

Chapter One

Hector Ramos wasn't exactly sure how old he was, but if he had to take a stab at it he would have guessed around seventeen or eighteen. Because he and twin sister Gabriella had been abandoned years ago by their mother—and neither had a clue as to who their father was—there was little guidance, or structure to their lives. They shared a scrap lumber and corrugated tin shack in a squalid shantytown hidden from view below a railroad trestle off the busy *Aldofo Lopez Mateos* Boulevard. They had each other and that was all they needed.

Hector learned early in life how to hustle a meager living on the mean streets of Mexicali, Mexico, literally a stone's throw across the border from its U.S. counterpart Calexico, California. He sold marijuana to tourists, most of whom were college and high school kids crossing the border on the weekends to take advantage of Mexico's eighteen-year-old legal drinking age. To the older tourists Hector peddled handcrafted leather belts and handbags made by his sister, and during the off-season when belt, handbag and marijuana sales were slow, he panhandled and occasionally sold his body to the morally decadent visitors from the north. For nearly two years Hector and Gabriela had been hording every penny earned, often doing without some of life's little pleasures—like food—that most take for granted. They'd managed to save the requisite \$2,500.00 that human traffickers charged to smuggle a person into the United States. Entry into the United States was, in itself, not particularly problematic; rather, it was the need of false identification papers and job placement that made the human traffickers a necessary evil.

The day Hector left Mexico, crammed into the cargo hold of a windowless extended Chevy van along with twenty-two other illegal aliens, he promised to work extra hard, double shifts when available, and send every penny back home so in a few months, hopefully, Gabriella could join him in the land of opportunity.

Hector's face snapped away from the acrid smell of ammonia; his last woozy memory was sitting on the edge of a double bed in his underwear, about to get *lucky* with a pretty *señora* from housekeeping. He recalled downing shots of weak tequila (American tequila was no match for the real

thing from the homeland) but for the life of him could not remember the girl's name: *Alicia*... *Alita*? He'd only drunk three or four shots, so why was everything so fuzzy?

Another whiff of smelling salts and Hector's eyes snapped open. He squinted into the harsh glare of a bright bank of florescent lights suspended over the stainless steel table he was lying upon. He blinked into focus the oscillating fan at the foot of the table that blew chilled air across his naked body. He tried to sit up and realized that his arms and legs were strapped securely to the tabletop: *Ah, one kinky* señora. he told himself.

Like an olive-brown balloon, a face rose next to his, its warm breath almost welcome against his cheek. Immaculately dressed in a three-piece white silk suit, *El hombre* spoke: "I have received no payment from you for three months; why is that, Hector?"

Hector's response? Violent, uncontrollable spasms.

Truth was, Hector was a little bit homesick and a lotta' bit lonesome, so in his attempt to expedite the rendezvous with Gabriella he'd forwarded entire paychecks to Mexico, sans food and rent money. He licked at cracked dry lips and in a quavering voice tried to explain why he'd fallen behind.

"¿*Eso correcto?*" Carlos Sanchez, owner of the Pot-O-Gold Casino and Racetrack said, and then switched to English. "Did you not know the building where you live is run by my cousin? She tells me your rent is paid faithfully each month, and on time. Hector, you insult me with your lies."

Sanchez ran the back of a perfectly manicured fingernail the length of Hector's smooth cheek. "So if your rent is paid up to date, what have you been spending *my* money on, Hector?"

Sanchez suddenly snatched hold of the boy's arms and twisted them painfully in the leather restraining straps. Hector grimaced as Sanchez examined his arms and legs for track marks.

"I see no needle marks," Sanchez reclaimed the stool next to the table. "If not drugs, eh, Hector, then what?" He looked into the quivering boy's eyes. "Could it be you save your money for a *special occasion*; maybe to move away from your *amigos*?" Sanchez swept his arm around the concrete subbasement beneath the casino. Hector heard mocking laughter from people he could not see. "You would leave friends who risked so much to

bring you to this country. You would leave without saying goodbye...” Sanchez’s eyes darkened, “without paying your debts?”

Hector’s head thrashed violently from side to side. “No, no, *señor!* I will pay, honest. I will pay all the *dinero* I owe, every penny. I swear on my mother’s soul I will make it up to you.”

With a reptilian hiss, Sanchez stood and ran his hands over dark slicked-back hair. He traced the length of Hector’s shivering body with his finger, stopping to tap his ankle. “Your mother has no soul, Hector; she’s a *puta* who doesn’t even remember your name.”

