

TRIBULATIONS  
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Chapter One

Mario Lopez came back from the fields at Fatima Farms tired but pleased with the work he had done that day. As he stepped off from the back of the truck that evening along with thirty other workers, he remembered this was the twenty-eight day he had worked at this job picking lettuce eight hours a day and he considered himself extremely lucky. Not just to have a job that paid three dollars and seventy-five cents an hour, the equivalent of two days wages back in his country, but to be able to fulfill what he considered was the most important job in the world, to provide for his wife and their six-month-old baby boy back in his home country. This privilege had been denied to Mario, who was nineteen at the time, because he refused to pay a tax imposed by the local street gang, as well as refusing to join them, and this put him and his family in the crosshairs of the vicious killers. He knew that if he remained in his country, his son may never grow up to see his father, so he set out to the United States to look for work and send money home. Arriving in America and being able to work almost as soon as he set foot inside made all the horrors of his journey to the border seem worth it, especially after all the money he sent to his wife during that time, which allowed her to move out of the slums and away from the street gangs. Now, unfortunately, his job was in jeopardy and the outlook was grim because of a workers' dispute.

Don Bernardo, the farm manager, stood nearby with a clipboard, counting the trucks and workers that arrived. He was an older man with salt and pepper hair, he had a pleasant demeanor, he was respected and liked by all the workers. The camp was a collection of six trailer homes arranged in a semi-circle around a common ground with picnic tables and light pole in the

middle. Mario walked to the second trailer home to grab his dinner while other workers gathered at the picnic tables in the center of the camp. Some had arrived earlier in other trucks and were warming themselves by a trash can fire, while the bright orange glow of the sinking sun was fading in the horizon. Mario came out the trailer and quickly found his friend Rodolfo. He opened a plastic container with a warm dinner and caught up on the latest as he ate. He stood out from all the other workers because of his dark black skin and curly hair, a visible mark of his slave and native American ancestry.

“So, how did it go with Petro today?” Asked Mario.

“Well, no one got run over, if that's what you're asking.”

Rodolfo, thin and about as tall as Mario, with lighter skin, was one of the workers looking out for the safety of the crew and had a difficult time at it. “We had to ask him to stop the machine three times in the morning, and later in the afternoon when we had to stop again, he got really mad. He came out of the cab and said: ‘This is the pace other workers are doing at other farms’, and when we told him that wasn’t true, he said, ‘fine, we’ll just replace you with people who are willing to work faster’.”

Mario was somewhat surprised by the escalation. “What? There is still half a farm left to harvest?”

Pascual, another mutual friend arrived at the table. He was eating cold soup from a can. “Hey guys, is it true Petro is looking to replace half the crew here?”

“That seems to be his plan,” replied Rodolfo.

“Why would he do something like that?” Mario was already imagining the consequences of not being able to send more money to his wife.

“He’s been angling for the farm manager’s job for years,” explained Rodolfo, “and the old man, Don Bernardo is standing in the way.”

“And anyone that arrived with him,” added Pascual. “That means you and me.”

“And me, too,” added Mario.

Pascual had a previous altercation with Petro weeks before. “Yeah, and he’s making out everyone that sides with Don Bernardo as troublemakers.”

“We’re going to have to bail out of here,” said Rodolfo.

“That’s what a lot of people are saying,” added Pascual.

“What if you don’t get out?” asked Mario, wishing very hard that his job wouldn’t end so abruptly.

“He’ll find a way to get you out, even if it means turning you over to the Border Patrol.”

“Why in the world would he go and do something like that? What does he have to gain?”

Rodolfo reached for his deep reserve of patience. “Mario, do you think anyone around here plays it straight for who they are? Don Bernardo gets a cut for every worker he brings in, and Petro wants to get in the game. He probably has a deal with another coyote already, that will bring other workers to replace us at cheaper wages. And the coyotes always work in cahoots with the Border Patrol. It’s the circle of life around here, if you will.”

“So, there’s no difference between the Border Patrol and the Mexican Migra, basically.”

“It’s a matter of degrees, but yes, they are both rotten to the core.”

“So, we have to go,” said Pascual, “screw this place. There are better jobs out there.”

“Hey, listen, would you two mind if I go with you?” Asked Mario.

“I’m okay with it,” said Rodolfo, looking at Pascual. He concurred.

“Okay, on Friday, after payday, we go into town and catch the last bus out of here.”

With a look and a gesture of his hand, Rodolfo asked Mario and Pascual to stop talking while they finished their dinner.

