

Sample Pages from
The Mexican Operation ©2006
by Lee A. Silva

CHAPTER 17

The stench, the filth, and the degradation of the wetback and the *bracero* camps had made a hard impact on Jeff Stone, because it had been something new to him. Hal DaSilva, on the other hand, had been seeing it from the start, ever since he had first taken over the taxi business, first with the wetbacks and then with the *braceros*. He had heard and seen how some of the small farmers cheated the wetbacks when they thought they could get away with it by paying them whatever wages they felt like, which was usually just enough to keep the wets coming back when they were needed, and sometimes turning them in to the Border Patrol to save paying their wages when they were no longer needed. He had heard and seen how the *braceros* were cheated with illegal deductions that were taken out of their paychecks, deductions that went right back into the pockets of the labor contractor or farmer who was paying them. Worse, he had seen and smelled and even tasted the slop that was being passed off as food in the *bracero* camp mess halls.

DaSilva had become accustomed to it all, but he had not become immune to it, even though he saw it in one form or the other every time he pulled into a *bracero* or a wetback camp. It was, he supposed, no concern of his, even though he was constantly appalled at what he saw and heard. The Mexicans, both the wets and the nationals, were, however, becoming more and more the major part of his business now, and DaSilva was not an unappreciative man. He caught himself wondering from time to time what could be done to improve the living conditions and working conditions of the *campesinos* who rode in his cabs so much.

One day, one of the Border Patrol agents who was assigned to the Blythe area was having breakfast in DaSilva's cafe, so DaSilva sat down and asked him about it. The agent, a man named Clint, scoffed around his coffee as he drank it.

"Shit, Hal—," he said, "there's nothing anybody can do about it—, even me. You got to remember that this expanded Bracero Program is still in the embryonic stage. Shit—, there aren't even any housing standards set up yet to speak of, other than the fact that the *bracero* camps are supposed to have running water and toilets, so what's there to enforce—? And who's going to enforce it? There's only one compliance officer for

this whole county, which stretches clear across the state almost back to L.A., so how much can he see—? Besides, he finally cited one labor contractor for taking non-existent deductions out of the *braceros*' checks, and you know what—? It took him a year just to get the guy into court, and then the court just fines the guy fifty dollars, and, on top of that didn't even require him to pay back the deductions that he had put back in his own pocket all that time. It would have taken too much time and red tape to track down all the *braceros* he'd cheated, the court said, so why bother—?"

DaSilva shook his head. "It's the same thing you see everywhere," he said. "Nobody seems to give a damn about the Mexicans—."

"Believe it or not, we do—, us Border Patrol agents," Clint went on. "It drives us crazy that our hands are tied by the lack of help we have and by the lack of money to operate on. Just between you and me, I know it's a fact that a lot of the big farmers are paying off their congressmen so that they'll keep voting against funds for the Border Patrol. The farmers didn't really want the Bracero Act, you know, 'cause the wets will work for almost nothing, and the farmers can really control the wets because the wets can't complain about anything 'cause all they'll do is get turned in if they do. The *braceros* have got a minimum wage, but the poor wets don't—, they just gotta settle for whatever a farmer or labor contractor will give them. 'Course now the farmers and labor contractors are finding out how much they can take out of the *braceros*' paychecks and get away with it anyway, so now some of them are beginning to like the Bracero Program, because by the time they take out their illegal deductions and make a profit on the crap they're feeding their *braceros* for food, they're gettin' the *braceros* as cheap as the wets anyway—. Hell, I heard of one guy that had a food concession to feed the *braceros* over in the Imperial Valley, he made a net profit of twenty-one thousand dollars in three months—, just feeding slop to the *braceros*. Nobody wants to stop what's going on, Hal—. There's already too many people makin' too much money out of the Bracero Program—."

"Besides—," Clint went on, "you think the *braceros* are having it rough in this country, you should see how the Mexicans are treating their own people down in Mexico, like at the *bracero* recruiting station at Empalme, south of Guaymas. Christ, Hal—, you wouldn't believe it if you saw it! You know the Mexican system of *mordida*—, of having to pay bribes to get anywhere? Evidently some big honcho's got the Mexican officials on the take who screen the *braceros* and give them their permits to come up here to the U.S., and the *mordida*'s so big that most of the Mexicans who are trying to become *braceros* are stacked up like flies on shit just waiting, 'cause they don't have the money for the *mordida*. There's usually twenty-five-thousand to fifty-thousand of them squatting in Empalme,

Hal—, living in cardboard boxes or just rolled up in their *morral*s—, just waiting to get on the list to come into the U.S. and work. There's shit all over the place, 'cause there's no sewers, and there's a hundred times more flies than there are Mexicans, and the flies are eating, but the Mexicans are starving 'cause there's nothing to eat—.”

“I've heard rumors about it,” DaSilva said, “but I didn't know it was that bad—.”

“Some of the Mexicans in Empalme have wised up,” Clint continued. “It's only eleven miles into Guaymas, and some of the Mexicans are walking into Guaymas to the fishing boat docks and scrounging whatever they can from the rich, *gringo* tourists who go down there to go fishing—, you know, marlin and game fish like that—. Hell, the minute a fish is brought in and gutted, the Mexicans are scrambling for the entrails, 'cause it's food and it's filling, and it's better than nothing—. And sometimes the *gringo* fisherman doesn't even want his trophy and he leaves his whole fish for the Mexicans—, but, all in all, there sure ain't enough tourists going down there to fish and leave enough fish to feed twenty-five thousand Mexicans—.”

“Norb Dixon and I have been wanting to go down to Guaymas and go fishing ourselves one of these days,” DaSilva pondered. “It would be interesting to really see what you're talking about. I had no idea it was that bad—.”

“It's bad enough that you better not eat before you see Empalme—,” Clint said seriously, “or you'll puke it all up—. They're just plain starving to death down there in Empalme, Hal—, just waiting to get on the list to come into the U.S. You know, there's a lot of them that get killed in fights while they're getting robbed by each other, and a lot get run over by trucks on the highway and stuff like that—, but a lot of them are just plain starving to death. You know what—? The Mexican government did an autopsy on a young Mexican who just laid down and died one day while he was waiting to get on the list at Emplame—. Evidently, they're trying to show just enough interest in what's goin' on to try to offset the enormity of the *mordida*—. Anyway, you know what they found in that kid's stomach—?”

“What—?” DaSilva said dumbly.

“Banana peels—,” Clint said. “Nothin' but banana peels—. He hadn't had nothin' to eat but banana peels for so long, he just died from malnutrition—!”

DaSilva just shook his head, for there was nothing to say.

“And you want to hear a worse one—?” Clint went on. “They ain't doing autopsies on older Mexicans, 'cause I guess they figure the old ones were overdue to die anyway—, that's kinda the Mexican philosophy of writing