I crawl over to him and hit him again, and again, and again. He has stopped resisting, but my adrenaline is pumping wildly, and my breathing is quick and deep, like I just finished the hundred yard dash. I hit him in the stomach a few times to stop him from struggling, just like the jocks do to me at school when they have an audience, or when just making fun of my name has lost it's magic for them.

I keep hitting him again and again, then I hear someone shout my name. I look up—it's Shane. I stand up and pull my prisoner to his feet. He is crying and saying something in Spanish, but my breathing is too loud for me to understand what he's saying. I grab ahold of his arm and lead him in the direction Shane is pointing. Everyone is gathered in an open area, just on the other side of some short, bushy trees. This is a family. Looks like I got the older son. There is also a teenage girl, elementary school age boy, a thirty-something mother, and a thirty-something father. I feel pumped. Energized. Alive.

Disappointment hangs over the captives as their fate is universally acknowledged. Mom holds the son I put the hurt on. Dad tries to give me a dirty look without Shane or Willie seeing it too.

Thank God! This could have turned out much worse. What if it had been drug runners? I don't have a gun. Do I need a gun? Did the recruiter even know what goes on out here?

Shane and Willie look over my prisoner, and then look at me with pride and confidence on their faces. I'm one of them now.

A modified tan pickup truck pulls up next to us. "How did the border patrol know right where to find us?" I ask, trying to keep my voice from cracking.

"He's got an app for that too." Willie says, recovering his comic nature.

"You all call for a taxi?" the Border Patrol agent asks.

Willie laughs, but he's the only one. We all just spend a moment taking in our handiwork.

Defeat rises out of the group, and the mother hides her sadness from us behind her husbands back. The wasted expense and effort. Dad's eyes throw sideways daggers at me. Big deal. He's not so tough when he's surrounded by Arizona's finest sons. Maybe next time it'll be his turn.

"No Coyote?" The Border Patrol agent asks, sizing up the group in front of us.

"He tore out of here like he had jalapenos in his pants," Willie says.

The officer says something to them in Spanish, and they all put their hands on their heads. He starts with the father and works his way down, tying their hands behind their backs with plastic handcuff things. The older son and I stare at each other for a minute. We are almost the same age.

After they're all handcuffed and frisked, the border patrol agent makes them all get in the back of the truck. They sit on metal benches and have to watch their heads so as not to bump them against the ceiling. The despair in their eyes is priceless. Soon they'll be on their way back to where they came from. This is so much better than watching the news.

“I’d give you guys a lift, but . . .” The immigration officer nods towards the collection of backpacks, jackets, hats, bags, water bottles, and other miscellaneous belongings on the front seat of his truck.

“That’s okay. We walked here, we can walk back,” Shane says.

“Thanks for making this one so easy.”

“Just doing what our country doesn’t have the balls to do,” replies Willie, winking at me.

We watch the truck bounce off towards the highway, getting up to about twenty-five or thirty miles per hour, seemingly unaware there isn’t a road out here. Willie laughs, “That right there is called ‘making margaritas.’”

I watch the truck take a few good bounces and get what he means.

“There was a Coyote with these guys?”

“They’re always the first to run.” Shane says.

“They get hit hard when they get caught.” Willie shakes the dust from his hat. “Prison time, fines, and I hear they get banned from the country for life.”

“He started running the same time you saw the dust,” Shane says. “That’s why we had to run to get on the other side of them before this turned into an all-day chase.”

“You mean he just left his customers there all by themselves?”

Willie looks at me with an expression of disbelief. “You think Coyotes care about these people?”

“Hell, most of them rape the women they bring here, and the guys just let ‘em do it,” Shane adds.

“They don’t do anything to stop them?”

“Can’t. Without ‘em, they’d be dead.” Willie takes a long drink from his canteen and reminds me I’m pretty thirsty myself.

“They’re predators--animals.” Shane’s face hardens as he talks. His voice loses all emotion, and a gravelly monotone carries the words over the hot, dry Arizona desert air. “They get paid thousands of dollars whether their customers make it or not, and they take whatever pleasure they want from whoever they want.” His pale blue eyes stare out into the desert, like he can almost see where the Coyote is going, what he looks like, how he’s dressed, where he may be hiding.

“You wanna go after him?” I ask.

“Nah, those guys are like rabbits. By the time we’d catch up to him, the border patrol would be back at the station, and we’d be out of cell phone range.” He takes a swig of his canteen and wipes his chin with the back of his arm. “The sooner we bring the military out here and pick off the Coyotes before moving in to capture the others, the quicker this whole thing will be over. Nobody will want to be a Coyote if they’re paid on this side of the border with lead.”

“Time to start heading back,” Willie says.

Shane takes one last look out over the desert, while I take a long cool drink from my canteen.

“Looks like they’re taking the bumpy way home.” Shane says with just the slightest hint of a grin. We watch the truck bob, and toss and turn and claw it’s way out of the desert. At times, rooster tails of dirt, and scrub shoot fifteen feet in the air. If you didn’t know any better, you’d think a couple of teenagers were out here four-wheeling

and having fun. The truck suddenly leaps into the air, and lands, throwing up a huge wake of dust and scrub high above it. “Wa-hooo. Did you see that?” I ask.

“Yeah, that would be one of the perks of working out here,” says Willie. “Four wheelin’ on the job.”

As we walk back to Willie’s truck I notice my clothes are stained with sweat and dust. I don’t know how I’m going to walk home from Denny’s without anyone seeing me like this.

“Hey, Frank, do they make you learn Spanish in school?” Willie asks.

“Nah. I heard that too, but they must have just started doing that, because I never had to. I do have to learn to speak it at work though.”

“Work? Damn, you just can’t escape it nowadays.”

“Yeah, not only do they come here to get a free education, free medical services, and free lunches, they don’t have the decency to learn the language of the land that’s giving everything to them.”

“We should just make them,” Shane says.

“How?”

“Just have everything in English. Period.” Shane shifts his rifle from his left hand to his right, and rests it against his shoulder. “I bet if they had to order food in English, they’d be pretty fluent in a month.”

“Or starve to death,” I add.

“Either way it, it’s fine with me.”

“This is the USA, and it needs to stay that way,” says Willie. “At the rate we’re going now, instead of this being North and South America, it’s going to be called North and South Latin America.”

We all stop and notice the dust storm appears again in the west.

“Hey, what you think they’re coming back for?” asks Willie.

Shane shrugs and pulls up his binoculars with his free left hand, still holding onto the 30-30 with his right. “That’s not immigration—it’s them.”

“Who are them?”

“Cowboys.”

“Yeah,” Willie says, looking through his binoculars. “They kinda round up strays,” he says with a wink.

What did that mean?

Chapter 3

A black Ford F-250 four-wheel drive pickup with two spotlights atop a beefy black padded roll bar pulls up next to us. Inside the truck are a couple of rednecks, a few years older than me, wearing sleeveless t-shirts we call “wife-beaters,” which give their muscular tattoos some room to breathe. Both have tattoos of eagles, clutching things like arrows or spears and an American flag. Each of them has a movable spotlight with big black handles right outside their windows. In the bed of the truck, holding onto their

rifles with one hand and the roll bar with the other, are two thinner rednecks. They are about my age and it looks like they all shop at the same clothing store. There's also a whole lot less of them sticking out of their shirts than the two in the cab, and from here their tattoos look more like crows than eagles.

"Seen your work over at the water station," the driver says.

"Yeah, nice." Agrees one of the guys in the back.

Silence.

"Thanks," I say. Shane locks eyes with the driver, and Willie looks the whole bunch over.

"What are you boys up to tonight?" asks Willie.

"Same as usual," the driver says.

"Rabbit huntin'." The guy riding shotgun grins, and spits a black stream of tobacco out the window and the dusty desert floor balls it up, making it look like a fuzzy black caterpillar. It seems even the desert has its standards regarding what liquids it will soak up, and what it won't.

Each of the skinny guys in the back picks up a dead jackrabbit by the ears so we can see them. They must be five feet long from ears to feet. I never knew rabbits could get so big. Leaning up against the back of the cab and tied to the roll bar, I see a pick and two shovels. One of the skinny guys sees me looking. "In case we get stuck out here," he says.

"Yeah," his buddy agrees. "We just dig ourselves out."

"You got all your bases covered as usual," Shane says, his eyes never leaving the drivers'.

"Got to," replies the driver. He leans over and sticks his head part way out the window, "Those damn wetbacks don't play by the rules—who says we have to?"

"Only two?" Willie asks, nodding toward the guys with the rabbits.

"We got a coyote yesterday," replies the guy riding shotgun.

"Was it alone?" Shane asks.

"Nope- I got his friend," says the driver, grinning from ear to ear. "Where you guys lining up these days?"

"We got teams of threes and fours every 5 miles or so for the next twenty miles," Shane says.

"I saw Immigration making it's way back to town." The driver cracks an evil smile. "Makin' Margaritas were they?"

"Yeah, we got five of 'em," Willie says.

"I told you Bobby, I told you," says one of the skinny guys in the back.

"Any get away?" The driver asks.

"A coyote," Willie says.

"Oh well, one thing about wetbacks is: there's plenty more where they came from," says Bobby, as he secures the dead rabbits in the bed of the truck.

"We're just heading in. I imagine the night crew will be half our numbers," Willie says.

"Thanks. Okay boys, lets go huntin' coyotes." The driver hits the gas and the two guys in the back snatch their guns with one hand and leap for the roll bar with the other.

They bounce eastward over the ruts and weeds and mesquite, leaving a dust cloud behind them. It's a wonder we catch anybody with vehicles. That coyote's probably long

gone by now, but then again, that truck can cover a lot more ground in an hour than a person on foot.

We follow tire tracks until we are back at Willie's truck, parked by a gate on the side of the highway.

We all pile into the old, blue, GMC pickup that brought us here, and when Willie turns the ignition we're immediately assaulted by his air conditioning, pumping out hot air like a blow dryer. He quickly turns it down, and then turns up the country music. From here on out, we're left to our own thoughts with a mournful soundtrack playing in the background.

When we get to the Denny's we all met at earlier in the day, Shane and I pile out of the truck and stretch our legs. "Thanks for the training guys, I appreciate it."

"Any time kid," Willie says. "Ask for us next time you go out, we'd love to have you."

"I'm sure you'll be better prepared," Shane adds before getting into his car.

"Yeah, I got it, believe me."

"Good boy, see ya later." Willie waves and drives off.

Shane just drives away. No wave, no goodbye. Pleasantries are a waste of energy for him. I want to be that cool.

I have about seven blocks to walk home. My mind is awash with all the new things I learned today as well as a hundred new questions I never knew to ask before, such as, where do these rats go after we capture them? What happens to them next? Do they get deported, or do we pay for them to have an attorney?

When I get home, I shower and heat up one of the meals my mother has pre-made and wrapped up for me. We hardly ever see each other. She works two, sometimes three jobs, and I either go to school full time or work. It's always been like this.

Before I fall asleep, I wonder what everyone at Taco Bell would think if tomorrow I told them I'm a Minuteman.

Chapter 4

I get out of the shower, and there it is. My nemesis. That hateful thing. It holds court over the entire bathroom and watches my every move.

Hazel eyes, dark brown hair, thick and short, like a bear's hide. Pale and speckless cheeks stretched over sad, thin bones. Clean-shaven, smooth skin, not yet dried and hammered by the sun. The once powerful rage of acne has retreated to a few blackheads and scattered pimples stubbornly resisting the dryness of age, on spotted, ghostly shoulders. Progress? Do I look older and wiser? Too soon to tell. Part man, yet still part boy. When will I ever grow up?

He stares back at me. Silent. Resentful. The mirror is a politician; a lying stranger hired to serve a need—but never does. The mirror has an agenda, hidden behind its silvery curtain, lurking just below the surface, smiling, barely controlling its own

laughter. But all I see is what it wants me to see. What it thinks I want to see. What I think I really see.

It serves a secret twisted purpose—the mirror. I’ve learned to hate it, resent its fake smile, it’s mocking eyes. I vow one day to get a new one, but I never do. They are all false confessors anyway, and they weave lies with the truth so cleverly, so artistically, it can be impossible to separate one from the other. Such is the tapestry of life. Believe it all or nothing; what choice is there?

In school they teach that life is binary. Black & white, on and off, good or bad. But in the real world there are many shades of grey, yet somewhere inside the depth of shaded space is an invisible line that once crossed--changes everything. Truth can be bent until it becomes a lie. Good things can be used for bad ends, and the good gets beaten out of it. Somewhere from good to bad, a line is crossed and binary seems to be the law. Hot to cold, up to down, black to white, hero to criminal. The mirror is where binary meets the infinite palate of life. Like or don’t like, hot or not, friend or un-friend. Polite society is in perpetual contradiction with it’s Law and Order court systems where guilt is always obvious, set against it’s Siskel and Ebert movie reviews, where everyone gets to choose one side, or the other, and be right no matter which side you’re on.

When I was a kid, the lies didn’t seem so obvious. Of course when I was young, the mirrors didn’t lie either. They revealed the youth I wished were older, the ugly I wished were cute, the skinny I wished were strong, the pitted I wished were smooth, the spotted I wished were not.

Mirrors tell the truth too much and earn a hard reputation. You begin to trust its brutal honesty, agree with its unfair accusations, and then one day you look different. The thing that stares back at you pretends to be you, but you know it’s not. The man you wanted to be is not there, just some impostor pretending to be you—the person you always knew deep down inside you would become.

He is neither rich, nor easy to look at. His body is not swathed in iron and dipped in bronze. There is no crown upon his head, or vengeful sword by his side. His eyes do not shine with the courage of a thousand vanquished fears.

I remember the ugly scrawny little kid I used to be, but the mirror won’t indulge me. My youth is almost gone except for the last fading spots on my nose, or maybe those are lies too, and in its place is this. . . loveless thing. Don’t look too long and get trapped in its lies. Hypnotized. Changed. Look away. Never stare into the Hydra. Never admit the link. The secret. The truth.

Mirrors are at least kinder than photographs. Pictures suck the fantasy right out of life.

Oh, crap, what time is it?

Dark brown pants, dark brown vest, dull yellow “Shift Leader” name tag. A gold “1” year pin, dark brown tie, dark brown socks; I’m a pauper, not a knight.

The promises made long ago, the ones where they say you can be anything you want are like a rainbows; you see one, you know it’s there, but the more you walk towards it, the more it laughs and says, I am here, come closer, you are not far. But you never arrive, and the rainbow bids you come, like a beautiful dream. I am neither young nor old. I am in the valley in-between. The pit. Purgatory, just like Shane said.

Time to brush my teeth. Careful, don't get any white specks on the mirror; break it's spell, provoke it's wrath. Put the toothbrush down and comb my hair forward. Time to go, can't be late. Dark peppermint for breakfast again.

God I hate working mornings. What is it about mirrors these days? The more I begin to look like a man, the less I like it. Shouldn't it be the other way around? I seem to be stuck right in the middle of a morph, the part where you change from one thing into another, but right smack dab in the middle. I wonder if there's a word for that. I should look it up. Maybe use it in my next poem or story.

I take a peek out the window and get more bad news. An early rain is misting down. Summer is ending so soon? Didn't they used to be longer?

I gotta get going.

In the closet by the door I see an umbrella and a clear plastic poncho. First rain—a sprinkle really, but it could get worse; grab them both. The large white box on the floor, the one that holds all the shameful things; it always. . . it's like every time I see it. . . I hate that we keep it. I hate she hangs on to something so bitter, so humiliating. She needs to move on. I wonder if she'd miss it, if it were just gone one day.

Outside a warm breeze pushes a fine mist around like wet dust and it's turning everything darker. Standing there for a second, looking up, I feel its cool wet fingers brush away the residue of whatever it was that twisted my insides just moments ago. Not to worry—that well runs deep.

I lock the door behind me and then open the umbrella when something flutters past my eye. I catch it before it hits the ground. I'm greeted with a cast of liars. Smiling faces before the ultimate betrayal. I've seen this picture before, a long time ago. I can feel black ink flowing through my veins as I look at it. I used to spend hours looking at these pictures and Mom would tell me great stories about my Dad. That was before I found out who he really was. I haven't looked at them since.

In this picture she looks very young and innocent, especially surrounded by that pack of vultures. Look how realistically they all smile. How could she not be convinced they liked her? It's not her fault, really; it's them. They are such good liars. Comes from years of practice I guess.

I gotta get moving. I shove the wedding photo in my back pocket. I'll throw this one away at work.

I wonder how it got inside the umbrella? Mom must have been looking at the pictures again. Why does she torture herself like that? She'd be better off burning the box and forgetting all about that side of the family, like me. Assholes.

A car driving by wakes me up from my little walk down memory lane. Mom's memories really. I wasn't born yet. I gotta walk fast, I can't be late. I have to be a good example for the employees if I ever want to get promoted to Assistant Manager. We could use the money.

I stand at a traffic light with six other people. I bet those Mexicans on the corner are illegal. I wish the border patrol were here. Why is it they never seem to be where the Mexicans are unless they get called? Actually, they don't even come every time they're

called. I called a month ago about the illegal aliens at work, but I haven't heard a thing from immigration or the Department of Homeland Security. This is why we patrol the border ourselves. Can't rely on our government to take care of the situation.

Out in the desert, Shane was so cool. Tough, silent, methodical, thorough. . . I could be like that. Maybe I should join the Army after high school, like Shane. Then I could be the one leading the patrol the desert. Maybe I could do like Shane says and pay the Coyotes in lead on this side of the border. I'd kinda be like a superhero. A masked vigilante.