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When Friday arrived, Mario was up at four thirty in the morning double-checking his backpack with a flashlight while others slept or stirred awake. He was now on high alert, preparing to leave the camp on very short notice, rolling up his clothes tightly and pushing them down into his backpack to make as much room as possible. When he was ready, he cleaned up, made himself a quick breakfast and came out to the picnic tables. The air was cold and crisp, and the faint glow of daylight was creeping slowly on the east. A few workers were up, warming themselves by the trash can fire and Mario looked for his friends at the picnic tables.

“Ready to go?” asked Rodolfo when Mario joined them.

“I am ready. But I could hardly sleep last night thinking about my cousin, Felipe.”

“Still feeling guilty about leaving him behind?” asked Pascual.

“Yes, I feel terrible. I could have been killed if I tried to help him, I know that, but I still feel like I must try to find him. It's been about five weeks, give or take, and maybe I should go back to Matamoros and try to get him out.”

Rodolfo cautioned him. “That might be tempting, Mario, but I would strongly suggest you don’t do that yet. First try to find out if he got out, if he contacted your family or a friend. Try every possible way to find out what happened to him, other than going there in person. You’ve been to Matamoros, you know what it’s like.”

Mario flashbaked to the night him and his cousin got caught in raid by the Mexican Immigration police on a crowd of refugees. “Yes, I do, and the whole thing terrifies me.”

“Or you can continue with us, make more money and keep sending it home,” added Pascual.

Other workers arrived while the sky turned blue, later they were boarding the first truck that went out to the fields. During the short ten-minute ride, Mario thought about his beloved cousin and inseparable companion, who came to the United States with him but was arrested and jailed after a raid by the Mexican Immigration Police before he had a chance to come across the border. Mario stayed behind for as long as he could to try to find him, but he was only able to learn that he was alive and that he would be detained for at least two weeks before he was let out. Mario was desperate to find work, it was the main reason he had risked so much coming to the United States, and he had to make the gut-wrenching decision to continue with his journey and leave his cousin behind. When they first arrived in Mexico, they hatched a plan about what to do in the event that they got separated, but first, as Rodolfo suggested, Mario had to find out if his cousin had called home or let any relatives know he was okay. His one chance to find out was coming up later that day, before catching the bus to Santa Clara, the next town over, when he would stop by the phone service booth and call his wife Mercedes. He always called his wife after wiring money to her, and as always, his cousin was the subject of conversation in one way or another.

Mario jumped down from the truck with sixteen other workers before it continued to another location in the fields. He donned his equipment, a plastic apron and a paring knife, and took his place behind the green machine, a hulking harvester about the size of a school bus. The first four workers usually took the positions in front and another twelve workers would take their places behind the harvester, then they would rotate in groups of four every two and a half hours. Mario looked up and saw that the operator of the machine that day was none other than Petro, he

immediately shot a glance at Rodolfo and another one at Pascual who was nearby. They knew exactly what to do and made sure the other workers were aware of what was expected: Everyone would try to keep up as much as possible, but raise a hand when they thought conditions were unsafe.

Petro, a tall and round Mexican who could hardly fit in the cab of the machine, turned the key and the diesel engine coughed up a black cloud of smoke in the pristine blue sky. Soon the machine was moving and behind it, twelve workers bent down to the ground and pulled a head of lettuce that had just been sprayed with water mixed with a preservative. Each worker would cut off the roots and the outer leaves with a paring knife, then place the head of lettuce in a conveyer belt that wrapped them in a thin plastic cone and send them down to a packing unit to the left of the structure. In front of the green machine, two workers received cardboard crates of lettuce containing twenty-four heads of lettuce, each on a conveyor belt, and two workers ahead of them, placed them neatly on a tractor that rolled slowly ahead of the machine stacking the crates twenty high and twenty deep. It took about one hour for each tractor bed to fill up and another one to take its place, usually with a helper that travelled with the tractor. Each tractor bed contained a few thousand heads of lettuce ready for shipping to supermarkets, each crate bearing the logo of Fatima Farms with the inscription below, 'From Farm to Kitchen'.

The hours ticked by under the watchful eye of Mario, Rodolfo and four other workers who were organizing. The lunch break came around, and during the morning only once did the workers had to ask for the machine to slow down. Mario checked in with Rodolfo while they sat and had a bowl of rice and beans for lunch.

“Something is keeping him in line,” observed Mario.

“Maybe he knows everyone is ready to bail.”

“Look at those fields,” said Pascual, pointing out to a thin line of green left behind the harvester. “These morons somehow figured out that its worth leaving produce on the ground, as long as we pick more lettuce, and they can push us faster.”

“As long as the numbers work out for them it doesn’t matter,” said Mario.

“Let’s just get through the day, boys,” said Rodolfo. “That’s all we need to do today.”

