



PROLOGUE



CHANCE HAS A HAND IN EVERYONE'S DESTINY

People who live north of Los Angeles from well-to-do areas like Porter Ranch to the more “impoverished” Van Nuys rely on I-405 to get to the city. On the way they work their way south from the San Fernando Valley and climb to the Sepulveda Pass, 1130 feet above sea level. Over 330,000 cars use this once or twice a day, experiencing traffic tie-ups with vehicles often at a complete standstill during peak hours.

That wasn't a problem at 4:00 a.m. this January morning as Miguel Juarez drove his pickup southbound on the north side of the pass. This early in the day, his ancient truck was laden with the metal, paper and other recyclables that he had accumulated during his travels yesterday and he was headed south to turn it into cash before starting out for another round of scavenging. It wasn't the life he had anticipated when he crossed the border ten years ago heading north to the land of opportunity for all.

He came north illegally crossing the Mexico-United States border hidden in a compartment of a trailer truck. He was seeking work to support his beautiful young wife Maria and their infant son Carlos. It had cost him \$4000 that he had scraped, stole, and borrowed, but he knew that he had no other choice. It had been late at night after twelve hours cooped up in the hidden compartment when he was finally freed from confinement with the five others who had managed to come up with the ticket price. They had been stopped for well over an hour while the semi was unloaded of what their coyotaje had

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purchased to help allay suspicion and search by the border patrol. It hadn't been easy or pleasant being confined in extremely close quarters with these other men, one of whom had diarrhea, breathing the foul air that came through holes drilled into the bed of the truck. Another of the other men had become nauseated because of the stench of the bowel excretions of the sick man and Miguel had thought he would get sick too. When the lid of the compartment had been finally removed and the six of them had stumbled out, the truck driver and owner was furious with the man whose shit filled not only his own trousers but had spread through the compartment and was now running down his legs and dripping onto the floor of the semi's trailer. He had kicked at the man, who had surprisingly nimbly dodged the kick and gotten out and away. It wouldn't have taken much of a tracker to find him if anyone had really wanted to do so, but nobody did.

The other four had also managed to avoid the man's frustrated kicks but Miguel wasn't as lucky; he dodged a kick but not the man's long arms as he felt a hand grab the back of his filthy shirt. He tried to get away but slipped in some of the offal left by the diarrheic one. Landing on his back in the middle of the glob, he was momentarily stunned and felt a heavy weight pressing on his chest. He looked up into the furious face of the semi-driver who was bending over, his foot firmly planted on Miguel's chest.

"So, Poncho, you are the only one left," the coyotaje snarled, his teeth gleaming white in his broad smile. "Ain't you fortunate."

He reached down and grabbed Miguel by the shirt, then stepped back and pulled him to his feet.

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“Today is your lucky day, Poncho,” the reddened face of the driver within inches of his and the man’s spittle covering his face with each word. “You get to clean up this lío de mierda.”

He half-carried, half-dragged Miguel to the door of the trailer shoving him out where he sprawled on the ground and quickly following him. Miguel felt himself being lifted once again and dragged to the side of a building.

“There’s a hose, long enough to reach and do the job. I want it clean, not a spec of mierda mexicana left.”

He shoved Miguel toward the hose and once again he went sprawling. Behind him he heard a door opening and a vicious growl. He rolled over to see a huge Doberman just several feet away, mouth open, fangs bared, torrents of saliva dripping from its jowls being held at bay by the man’s grasp on a studded collar. Miguel sat up and used his hands to move himself several feet backwards until he bumped up against a garbage can.

“And don’t think you can get away like your amigos,” the driver said. “Satan here is hungry and loves Mexican food – raw. As long as you stay in the trailer, you’ll be all right. Now get the hose and that there mop and get in there. You can call me when you’re done, hear?”

It had taken Miguel an hour before he felt the trailer was clean enough to pass inspection. He had called the driver but it had taken him another hour to get his attention. He didn’t dare try to get away as Satan was sitting just ten feet from the trailer’s doors, his eyes never leaving Miguel when he got close to the rear. Finally the driver had come, climbed into the trailer and inspected. Satisfied his had looked at Miguel.

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“You look like shit. You did a good job. Better than any others have. Come with me.”