What would a good border guard vigilante superhero name be. . . I'd be in the desert so I could be Scorpionman. . . The Rattler. . . The Lone Chupacabra. . . I'll pick this up later, I'm at work already. Time seems to fly when I get thinking about them. For now I'll just be me. Quiet, calm, calculating. . . and tough. Shane. I could live with that name.

Chapter 5

A large Taco Bell truck is parked by the back door and the short, stout Mexican driver is fussing with the lift. I open the door and prop it open, flooding the drive-thru with happy accordion music. The smell of spiced taco meat and simmering beans tells me I'm not in Germany.

I put my umbrella and poncho in a corner to dry. The little delivery guy is right behind me with the invoice. Perfect timing. Nobody likes to check in the food and I always seem to be the guy that does it. I hope Robb notices.

I go over and remove the food order clipboard from the wall, take the invoice from the cheerful little rat, and go outside to begin comparing the delivery we're receiving today, to the order we placed a few days ago. I'm in and out of the building just long enough to get the stink of the back of the house in my nose, and an overdose of "Ayeee yayeeee yayeeee," in my ears.

I'm officially in a war zone that is dressed up to look like a friendly version of the enemy: menus in English, English speaking counter people. It's pretty shrewd really; being able to look like an American impersonation of Mexico, when in fact, it's really a piece of America reclaimed by Mexico—just look inside.

I begin highlighting the items on the shipping invoice that I see on the pallet. The driver is the same cockroach that normally delivers the food. He's almost finished cutting the long band of twelve-inch wide plastic wrap that keeps the pallet and all its cardboard boxes together. He is a little older than me, but you would hardly know it. His lighter brown uniform, already stained from his earlier deliveries, strains at his movements. His jet black hair is short like mine, but his smile and constant calmness are what tells me this guy doesn't have to deal with people very much.

When you deal with people—lots of people—things go to hell in a heartbeat, and often for no reason at all. That's what people do; they look for any reason they can think of to complain so they can save a buck or two. It doesn't matter to them if you get into

trouble, or your reputation is tarnished, or if it costs someone else some money. All that matters is that their commands be obeyed, their egos get stroked, and they get to live the life of an emperor for an hour. Then it's time to go back to work and be Doris Doodlemeyer—file clerk once again.

Waiting on the public is the hardest thing anyone could have to endure. Every day there's always a complainer, trying to get something for nothing by making up bullshit stories of poor service or food. Many a person's honor is cheaply bought, or traded for a taco and a soda.

This driver sees none of it.

I shout out items that are on the list, but I don't see, and he moves things around and points to the items on the pallet. It looks like he's being helpful, but he just wants to get this over with too.

Looks like we're missing a couple of bags of shredded carrots.

"Hey, donday esta la carrotas?" God I hate speaking Spanish, but this guy's English is almost non-existent, and his extremely heavy accent makes everything he says sound like Spanish anyway. Why do they hire people to do jobs they aren't suited for? I bet some American is in the unemployment line because this guy works cheaper. Look at him, just standing there, smiling at me with a deer in the headlights look so familiar with these non-English speaking people. Okay, I'll try it again, this time a little louder and slower, "Dooondaaaay eeeestaaa laaa caaarroootaaaas?"

He had to have heard me that time. This is stupid, really—it's his fricking language. Now he looks even more confused, like I'm speaking a foreign language or something, which I am, but it's foreign for me, not him.

"Hola Frank, What's up?"

"Oh, Roselyn, thank God! This guy doesn't speak Spanish or what?"

"Frank, calm down. What is it you tried to say to him?"

"Were missing two five pound bags of shredded carrots." Thank God for the ones who care enough to learn English.

"What was it you asked for?"

"I just told you, I asked him for the carrots, you know, the carrotas." Why is she laughing? She is trying not to, but. . . and look, the driver is smiling and pretending to be in on the joke too. What the heck is wrong with these people?

"Zanahorias, Frank. Carrots are called zanahorias in Spanish, not carrotas." Now they're both busting up.

Oh, really? Like I'm supposed to know that? She keeps laughing, getting the rest of it out of her system, and the driver follows along. Great, now I'm the stupid one? I start to reply, when a young Mexican kid walks up. He's smiling and looking at us, like he's in on the joke too, but he couldn't have heard anything. "Can I help you?" I ask.

He says something in Spanish, but he speaks so fast I can't understand a word of it. It's like those people who leave a nice and slow message on your answering machine, and then blurt out their phone number right before they hang up. What is up with that? Can't anybody speak clearly and with the intent of being understood?

"Let me take this for you," Roselyn says, grabbing the clipboard from my hands. "Looks like you have a new employee."

"But you don't know where I left--"

"I got it Frank, don't worry, you are busy."

The delivery guy suddenly loses his smile. “Momentito, momentito,” he says as he scrambles back into the truck, probably to find the missing carrot- zana. . . whatever.

“Ok, come with me kid.”

The smell of beans and beef is like a dirty fragrant welcome-mat. In a minute or two I won’t even notice it. In ten minutes this will be what I’ll smell like.

I walk to the wall with the row of clipboards hanging on it, and the “new hire” clipboard has an application on it, let me see. . . “Francisco?”

“Si, Francisco, si” he smiles, his dark and dry face cracks and folds at his eyes. Even his lips are cracked, but his hair is neat. New haircut. His eyes hold an eagerness for this job I can’t understand. His new brown pants, black belt, and black shoes have obviously been bought for this job. What a dufus. He will barely make back the money he paid for those clothes before we have to fire him for not having legal ID. I wonder why we even go through this charade. Half our crew is on a revolving door and we are constantly training and hiring new people just to keep up. This guy is obviously fresh off the boat. Look how skinny he is. Why do we let these people abuse us like this? Oh well, he’ll do for now, I guess. We lost Manuel last week because his ID was no good and we’ll be running short until we get this guy up to speed.

I look through the window into the office and see Robb Haley, the General Manager. I knock and wave, just to let him know I’m here.

He opens the door. “Frank, good, you met the new guy. Get him I-9’d and have him watch the videos. We’re term’ing Jose M today, his ID is no good. I’m getting his last paycheck ready now.”

Robb winks as he closes the door to the office. He knows I like the poetic justice of having people train their own replacement. I’ve done it many times before. Heck, if it were up to me, I’d make it standard procedure. After all, you were being replaced for something you did so you might as well help out in the process. We’ll term him at the end of the day and get one last shift out of him. We trained him and now just when he’s getting good, we have to train somebody else. We have to let him go: company policy. We could face huge fines if we’re caught hiring illegals.

“Okay Francisco, let’s get a soda before we sit down and fill out this paperwork.” I hand him a cup and we each grab a coke and sit at a booth that lets me see the employees working. They goof off less when they know I’m watching—lazy cockroaches.

I spread the papers around and start filling them out. That damn boom box gets on my nerves. It constantly plays that stupid Mexican music and this song appears to be everyone’s favorite. Never trust a country whose national instrument is an accordion. I can’t wait ‘till we open and I can turn on the Muzak. Anything’s better than this.

“Tienes papeles?” I ask. He has to have two forms of ID for us to hire him.

He hands me a green card, and a social security card. They both look okay—I guess. How am I supposed to know what a counterfeit looks like? I’m not an expert; I’m a restaurant manager for Christ’s sake. If we really wanted to keep illegal workers from coming here we would ship them back to Mexico once we found out they were here illegally, but oh no, let’s not actually do something about this problem. Instead, we let them work for two to three months, give them a paycheck, and let them get a job somewhere else. Yeah, big disincentive.

I write down the information on the form and sign to the fact that I actually looked at these documents, but I am under no obligation to actually make a copy; I wonder if anyone does.

Here's this kid sitting across from me: young, able, eager for work. Why doesn't he just get the legal papers? It just sounds so much easier and a lot less hassle to do this legally, than this illegal routine, with having to sneak into the country too. By the time you calculate in all the time it takes to get here, the expense of getting here, and the expense of acquiring all the necessary fake IDs. These guys probably spend about half of what they make just to get the job. They also probably pay ten times what real documents would cost to the counterfeiters. What a waste. And with the rent and food, how much money could they possibly send home? That's probably just an excuse, so they can look more noble than they really are. Probably helps them get women too. Hell, you get a new name when you come back to the US, why not get a new wife and family? And when you get deported, your family won't know who to look for, because you used a fake name.

Okay, focus Frank. Let's get on with the next form: The W-4. "Tiene casada?"

"Si," he smiles.

Of course. I mark down married on his W-4 form, and I put a one in that column. I put a one in the head of household and one for himself. Three exemptions so far. I love the answers I get for this one: "Tiene e-hose?"

"Si"

Yeah? You've got kids eh? You're still a kid. "Cuantos?" . . . wait for it. . .

"Siete"

"Seven?" He smiles and says nothing. This guy isn't even eighteen—twenty tops, and he has seven kids. Did he start raising a family at twelve or thirteen, or did they all come at once last year? Oh well, it's not for me to tell him how many children he can claim. That's between him and the IRS—like they're ever going to get ahold of him. That's... let me see... ten exemptions. He won't pay hardly any federal or state taxes. He will use the roads, buses, have access to EDD for employment discrimination suits, the HUD for housing discrimination. He probably doesn't really have kids so they won't go to school on our dime, or have free lunches for low income families, or be eligible for food stamps and clothes from local charities, churches, etc. . . at least we don't have to worry about that. Plus he may go to jail when he gets caught, but when you add the meals and court costs, and transportation back to Mexico—that will cost us taxpayers, so all in all, he is putting back a whole lot less than he is taking out. Nice. Oh, and he'll use our roads and bridges, without even getting a drivers license or having any of that pesky and expensive insurance stuff.

Oh God, don't get me started about driving. Stop signs? Just a suggestion, really, just like back home. Four-way stops? Just stop and then go. Easy right? Honk if anyone gets in your way, that's all there is to it. Park on the side of the street? Open your door any time you want. The moving vehicle coming up behind you will swerve and go around you. Get in an accident? It's a fake name anyway. Hit someone walking across the street? Just keep going. Who is going to know you did it? You don't really exist. Thank God we have some legal immigrants. At least you can identify them. It's harder to get away with stuff when people can find out who you really are.

I take an angry sip from my soda and wake from my little rant. This place gets me so riled up sometimes—all the time really.

Roselyn comes up to the front counter and inspects the progress of the opening workers. She seems to be moving to the rhythm of the music. . . actually, so does everyone else. Everyone is smiling, and wiping, and sweeping, and stocking, and bobbing, and swaying to the music. It's like watching a Mexican version of Willy Wonka and the Chocolate factory.

Ok, I'm done writing down all the information on these new hire forms. I need to introduce this guy to Jose Martinez, otherwise known as Hosem. We had one guy, Jose Rodriguez. We called him Hoser. That was the great. We had a Jose Diego before, and we called him Hosed. Not much else to do around here for fun really.

Oh, there he is, putting on his apron. "Hosem, this is Francisco; a new-evo employee-ado." They say hi to each other. "Por favor, el trabajo con tu, oy." I see the two of them are slightly pleased, but with blank looks staring back at me. Great, I'm not getting through to them. This really sucks when I am speaking their language and they can't even understand me. "Tu es la instructor-a-doro. "

"Maestro" A familiar voice from behind me says. Roselyn is just working away, not thinking twice about helping me out with my Spanish, which after all, is her native language. She is sporting that smile of hers, I can never tell if she is laughing at me or just happy. I look back and see the two I just introduced talking rapidly in Spanish and Hosem looking very pleased, as if he has just been promoted. So clueless.

Chapter 6

"Hey Frank, have you done your circle yet?"

I turn around, "No Robb, I just finished hiring . . . Francisco." I wave over at two smiling and nodding Mexicans, who appear to understand English much better than Spanish.

"Ok, remember, circle the entire restaurant every 15 minutes. See everything and make yourself seen."

"Right. M.B.W.A., managing by walking around—I'm on it."

He returns to his office. That was it?

Beans are simmering on the stove and I see Aracelli is stirring them; perfect as usual. She does this five days a week, and has been doing it for longer than anyone else has been here.

I reach up and pull the grease trap down. It's already full, and it can't be just from today. Great job Darren. It was your shift last night and now I will clean up after you, as always, and make you look good. So typical. Too bad you never do the same for me, you little toad. Instead you just stand around yacking and looking for anything to report to Robb. Frickin Darren, even when he's not here he can get on my nerves. I empty the little metal container and now I need her to clean it before putting it back up there. "Aracelli, lavas this. . . chingaso por favor?" I don't even know what that thing is called in English. I think chingaso is Spanish for thingamajig. All the managers say that when they don't know what to call something.

“Okay Frank.” Her smile reveals the familiar gap between her two front teeth. Nice girl, a little homely and quiet, but she’s very reliable.

The stainless steel shines, and except for that dent near the prep table, it looks brand new. How can you tell old stainless from new stainless anyway? It doesn’t stain, or tarnish. . . I guess that’s why we use so much of it.

The walk-in refrigerator is at 37 degrees, and everything looks organized and dates are on everything.

Back into the prep area, the drawers look clean and organized. The condiments look full and clean—no spilled and crusty food, or food boogers, as well call them. I see that Hosem is setting up the video player for. . . that new guy, so he can watch: the “Welcome to Taco Bell” video, the “Sanitation” video, the “Sexual Harassment” video, and the “Food Handling” video—all in Spanish, of course, and all in the back of the store next to the office. I hope no one’s planning on taking a break any time soon. Actually, it couldn’t hurt for these idiots to watch these videos again. They all seem to forget about this stuff about a week after they see it.

Garbage on the floor. Missed the waste basket again someone? “Llorena. . . por favor. . .” She immediately comes over and begins cleaning up the area. I know she’ll do a good job, but I’ll check it later. It’s not enough to tell someone to do something; you have to follow up. “Its not what you expect, it’s what you inspect that gets done.” I am management material. I deserve to be the next Assistant Manager, not that backstabbing, kiss-ass Darren.

The floor out front always needs sweeping, I see Luisa has just joined us for some fun today. “Luisa, la piso por favor. . . Don’t look at me like that.” She thinks her seniority makes her off limits to do the more menial jobs around here. Roselyn and Aracelli have been here longer than her and neither one of them acts like that. None of the other employees like her because of that attitude either. She’s their “Darren” I guess. Maybe now’s a good time to tell them I’m a Minuteman, and I sent five of their “Primos” packing yesterday. . . Maybe later.

I see the counters and cash register area need cleaning, “aqui too por favor.” I point and put on a big Taco Bell smile. That should piss her off. Her face displays a pleasant, blank expression. She’s good. It’s all part of the Mexican code of conduct; never admit you’re wrong.

Looks like Juan has just finished the windows. He does good work. The air-conditioning vents in the ceiling are looking a little fuzzy. “Juan, por favor. . .” I point to the ceiling vents. I hope he sees the problem too because I have no idea how to say fuzz or ceiling vents in Spanish.

“OK, Frank, I got it,” he says with a heavy Mexican accent. “How do you say in English Frank?”

“That is how you say it in Spanish and English—it’s just Frank. . .” He doesn’t seem to get the joke; they never do. I wonder if they have comedy in Mexico. None of these guys laugh at any of my jokes.

I kinda like Juan. At least he tries to learn the language of the country he is living and working in, and he is here legally—his ID is okay. HmMMM what should I tell him? What would Willie tell him. . . “bosoms.” I gotta keep a straight face or he won’t buy it.

“Bosoms,” He’s smiling really big, like he got a gold star on his English exam.

“Yes, bosoms.” I turn towards the front counter. Just wait till he asks Darren or Robb to inspect his bosoms—that should be fun. I hope I’m around when he does.

Juan walks to the back of the house to return the window cleaning supplies, and I hear him muttering, “bosoms, bosoms, bosoms” to himself as he disappears behind the kitchen.

After inspecting the bathrooms, and circling the restaurant to make sure we look good to the public, I enter through the front doors like a customer, and see what they are going to see when they first step inside.

The bright orange and purple colors attack my eyes, and the Spanish music on the boom box assaults my ears. It’s a good thing we don’t do both of these at the same time when we’re open, or nobody would want to come here . . . except maybe blind Mexicans.

Robb bought the radio to keep the workers happy while they work. They can play it before we open in the morning, and after we close at night. It seems to work; everyone is singing. They all seem to know the words, and they always inject an ay-yay-yay, or a shrill, whee-whee, like a pig. They seem to think those things are needed, but I really have to wonder; if they are so important, why didn’t the musicians put them in the songs themselves? The musicians are Mexican after all, and they know their audience is going to be doing this to their songs. Maybe it’s like a Harley-Davidson; the first thing someone does when they buy one is get a new seat and maybe handlebars or a custom gas tank. Nobody just lets it stay factory looking. I guess the same goes for Mexican music. They can’t just let it stay factory sounding.

The menu board looks fine, and all the menus are clean; everything looks good. The customers will be thrilled.

I wonder who’s coming in next? On my way to the office I pretend to inspect things again, even though I was just here a few minutes ago. That’s about all there is to M.B.W.A.

Ah, there is Jesus punching in and getting ready for his shift that starts in about ten minutes. No one will ever accuse Jesus of being lazy. I can always ask him to clean the bathrooms. “Lava los banos, por favor.” He nods and smiles and walks off towards the mop station. Hmmmm, I wonder if it’s proper to have Jesus clean the bathrooms. I hope I won’t be damned to hell by some religion. Come to think of it, I think Jesus has cleaned our bathrooms every day since we hired him two weeks ago. No wonder they look heavenly. . . Yeah, that wasn’t funny. I think I’ll keep that little joke to myself. I’d hate to get excommunicated before lunch.

