



PROLOGUE

Chicken

1979

“Buenas tardes, Capitán.”

“Buenas tardes,” I replied.

I sat down at the desk along the right wall of Veracruz’s flight office and began filling out a flight plan.

“A dónde vas?” the agent asked from behind the counter.

The collar of his blue shirt was unbuttoned and his tie was loose. He had been helpful in my education of flight procedures in Mexico.

“I am flying to Los Leones north of Tampico to go fishing,” I answered. We spoke in Spanish.

“Ah. Very good. And your friend? He is not accompanying you?”

“No. He must return to the United States for work.”

The printer behind the counter ran for half a minute.

“Tampico has clear skies,” the agent informed me.

I handed him my flight plan from Veracruz to Los Leones. He laid it on the counter and marked it with a pen while I read the printout of Tampico’s weather.

“Muy bueno,” he said and smiled, proud of me.

“Gracias.”

He signed the top copy and detached it, then handed me the two carbons.

“Buen viaje,” he bid. *Have a nice trip.*

I taxied the Piper Arrow to the gas pumps where the young fuelers topped off the wing tanks and filled the four plastic gas cans in the baggage compartment. We joked as they polished the windscreen, and I added a nice tip when I paid.

Although the wind blew from the east, planes were taking

off toward the west to avoid making noise over Veracruz. The tailwind would increase my take-off distance, but Veracruz's main runway was a mile and a half long, so the slight increase in the take-off run wouldn't be a factor for my small single-engine Piper. I radioed ground control and taxied to the end of the runway.

After lifting off, I raised the landing gear and continued straight out farther than normal so the control tower wouldn't notice my turn to the south. I flew the highlighted course on the chart in my lap and watched for the landmarks circled in ink: a road, a power line, a river and another road. Eighteen minutes after takeoff, a narrow rectangle of gray appeared ahead in the green jungle. Even with 260 flight hours under my belt, I still got a feeling of accomplishment when an airport or even a landmark showed up exactly where it should.

I lined up with the runway and landed east, into the wind. On the rollout, I spotted our rental VW Rabbit parked behind some bushes two-thirds down the runway on the left. I spun around and set the parking brake adjacent to where Todd was dragging our two suitcases through the weeds. With the engine still running, he climbed onto the right wing and hoisted the suitcases behind him one at a time. I reached over and pushed the door open against the wind from the spinning propeller. Todd kept his back to the door as he shoved the luggage onto the rear seats. He started to say something but stopped in mid-sentence as he stared through the windshield.

"Fuck," I read on his lips.

I looked ahead. A truck painted in army green was hauling ass down the runway toward us.

"See you in Houston," I said.

Todd jumped off the back of the wing, and I latched the door. If there had been enough runway behind me, I would have spun around and taken off in the proper direction—into the wind and away from the truck. But there wasn't enough runway behind me. I'd go off the end before I could get airborne. My only option was to take off where I had enough runway—toward the truck. I shoved the throttle to the firewall and held constant, adrenaline-driven pressure against it.

Getting into the air before our paths met was not something I could hope for. When it comes to aeronautics, physics beats hope every time. It was down to an old-fashioned game of chicken. I stayed on the centerline of the runway and watched

the airspeed needle slowly rise as the truck got bigger. If we hit, then we hit. Stopping and giving up was not an alternative. One stint in a Mexican penitentiary was enough for one lifetime.