It wasn’t until the end of the shift when the crew was getting tired that things got tense again. After the last fifteen-minute break at two thirty, about two hundred yards after starting, two workers requested for the Harvester to slow down. Twenty minutes later, Petro was asked to stop, and he grumbled as he slowed down the pace, he was getting visibly frustrated. Mario was in the worst possible place at the time, he was working with the four-man crew in front of the green machine, rotating the receiving gate with Pascual. They filled up one flatbed with boxes, paused for the next one to latch on and Mario switched spots with Pascual on the receiving gate.

Right from the start everyone noticed the rushed pace and one worker raised his hand, then another, then Pascual dropped a box and he stumbled. Mario raised his hand and yelled: “Stop! Stop!”

But by the time the machine halted the wheel crushed the crate and missed Pascual’s foot by a hair. “Hey! What the hell is your problem?” He hollered at the foreman, “You could have killed me, *cabron!*”

Petro, realizing that this was almost an accident again, turned the engine off and got down to see. Mario was calming down Pascual and Rodolfo was standing nearby.

“It’s okay Pascual,” said Mario. “Remember we’re getting out of here today.”

“Wow, sorry about that,” said Petro. “Are you okay?”

“You trying to run me over mother fucker-*cabron*?!” Pascual was pushing himself forward and gesturing aggressively.

“Pascual, no!” The thin lanky worker lunged towards Petro, but Mario and Rodolfo were there to stop him. He was clearly no match against someone of Petro’s size.

“You little shit got a problem?!” Petro roared and pushed his way towards Pascual, at one point seeming like he could push the crew of men that was trying to hold him back. Suddenly, a tractor pulled up next to the harvester and beeped its horn. Everyone stopped on their tracks and looked towards the tractor. The driver stepped down and surveyed his surroundings, quickly realizing that there have been some sort of altercation and work was stopped. He came up to Petro and spoke in a calm voice.

“Petro, Don Bernardo needs you to get ready for payday.”

Petro immediately dropped his defensive stance, turned around and stormed towards the tractor, instructing the driver to take charge of the harvester. Petro hopped on the tractor, stepped on the gas and roared back to the worker’s camp.

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The payday routine began shortly after the crew returned to the workers’ camp and the mood was tense. As workers were lining up before the folding table with the metal box, most of them were already donning their back packs, and no one said a word. Don Bernardo sitting on the other side of the table carried on his usual routine of repeating the workers name and looking up his hours on the ledger. He would ask the worker if he kept track of his hours and what was the total, and he almost never had a difference with a worker. A foreman stood guard behind Don Bernardo with a shotgun at cross arms and after a few minutes, the owner of the farm, Mr. Reed pulled up in a black Ford pickup truck, Petro was riding in the passenger seat.



Mario, Pascual and Rodolfo looked on in disgust as Petro stepped out of the truck all full of himself, and Mr. Reed, the farm owner, stepped out from the driver's seat. He was taller and fatter than Petro with pasty white skin burned red at the neck. The only white man in the camp, already past his seventies, Mr. Reed wore a grey Stetson hat and a ratty brown flannel shirt covering his wide frame. He sported mud galoshes over his feet and strode forward towards the picnic tables. Don Bernardo stepped aside from the table, put another foreman in charge and exchanged few words with Mr. Reed. The meeting lasted less than a minute in which Mr. Reed was seen shaking his head and Don Bernardo nodding in approval, and that only made the workers more anxious.

Having arrived early after finishing their shift abruptly, Mario and his friends hopped on the first truck out of the farm going towards the depot, a cluster of business and a strip mall by the side of a state road. There, workers could find check cashing stores, convenience and grocery stores. Mario went straight to the Western Union office next to the deli counter in the *bodega*, wired everything he made for the week to his wife Mercedes, minus eighty dollars, twenty for the fare to Santa Clara and sixty for spending money. And when he was done, he went straight to the phone booths a block down the street. There he ran into Pascual and Rodolfo who were talking to their relatives before they left, and Mario got a booth, just as they were finishing.

"Hurry up you have ten minutes!" warned Rodolfo. Mario listened to the tone with bated breath and on the other line the sweet voice of Mercedes, his wife, came on.

"*Alo*. Mario, is that you?"

"*Mercedias, mi amor*. how are you?"

Mercedes was holding their baby boy in her arms and Mario could hear him cooing on the other side. The conversation was brief but full of new information and new developments,

like Mercedes' mother moving to the city to live with her under circumstances that were less than ideal.

Mario tried his best to put a positive spin on the news by saying that it would be good for the baby to have his grandma nearby, but all these news was a little too much for Mario who was hoping for a simpler call when unexpectedly, Mercedes asked about Felipe. Mario felt a stab to the heart.