I pass through the prep area, and a slow and mournful melody begins playing on the radio. I know what I’m going to see before I even turn around, but I look anyway. All the boys are serenading the equipment as they clean and stock. They are wiping and sweeping tenderly to the music, like they are cleaning someone’s grave or casket or some other terribly important, but tragic thing.

The girls listen intently while gently swaying to the music too.

Juan is on one knee, polishing the stainless legs to the prep table with one hand, while his free hand is in the air, emphasizing the drama of the moment.

Oh-my-God! The new kid is hugging the cash register. This is so fricking funny! They seem to be having a contest to see who is the most sincere in being so sad. Now the new kid has dropped to both knees and he is pleading with the cash register. I’m glad they were not cleaning the bathrooms when this song came on. The women look on

knowingly and approvingly, swaying gently to the music. I wonder what they are singing about.

The whooping during these songs is the same as in all the others, only a little sadder and a lot slower. Instead of ayayay, Its more like, aaaaayaaaaayAAAEYYYYyyy, and instead of the whee-whee pig noise, it sounds more like a couple of pigs are falling off a cliff, WHEEEeee, WHEEEeee. It's like they took the last song and slowed it way down--and that's it. Same song—just way slower. Us Americans couldn't pull that off. We can't go, Yeehaw or , “Wahoo” and slow it down and make it sad. It just wouldn't work.

Hmmm. Let's try. I'll add my American version to this song. . . Wait for it. . . “YiiiiiiPeeeeKaaaaaYaaaaaaaay.”

Why is everyone staring at me? Well I proved my point. Americans can't do this, it's purely a Mexican thing. Slow equals sad, fast equals happy. You can't make it more simple than that.

There they go again—undaunted. Really emoting their hearts out, as if remembering their homes so far away and the places they used to play as kids. Or maybe they are thinking about their families and friends, birthday parties and holidays, and the good times they left in order to come here to work and live like kings compared to back home. This is kinda making me sick—it is so phony. If it was so good back home, why didn't they stay there? Because it is so much better here—that's why. Here we have: paved roads; air conditioning; cable TV; cell phones; less poverty; floors in all our houses. What was there to miss in Mexico?

I open the door to the office, and quickly close it, effectively turning down the hypocrisy.

Hey, what happened to Robb?

It's time to get the drawers out. We open in just a few minutes, and there's no telling what disaster awaits: equipment failure; employees not showing up; someone gets burned or cut; a customer complains. . . I gotta be ready for anything.

I turn the tumblers and open the safe. I hear a knock on the door.

I look up and see Rodrigo smiling through the window. “Hey Frank, whazzup?”

I lean over and open the door. “You're late!” Either he didn't hear me or he is ignoring me. Whatever.

He thinks he's so cool; God's gift to Taco Bell. Great, welcome to it. He punches in and begins to get dressed, taking his time and talking loudly to everyone in Spanish. I see by my watch he has punched in late. I gotta stay on top of these guys or this place will go to hell in a matter of days.

My turn to knock on the window. He turns around. I point to my watch.

“Sorry, Frank, sorry,” but he keeps on walking and talking and putting on his name tag and hat on his way to the cashier's station. Rodrigo speaks some English and because of that, he is a cashier like Roselyn and Luisa. Bi-lingual front-of-house help is really valuable in a restaurant. So many of these guys don't even bother to learn the language, so they get stuck with the back-of-house jobs. It pays less, and it's more work, but that's the price you pay for not learning the language.

I look over the cash register and compare it to the calculator tape with Robb's signature on it. All the dollar bills match what's on the tape, and the calculator says

there's a hundred dollars here, including all the change. Everything looks to be in order. Time to go walk this up to the cash register.

Luisa is standing around, as usual. This is what happens when you give someone a chance to earn some money—more money than they could have made in Mexico in several years, and all you ask in return is for them do a little work. Poor morals. These people are obviously not brought up well. Blame it on poverty, but I think it's poor parenting. Their parents probably weren't good role models either. . . and their parents. . . and their parents. . . I wonder how far back you have to go to find the lazy ass who started this whole laziness thing and slap them for ruining all these future generations of people.

I slide the drawer in Rodrigo's cash register and leave it open so he can count it. I turn to go get another drawer. Rodrigo says something in Spanish, and it must have been a joke because some of the other employees are laughing. A sharp slap and a startled "ay yay yay" stopped the laughter instantly. I don't need to see it. Whatever he said—Roselyn fixed it! I wish she'd fix the ay yay yay too. I'm so tired of hearing it. Nothing sounds as Mexican as ay yay yay.

I go back and get another cash drawer, and when I bring to the to-go window, I hear Roselyn say, "abierto." She walks to the front door with the screwdriver in her hand to unlock it. I turn back to look at the radio blaring away on the prep table and watch Aracelli turn it off, pick it up, and walk it back to the employee break area where it will live until after the last customer leaves tonight.

Silence.

After slipping the drawer into the register, I hurry back to the office, open the door and hit the Muzak machine switch. "—Gypsies, tramps and thieves. . ." This is my favorite task of the day. Such Relief. We're in America again—kinda.

Nine-fifty on the dot. The five customers who were waiting outside for us to open, follow Roselyn to the order counter and Rodrigo begins to help them. We are open. Everything is clean, stocked, and we're ready for anything, and as every day begins with the sun rising, something difficult will definitely happen today.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. "Okay Frank, all the bosoms are clean!" Juan is standing proudly beside me. All noise in the restaurant has stopped. The customers, employees, even the traffic outside--all silent.

"I cleaned all the bosoms in the restaurant Frank," he says again, taking full advantage of all the attention he is getting by doing such an obviously terrific job, not only on cleaning the aforementioned bosoms, but also displaying his mastery of a new word. A word he has probably figured elevates him into the upper echelons of the native speaking society, as he, no doubt, has never heard any of his friends or co-workers utter it. He is a Mexican genius.

The customers appear confused as they look first from Juan then to me, then back to Juan again.

How could this happen? I feel a warm flush begin in my chest and rush up through the top of my head. Roselyn's mouth and eyes are both wide open. What should I do? Smile? Pretend like nothing happened?

"Okay, Okay, Thanks Juan." I push him away from the counter. There is some laughter and chuckling, and then the conversations resume, but now at a much louder, more animated level. The back of my neck is sweating. It's obvious Juan knows

something is up, but he's not sure exactly what. I'm just going to try to forget that whole thing ever happened. Soon we will be busy and nobody will remember this little incident anyway.

I hear Roselyn taking orders and being very polite. She would be a good manager, but that will never happen. She is a Mexican, and that means one day she will leave for Mexico to visit her family right before Christmas, with only a few days notice so you can't terminate her, or dock her hours, or punish her in any way whatsoever. This is why we are always short-handed though the holidays and scramble to fill every shift--they all do this.

You can tell them that if they want a holiday off that they should ask for it and we will give the workers with that most seniority the preferred dates, etc. . . hopefully keeping the older employees and giving the newer ones an incentive to stay longer, but they all say, NO, NO, we don't need anything off. We're going to stay here this year. Then a week before Christmas—BAM! Oh Frank, I am going back to Mexico day after tomorrow. I need my last paycheck.

Almost half the staff did this the first year I worked here. That's how I got promoted from cashier to shift-leader. But they don't care. They made their money—more than most people in Mexico make in a year. Then they go home and live the good life for several months before coming back and putting this job down as a reference so they can get hired someplace else. In the restaurant business, if you have experience, you go to the front of the line.

There are no consequences for the truly selfish. Even though Roselyn has never done this in the almost two years I've worked here, it's still possible. It could even happen this year. Too bad, she is very good and we don't get very many non-Mexican applicants to save us from this travesty.

I have some time to count another drawer in case I am needed to help with the rush. Before I get to the office I see Jesus is in the back emptying the mop bucket and putting everything away. That reminds me, "Necesi tas agua and soap por favor" I tell him we need to have a clean mop bucket ready in case we need one quickly or "on the fly" as we say in the restaurant business. In Spanish it is, "on la mosca." Working in a restaurant you learn all kinds of Spanish. I bet I could get by just fine in Mexico if I had to.

Robb has magically reappeared in the office with a briefcase in his hand. He opens the door, "I'm on my way to corporate for an emergency meeting. This shift is yours Frank, from this moment on."

He said that like he had gotten the store ready to open himself and he's now handing over the rest of what's left of the shift to me. Yep, he'll make a great District Manager.

"So are you ready to be a manager?" he asks me. I start to reply, but he continues. This is going to be another one of those one sided conversations. "This meeting is probably to officially announce I'm the next District Manager. Reggie will take my place here, so I need to find another assistant manager soon to take his place. . ."

Really? It's not like we've been talking about this almost every day for over six months.

“ . . . I haven’t made up my mind which one of you is going to get the spot yet so I need you to really impress me, Frank. Darren is a hot shot and rising quickly. I would hate to see you not get this because you didn’t try. . .”

I strain to keep a calm expression on my face, but what the hell? All my hard work up until now has just been relegated to the, “stuff that didn’t count” category. What I do from now on is all that matters.

“ . . . Cream rises to the top, Frank, and I’ll know it when I see it. . .”

Yep, that wasn’t condescending.

“Oh, by the way, you need to term Jose M. His last check is on the clipboard in the office along with the paperwork.” He opens the back to leave, “get him to sign for it before you give it to him. Well, gotta go, have a good day.”

“You, too, Robb. Nobody deserves this more than you.”

Jesus finished getting the mop bucket ready and he’s now inspecting the paper goods shelves. He looks over at me with a puzzled look on his face. “Cual es?” he asks, pulling out a thin white cardboard container.

I open up one of the boxes of toilet seat covers and take one out and show it to him. He doesn’t seem to recognize it. I place it over his head and push down so his head goes through pre-cut center of it, and the rest settles around his shoulders like a thin, white bib. He smiles. Okay, enough goofing around.

I return to the office, open up the safe and begin counting out the last drawer.

Robb is such an asshole. I don’t know why he just doesn’t make a decision and begin training the new assistant manager now. The transition will be smoother for the entire store when it’s time for him to leave and be the next District Manager. Waiting until the last minute is stupid.

If I get the Assistant Manager’s job, my pay will more than double, plus I’ll get medical and dental. That would really help Mom out at home, plus I’d be able to pay for college, and I’ll be able to get a car after I get my license. I don’t want to be one of those guys in his twenties, trying to look cool as he’s pedaling around town on a bike.

A loud banging on the door interrupts my count. I try to see who it is, but they are banging on the door, not the window, so I can’t see them. They bang again and this time I sense urgency in the pounding. What could be so important?

I barely get the door opened before she begins yelling, “Frank, hurry, quick, it’s Jesus.” Her eyes are bugging out of her head, and she never loses it.

“What’s wrong with Jesus?”

“Come quick, quick, quick!”

She grabs my arm and practically drags me to the counter. I look out into the restaurant and instead of seeing a melted employee burned beyond recognition, or a choking employee hanging by his neck from a ceiling fan, doing spastic circles in the dining room—I see something much worse.

Chapter 7

A chill comes over me and every hair on my entire body stands up in shock. What more could possibly go wrong with this shift? Right there in the middle of the dining room, for all the world to see, and to make denying this ever happened completely impossible, is a family struggling desperately with Jesus, trying to tell him that they do not want the ass gaskets placed over their heads while they eat.

Jesus looks very confused and obviously doesn't understand why they don't appreciate his kind gesture of concern for their own protection. He is sure he's helping the family out and keeps insisting on putting what he believes is a paper bib, over a little boy's head. The boy is not happy either.

"Hi everyone." I say, suddenly standing in front of the table. How I got here I'll figure out later. What the hell am I going to do? I need to look in charge—but not responsible. "Could you excuse me for a second please?" I ask the Father, who is on his feet and about to take action himself. I take Jesus's arm firmly and he releases the death grip on the child. The father's face begins to relax a bit and he slowly starts to sit back down.

No other words crawl out of my brain, or my mouth. The mother looks like she just witnessed her son being sexually molested. I will have to come back later and talk to these people to make sure everything is all right.

I push Jesus away from that table in much the same way I nudged Juan away from the customer counter just moments ago. This is not my day.

How am I going to show Jesus what he was doing without traumatizing him too much. I mean, my God, what-the-hell? How could he really not know what those were? I look over at the bathrooms down the hall.

I motion for him to follow me into the men's room. I have to nudge him firmly because dragging him inside could be taken the wrong way, and there is already enough of a communication problem going on today.

I look to see if anyone else is in the bathroom. It's empty—thank God!

Jesus is standing in the hallway in front of the bathroom and looking very pale. I wave him in while I put on a "come on, it's okay, I'm not a pervert" expression on my face. After he comes in I lock the door as nonchalantly as this situation permits, so no one else will walk in while we are having this little demonstration. Jesus's eyes widen. I'd be nervous too if some guy walked me into a men's room and then locked the door. I gotta work fast before he panics. The last thing I need right now is a freaked-out employee.

I go over to the toilet stall, and wave for him to join me. He has obviously reached his limit of trust with this little excursion and he stays put.

I point to the silver toilet seat cover dispenser above the toilet. "Look, look," I say as I put on a big smile and display the toilet seat cover dispenser. I pose like a spokesmodel showing a prize he could win on some game show if he chooses the right answer. Very slowly he peeks around the stall to see what it is I am gesturing at.

I pull out a thin paper ass gasket from the dispenser and show it to him. I can tell he recognizes it, but he still isn't getting it. I punch the center out. Now I can see he is

wondering why—of all places—are these paper bibs in here? It looks like I’m gonna have to spell it out for him.

I bend over and place the paper cover on the toilet seat and let the center fall into the toilet, while the rest of it perfectly covers the toilet seat.

I look to see if he gets it now. . . His eyes are huge white balls with small black dots in the center, and his mouth is open so wide I can see all of his bottom teeth and the back of this throat. Great. “Look Jesus, it’s okay.”

“No.”

“Yes, It’s okay.”

“Nooo!”

“Everyone makes mistakes, it’s okay, no big deal.”

“Nooooo!”

I think he’s up to speed about the true function of the ass gaskets, but I don’t think he’s buying the, “It’s no big deal, people put toilet seat covers on other people’s heads every day” ploy.

I notice he is shaking a little. “Okay, look Jesus, I was only kidding. I didn’t expect you to go out and put these on people. I never said to do that.”

Jesus’s eyes glaze over like he is in some kind of trance. It looks like he is replaying the whole scene in his mind, over and over again, but this time knowing full well what he was doing. His face changes from astonishment to disbelief, and then anger, and then back to astonishment. . . It’s like watching him experience an intense embarrassment--retroactively.

“Okay Jesus, just come on out and let’s get back to work. Let’s just pretend this never happened okay?”

“No, NO señor.”

He called me señor and not Frank. I’m gonna need a better plan than, “Hey, fugget-about-it.” “Okay, look, stay in here a while and when you are ready, come back out and work okay?”

I can’t stay here locked in the means-room with Jesus all day. People will talk.

I unlock the door and walk out, leaving him to contemplate this fiasco in solitude, to play it out, step by step, lose all sense of dignity, and then start all over again, like he’s some Groundhog’s Day shame-lemming.

As I walk toward the dining room, I hear the distinct click of the bathroom door locking behind me. I feel awful. Jesus is completely demoralized, and I am partially to blame.

I go back to the office quickly, trying to avoid anyone’s attention, and get the cash drawer I was counting when this whole nightmare started.

Rushing back into the busy restaurant, I put the drawer into the register, and notice my hands are shaking and I’m sweating all over.

Looking to my right I see Roselyn doing her best not to look back at me. She is forcing huge smiles for the customers benefit, but I can tell I won’t be receiving one this afternoon.

I try to calm down and act normal, while everyone around me is either pretending to smile or trying hard not to laugh.

From where I am standing, I can see the poor family's table perfectly. Everyone is eating, but instead of having a nice meal together, they look like a family of deer grazing in a field, while keeping an eye out for the crazy-assed hunter. After a few minutes I'll get up the nerve to go over there and see if everyone is okay. I should offer to buy them all a meal the next time they come in. There's little chance I'll forget them, but even less of a chance they'll be back.

They finish quickly and gather their stuff to leave. The father looks at me sternly as they all rush out the door. You would think I fondled his wife or something. My God, it's not like they were used toilet seat covers or anything. They were just paper.

I don't have the guts to open my mouth and offer them a meal. The sooner this gets put in the past, the sooner I can begin the denial process.

Chapter 8

All through lunch, I keep my eye out for any sign of Jesus coming back from the head. Nobody says a word about the incident. There seems to be an unspoken law about not acknowledging the situation.

When the lunch crowd has quieted down, a shy and slightly calmer Jesus emerges, slowly and cautiously. It looks like he is waiting for the all-clear. All I can think of is, Finally, He has risen, but I don't dare say it.

Everyone tries to act like nothing happened so Jesus can pretend that nobody saw anything. People give denial a bad rap. It's times like these that make me think they should actually teach it in school, but I guess these types of things are better learned at home--or at work--than at school.

I take a cash drawer to the back just ahead of him and I can feel his eyes burning into my back. I hope he doesn't have anything sharp in his hands. Wow. Think about it; getting pierced by Jesus.

After counting the cash, slipping it into the safe and filling out the Daily Sales Report, I put the freshly counted drawer in the first register and tell the still-getting-dressed-and-talking-to-her-friends-Estrella, to count it, relieving Roselyn of her duties.

This is going to be fun. Roselyn is not somebody you want to be on the wrong side of. Not that she's violent or anything, but because she is always on the right side of everything and she knows it. She's like a Mexican version of Oprah and Dr Phil combined. You can't argue with her. The more you argue, the more you both know you are wrong and she is right—it's pointless.