Hector shuddered...convulsed...sobbed...pleaded...begged, and if it were possible, would have steepled his fingers and prayed. “Please, *Señor* Sanchez. Please. Forgive me this one time; you can keep all of my pay until I’m caught up...until I’m paid in full. Please, I beg of you.”

Sanchez looked down at the trembling spread-eagle boy strapped to the table, crossed his arms and rested them in front of his chest. “Tell me, Hector, why should I give you another chance.”

“Please. I’ll never be late again,” Hector wept, “I swear on all that’s sacred I’ll get you your money. I’ll work more shifts; sell myself if I have to...please. I’m trying to bring my sister to America!”

Hector’s owing Carlos Sanchez was not what had gotten him into trouble, it was his bravado, his telling the others he worked with that Sanchez could do nothing if they banded together, if they stood up for one another. Hector quickly discovered that the only place illegal immigrants have rights in America was in the immigration/deportation courts, certainly not in the restaurants and sweatshops, and definitely not in a subterranean casino dungeon owned by a man who had no compunction profiteering off those too frightened to speak out. In the human traffickers world it is better to lose one rabble-rouser than allow him to infect the entire group.

Sanchez stroked his chin thoughtfully as he walked a contemplative lap around the table. He stopped at the head of the table and looked down with emotionless eyes. “Not only do you lie to me...” Sanchez wagged a scolding finger in front of Hector’s face, “by telling me you are behind on your rent—when that is not true—you brag, Hector. Behind my back you insult me, say horrible things...after all the expense, all the risk I have taken to bring you to America. I gave you a good paying job, have done so much for you, and you disrespect me like this.”

Hector's upside down view of Sanchez was making him dizzy.

Sanchez set fiery black eyes on the boy. "Your mouth is bad for business, Hector, bad for morale. Others wonder why they must pay, yet Hector Ramos does not—and boasts."

Sanchez snapped his fingers several times and nodded toward the foot of the table. Raul Morales, Sanchez's *número uno* thick-neck disciple stepped from the shadows and set up a tripod and video camera at the foot of the table.

"Hector, it is better for business—*mucho mejor*—if others see it is unwise to mock Carlos Sanchez's generosity." Sanchez shrugged innocuously. "Think of yourself as an actor in a training film."

Hector strained against the leather tie downs and despite the chill in the room, was sweating profusely.

Sanchez stepped alongside the table and patted the boy's shoulder. "Hector, relax. You're going to hurt yourself.

"Tonight, when it's all over, you will have learned a very valuable lesson." He again wagged his finger. "Carlos Sanchez is not to be trifled with."

Hector breathed a sigh of relief knowing Mr. Sanchez would spare his life. Beatings had been a staple in his young life, and although he was sure these men were about to deliver a whipping the likes of which he'd never experienced, or hoped to experience again, he would at least survive.

Sanchez leaned over the table and raised a finger toward the ceiling to emphasize his point. "I want you to know that this is not personal, Hector, it's simply business."

Sanchez patted Hector's cheek, smoothed the kid's disheveled, sweat-soaked hair, wiped his hands on a silk handkerchief and returned it to his pocket. He nodded to Morales and walked from the room, shoe cleats clacking against the floor. Hector twisted in the leather straps, shouted his thanks to Mr. Sanchez for allowing him a second chance.

Morales switched on the video camera and adjusted the angle and focus. Before disappearing from sight he tightened a dozen tourniquets around Hector's quivering limbs.

While Hector craned his neck in all directions, a futile attempt to see what was taking place beyond the peripheral, another of Sanchez's underlings stepped from the shadows wearing a leather butcher's apron

and plastic face shield, hands encased in surgical latex gloves. He stepped to the table and thumbed on a battery operated reciprocating saw. Hector's jaw fell open in a silent scream as the man began hacking off his right foot.

Through the liberal use of tourniquets and smelling salts, Hector Ramos remained alive for over half an hour as, one by one, he watched his body parts removed and deposited into plastic garbage bags.

Hector begged Gabriella's forgiveness, and with blood-curdling screams, prayed for a quick delivery into the Virgin Mother's arms. Neither prayer did much good to diminish his prolonged, agonizing death.

Carlos Sanchez stepped from the private elevator into his penthouse office suite on the third floor. He walked across the room to the ceiling-to-floor windows overlooking the racetrack, where he pondered on whether or not to show *new arrivals* Hector Ramos's "punishment." He decided to wait until Raul brought the tape to his office—where he could mute Ramos's screams—before making such a decision.