"You mean, he hasn't called his mother yet?" Asked Mario pretending he had some contact with him prior to the phone call. Since Felipe's arrest, Mario covered for his cousin with little white lies and evasions, all designed to keep his family from knowing the gruesome truth that he was in jail and that there was no telling when or how he would get out. But covering for his absence was getting increasingly difficult by the day, and Mario felt stressed and pressured to act.

"Mario, everyone is asking me about Felipe, and I don't know what to tell them. When was the last time you talked to him?"

"Well, *nena*, remember I spoke with him about a month ago, but the farm where he works is very far away and he can't get to a phone that easy."

"Can you please tell him to call his mother? She is desperate to hear his voice and to know that he is safe."

Again, Mario felt a stab to the heart and made up another lie to soothe her anxiety.

"Nena, please tell Aunt Alicia that I'm going to see him this weekend, and I'll tell him to call as soon as possible." He quickly changed the subject: "Nena, just so you know, I'm going to be changing jobs, too."

"Why? What happened?"

Mario was quick with another half-truth, this one about the short season for lettuce picking and that he was moving on further west to other farms. She was a bit disappointed, but as always, she reminded Mario how much she appreciated the sacrifice he was making and how much she missed him. Mario was lost in Mercedes voice for a few seconds, wishing with all his heart that he could be there, holding her and their baby tight. He was soon jolted out of his brief moment of bliss when a small red blinking light went off in the booth signaling the five minutes he paid for the call we're almost over. The man in the counter signaled to Mario that it was time to end the call, and he said his goodbyes as quickly as he could. He reaffirmed his undying love for Mercedes and their baby, hung up the phone and rushed out of the store. Mario reached the bus moments before it pulled out, his two friends we're sitting together and they saved a seat for him on the aisle. Rodolfo asked how the call went.

"Everyone's good, thanks God. No word from my cousin, though."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I feel stuck."

Mario sat back on his chair and felt good about speaking with Mercedes and hearing the baby's voice, but he was deeply troubled about his cousin. He started his journey from home with him and made it all the way to the border only to be separated from him the day before they were to cross into the United States. The bus rolled slowly out of the depot down the only road that led to the highway, Mario asked Rodolfo about the farm they were going to, who was his contact, then suddenly, flashing lights appeared behind the bus, a Border Patrol cruiser sped up in front of it and ordered the driver to pull over.

"Dam it, Petro!" cursed Rodolfo. "He turned everyone in!"

Pascual got up from his seat. “That mother fucker! *Puto cabron!* I should have beat the shit out of him when I had the chance!” Other workers were getting up from their seats, looking for any chance to escape.

“Oh no, Rodolfo what should I do?” Asked Mario alarmed.

“Remember, say you’re from Mexico! But not to the Mexicans!” The bus came to a halt and Rodolfo made his way to the front. He yelled at the driver: “Hey! Tell the officer there are people here with working papers!”

An officer was already climbing on board ready to make an announcement but many of the workers were agitated. Some were angry, others frightened and wanted to run, others shouted at the Border Patrol agents.

“Everyone here’s got papers! Leave us alone!” shouted a man from the back of the bus.

Rodolfo produced his green card and showed it to the officer, who completely ignored him and announced: “Folks this is a routine inspection! Please show some ID! *Inspeccion de rutina!*”

“Routine Inspection my ass!” Shouted a worker.

“You’re bought and paid for, ass hole!” shouted abother.

An officer in charge heard the commotion and stepped inside. “Alright, everyone out! Single file! Now! *Afuera cabrones!*”

Others workers got more upset and continued their heckling: “Traitor! You’re a sellout, *cabron!*”

“Your mother would be ashamed!”

“I said everyone out!” The officer was angry now. He grabbed Rodolfo by the shirt and tried to force him out, but he fought back.

*“Puto cabron! Get your hands off me, I have my papers!”* He protested. The officers jumped into riot mode and manhandled Rodolfo out of the bus.

*“Fucking pigs!”* Shouted another worker from inside.

*“Chinga tú madre, cabron!”* More officers came into the bus and Mario decided to cooperate, even though he felt the urge to run. All the passengers were escorted out roughly and while they were made to line up next to the bus, two men made a run for it and two officers went after them. One was recaptured easily, he was heavy set and couldn’t run very fast, while the other ran into a field and the officer soon gave up the chase. He immediately reached for his shoulder-talkie to call for reinforcements.

Mario caught Rodolfo’s eye as he was being dragged and handcuffed, protesting he had working papers. There were no words exchanged but they said goodbye to each other. Mario never saw Rodolfo again.

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