As Roselyn counts the drawer in the office, I pick up the clipboard with Hosem's last paycheck on it and ask him to follow me to the table in the corner of the dining room.

Francisco comes over to the table, too, but three is definitely going to be a crowd at this party. "Ah, Francisco, Trabajo bien?" I ask, trying to see if he likes his job. He nods, and some Spanish blurts out of him. "Mañana. Same horas."

"OK, Gracias. Adios, Jose."

"Adios," Jose replies.

Francisco stands there, smiling and staring at us. What? He doesn't understand Adios? Is it me, or isn't Adios his language. I stare back at him.

He finally gets the hint and leaves.

I remove the envelope with Jose's name on it, containing his last two weeks pay, and place it nonchalantly to the side where I know he can see it. Hosem doesn't have much of a poker face. This must come as a bit of a surprise after that brief promotion he just received.

Now comes the fun part.

"Jose, we tango a rejection notice-eus from the government-o. They say the nombre tu gave us does no tango la number-os correct-o." I always skip the "Although this does not necessarily mean termination," part. It's so stupid. I mean, that's what we're doing. I guess there is the possibility that there was a screw up somewhere, but I've never seen it. These guys know they're illegal and just take their last paycheck and go to the next unsuspecting employer without much argument.

I guess for them, they just need to get new jobs every couple of months; inconvenient but not impossible, with all the places that take in cheap foreign workers, driving down the working wage. A naturalized citizen would require much more: more pay; more hours; more benefits. I guess it's cheaper to do it this way. It means more profits, and that is the name of this game, right? Profit above honor?

He looks down at the envelope, and then down to his lap. He's young. He'll go through this many more times in the next twenty or thirty years—might as well get used to it.

I pull out the company speech we give all employees upon their termination. It is written in English and Spanish. I give it to him to read; there's way more Spanish in there than I should have to learn.

"We really like working with you, Jose. You are a good worker and everyone here likes you. I don't want to let you go, but the law states that we may only employ people with valid ID authorizing them to work here in the United States. The government has told us that the documentation you gave us does not match up with the information you provided, so we have to let you go. Should you fix this problem any time in the future, we would love to work with you again. Here is your last paycheck. Please sign right here acknowledging you received it. Thank you and Good luck."

This was either designed by corporate lawyers trying to avoid any unlawful termination suits, or by a corporate big-wig trying to avoid creating a disgruntled former employee, who may return later with automatic weapons.

He nods and signs the form. I hand him the envelope. He gets up and moves slowly towards the door.

I'm sure he won't waste too much time before applying to another restaurant and getting them to train him, only to have to fire him too. Must be some kind of game for them.

Hosem walks out through the back, shaking solemn hands along the way. This is one re-run I enjoy watching to the end.

Jesus is vigorously mopping the dining area after the lunch rush. I can't tell if he's still mad or not, his eyes are fixed on the mop and the floor in front of him.

I take my cash drawer out of the register and walk back to the office. Roselyn has just finished counting her drawer, and she is leaving the office as I walk in. Perfect timing. Too perfect. “Frank, it’s all done.”

“Thanks, Roselyn.” She hesitates for a second.

“And Frank. . .” Here it comes. She shakes her long black hair out of her way and looks me square in the eyes and face to face. “That was mean what you did to Jesus.”

“Roselyn, it was all just a misunderstanding, I swear. I never told him to go out to the dining room and put those things on customers. That would have been stupid, it would have made us all. . . me, look stupid.” Mission accomplished anyway. “He did that all on his own, I was just as surprised as everyone else.”

“Oh si? Try telling that to Jesus.”

“I did. It’s not my fault he’s as dumb a brick.”

“Jesus is only seventeen years old—“

“I knew what ass gaskets were when I was five.”

“You never grew up in the country, far away from a big city, and being poor does not make you stupid.”

Oh, so this is about being rich?

“You have many benefits over him. He may seem stupid to you, but he knows very much what happened today, and his feelings hurt like anybody else, even you.”

I can’t believe I am taking this crap from a fricking Mexican. “Look Roselyn, this wouldn’t have happened if he would have learned a little English like you.” Oh shit. What did I say? She takes a step back and slowly sizes me up, from the floor to the top of my head. I brace myself for impact. . .

“Okay, Frank, I believe you did not try to hurt his feelings, but you be careful next time. And. . .” she takes another step closer and we are now almost nose to nose. This may hurt. “As far as him learning English, I know that we are in America and here people speak English, but a guy who hires and works with many Spanish speaking workers, a manager who wanted to be a leader, would have learned to communicate with his workers—like Darren.”

“Darren’s a kiss ass.”

“I know who Darren is. He’s the only one who tries to communicate with his staff like a real leader should.”

That did it. I slam the door behind Roselyn, and wait for the outside door to close so I know she has left for the day. It would really suck if she was outside waiting for me to leave so she could kick my ass with another one of her Darren is better than you sucker-punches.

I look out the window. Rodrigo and Luisa must have watched the whole thing. Great, now what is the crew going to be saying about me? I’ll just organize this office a bit. I don’t think I can handle condescension from those two slackers right now.

What the hell happened today? Miscommunication, the cream rises to the top, bosoms, ass gaskets as bibs; I can’t do anything right today. Being told the situation was my fault because I don’t speak Spanish and that doesn’t make me as good a leader. If some French kids started working here, would I be required to learn French, too?

“Hey Pancho, start any rebellions today?” Oh God! Now I have to deal with Darren. I can’t tell whether he has heard anything or whether this is just his sarcastic way of starting the day. “The name is Frank, remember?”

”Oh hey, and I’m Bond, James Bond. Ha.” I hate the way he always laughs at his own jokes. “The place looks good my man, nice job, nice job, so how was it? Busy? Slow? What are the numbers?” He picks up the clipboard with the Daily Sales Report on it.

Darren is trying to be every bit the Robb Haley that Robb himself wishes he were. Obsessed with numbers, procedures, but constantly smoking cigarettes outside and talking on his cell phone to God knows who. The phone rings. “Hello, Taco Bell.”

“Frank, good, I caught you. I just got out of a meeting here at the district office and I have some bad news.” Great, more bad news. “Is Darren there yet?”

“Yep, he just got here.”

“Good, put me on speaker.”

I switch the phone to speaker-phone and hang up the receiver. “Darren, Robb has some bad news.”

“What?!”

“How do I know? He hasn’t told me yet.”

“Okay you two chill out. Corporate has just gone over the numbers and apparently, with the economy as it is, and sales down by over twenty percent during the last three quarters, it doesn’t make sense to open up another store in this district.”

“What?” Darren asks, but we both know what that means.

“Yeah, I know how you feel. I’m not getting a district. As a matter of fact one of the DM’s just got canned and his district is being divied up among the remaining DM’s to cut costs.”

“So when do they predict we’ll be back on track to expand again?” Darren asks.

“Ever the optimist. I like that Darren. Unfortunately there is no plan to start construction on the next unit. We may even sell the property we were going to build it on, but here’s where this affects you two. . . ”

I look up at the ceiling. Just dump it all right here Lord—I can take it.

“As of immediately I am taking over the scheduling of the staff, and I am faxing over a new management schedule right now. You will see it any second.”

Sure enough, the fax machine begins to whine. “New schedule?” I ask.

“Yeah, you guys luck out. As you are still paid hourly, you will each give up a day a week, and I am going to be pulling six day weeks.”

“And Reggie?” Darren asks.

“Since I’m not leaving, Reggie, of course, is not getting promoted to GM. He and I are going to do all the heavy lifting. You two are going to fill the gaps. Look at the schedule coming over the fax and I’ll be in tomorrow morning if you have any questions. I gotta run. I have to cut some hours on this week’s schedule for the employees and have it ready by tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t worry Robb, we got your back.” Darren says. The kiss-ass.

“Thanks guys. We’ll need it.”

We exchange some fake pleasantries and the call is over. When the fax is finished we both look at it together. Both Darren and I are down to four shifts per week, and it looks like we’re cooks and cashiers again for half of them. We have only two shift leader positions each. “Brutal,” Darren says. Reggie’s schedule covers most of what Robb can’t. Being an Assistant Manager on salary means you get all the hours you want, and then a

few you don't want too, but you get paid a lot more. I could've really used that money for a car.

"Darren, come look at this," a voice calls from out front.

He leaves and I put the last of the invoices in the file cabinet and get ready to leave.

I close the office door behind me and slip my now dry poncho over my head, and pick up my umbrella. Juan and Llorena are on their way out too. "Pinche Pancho" they say under their breaths, shaking their heads, smiling.

"It's Frank" I shout. They flinch and quickly walk to the door. Fricking Darren. He keeps calling me Pancho and now everyone else does, too. I would love to stick his head in the microwave and push Soup. Oh well, this day is finally over. Time to go home and relax--maybe even take a shower and get some of this horrible shift's stink off me.

Juan opens the back door just ahead of me and about a dozen cops come rushing in, flashing badges and talking Spanish.

"Atención, atención, todos empleados aquis por favor."

As the agents flood in I see the ICE on the backs of their jackets in bright white letters. Immigration—yes!

Chapter 9

From the looks on everybody's faces, there is no escape. Finally something good happens today. I've helped catch five illegals yesterday, and I don't know how many today. Nobody can say I'm not doing my part in making this country safe.

The agents are shoving us all into the back of the break room. I can see some officers coming in from the lobby. It looks like we're getting closed down. I probably shouldn't bring up the fact that it was me who made the call.

Darren is talking to one of the officers. I should probably at least let these guys know I'm a manager, and find out what's going to happen to the store. "Excuse me, I'm a shift leader."

"Good for you. Now shut up and stay against the wall with your Primos. Hands on top of your head. Now! Manos encima de su cabeza! Manos encima de su cabeza!"

I put my hands on top of my head with everyone else and we all get frisked. "Excuse me, I'm not an illegal. I'm a US citizen." I look around for confirmation from the other employees, but they all refuse to look at me.

"You got any ID?" A female ICE agent replies.

"Yeah, I have my student body card." I go to pull out my wallet.

"Hands back on your head, and I mean now!"

I feel the air rush out of my lungs when she hits me in the gut with her baton. I wave my arms wildly at her to stop.

"Calma te," a male voice says as I get slammed up against the wall, his forearm pushing hard against my neck. I can barely breathe. Everyone else stares blankly ahead.

Why isn't Darren . . . I can't believe it. He told them I was a Mexican? That son-of-a- . . . Look at him. All fake distress and concern. Well, it's his shift now. How you going to explain this to Robb? Asshole.

I get frisked by one of the male ICE agents, while Forearm-guy keeps me pinned against the wall. "What's in your pocket?" he asks.

"My wallet," I squeak out above the pressing forearm on my neck. "It has my Student Body card in it."

"Student body cards are not legal forms of identification. Do you have a drivers license, social security card, state issued ID card, greencard, non-resident alien card, anything like that?"

"I have a social security card at home."

"At home?" Forearm guy spins me around and holds my hands behind with one hand, while emptying my back pockets with the other. The right side of my face is smashed against the wall and between his arm and my arm, I can't see much of anything in this position.

Suddenly I remember the picture of my parent's wedding that fell out of the umbrella this morning. The one I forgot to throw away because this whole shit-storm of a day got me sidetracked. This is not going to look good. I nod.

He pulls the wallet and photo out of my back pocket. "Just a wallet huh? This your graduating class?"

"Oh, I forgot about that, " I say to my elbow. Why do I feel like I'm lying?

"Sure you did. This your family?"

What do I tell him? They kinda are, but I've never met any of them.

He lets me go and I turn around, keeping my hands where they are. Forearm guy points to someone in the picture, "Hey, looks like we got a Mexican John Travolta here." A couple of other ICE agents come over and have a laugh. I look over at Darren. He is purposely trying to not look at me. That asshole. When they are through making fun of me, the ICE agent slips the picture into a plastic bag, along with my watch, wallet, and my Taco Bell '1' year anniversary pin. He opens the wallet and reads the name off my Student ID card and writes it on the plastic baggie with a Magic Marker. I thought that isn't a legal form of ID. Looks like it worked for him, but I'm not going to say anything. This guy's a little slap-happy for my taste. This is so degrading. It's not me they should be making fun of. I'm on their side!

After about half an hour of ID checks, they let some of the other workers go.

Now they are putting plastic zip lock things on the remaining employees wrists like handcuffs, and then they take us out, one by one, to a truck-like wagon thing that is parked out back where the Taco Bell supply truck had been just a few hours ago.

A small crowd has gathered behind the building. They stare at us like we're convicts and whisper amongst themselves.

There is a slight drizzle coming down, and I see a news truck pull into the driveway. Great. Now we're going to be on the news. This day just can't get any worse.

After the last of us gets put into the truck, I look out the back window at the news crew talking with an ICE agent. Darren is nowhere in sight. I hope I'm not going to be on the news. What if Willie and Shane see this? They may never let me patrol again.

When the last of us are in the truck, the doors close and we begin to move. We turn the corner, and out the back window I see Roselyn, standing at a bus stop. She's a

good six inches taller than most of the others, and has a jean jacket on over her Taco Bell uniform. No raincoat or umbrella—not smart. She was obviously far enough down the street to not know what just happened. I bet she'll know all about it in an hour when she gets called back to pull a double shift.

This is humiliating. Being treated like a rat. I look at the other workers. There are ten of us in here. Eleven if I count myself too. I was sure some of these guys had valid ID. Maybe they are waiting until we get to the station before checking us out more thoroughly. Maybe they need to access a database or something.

Oh well, I'm sure this'll all get ironed out when we get to wherever it is you take illegal immigrants. I just hope it isn't far. I'll probably have to walk home when they let me out.

Chapter 10

We're separated from the girls and taken to a large room where a couple of immigration agents photograph and fingerprint us, then lead us to one of several large holding cells. The one we're put in has two cement walls with benches in front of them, and two steel bar walls, just like in the movies. There are several white wooden benches in the middle of the cell too, but all the benches are full of illegals. The only seat not taken is the stainless steel one in the corner, and I'm pretty thankful that one is not occupied. There are no partitions or doors for privacy, aside from a waist-high cement wall that makes up the third side of a stainless steel box the toilet sits in. There is nothing closing up the fourth side. I don't particularly want to watch anyone take a dump. God knows I won't have to go no matter long I'm in here.

I'm the only white guy in here. Rodrigo, Gerardo, Juan and Hosel walk over to some other guys and Rodrigo immediately starts talking and making friends. I pick out the emptiest space inside this cell and stand in the middle of it. Making friends here is not something I'm interested in.

After a while, I begin to notice that everyone Rodrigo has been talking to is staring at me. They must be talking about the shift today. Could this day get any worse? Oh wait, here comes a couple of swell looking guys. Tattoos all up their arms and neck. Gang-bangers. This just keeps getting better.

They walk up to me and surround me, pinning me to the bars of the cell. The tall one has a face like a cactus and the two smaller ones are younger, but look like they've been through a war. Stone faces all of them. "There's a guy says you work for Immigration." Everyone stops what they're doing and looks over at me.

"No. Who told you that?"

The big ugly one continues, "He says you beat up his son."

Son? Oh shit! Are they here? I look around for some vaguely familiar faces. "That's crazy. If I worked for immigration, what would I be doing in here?"

"You tell me, home-boy." His three-day beard is an inch away from my face. His breath smells like he brushed his teeth with beer, and it's making my stomach turn. The

other two look up at me with their heads tilted way back, like they are peeking underneath an invisible bandana that covers the top part of their eyes. I have nowhere to go. I can see people are spreading out and giving us room. I don't need any more room. I don't want to fight these guys.

Angry Spanish flies over the crowd from the neighboring cell. Everyone from this cell looks in the direction of the voice, and then turns back to look at me again. They expect an answer, but I have no idea what was said. If I don't know Spanish, will that prove to them I'm an immigration officer?

The big tough guy in front of me says something in Spanish, but I don't understand that either. The two guys with him laugh and look at each other. What the hell did that mean? This would be a really good time to know some jail-house Spanish.

They all move in closer. "I think this is a bad day for you to get locked up white-boy." Beer breath grabs my Taco Bell vest and pushes me against the cement wall to my right. I feel like I got hit by a car. He presses his face close to mine, like he's about to tell me a secret. Everyone but me is smiles and good times. I try not to vomit while I brace for impact. . .

"Okay, you ugly sons-a-bitches. . ." a guard yells from outside the cell. He says some other stuff, but in some other kind of Spanish I've never heard before. He starts calling out names and guys leave the cell to stand in a line by the door. My name gets called and everybody laughs. Typical, but I've never been so happy to hear my name called. I wave my hand, acknowledging my name has been called and slide past my would-be attackers. As I make my way to the open door, I feel eyes burning their way into my back as I leave.

"Hey, white-boy! I'd sleep with one eye open if I were you," the big ugly guy says, and his two friends smile slightly and stand there beside him, looking down their noses at me. I hope these guys go to jail for a long time; keep them off the streets.

Everyone is standing on a yellow line that's painted along the length of the hallway, disappearing around the corner. I stand on the line like everyone else. I have a good view of the cell next to the one I came out of. I lock eyes with a father and two sons. One of the son's face is swollen and discolored. A chill runs down my back. They begin talking to themselves, and some of the guys around them turn and look at me. Of course I'd be taken to the same place as the guys we captured yesterday. I should have thought about this possibility on the way over here.

The whole group guys surrounding the Mexicans I helped capture rush to the bars and several begin yelling and saying things in Spanish. I feel a sharp jab in my back. I turn around to see a hateful Mexican face.