Miguel had followed him like a puppy, himself followed closely by Satan until he entered the door of the building and Satan obediently sat down outside. It was a huge warehouse, mostly empty, but there were several stacks of crates scattered throughout the premises.

“There’s a washer and dryer in there,” the driver said, “and a shower. Clean your clothes and yourself and then come see me. I’ll be in that office,” pointing to a room across the space.

Miguel shed his clothes into the ancient commercial grade washer and started it, got into the shower and washed himself luxuriating in the hot water, something he rarely got to do. A once-a-month bath in a metal tub with water heated on a stove had been a luxury. He stayed in the shower until the washer was done and then stepped out, wrapping a coarse but clean dry towel around him. He pulled his clothes from the washer, put them in the dryer and started it. His knowledge of written English was almost nonexistent so his twisting of dials on both machines had been by guesswork but was good enough to get the job done. With a minimal load, the commercial dryer didn’t take long. Dressed in clean clothes, Miguel thought about leaving but the thought of Satan on guard outside stayed him.

“Come in, Poncho,” the man said when Miguel knocked on the door.

Miguel entered and stood there quietly. The man was sitting behind a desk, writing in a ledger, a small stack of greenbacks on the table in front of him, probably the fruit of his latest border crossing. He finished his notations in the book and looked up.

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“Not bad, you clean up good, Poncho. What are your plans?”

Miguel shrugged – he didn’t have any. Well, get a job, make a lot of money and bring Maria and Carlos here.

“Got a job?”

“No, señor,” Miguel said.

“Would you like one?”

“Si,” Miguel’s bleak outlook suddenly brightened.

“Can you drive?”

“Si, si!” Miguel said excitedly. “Back home...”

“Forget home. I’ve got an old pickup you can use. Had a guy who helped around here but he left, uh, unexpectedly ‘cause of some trouble he got into. You can use the truck for whatever, but when I need it or you to do something for me, you do it.”

“Si, si!” Miguel said.

“You can stay here until you find a place. There’s a cot out there. Tain’t much but don’t expect you’re used to much.”

He tossed Miguel a set of keys.

“Them’s to the truck, this here building, and the lock on the gate. You take the truck and lam it, I’ll find you and turn you into a pile of mierda mexicana like that you cleaned out of the truck. Understand.”

Miguel nodded excitedly, understanding “pile of mierda mexicana” completely.

“Good. I’m John. What’s your name?”

“Miguel Juarez.”

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“Good, nice to meet you, Miguel.” No handshake offered. “Now let’s go make friends with Satan so he won’t tear you to pieces.”

That had been ten years ago and the working agreement was still in existence although Miguel no longer stayed in the warehouse and had never seen any of the other men who had crossed the border with him in that compartment. He and John had developed more than just a working relationship. With John’s help he had gotten a green card and after three years he had saved enough to be able to afford to bring his small family across the border to live in his new country. Miguel and Maria had set up housekeeping north of the Sepulveda Pass, adding Louisa and Rafael to their family with Miguel making his long daily trips into the city where he scavenged and sold to make ends meet. He still drove the same truck, now with many more miles, but it was dependable and didn’t cost much to keep running. John was a mechanical marvel and with Miguel buying the needed parts, would do the repairs. Miguel smiled at the thought that in just a few days a new president – a wonderful lady he had seen in person during one of her campaign trips to Los Angeles – would be sworn in. The first one for whom he, as an American citizen, had been able to vote.

Topping the pass in the early morning gloom and into a thick patch of smog haze, Miguel was intent on his driving and didn’t notice the flashing lights of the car parked on the berm ahead. Peering straight in front of him into the hardly effective beam cast by the truck’s only working headlight, and that on the driver’s side, he missed seeing the man who straightened up from his work replacing a flat tire on his car, and had reflexively stepped back into the outside lane of the I-405. Miguel hardly noticed the

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impact of his right fender striking the man propelling him forward into the side of his car where his already dead body smacked into it and slid to the ground.

Miguel thought he had hit a small animal or debris that had fallen from one of the other trucks that used the pass daily and so he didn't even stop. He never even noticed the added dent in his right front fender or the cracked headlight that hadn't worked anyway. It was half an hour before the haze and night's gloom had lightened enough for someone else to notice and stop. By that time the man's body was cold and a business class ticket for Derek Smythe on a TransOceania flight to Hong Kong later in the day would go unclaimed.