"Calla te," one of the guards yells, but that does little good. Another guard yells a command and we all walk down the hallway on the yellow line painted on the floor.

"Seems we have a celebrity," a female guard says.

As we walk the guy behind me kicks the bottom of my right foot as I am picking it up to take my next step. I stumble and trip a bit, but keep my balance.

"Back in line," yells a guard, and I jump back in line. A few steps later, I get a knee in the butt and I stumble forward, slightly bumping into the guy in front of me, who turns around and shoves me back. I stumble into place and continue walking. We turn the corner and again the bottom of my foot gets kicked and I go flying into the guy in front of

me, who pushes me even harder into the guy who kicked me, who then pushes me with his shoulder.

I'm grabbed by my elbow, thankfully, before I fall, but then I'm flung into a wall, my arms pinned behind me and my face smashed hard into the fresh white paint.

"Knock it off, asshole," a male guard says. "We got a special way we deal with your kind around here."

I don't know who my kind is at the moment, and I don't even try to tell him I didn't do anything. I can't wait to explain I don't belong here. Maybe we're going to talk to a judge or lawyer or something, or maybe I'll get to make my phone call.

We walk a short distance, and now we're ordered to stand up against the wall. I think we're not supposed to touch a shorter red line on the floor, or stay behind it or don't go outside it. I'll just do like everybody else. That should keep me out of trouble, unless someone decides to start a riot. What should I do then? Does that even happen here? I never thought I'd be in one of these places.

One by one a door opens and a guard takes one of us into the room, and at the same time, a guard leaves with the person he previously escorted into the room. The exiting Mexican is taken around the corner. Whatever they're doing doesn't take very long. I wonder where they're going? The big ugly guy in front of me, and the little asshole who kicked my shoe, keep looking over at me. I need to get out of here fast. What if they put me in the cell with the kid I beat up yesterday? Do people ever die in here?

When it's my turn, I get the officer who shoved me into the wall. He smiles, letting me know he'll be enjoying this.

I'm pushed inside a small, pea green room with a big metal desk and a guy in a cheap suit in the chair on the other side of it.

"Nombre"

"My name is Frank Veela, look there has been some kind of mistake--"

"Shut Up!" he yells. "Frank is some kind of nick-name is it? Well I'm glad you speak English. I'm going to skip the Spanish version. Here's the deal: If you agree to a 'Stipulated Removal,' this will not go on your record, you will probably get released today, and you'll get dropped off at the border."

"I'm trying to tell you, I'm not a Mexican, I'm an--"

"Your second option is to request a hearing. You will be held in this facility until you go before a judge, but this could take months, and if you aren't deemed eligible for bail, you are held for several more months awaiting trial. Lose the trial, and you are banned from re-entry into the United States for three years and you are dropped off at the border. Which sounds better to you?"

"But I'm not a Mexican. I'm a manager--"

"Don't tell me that! That will automatically make you stay here until a bail hearing, which could be weeks from now. Then, when bail is met, you could be awarded a fine of up to \$2000 per illegal hire. It says here that eleven people were brought in with you. That could be twenty-two thousand dollars. In case you haven't heard, we are getting tough on illegal workers here in the US."

I can't believe I'm hearing this.

“Then there’s the trial process. You could be here a very long time. My advice, accept Stipulated Removal and get out of here today. No fine, no penalty. Otherwise, be prepared to stay here a while.”

“Don’t I get a lawyer?”

“Right now, I’m him.”

“Wait—“

“No waiting. This is the deal, take it and go home, refuse it and stay here. Here are the forms—you choose. And make it quick, I have thirty more people to talk to before I submit these to the judge for his signature in half an hour.”

“But I’m not a Mexican, I have a student ID card in my back pocket.”

“Very funny. Last time I checked, a student ID card is not a recognized form of legal identification.”

“But I’m an American I tell you.”

“Look, I’ll level with you. I’ve heard people try that before and it hasn’t worked the whole time I’ve been doing this, so I’d give it up right now. Especially since, with your real name and all, that will only piss the judge off, and he’s the last guy right now you want to mess with.”

He’s worse than those guys in the other cell? Oh my God! When did I enter the twilight zone? Is this really happening?

“Okay, I’ll say you request a hearing and you’ll go back to the cell.”

I can’t go back to that cell. “Hey, wait, I’ve never done this before.”

“Well you better get good at it quick, or you’re in a heap a shit. Sign the Stipulation and get out today. It’s really a no-brainer if you ask me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hey, I’m on your side. This is the easiest, quickest way out of here.”

I pick up the pen. It feels funny in my hand, like I’ve never held one before. I start to sign it, but I temporarily forget how to sign my name. When I’m finished he snaps up the paper.

“Okay, next!”

The door opens and it’s my turn to get escorted down the hallway and around the corner.

I’m put into a cell, about half the size of the one I almost got beat up in. Since this room is smaller, all the benches are bolted to the floor and sit against the two walls that are not bars. Everything else looks the same. All the light comes from dirty florescent overhead lighting, giving everything an oddly fake tint, like this is some sadistic dream that I will eventually wake up from.

There are already ten guys in here, and more come all the time. What if that big ugly guy comes in here? Or what if one of the guys I helped arrest come in here? Or their friends? Why is this happening to me? I’m an American.

Each and every minute I’m here ticks away so slowly, especially since I don’t have my watch. I have no way of knowing how long I’ve really been in here. Every time I hear footsteps coming down the hallway, I brace for bad news.

Chapter 11

After what seems like days, I finally get called to leave the cell. Whenever someone gets called they don't come back. Maybe we're let go. Or maybe I'm going to where those gang-bangers are, or worse. . .

I'm told to walk along the line again, even though it's just me and the guard. I am stopped at a window with a small opening. I tell her my name, and she looks at me hard. My name does not amuse her, which I pick up on right away, because it usually amuses everyone else. She nods slowly, and opens up an envelope with my name on it. Funny how your name on something can make you feel associated with it. I feel like a criminal, even though I haven't done anything wrong.

She hands me my watch, wallet, jacket, and wedding picture of my parents.

"You think you're pretty funny, huh?"

"No."

"Well we got a way of dealing with smart-asses like you."

"I'm not trying to make trouble, honest."

She writes something down on a piece of paper and a buzzer goes off. "I'm done with this one. Have a nice trip. Next!" A door opens and I am led into yet another cell. How many cells does this place have?

Have a nice trip? What did that mean?

Another long wait. Everyone else gets called but me. Why? Did they find out I'm an American after all? I don't really care. As long as one or more of those gang-bangers that want to kill me don't get locked in here, I'm okay with just about anything.

Finally, after an eternity, possibly days even, a guard comes to let me out.

"Okay, we have something special for you today."

"What? Special? What does that mean?"

"Special, as in, not ordinary, set apart. You should really learn the language if you're going to try to live here, amigo. The judge has signed your papers, and your plane is waiting. Lets go."

"Plane?"

I stand up and he grabs my wrists and spins me around. He puts the plastic handcuffs on me again. I hate them—they cut into my arms.

He walks me down a hallway, then out a door where an Immigration Patrol wagon is waiting for me. He helps me into the back, but he uses a little too much force and my head slams into the ceiling of the truck. I see a bunch of little white lights swirling and diving in front of my eyes.

"Hasta la vista, baby!" He grins. I think he did that on purpose. Where am I going? I thought they were going to let me go!

Chapter 12

After takeoff, a flight attendant cuts my handcuffs with a little clipper thing. They must get a lot of deportation-ers on these flights. Those Immigration officers seemed to think it was funny to send me as far away from the border as possible. What am I going to do? How am I going to get home? Why is this happening to me?

A Pee Wee Herman movie starts on the screen in front of me. I can't handle this right now. I feel the growing sadness in the center of my chest that signals depression, like lead flowing through my veins. I feel heavy, dark and tired.

There is really nothing to do but sit back and go for a ride. I see a AAA Travel Guide to Mexico in the pocket in the seat in front of me. I pull it out, and flip through the pages. Wow, this is going to be a six or seven hour flight in cramped seats and crummy old movies. Maybe I can sleep my way to Guadalajara.

I begin to fantasize about jumping from the plane. I take back what I said to Willie about my version of hell. This whole day has been hell.

I look around the plane. There are heavy forty and fifty year olds in loud shirts, shorts, socks and sandals everywhere. Mr. Comb-over on my right is playing a Crash Bandicoot game on his iPhone. The guy on my left is typing away on his laptop. This looks like a normal flight to Guadalajara; not at all like that Nicholas Cage movie with criminals in a jet.

A large weight pushes against my chest as we begin to take off, and the depression takes hold with a vengeance.

The magazine pages, glossy and full of ads seem to be all for hotels and car rentals in Mexico, with happy white faces smiling at me, telling me what a great time I'll have when I get there. Even the ads are insincere; fake smiles on fake families with fake promises.

Dad looks so different now than from his pictures. He is balding, which is rare for a Mexican, and the ring of hair in a circle around his head like a scruffy horseshoe, is short and stubbly, parting only for his ears and mouth. He vainly wears a hat and never takes it off in public, so no one, not even his children, know what he really looks like. His face is cracked and blistered from the sun. There's a lime sticking out of the top of his beer while his wives work and take care of the children. His beer belly brags of his lack of physical effort and sticks out under his plain white shirt, which is unbuttoned at the chest to show off his sweat-stained tank-top t-shirt. His skin-tight polyester bell-bottomed pants are white with long blue and red stripes that run from hip to foot, and his bell-bottoms don't quite reach his ankles. His bright blue socks are plainly seen by all, through his tan sandals, and his toes stick out through holes like they're tunneling to freedom. I'd recognize him anywhere.

His family comes up behind him like a sad garden, every flower a wilting tragedy. Torn and wrinkly dresses of various faded colors, and pants with holes in the knees. All the men are fat around the middle and skinny everywhere else. All the women are barefoot and pregnant, right down to the teens and tweens. The whole tribe is missing teeth and what little is left of those are yellow or brown. They obviously prefer tequila

over mouthwash and the kids run around skinny and dirty with muddy snot running down their noses. They smell like a garbage dump, and flies circle their heads looking for treats.

The family stares at me to, trying to get me to come close so they can marvel at their American relative. Their sad, shameful faces painted with guilt, pleading for forgiveness, wishing they could be like me, thinking that maybe if they would have been kinder to me and my mother, things may have turned out better. Regret is their master and they swim in a sewer of shame and dishonor—evidence for all to see. They are even shunned by all the other Mexicans and live like hobos, begging from town to town.

People ask me, “how can you be related to them?”

“I’m not really,” I tell them.

“This is your captain speaking.”

Huh? How long have I been asleep?

“We are on final approach at the Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla International Airport in Guadalajara. The weather is sunny and a balmy eighty-five degrees. Please observe the fasten seat-belts sign. . .”

Oh, crap, I’m still on my way to Mexico. I’ve never woken-up to a nightmare before. My wrists still have the indentations where the handcuffs were. This is really happening.

“ . . . Please remain seated until the plane has made a full and complete stop.”

The moment the plane has all it’s wheels on the ground and the plane is level, many people jump up out of their seats, grab their things and rush to the front of the plane. It’s like a race or something. I guess there’s a lot of grey area in the definition of a full and complete stop, here in Mexico. I think I’ll wait and let them fight it out to get off the plane the quickest. A couple of extra minutes aren’t going to hurt me any.

As people pass by me, they stare at the guy who had the handcuffs on. This is so demoralizing. At least now I know what those scumbags have to go through when they are deported. I always thought it was a gift. I can’t wait to tell Shane. . . wait, I can’t tell Shane and Willie I got deported.

Well it looks like I might get the chance to face my father and reveal to everyone the scum-sucking pig he really is. This could be interesting. . .

Wow! Eighty what degrees? Are you kidding? The heat off the tarmac is ferocious. I check my watch; it's almost noon.

Not much of a greeting here at the airport. When you land in Hawaii I hear some beautiful girl puts a lei around your neck and gives you a kiss to welcome you to their island. You would think that Mexico would do something similar, with all the tourists they get. Mexico should have their own twist to the greeting, like instead of a lei of flowers around your neck they would place a sombrero on your head, and when you bent over and closed your eyes for a kiss, the beautiful girl would give you a swift kick in the nuts.

I quickly cover the short distance from the plane to the airport, and pray the Mexicans have discovered—ahhh, air-conditioning.

I guess customs is over here. I'll just follow everyone else, they look like they know where they're going. I wonder what this is going to be like. I've never been. . . that was it? Wasn't I supposed to stop or anything? I look around and see a man in a tan uniform sitting at a table, barely feigning interest in the people passing by. Well that was anti-climactic. He barely looked at me. I guess I don't fit the: drugs or weapons smuggling profile. I'm more the: young kid looking for his no good deadbeat dad, kind of profile. They probably get a lot of us down here. I bet someone could set up a little stand next to the customs desk--DNA testing, while you wait.

This is a very small, and old airport, and here I am, back outside in the sweltering heat of the mid-day Mexican sun.

There's got to be a bus stop around here.

I stand at the doorway for a second and take it all in. I've never been out of the United States before. I am in now another country. Yesterday I was at work, having a lousy day, but nowhere in my wildest imagination would I have thought I would have ended up here, today. My life got weird in a hurry.

I stand and look at the area around me. The traffic is mesmerizing. It pulses and flows, bobs and weaves, all without turn signals. They are bunched together like they're in some kind of dance routine, and everyone is in colorful metal, glass and chrome costumes.

Feeling a drop of sweat run down my chest, I look for some shade. A bus stop would be nice. I could take the bus into town and look for my dad. I seriously doubt I will find him, but my parents got married in Guadalajara and my dad's family lives around here somewhere. I don't know when I'll have this opportunity to even try again.

The glare off the white buildings is harsh. Most people I see are wearing sunglasses. I should get some too. I'll bet they're pretty cheap down here too.

Now, where is the bus stop? That looks kinda like a bus stop sign. It's all in Spanish, except for the numbers.

I feel like such a tourist. If this is a bus stop and a bus does pick me up, I have no idea where it will take me. Everything around here is in Spanish. I can't tell which way I am facing but I think there are hotels in that direction.

I glance at my watch for the um-teenth time and see I've been standing here about five minutes, and I have yet to see a bus. Just a few stragglers emptying out of the airport and disappearing every which way. Maybe waiting to be last out wasn't such a smart idea. I bet everybody on the plane ran to get on the bus before it left. Why doesn't anyone announce these things? Instead of stating the obvious, it's eighty something degrees outside and very sunny, which any fool is going to find out the moment they exit the plane, he should say, Hi this is your captain speaking, you have exactly two minutes to get to the bus stop before the last bus leaves, so don't worry about the plane stopping, just grab your things, open any emergency exit, and jump.

Two Mexican couples, come out of the airport and walk over to stand about fifty feet away from me, at the edge of the sidewalk and toward the oncoming traffic. They are all wearing light earth colors with white shirts and blouses. I can hear their steps above the din of the traffic, like they're wearing taps or something. I'm at the bus stop, I think, so they must be waiting for family to come pick them up or something. There doesn't appear to be an arrivals or departures staging area around here, or line of taxis waiting to take people away from the airport to the hotels. Maybe those got snapped up by the eager de-planers too.

The couples wave excitedly at a white Volkswagen van with the number fifteen written in black electrical tape on the front. It stops in front of them. The driver gets out and runs around the front of the van to open the door for them, then he runs back to the drivers side, gets back in, and they drive right past me. The passengers and I stare at each other as they drive by. I get a funny feeling something just happened.

Another couple comes out of the airport, talking and waving their hands excitedly. They walk over towards me, and they also stop about forty feet between me and the oncoming traffic. They are not there for long before they get into an old, small, green and yellow Volkswagen beetle, which I bet is a cab. Maybe that Volkswagon van was a cab too. Makes sense. Small slug-bug cab for a couple of passengers, and a big van for families or people with lots of luggage. They probably use Volkswagens for cabs like we used to use those old Checker cabs. I still don't see any buses coming.

A small family carrying some luggage stands in about the same place as the last people did, and they appear to be looking for someone too. After a few minutes another white Volkswagen van with the number 12 in thick black tape pulls up and the driver runs around, opens the door and they get in. The driver runs back around to his side, gets in and pulls out into traffic and drives right on by—same as before. The driver is smiling and sweating as the van passes me. Still no bus. They should post a schedule with bus numbers and routes so people would know how long they should expect to wait. We do it all the time back home.

A gentle breeze carries the scent of Mexican food to me. If I walk in the direction of the wind I'm sure to find a restaurant. I don't think there are any houses around here. Restaurant. I'm getting hungry. I didn't eat real well in jail, and I slept most of the trip on the plane. Maybe I should look for some food first, and then start looking for my deadbeat dad.

A middle-aged woman with short black hair and large gold hoop earrings walks up and stands twenty feet in front of me. Her baggy tan colored pants and silky blue shirt

wave lazily in the light breeze. The wind isn't strong enough to actually cool anything down, it just gently blows hot air all over my body and makes me drowsy. I feel like I'm standing in front of a giant blow dryer with the setting turned to boredom.

The woman in front of me waves and a small green and yellow Volkswagen beetle stops beside her. This must be the slug-bug capitol of the world. The driver just reaches over and opens the door from inside to let the woman in. Still no bus in sight.

It's way too hot to stay here in the sun all day. Maybe I should hire the next Volkswagen that comes by.

A young couple with their young daughter in hand, stops about the same place that last woman stood before getting her cab. I think I'll stand twenty feet in front of them and snag the next slug-bug that comes by. I'll just pick up my bag, walk nonchalantly . . .

Mission accomplished. Now I just have to find the next yellow and green slug bug, or white van with a number on it and flag it down. It shouldn't be long. I've seen three or four of them go by in the last six or seven minutes.

A small family stops about twenty feet in front of me. It's a young couple with a little daughter. . . hey! I look behind me and the family I snuck in front of is not where I left them. That is them. They are in front of me again.

They are a young family, not much older than me. The Dad is in Levis and a baggy, green shirt, and his wife is wearing a thin, blue dress. They have a little black-haired girl, and she is staring right at me, but her parents are pretending I don't exist. Well two can play—well four can play this game.

I slowly take a long way around them so they won't see me. . . La de dah, such a nice day for a pleasant stroll. . .

Oh shit. They must have eyes in the back of their heads. They are walking further up the sidewalk too. That's not fair! I've been here way longer than them. I'll just walk faster.

Mom just took a peek. Now they are walking faster too. I pick up the pace. They begin to run, but the little girl is slowing them down. Ha! Oh good they stopped. Victory is. . . Oh shit! I didn't see that green beetle. Well, it's theirs now. The Dad looks over at me with a cocky grin. Whatever.

I look back in the direction I came from and see I've run about a quarter mile in the opposite direction I want to go. My whole body is now covered in sweat.

I think I'll just walk in the direction all of those Volkswagens went. Funny how nobody stands at the bus stop—wait! Maybe it's not a bus stop. Maybe it's just a trap so the locals can get taxis without having to wait in line behind the tourists.

Before I cross the street, I take one last look back to see if anyone is standing at the bus stop. Nope. Maybe it's out of order. Or maybe the Mexicans haven't quite figured out how bus stops work.

I pull out the picture from my back pocket and look at it as I walk. I might as well start searching for my so-called father, or anyone else in this photo. Mom said my so-called dad washed dishes and bussed tables, but you gotta think that in seventeen years he would have gotten a promotion. I wonder if he cooks. They do speak his language down here, so he could work the front of the house too. Maybe he is a waiter. I think searching the larger restaurants and hotels will be a great place to start. Then, if I don't find him

today, I'll ask at the jail or police station, first thing in the morning. I bet he's on a first name basis with everyone who works in the jail. One of his brothers is a cop.

Here comes a white Volkswagen van. Just for kicks I wave at it. It pulls over and stops right in front of me. The driver runs around and opens the door. SCORE! There's a couple of other people already in here. I wonder if bus stops are even needed, unless you are a bored Mexican, and want to laugh at the stupid tourists who stand around waiting next to any old metal pole that sticks out of the sidewalk.

"Hi, my friend, you need hotel?"

English, great. "Yes, I need a cheap hotel, some place near all the big hotels."

"You need big hotel?"

I guess his English isn't all that great. "Yes, I need a quart-o in la middle of la. . . Guadalajara."

"Oh, yes, my friend. I got it for you, my friend." He has a big smile that wrinkles his whole face. He is a thin middle-aged man and he's wearing a light brown hat with a black band around it, and a white short-sleeved button down shirt with pockets on both sides, but something about his strikes me as odd. I can see he is also wearing a t-shirt underneath his shirt. In this heat? Are you kidding me? Where's his mittens?

The other people in the back smile when I turn and look at them. Can I handle three days of this? I have to be back at work on Thursday. "Not too expensive," I repeat.

"Ex-pen-sive."

"No, NOT EX-PEN-SIVE-O."

"Espensivo."

Christ, I'm in a country of idiots. What was I thinking?

"Sure, sure my friend. I got it for you," he says again with a big grin. I should have just walked. We merge into traffic, or more correctly, push everyone else out of the way. As we pass an old Mercedes-Benz, it does the same to us and we swerve a bit, and everyone next to us swerves too. I guess cars made in Germany have the right of way down here.

The city is dull and drab, with dirty white buildings that contrast sharply against the brightly colored signs advertising things in Spanish, mainly, but there are some in English scattered about too. This town smells of cars and beans and every few blocks there is the sound of Mexican music playing loudly outside, as if it's piped in from some central radio station for the amusement of the tourists.

I didn't think the airport was this far from the center of town. The driver is pointing out all the landmarks and saying stuff in Spanish that I've never heard before.

The city is bigger than I had imagined. We seem to be in the downtown area now. Large stately hotels, bars, stores, a few big neon lights. many more signs in English, lots of old, small offices, apartments, stores, restaurants, cantinas, shops. There are apartments over stores, shops over offices. Everything is mixed up and all bunched together—very confused looking.

The driver stops in front of a large hotel then jumps out and runs around the van. I guess he was going to open the door for me, but I'm halfway out already when he gets to me. The couple in the back look relieved. I pull out a couple of dollars and hand it to my new smiling friend.

“Thank you, my friend. Hasta luego.” he says and runs back to the drivers seat. I wave, and the old folks in the back of the van wave back, as the driver shoves his way into traffic.

I look at the large, hotel in front of me, with the fountain in front and tall potted shrubs on either side of the front doors. I guess this is as good a place as any to start. I’m not sure what to expect, but I might as well look around for my good-for-nothing dad, and maybe see some of Mexico before I get a room and call Mom.

Wow! How am I going to explain this? I barely believe what’s happened to me, yet here I am.

Chapter 13

The moment I set foot inside the hotel, icy air shocks me to a new level of awake. They seem to have perfected air-conditioning down here. It’s not this cool in the offices or restaurants in Arizona.

The lobby is gi-normous. The floor is black marble tiles with white and gold veins and flecks. The sofa’s are all plush white, and there are black throw pillows with gold tassels at each corner. There is a scattering of dark wood tables, some with magazines and newspapers on top of them. It looks like bus loads of people cold sit and talk, or read in here. Where they would get the buses: I don’t know, but they could get dropped off here while they wait to get checked in. At the far end is the reception desk, and then off to the right appears to be a lot of plants and music. I wonder how much it costs to stay here. Oh, that reminds me. How many pesos are there in a dollar? I should probably go to a bank and switch the money so when they say something costs so many pesos, I can give it to them and they won’t try to take advantage of me when they see I have American money and no friggin clue.

I make my way through the expanse of the lobby to the reservation desk. A nice looking brunette in a dark blue suit and long straight hair pulled back behind her ears, smiles and looks up at me from her computer.

“Hi, do you have a reservation?”

I have no idea what to say. How do I word this? I am looking for my father, sounds pathetic. Do you know any of these people, sounds like a detective. Should I ask for him by name? That at least sounds normal. I am taking way too long to answer her. She must think I’m deaf or something. “Hi, sorry. . . um, does an Armando Veela work here?”

“I’m sorry sir, I don’t recognize that name. Does he work in the hotel or the restaurant?”

“I . . . either. . . um . . . I mean, I don’t know.” Get a grip Frank, “I’m looking for my . . . uncle. I haven’t seen him for a long time. The last I heard he was working in a hotel or restaurant in Guadalajara. Do you recognize any of these people?”

“Any of these people?”

Oh crap. “Yeah, I haven’t seen some of my relatives in a long time and I’m trying to look them up, you know, find my roots.” Roots? Did I actually say roots?

“Maybe you should talk with a manager, perhaps he could help you.”

“Great. That would be fine, I mean fine, that would be great.” Why am I sweating in this chilly room?

“Can I tell him your name?”

“Frank. Frank Veela.”

“Veela?”

“Villa, Frank Villa.” Great. Now she thinks I don’t even know my own name. She waves to a tall, black-haired man in a light colored suit and dark tie. I hope he’s the manager and not a hotel-bouncer-guy.

“Frank . . . Villa here is looking for his uncle, perhaps you can help him?”

“Possibly.”

Wow, give the cologne a break. “His name is Armando Villa. Here is a picture. I haven’t seen him in a long time and the last I heard he was working in a hotel or restaurant around here, so I thought I’d ask around and see if anyone recognized an old photo of him.” There, that sounded normal.

The manager’s neatly trimmed mustache purses up for a second as he looks hard at the photo, and then he looks back at me, and his impeccably trimmed eyebrows get a little screwy, then he looks back at the photo again. I’m impressed by his haircut. Every line is very sharp. I bet when he goes in for a haircut; he gets his whole head done at the same time.

“He is the Groom, no?”

“Yes, you know him?” Could it be this easy? A chill runs through my entire body. I might actually get face-to-face with my dad--holy shit!

“No, but I see the family likeness.”

Whew! Close one.

He points to someone in the picture. “Is that John Travolta?”

“No, he’s an uncle.”

“Oh, that white suit and black shirt. . . I’m sorry sir, I don’t recognize him, or any of these people. Perhaps you could try the police, maybe they could help you better.”

“Maybe, but first I thought I’d try some of the places he may have worked and look for find a friend or something.”

“Perhaps if you show this photo to the bartender. Gerardo is his name. He has been longer here than anyone, even myself.”

“Okay. Thanks for your help.” This guy’s English is really good. A little accent, but I can at least understand him.

He smiles at me, but without moving his head, his eyes look at the receptionist. She returns the same expressionless look.

What was I thinking? Hello, are you my daddy? Oh God, this is so pathetic. I really should have thought about this on the flight over--prepared a script or something.

I follow the music around the corner and see a live Mariachi band playing on a small stage in a cafeteria-sized lounge. No wonder the music is so loud.

The bar is very showy. All the bottles of liquor are lined up neatly above the bar, and small lights behind some of the bottles make them glow. The bar itself is black, with

padded black leather edges to lean against, and it's sunk into the ground so that the bartender is at eye level with the customers when they are sitting. Very classy.

The bartender sees me coming and he walks over to me. His uniform is sharp. Black pants, black vest, white ruffled shirt. When he gets right in front of me I can see him more closely. I notice this guy must go to the same barber as the last guy. Every hair on his head and face is cut very straight, and in sharp angles. It's like somebody masked off his face and spray painted his hair on.

"Hi, what can I get you?"

Wow, what is the drinking age down here? "Hi, Gerardo? The manager said I should ask you if you know my uncle, Armando Villa."

"Armando Villa? No senior, the name is not familiar."

"Well, maybe you would recognize his picture."

I hand it to him and he bends over to see it in the lights below the bar. "Which one is he?" He looks up at me and then back to the photo. "Oh, wait, he is this one. The wedding is his."

"Yeah, my uncle married my mom--I mean my mom married my aunt. No, my mom is not my aunt." Ugh! "These are all my relatives, do you recognize any of them? I'd really like to find them, it's been a long time since I've seen them."

"All of them?"

Oh, shit.

"You are missing all of your family?"

"Yeah, I . . . um. . . ran away from home when I was. . . younger, and now I'm trying to find them." God that was stupid. He studies the photo a bit more, then hands it back to me.

"No, I do not know any of them, but that is an old photo. Sorry. May I get you a drink?"

"No thanks." I just want to get the heck out of here.

The noon sun bouncing off all the buildings outside instantly blinds me after being in that dark bar, and the heat seems even worse after being in that refrigerator of a hotel. I wait for my eyes to adjust before going down the steps.

My stomach growls, no—roars, reminding me I skipped breakfast and lunch today. I should look for a decent restaurant. I wonder if there are any American food places around here. This lady looks friendly, I'll ask her. "Excuse me, do you know where there is a McDonalds or Carl's Junior—"

"Si. . . " and that is all I understand. She is talking so fast it sounds like a kid imitating a machine gun. Bih-kih-duh bah-kih-duh boh-kih-duh boo-kih-duh, bang bang bang. Is this really a language?

"Gracias." I'll just keep walking down this street a bit farther.

This is a strange city. Some of the streets are paved with asphalt and some of them are paved with stones. You know if they cleaned the outside of the buildings once a decade or so, this place wouldn't look so. . . lived in. Could use a little paint too. Why do I smell beans? Is it me, or has Taco Bell ruined my nose?

I'll try some Spanish on this guy. "Hi, hola. Donde esta la McDonalds?"

. . . Damn! This guy talks faster than that lady. Okay, smile and nod and keep on moving.

My watch says 2:28, but did I pass an international time zone, or did I just go straight down? Maybe there's more time lines at the equator. Makes sense; the earth is wider at the equator and the sun would probably take longer to get around the middle than at the ends.

I'll ask this lady, "hola. Donde esta la McDonalds?" Why did she give me that look? What the heck is she saying? Over this way? Yeah, pointing helps. Okay, Gracias." I must be getting close.

The buildings down this street seem to be getting older and more tired. Laundry hangs out to dry above what looks like a video store. An apartment above a musical instrument store doesn't have any curtains, and a chubby woman in a black sleeveless dress smokes a cigarette and blows the smoke out over the street.

When I turn the corner, the accordions that have been lurking in the shadows until now have all been set free and are bouncing off the walls and down the street. It's like a Mexican boom box competition with singers, accordions, and tubas adding to the cacophony of Mexican life here in the older part of the city. I can't quite distinguish one song from another. Accordion music, hot and muggy weather, bean scented air. . . It's almost like home—or is home, almost like here.

I walk a little farther, and some kids are playing stick-ball in the street, squeezed in by old cars on both sides, but they don't seem to mind. All of the ones with long pants have holes in the knees, and the ones wearing shorts have bandages on one or both of their knees. They look like they've been playing all day. Someone should tell these guys it's okay not to slide into home when you're playing on asphalt.

"Hi guys, donde esta McDonalds?" . . . Wow, jackpot. Of course, any kid will know where McDonalds is. "Wait, wait, slow down." That shut them up. "Donde McDonalds?" . . . Frickin-A. All six of these little guys are talking excitedly and pointing in all different directions. I can't make out a single word. "Gracias."

I think this is the way back to the center of town. I cross the street at the light and after a minute I come across someone who might help me. Wait, this guy looks tough. Just look down and keep walking. People get mugged down here all the time. I should have just stayed on the main street. I suddenly feel like I'm a junky, looking to score a McFix.

I cross the street at another light and walk back towards where I think I came from. The sidewalks here are made of brick. I've never seen that before. Ever.

It's so hot down here. I sure could use a soda right about now. Yeah, a couple of Big Macs and a gi-normous Pepsi. I'll ask these two guys for directions.

It just occurs to me there is something strange going on around here. What's up with all the dark colored t-shirts? It's way too hot down here for dark clothes. "Hola, donde esta la McDonalds?" He points down another street. Great, I haven't been down there. Maybe this is where I went wrong. There had better be a fricking McDonalds down here or I swear. . . I mean, how can I expect to find my father when I can't even find a McDonalds in Mexico? It should stick out amongst all the cantinas, stores, carnicerias, clothing and shoe shops like a Nun in a crack-house. This looks like a used record store. They still have those?

This guy looks friendly, "hola, donde esta McDonalds? "

“Hola. I don’t know, tu savy Starbucks?”
 “No. Yo looking por McDonalds.”
 “Yo looking por Starbucks. Tu no quiero Mexican comida in Guadalajara?”
 “Nah, yo trabajo in Taco Bell in Arizona. Yo tango mucho Mexican comida every day.”
 “Oh, si. Yo no see a McDonalds, pero yo see yellow esta.”
 “Tu mean down aquis?”
 “Si, attempt-o esta.”
 “Okay, gracias.”
 “De Nada. Tu no seen a Starbucks?”
 “No, pero, con me . . . luck-o, it’s probably next to la McDonalds.”
 “Si.”
 “Well, good luck.”
 “You too.” Finally, someone who speaks regular Spanish, and at a reasonable speed too.

Chapter 14

I’m so hungry I could. . . Oh my God. . . There is something yellow down here. I feel a surge of energy. As I get closer, I begin to what could be two large yellow arches sticking out of a building. What a beautiful sight. I think I hear a choir of angels singing. When did I start running? Who cares; I am so starving. . . and melting.

I rush past people leaving the restaurant, fling open the front door and scramble inside. I never thought I’d miss the smell of hamburgers and French fries so much. Wait a minute. What’s this? The menu is in Spanish? Are you kidding me? The sign is in English.

Okay, no problem. I speak restaurant Spanish. I can figure this out. Okay I’m looking for a Big Mac. You can’t say that in any other language. Big Mac. . . Big Mac. . . Grande Mac—that’s it! Tried to trick me eh? Oh, wait--there are a bunch of little paper menus in English on this table.

Wait a minute. Now that the menu is in English, why is the money still in Spanish? That only helps me half-way. Somebody should tell that Kroc dude it’s either all or nothing for us Gringo’s. If someone doesn’t speak Spanish, they probably don’t comprehend pesos either. I feel funny spending over four hundred of anything for a hamburger. Okay, my turn. “Yo quiero dose Grande Macs y uno Pepsi grande por favor.”

“Hey, great Spanish.”

“Oh, you speak English.”

“Duh- McDonalds.”

“Duh- Mexico.”

“Duh—ochenta y cuatro dólares y veintiséis centavos por favor.”

“What?”

“I didn’t think so.”

Great, I'm getting talked down to by a McDonalds worker in Mexico. That just made my day.

"Oh, American dollars? Who would have guessed? That will be six dollars and thirty two cents."

I think I'll just keep my mouth shut and wait for my food. She is bagging it right now. Everyone is in uniform and working away, floors clean, everything is in good repair. Red tile floors, just like at Taco Bell. Somebody probably made a lot of money selling red tile to all the restaurants of the world.

"Here you go, Señor! Next?"

Ahhh, this smells so much better than beans. There's an empty table over there by the window. Let's see if the food is the same as back home. That's what a franchise is all about, right? Consistency. Looks good. . . Smells normal. I take a big bite and chew it a few times--what the. . . hot! hot, hot. . . jalepenos? What am I going to do with a mouth full of acid? I spit my mouthful of half-chewed burger onto the table in front of me. I sip on my soda like a fireman putting out a three-alarm.

That's better. Who the heck would put. . . oh yeah, Mexico; they probably put jalepenos in everything.

Where's that cashier. . . She sees me, and her smile got a little bigger, "Hi, welcome to McDonalds." No problem. I open up the burger and take the offending chilies out. I notice the Mexican guy at the table next to me is putting them in his burger. His jalepenos are on the side in a small plastic cup. Mine were inside. . . I look back at the cashier who suddenly looks very busy, even though there's nobody in line at the moment. Okay, rule number one: don't piss off the cook before she makes your food. That is rule number one anywhere. God! I go to Mexico and immediately lose forty or fifty I.Q. points.

Oh well, at least the soda tastes normal. Too bad it's almost gone.

I look straight ahead at a large and very pale Mexican lady, dressed in a large red Moo moo, or sarong, or whatever you call those things that wrap around you like you just rolled out of bed, taking a very colorful sheet with you. She has dozens of packets of hot sauce. Hot sauce? They have hot sauce at Mc. . . Mexico, I keep forgetting. In here, all the decor, the smells, the colors, tables, everything is just like in America--except for the menu's, but if you don't try to read them, you'd swear you were in the US, except for the jalapeños and hot sauce. She'll never even taste that chicken. It sounds odd, but I kind of expected to see more Americans in here. Bummer. I would have liked someone to talk to.

The workers here are good. The floors are clean, the tables shine, the signage is neat, the ceiling—ah, is that lint I see on the ceiling bosoms? Yep, not quite as detail oriented as we are back home. The windows look good, and I don't remember seeing any litter outside, but then again I was pretty much focused on getting inside once I saw this place.

Those Big Macs went quick. Okay, now the final test. Let's see what their bathrooms look like. . . or do I dare? I just ate. Oh well, I gotta go. That Pepsi is running right though me.

It's still hot as hell outside. I have to jump to my right to dodge a guy with large mad eyes running into McDonalds. That's probably what I looked like. I guess this happens all the time around here. They should seriously think about putting the arches higher, or hanging over the street or something.

Now which way do I go?

Chapter 15

This hotel looks pretty good: tall and kind of old-ish looking, with lots of wood trim, the usual stucco exterior walls, and a red tile roof. A dark red canopy stretches out to greet the guests and a gold seal or coat of arms hangs from the front of it. A deep red carpet covers the sidewalk beneath it and leads to two large glass doors. I bet a couple of hundred people work here. I can already hear the music coming from somewhere deep inside the building.

The moment I step inside I notice this hotel is colder than the last. The decorations are older and darker. The floor is red tiles with dark grey grout in between them, the same as in Taco Bell, but much larger. There are tall green plants in large white vases, and the walls are covered in red wallpaper with some kind of pattern in red felt sticking out of it. All the wood chairs and sofas are made of dark wood and the cushions are covered in pearl white cloth. The front desk is made of dark wood to match the furniture, and is only a few steps from the front door. A female desk clerk in a white suit smiles at me, so I walk over and re-start my search for my deadbeat dad.

“Hi, um, my name is Frank Villa and I’m looking for my uncle. His name is Armando Villa, does he work here. . . by chance?” This girl isn’t as pretty as the last one. She’s obviously dyed her black hair blonde--which now looks orange, and she has a slight black mustache under a Toucan-like nose. Her eyebrows are thick and dark and I can see her plucking a break in-between them to keep from having a bug furry uni-brow. I bet all her friends say she has a great personality.

“Just a moment.”

She picks up the phone and talks quietly so I can’t hear what she is saying.

Thank God! The music stopped.

“Senior Villa? I checked and there is no Armando Villa working here. Your uncle, don’t you know where he works?”

“No, I just know he works in a hotel in Guadalajara. Maybe he’s worked here in the past?”

“You may check with the Manager. He has been here many years. He is in the bar right now.” She points to a set of dark wooden doors off to the right of the lobby. “He is wearing a white suit.”

“Okay, thanks” I walk over to the large wooden doors and open one. It is darker in here than in the lobby, so it takes a few seconds for my eyes to get used to the darkness. I finally see a little guy with black hair, chubby face, goatee, white suit, thin black tie. He looks like a mini Mexican Colonel Sanders. I’ll just wait here until he’s done talking to the musicians. I can’t believe how dark it is in here. This must be the place to come when you are having an affair and you don’t want to be recognized.

There he goes. “Excuse me sir? Are you the manager?”

“Si, yes, may I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Frank Villa and I am looking for my uncle. I haven’t seen him in quite a while and all I know is he lives in Guadalajara and works in a restaurant or hotel.”

“There are many hotels in Guadalajara, and many more restaurants. Good luck.”

He begins to turn away, “His name is Armando Villa.”

“No, Armando Villa is not working here.” He starts to leave again.

“You don’t recognize the name?”

“No, excuse me please. Maria? Maria, momentito. . .”

I think I’ll keep my photo in my pocket and just take his word that he doesn’t work here.

“Can I get you something?” The bartender scared the crap out of me.

“Me? Oh, no thank you, I just—I have to go.” The drinking age must be around eighteen. Maybe even sixteen. This trip could get interesting.

As I leave I see the orange-haired hostess isn’t busy. She might know where a good place to look next would be. “Excuse me, where is the next big hotel from here?”

“That would be the “Matador.” Are you walking or driving?”

“Walking.”

“Okay, Just go left and down the street about six blocks, and then go right and under the freeway. It will be on your left. Good luck finding your uncle.

“Thanks.” Whew, that was a little easier. I leave just as the band begins to play; perfect timing or what? I wonder if I should even try showing the photo any more. It is pretty old.

This town is funny. It’s like a big suburb with hotels, offices and shopping.

In front of me I see a green Volkswagen pull out right in front of a white pickup. The people driving those slug-bugs are maniacs. I’m amazed they aren’t all dented up, but if they constantly miss each other like that, then maybe they should be in good condition. It does kinda look like close calls are the norm around here. Turn signals are definitely optional equipment. I wonder if they are even installed on cars bound for Mexico. Or maybe the first thing they do with a new car is yank out the turn signal lever. Wont’ be needing this—yank!

Smack in the middle of a building is a small colorful cantina. Could be a Mexican dive. It’s painted the same color as those green Volkswagens, and it has a bright blue door. There are no windows. You can tell the music inside is coming from a jukebox or radio or something. Definitely not live. I bet only hardcore Mexican drinkers go there. I wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like that.

A little farther down the street I see the freeway the receptionist was talking about. I stand and wait for the light to turn green, but everyone else seems to just keep right on walking. Green light, red light, yellow light--doesn’t matter. Maybe Mexicans are color blind and they are just too proud to admit it. That would explain the strange color combinations for their restaurants, bars and taxis.

A lady and her little boy walk up behind me and wait for the light with me. Two teens just keep on going as if the light wasn’t even there and walk in between the crossing traffic. One of them turns around and looks at me, like I’m from Mars or something—that’s not emasculating. I bet that’s how it all started; one guy makes a dash for it and nobody else wants to look like a wimp.

Finally the light turns green.

Chapter 16

A big restaurant squats beside the overpass on this side of the street, and it sits in the middle of a large parking lot. I think I'll check here first, and then go to the hotel across the street after.

The moment I step inside I'm greeted by a long lost friend: air conditioning. It's like food for the skin.

The hostess is pretty, I guess, in a strange sort of way.

"Hi sir, welcome to El Burro. Just one today?"

"No, actually I'm looking for my uncle. His name is Armando Villa. Does he work here?"

"No, I am not to be knowing any Armando."

She's not strange looking—she's Indian. "Are you sure? Has he worked here in the past maybe?"

"You are not knowing where your uncle is?"

"I only know he is in Guadalajara and works in a restaurant or hotel." Christ, does everyone down here know where all their relatives are twenty-four seven?

"Ay, no. That is being a lot of places to look. I'll ask my manager. He may be knowing your uncle. You can wait in the bar. Your name is?"

"Frank Villa. Thanks." Wow, I never knew people from other countries would want to work in Mexico. I thought just Mexicans wanted to work in the US. . . I wonder if she's legal?

I walk over to the back of the restaurant where the bar is. Nice, plush black leather seats. Ahh! It feels great to get off my feet. I've been doing a lot of walking today.

Live Mariachi music begins to play—how original. It's like the same band is playing the same song everywhere I go. Is today Groundhog Day in Mexico? It's more like a song than a musical style. I bet the guy who wrote this song was named Mariachi. Or maybe the song is named Marriachi and nobody remembers all the words, so they just wing it.

"What can I get you?"

I look up and I'm face to face with a latin model. Wow, she is beautiful. "Um. . . could, uh. . . yeah. . . um," I bet I'm scoring big points so far. "I'll have a beer."

"What kind?"

Oh shit, I hadn't thought of that. "Um. . . what, um. . . kind do you have?"

"Tecate, Dos Equis, Corona . . ."

"Okay, that one. . . a Corona." I've seen those commercials with the lime wedge in the bottle.

"Okay." She puts a square white paper napkin on the table in front of me and then turns and walks away, leaving a wake of sweet femininity as she leaves. I like the way she walks. Her butt's a little big but. . .

"Hi sir, are you Mister Villa, the person looking for his uncle?"

"Yes, that's me. His name is Armando Villa. Have you ever heard of that name?"

“You can’t possibly be a detective.”

“No, I’m not. Really, he is my uncle and I just want to find him. We haven’t heard from him for a couple of years and my mom is a little worried.”

“I see. No, I don’t know anyone by that name. Do you have a photo of him?”

“Yeah, right here.” I fish it out of my back pocket and hand it to him. He takes out a little flashlight from his jacket pocket and shines it on the photo. Man, is this guy is prepared, or what?

“Is this your most recent photo?”

“It’s the only one I have with me.”

“Which one—the groom, no?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“No, no. The only one I recognize, well, partly—“

“Really, which one?” Anyone in that photo could lead me to him.

“The man in the white suit, John Travolta, are you related?”

“No, he’s another uncle.”

“John Travolta is your uncle?”

“No, the man in the picture is my uncle, not John Travolta.”

Oh, I see. No, I don’t know him, but that looks like a long time to remember a face.”

“Okay, well, thanks for your time anyway.”

“It is nothing.”

“Here’s your Corona,” the waitress sets the bottle on the napkin in front of me.

“Thanks.” I’m actually going to buy a beer. The manager didn’t even blink when the cocktail waitress walked up with it on her tray. This is so easy.

“That will be thirty-six pesos.”

“Uh, all I have is American is that okay?”

“Yes, that will be . . .”

“Will five do?”

“Yes.”

She smiles and I forget who I am for a moment. “Okay here you go. Keep the change.”

“Gracias. My name is Carla.”

“Hi, my name is Frank.”

“I mean I’m your cocktail waitress, Carla, let me know if you need anything more.”

“Uh, yeah, and I’m your customer, Frank. . . nice to meet you.” God! Did I just say that? This is going to be hard when I get old enough to drink back home. They should let you practice so you won’t be such a klutz when you turn twenty-one and all the sudden you’re supposed to know how to do this.

Wow, my first beer. . . Ugh! This tastes awful. “Uuuughhhh.” I think I’ll chug this thing and get it over with. . . ow, ow, ow, it burns. Too much carbonation. “Buuurrrrp! Oh, excuse me.” That just came out all at once. I see why people drink beer slowly.

“Buurrrp.” Okay, almost done. There aren’t very many people in here, and nobody seems to be paying me any attention. I better get this over with before someone cards me. I gotta burp one more time. I’ll try to be more discreet, “Auuurrrp.” Oh crap, I

burped through my nose. I grab the napkin and wipe my burning and dripping nose with it. My eyes water and tears run freely down my cheeks. This must be why they give you napkins with your beer.

I dry my eyes with the backs of my hands and look around the room. I wonder where Carla went? Good thing she didn't see that. I gotta get going before I do something really stupid like fart out of my ears or something.

I try to finish the beer, but only get a couple of sips before I have to stop. It tastes horrible. People actually like this stuff? It tastes like. . . wheat soda. Who in the world came up with this idea? I finish the beer and practically run for the door.

It's not as bright out now as it was earlier. There are long shadows all around, making the buildings less bright and reflective. The temperature is cooling off a bit too. That was a trip—I bought and drank my first beer. Wow. Mexico is cool! I would have never gotten away with that back home. Sniff, sniff. My sinuses are extremely clear, too. Nice. I wonder what strange new experience awaits me at the next hotel.

Chapter 17

What's up with hotels and air-conditioning? The chill in here wraps me up like a cold blanket. Mariachi are playing in the bar as usual. Must be some kind of law or something; if you sell alcohol, you must have mariachi music playing.

The host in this hotel is a man for a change. He is tall, blonde, wearing black pants, black vest and white shirt. Another guy walks up to him and he is dressed the same, except he also has a black jacket and tie on too. They both look American. What are they doing working down here? What is this, reverse immigration—outigration? I'm going to have to shout above the music in here to be heard, "Excuse me but I am looking for my uncle. Here's an old photo of him, he's the groom and his name is Armando Villa. Does he work here?" The waiter glances at the picture, then quickly walks away.

"Let me see that. . . when was this picture taken? Hey, is that—"

"—No, he's not. He's an uncle."

"Well, it sure looks like him from behind. . ."

Apparently John Travolta was big in Mexico in the seventies. "Yeah, it's all I have with me. Do you know anyone who would be able to help me find him? My mother is really worried. We haven't heard from him in over two years."

"No, I've been here for twelve years. I don't think your uncle has ever worked here. Of course, he could look a lot different today. John Travolta doesn't even look like that any more."

"Yeah, I'm finding that out."

"Now if you'll excuse me." The host grabs some menu's and walks over to a small family who just came in the front door.

The memory of my first beer makes me giddy inside. I wonder if the bar here will serve me. Couldn't hurt to try. The beer didn't really taste all that bad did it? I'm starting to feel a little. . . different—calm, perhaps. How many beers does it take to get drunk?

The bar is darker than the lobby. This may be why I was served before; they couldn't see me very good. "Hi, can I have a Corona?" The bartender smiles and walks down the bar and brings back a beer, opens it in front of me and sets it down on a square napkin. Five dollars worked last time. Maybe if it's a good tip they won't say anything. "Here, keep the change."

"Gracias."

I'm actually sitting at the bar. This is so cool. Peanuts! Maybe these will help with the taste. I should probably hurry. Surely an American manager will know I'm not old enough to drink yet. Or am I?

This place is getting busy; there aren't many empty seats in here. The cocktail waitresses don't wear skirts as short as across the street, but then again this is a hotel. Gotta keep a family image, I guess.

These peanuts are addicting. They seem to be working; this beer doesn't seem so bad. . . Ugh! But not that great either. I would much rather have a Coke. They burn when you chug them too, and make you burp, but at least they taste better.

This same song has been playing in all the places I've been to today—except McDonalds. Must be the national anthem.

I take a slow sip of my beer and finish it off. That wasn't so bad. The peanuts are all gone too. I guess that's my cue to leave.

Whoa! Almost fell off this bar stool. They should make them a little more stable. This could be a lawsuit waiting to happen. Okay, where next?

It's getting dark. I should stop soon. I don't wanna get mugged. Maybe I'll get a room at the next place I go. Hey! I feel great.

The temperature outside is getting bearable now that the sun is almost down. Man, look at that family run across the street. All four of them—made it too. Boy, if they can cross here, they can cross anywhere. . . "it's up to you. . . something-something Mexi-cooo."

Hey, what is this guy looking at? Never seen a white guy before? Well, that's okay. This is the first time I ever seen a Mexican Mexico. Where the hell am I? Where's my bag, oh, I don't have one. Whew! I think I'm getting drunk.

Oh, a Volkswagen. I'll flag it down. "Yeah, sure I want a ride. Take me to. . . thank you I can get in. . . ahhh, take me to. . . what was I gonna say? Casa, no . . . hotel. Take me to a hotel. . . Yes I know I just came out of a hotel. I want a fresh one, I've been to that one. . . Sure-sure. Take me to a hotel. Just don't kill me that's all I ask. . . or maim me. Just don't kill me or maim me, that's all I ask. Or rob me. Okay, here's the list: don't kill me or rob me or. . . that other thing." Wow. I feel like I'm riding in a video game. Grand Theft Slug Bug. Look at this guy go!

This hotel looks like it'll do. "Here is a fiver." That seems to be what everything costs around here.

. . . What? not enough? . . . really? Okay, how about another three? Four? Well you're not getting a twenty for that ride. . . . What are you saying? Look, here, take two fives; that should be plenty. . . . What does the meter say then? . . . Oh, the meter was off. Bummer for you then. . . Not me bummer, you bummer. . . No bummer for you. . . No bummer for you. . . No bummer for you. Do you even know what a bummer is? Okay, here's two more. I'm going. I gotta get a room and find my daddy—I mean uncle."

This place is fancy. Everything is white and gold. White walls, gold trim, white marble floors with black flecks and gold veins. Every now and then they throw in a black square of marble with white veins just for fun. The couches have gold painted woodwork, and are covered in white, glittery material with gold buttons pushed in deep, forming white diamonds. There are black throw pillows with gold tassels strewn about. A huge gold chandelier with hundreds of sparkling crystal tear drops hanging from the center of the twenty-foot ceiling. White candle-looking lights provide the light for the crystals to toss around the room.

This place smells like roses, but the only flowers to be seen are big white Calla Lilies, in four-foot tall, white vases.

It's very cold in here. Each hotel I go to has their air conditioning set colder than the last. I bet they have contests to see who has the coldest lobby in town, just like some bars advertise the coldest beer in town.

Our lobby is so cold three people died of hypothermia last week.

Oh yeah? Our lobby is so cold you have to ice skate to the front desk.

So what? Our lobby is so cold we store all our frozen foods there.

Okay, enough of that, where's the bar? I don't hear any music. Maybe here you drink in a library.

I walk down a hallway, turn right and voila—here it is. I'm getting good at finding bars in hotels.

"Hi, I'd like a Corona please. Thanks." I make myself comfortable in a white leather bar chair. "Hey do you have any peanuts?" I didn't know you get the munchies when you drink beer. "Oh, yeah, you want money, Can you twake a benty? I mean bweak a twenty. . . here."

So what, is the band on break or what? The bartender brings me back two fives and some ones. "Thanks." I'll leave a buck for a tip. If he got a buck for every beer he poured he'd be rich. You know, the beer tastes better in this bar. I think I'll come back here and drink from now on. Where am I? I'll ask the bartender—wait. This will be the first time I'll have had to ask directions to find where I'm already at. That doesn't sound very smart. I should just stay quiet. This beer is going much faster than the others. So what am I going to do now? I should ask around about my dad since there's no music.

"Excuse me! Has anyone seen my daddy? Anyone? Can you talk? Hey. I'm looking for my dad. He's a bum, and I haven't seen him my whole life, here's a picture." Now that wasn't so hard. A couple of guys in black suits come over and they seem very helpful. "He's over here? Really? You didn't even look at the picture. Here, look. . . I don't need help walking, let go of my arm.

What am I going to say to him? "He's outside? I said let go of my arm. . . hey, I gotta find my dad. . . I have no idea what your are saying. . . That's not English. Do you know you are not speaking English? Okay-okay, I'll go. Thanks for not looking for my dad. What the hell?"

So now where do I go? I ate all the peanuts and all the pretzels and still I'm a little hungry. I don't think I finished my beer back there. I need a restaurant—hey, there's some kind of place across the street. Looks shiny. I'll cross here.

Oh, I should run. . . Okay, they are stopped. Why can't I run fast any more? I feel like I'm moving under water. My legs are heavy and feel like they're made of rubber.

Good, I made it. I wonder what I'm gonna to have for dinner. Tacos? Enchiladas? Burrito? Chimichanga? I could sure go for a hamburger right about now. I wonder where that McDonalds is from here. Okay, where we are. Hmmm.

Chapter 18

Accordions and voices seep through the walls at night. This town looks different too. The shadows hide all the dirt and grime, and the lights paint fun and festive-ness all over the place.

Father hunting is fun. I should do this every year.

Dark brown double swinging doors on a bright green stucco building. Cool, just like the movies. . . and Arizona. Might as well see what's up.

It's really dark in here. . . and smoky. The music is loud and tinny, and it smells like old ashtrays. Hey. . . this is a bar—no, a Cantina. Wow, I've never been in one of these before. I'm doing a lot of new things down here. If I would have known this was fun I would have come here years ago. . . like when I was six or something.

There's that song again. I bet if I closed my eyes I could pretend I was home—I mean at work. Whenever I want to go to Mexico, I'll just grab a couple of beers and go to Taco Bell—same thing, kinda. I'll just have one more beer and maybe some tacos, then get a room some place.

I hope this place is friendlier than the last one. It sure is different from all my walking and questioning and trying to find my dad in a strange city, in a strange country. I feel like I'm on a strange planet. Like in Star Wars when Luke Skywalker and that . . . Kung Fu. . . Jedi. . . Muppet-guy go looking for. . . something in that bar on. . . that planet. Maybe I'll find some clues to my father's . . . hideout. I wonder if Pat Garret had this much trouble finding Billy the Kid. I wonder where he did find him; probably in some small hole-in-the-wall cantina like this.

My eyes are having trouble getting used to the dark in here. I'll just inch up to the bar here. Careful, don't trip on anything.

All the chairs around the bar have a tall wooden backs. There's the bartender talking to a customer at the other end of the bar. I don't think he's seen me yet. Must have problems seeing in the dark too. I hope he knows his tip goes down every minute he makes me wait.

So, I've seen a few pretty nice hotels today. Huge lobbies, clean and snappy front desks, fountains. . . cute waitresses. All the shops look to be selling used stuff. This place is like a giant flea market. Maybe that's why they're so popular in Arizona. It reminds them of back home. Home. I need to get back soon, before Mom starts to worry. I wonder how long it will be before she notices I haven't been around. We hardly ever see each other any more.

Man, was I on a mission or what? I guess I can't be looking in every shop, liquor store, and gas station-like place I come across. I don't have that much time. If I were here for a few months I could get to know some people, and maybe do a more thorough

search, but then also, the news might get around that an American was looking for Armando Villa, and he may get spooked and hide. Oh, no! What if that's already happening? What if everyone knows my father. They all do call each other primo back home.

I wonder what Willie would do if he were me right now. What would Shane do? I bet Shane could find my father fast. I bet Shane wouldn't want me to go with him on any more border patrols if he knew I was kinda related to a Mexican.

What if my Armando is following me right now? Naw, it's too dark in here; he'd never find me. Heck, the bartender can't even find me, and he works here.

I think the guy next to me has been staring at me this whole time. I can feel his eyes staring at me. It kinda gives me the heebie-jeebies. What is his problem? I should let him know I see him. "Hola"

"Hola amigo. . ."

Blah blah blah blah. I should have just stuck with English. "Sorry, I don't speak much Spanish." I might as well just give up this secret mission thing. I just can't pull it off.

"I know. I was just messing with you. I'm Luis."

"My name is Frank."

"Hey, Frank, now that we're friends, buy me a beer."

"Sure, but my name isn't really Frank."

"No?"

"No, It's Francisco"

"Okay, Okay, sorry about that Spanish thing."

"No really, Francisco is my name."

"No shit?"

"Really."

"Great, okay Francisco, buy me a beer and I'll get the bartender for you."

"Okay."

"Hey, flacko, dos cervezas por favor."

The bartender opens a door below where he's standing and pulls two dark bottles out, pops the tops off with some device under the bar, walks over and sets them down in front of us. No white square napkins here. No peanuts either.

"Thanks, Francisco."

"No problem-o. . ."

"Luis."

"Yeah, Luis."

"So you are down here seeing the sights, getting drunk, getting laid, yes?"

"Not really."

"So you're not getting laid?"

"No."

"So, you a cop or something?"

Suddenly it feels as though everyone's eyes are on me right now. "No." I take a great big sip of my beer before continuing, "I'm looking for my father." Laughter and conversation erupts all around. The Juke Box begins playing that song again.

“Sorry, we get that a lot down here,” Luis says with a fresh laugh. He’s probably reveling in the perceived pride that a person gets when his race’s machismo has been reinforced, like when an owners dog wins a fight.

“Dog’s lick their balls too.”

“What?”

Shit, I said that out loud. “Oh, nothing.” Good thing there’s a lot of noise in here.

“So really, you down here looking for your dad?”

If I just keep my mouth on this beer, I won’t be able to continue this conversation . . . and I won’t accidentally say what I’m thinking.

“You think he drinks here?”

Ugh! He’s not going to let it go. “Yeah, I think so.”

Luis pauses for a second, and seems to think about that. He squares up his shoulders and looks right at me, “You know I never been to the United States. . . .”

This is never going to end. I should just leave, get a room and go to bed. “Don’t worry, you’re not my father.”

He sits back in his barstool and takes a sip of his beer. “What, I’m not good enough to be your father?”

“Your not . . . old enough.” I lied. I should have said not TALL enough. Both my mom and I are taller than this guy by a mile. Other than that, I can barely make out the face of the person I am talking to, let alone figure out how old he is. “And besides, I have his picture.” I show it to him. He tilts it so he can see it better in some mysterious light that I can’t see.

“Que faya,” he says. I don’t know what that means, but I nod anyway.

This fourth beer is starting to taste pretty good. I’m getting the hang of this beer drinking. . . thing. I feel more relaxed than I have been since I got here—no, “all year.”

“All year what?”

“Oh, just thinking out loud, sorry.”

“So, what is the name of your father?”

It can’t hurt to tell him, besides, keeping it a secret isn’t going to get the job done. “Armando, Armando Villa.”

“Hmmm.” He thinks about that for a second. “Nope, I don’t know anyone by that name, but you know when we go to the United States, we often change our names.”

“Yeah I know. And why is that anyway?” Lets see someone actually answer that question.

“Well, for the very reason you’re down here right now.”

He has a peculiar laugh. Kinda like a car that won’t start, but I did walk right into that one. So all Mexicans are dogs. They go north to take a job away from an American, get some girl pregnant, and then go back home to Mexico. They probably brag about how they have enough children in America to populate a small Mexican village. What a guy.

This search seems so hopeless. I feel a darkness forming inside my chest. Maybe it’s the lack of lighting, or maybe it’s the cantina itself, or the song, or any number of things I usually obsess about.

I’m beginning to think coming in here was a bad idea. I wonder if anyone else in this bar-cantina, is having a good time.

I bet the women in here are really ugly, and the men don’t find out until it’s too late.

“So what was your name again?”

“My real name is Francisco, but everyone calls me Frank.”

“Frank. Frank? Frank is no nickname for Francisco. Pancho is the nickname for Francisco. Oh, right, Pancho Villa. That’s a good one. You got me kid. You’re a funny guy. Just don’t say that too loud around the bartender, it’ll really make him angry.” He finishes his beer and puts the empty glass down hard, making a loud knocking sound on the bar. “Hey, see that guy over there?”

He is pointing in the direction of some loud laughter coming from a table towards the back wall. There’s the Juke box, and the orange and yellow lights on it barely reveal a thin man sitting with a couple of women. “The guy with two girls?”

“His name is Jose Cuervo.”

Man. Can this conversation get any stranger?

“NO! Seriously.”

“How stupid does this guy think I am?”

“ I don’t think you’re stupid.”

Shit, I said that out loud again. Why do I keep doing that?

“Don’t believe me? I’ll prove it. Hey, Jose, Jose Cuervo... Amigo. Dame un tequila amigo.”

The man waves a beer in the air at the bartender, who reaches down and magically produces two shot glasses with one hand and a bottle of tequila with the other. He walks back over to us and places the glasses on the bar and then he pours the tequila into both glasses at the same time. Wow. Two shots of tequila. Uh-oh—real liquor. I heard this stuff tastes really bitter and they make it with cactus and scorpions and even some secret stuff nobody knows about. The bartender places a shot in front of each of us and then returns to his really interesting staring contest at the other end of the bar.

“Salud.”

“Uh, yeah, salud!” It smells. . . different. Luis just poured it back into his throat all at once. He must like it. I guess it’s like beer; it probably grows on you after awhile. I don’t see any insect legs or worms or anything floating in the tiny glass. Looks pretty clear to me.

“Come on Amigo, drink up!”

“Okay, here goes. . .” I take a sip to see what it tastes like. Holy shit! “Cough--cough, damn, cough.”

“Okay, Pancho, my friend—“

“This stuff is cough-horrible-cough, cough. Why would-cough-anyone cough-cough, drink this shit-cough-cough.”

“Come on Amigo, it’s not that bad.”

Ughhhh! I can feel it’s warm grossness sliding down my throat. I gotta stop coughing and keep it together. I can feel a lot of eyes staring at me in the dark. They’ll think I’m a wimp, or too young to drink and kick me out.

“Hey, take a sip of your beer.”

“Good idea-cough.” I grab my beer and drink about a third of it without stopping.

“Better?”

“Man, that really says something-cough, when you need to use beer to get rid of the bad taste of tequila-cough.”

“Hey, you barely even drank that tequila.”

He's right. It still looks almost full. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I sense the eyes of strangers staring at me in the dark. This place suddenly feels haunted or something.

"Don't worry about them my friend. You shoulda told me this was your first Tequila."

"Yeah. So, is his name Jose Cuervo for real?"

"I called him Jose Cuervo, did I not?"

"Yeah."

"He just bought us a drink, did he not?"

"Yeah."

"What more proof do you want? You want to see his ID?"

"Naw."

"Anyway It's better than Pancho Villa," he whispers.

"How did you know he would buy us a drink?"

"Hey, Jose Cuervo. Amigo! Dame un tequila por favor."

The bartender sees his signal, and he begins setting up two more tequilas just like he did last time.

"Okay, I got it."

"No, it is a good question. I thought about this myself for a long time."

"You mean you asked him?"

"No, No! I figured it out. Listen, If you had the name of Jose Cuervo and you go to a cantina, what do you think would happen?"

Okay, that's obvious. . . "Everyone would ask me for a shot."

"Exactamente."

The bartender sets a couple more shots in front of us. I notice I'm beginning to feel like I'm on the moon, and things are moving slower and more fluidy.

"You barely touched your tequila. Don't sip it. You're supposed to drink it all at one time. Even Mexican women drink it all at one time."

"Thanks." All the women around here are more macho than me. That tequila looks as full as it did when the bartender brought it over. Are these magic shot glasses or what? "Okay, Let me just get this over with. I tilt my head back and dump the entire contents of the little glass into my mouth. My whole body rejects the taste and a warm sensation coats my throat and belly, but some of it went down the wrong pipe again. "cough, cough, cough."

"All right, my friend. Now you are a man."

Oh, so that's what it takes. I always wondered. Does that mean Mexican women are really men too? Many sensations mingle in my head. I know, maybe if my father used a fake name, then what could his real name be? Rodriguez, Cervantes, Ramirez, Gonzalez. Anything that ends in -ez. Wow. Maybe Villa really isn't my last name. That son-of-a. . . Why would he name me what he did? "Hey, you think it would be 'spensive to be name Jose Cuervo?"

"For sure."

"And you would think he'd want to avoid caninadas. . . tankingada. . . these places."

"What? No way, my friend, think about it. With a name like Jose Cuervo, would you stay at home?"

I look over at the thin man near the juke box, sitting with a girl of unknown beauty on either side of him. He probably owns the most expensive set of tequila goggles ever invented. That was probably why he brought them here. After a few drinks he would forget how fugly they were and he could fantasize they look like anyone he wanted. Roselyn's face suddenly comes to my mind, like one of those paintings of melting clocks and stuff. She's the only Mexican female's face I can think of. That so sucks. I need another drink.

I look down the dark and fuzzy bar. The bartender is watching a couple of guys stare at their beers. I wave at him, but I get no reflection. I feel like I am swatting flies in the dark. "You think you could get the bartender again? I don't think he likes me."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't know my existence."

"You think? How do you get the bartender's attention where you come from?"

Hmmmm. Let me think. How do I get bartender's attention back home. I can't remember. I can't remember anything about the bars back home. "Oh, I know, you just ask them for a drink when they get here."

"Wow. It's a wonder you guys ever get drunk. Down here it is different. We tell the bartender what we want and then he comes down here and gives it to you. Makes more sense that way."

"Yep. Dos cervezas por pabor" My tongue is not listening to my words. Is looking me stupid.

The bartender looks down at me. Shhhh. I need to be quiet. The guys sitting in front of him are looking at me too. Hey, I can see better. I guess tequila goggles are night-vision goggles too.

The bartender walks over. Why did I call him? Luis does nothing. He put a beer in front of each of us. He says something to me, but it's in Spanish. I look at Luis for help.

"He is asking if you want to pay now, or when you finish." He smiles at the bartender.

"Oh, Sure. Si." God, I feel so stupid speaking Spanish to him when it is obvious I don't know the language. Luis just translated right in front of him.

"Como se llama?" he asks, magically picking a pencil out of his ear and a notepad from his shirt pocket. Hey, he has magic ears. And his t-shirt has pockets. Now he's staring at me. I think he is reading my mind to see if I am lying. I better tell the truth or I could get in trouble.

"Pancho Villa."

The alcohol is really getting to me. The bartender stares at me, like I'm stupid or something. I look back at him. Luis is busy swatting a pesky fly.

"Mande?" he asks me.

Luis is silently yelling at the fly. He probably can't hear me. The jukebox is playing that song so loud, but it stops right when I yell, "Pancho Villa." Everyone at the bar turns around and looks at me. What happened?

The bartender drops the pencil and paper and is making his way around the bar very quickly.

Luis whispers, "No,"

"No what?"

"You can't call him Pancho Villa"

“I didn’t.”

“People call him that behind his back because of his thick musta—“

The bartender looks much bigger up close. I can see the resemblance to Pancho Villa now. The furrowed brow, balding head, thick handlebar mustache, large fist.

Luis is bending down and looking at me. I think I fell.

Someone lifts me up off the floor. I look over and Luis has a wallet in his hands. I don’t think I should drink any more. Other people have come over to me. Some of them are now taking off my watch. Hey, I think I’m being robbed. Luis looks inside my wallet and his eyes get really big and his face gets all screwed up.

I see the bartender again. He looks really angry about something. There’s that fist again.

I’m on the floor again, and it’s really, really dark down here.

“Como se llama el?” the bartender shouts.

I can barely see his face, when Luis looks down at me, holding my student body card. He looks like he’s seen a ghost. “Pancho Villa,” I hear him say. Why does he not believe me? He’s holding my Student ID. I’m getting pretty tired. I close my eyes right as the bartender starts in on the second smart ass of the night.

End of Part 1

Read Part 2 for free go to <http://www.thedishwashersson.com/the-book/>

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Mike J. Quinn is also the author of, “America Needs A DREAM,” and is available on Amazon.com.

Mike has lived in California all his life. He lives with his Wife and her three children. He has been in the restaurant business for over 25 years and has been writing poetry, songs, music and stories since the fourth grade. A performer at heart, the one thing he longs for the most, besides ice cream, is to be on stage again.

For more books by Mike J. Quinn go to <http://www.amazon.com/author/mikejquinn>