

# CRAZYLOCO LOVE

## CHAPTER ONE

I was just turning sixteen years old when my dad told me that he needed to talk to me. We walked across the grass and past the barn and corrals to the big old pepper tree. This tree was so huge that many of its limbs were as big around as the trunk of some fully grown trees. I'd been playing underneath this tree since I was a child and I'd helped slaughter and hang and butcher hundreds of steers in its limbs.

"Son," my dad said to me, "in a few days you will have your own driver's license and be driving your own car."

"Truck, *papá*. Pick-up truck," I said.

I was all excited about the truck I was getting. It was a 1956 Chevy my dad let me pick out at Weseloh's Chevrolet in downtown Oceanside. It cost a fortune, one thousand and three hundred dollars.

"Okay, *mijo*, a pick-up truck," said my dad to me, "but the point I want to make is this, you are no longer a boy. You are a man now, and to be *un hombre*, a man must not only know right from wrong, he must also know who he is and who he isn't. Because if a man doesn't know who he is and who he isn't, then no matter how much he knows about right and wrong, he will always be like a fish out of water.

"But, on the other hand, if a man knows who he is and who he isn't, then he will have the strength and confidence to do whatever it takes to keep his head above water and create a good life for himself and his loved ones. Do you understand? Am I making sense?"

Suddenly, my gift, the new Chevy pick-up – a beaming turquoise – didn't quite seem as important or as exciting to me. What my dad was telling me was kind of scary.

"No, *papá*," I finally said. We were speaking mostly in Spanish. "I don't understand, because, well, to learn what is right and what is wrong, you have the priest and nuns and everybody else telling you which is which. But to learn who you are and who you aren't, I don't see how anyone can teach you that. So, then, how does a man learn this? I don't get it," I added.

My dad smiled a great big beautiful smile. "Exactly," he said, "this is the million dollar question that nobody can teach you and you need to learn for yourself. My mother, a woman, told me this, and I'll tell, you, *mijo*, that you will learn who you are and who you aren't in the next four or five years, because not to learn who you are and who you aren't in the next few years, my mother said, is to be missing the most important part of your whole life.

"Myself, I had to learn who I was and who I wasn't at a very early age. Our father had abandoned us and died. The Revolution was going on all around us, and my old mother and my two sisters were starving. I was ten years old, and all the games I'd played as a child suddenly became the tools for our survival. I knew how to catch rabbits, trap quail, and which wild roots to dig up so we could eat. I knew how to lie and trick the soldiers so that they wouldn't find my sisters and abuse them. All the playful games of my childhood suddenly took on new meaning, and I learned to see and think, here in my *cabeza-head*, not as a child, but as the man responsible for the survival and welfare of his *familia*."

"I know, *papá*, you've told me this a hundred times," I said.

"Only a hundred? Well, then listen good, because now the time has come for you, too, to put away your thinking as a child and to start looking at life as a man, a person responsible for the survival and welfare of his loved ones. Your brother José is dead. He died at sixteen, just as he was coming into his own manhood. You didn't get to

see how he was going to make it here in the United States. And how I came into my own manhood in *México* during the Revolution and then here in this country in prison and at different work camps, all that isn't going to be much of a guide for you, either. So *mijo*, you are going to have to keep your eyes open and learn as you go. You're pretty much on your own now, but you are not all alone, because you have *familia*. Do you understand?"

I didn't know what to say. My mouth was dry. I was scared. My dad must've sensed my fear, because he reached out and put his thick workman's hand on my shoulder and patted me gently.

"A little fear is good," he said. "Nothing wrong for *un hombre* to be afraid. It helps keep the eyes and ears alert like a rabbit in the bush."

Tears came to my eyes.

"Good, go ahead and cry, *mijo*," he said. "Good men aren't afraid to cry. You are going to do very well. You are already very much *un hombre*. I've seen you handle a horse. I've seen you be kind and patient when we bring the steers from the corrals to this tree to slaughter them.

"I've also seen you work in the hot sun in the fields, as good and strong as any boy from *México*. You aren't afraid of work or sweat or shooting a steer right between the eyes so he never knows what hit him. It is the cowards in life who are afraid of taking on the full responsibility of death who make the cattle suffer, then make their own *familias* suffer, too. You are going to do good, *mijito*."

The tears now ran down my face. I took in a big breath and blew out. My Chevy truck didn't seem very important to me anymore. I could see that my vehicle and driver's license were coming to me at a much higher price tag than I'd ever imagined.

"Also," he said, "remember it is only in making mistakes, and big ones, that you learn to be a man. A man doesn't learn who he is and who he isn't by sitting around and talking. A man learns who he is and isn't by watching, thinking, then stepping into the bullring of life, and taking *la vida* by the horns!

"And a wise man," he added, "learns a lot about life's twists and turns from other's people's mistakes. No man has the time in one lifetime to make all the mistakes he needs to make in order to find out who he is and who he isn't. So, *mijito*, you keep your eyes peeled like the newborn chick and learn a lot through the experiences of your friends and relatives, and especially from your enemies. In fact, when it's all said and done, my mother always said that a wise man looks back on his life and sees that it was from his enemies that he learned the most.

"Now do you understand? Now are you beginning to see that this is every person's calling, not just for men, but women, too? And people who don't know who they are and who they aren't will leave a string of mistakes behind them like a cat in heat. It takes real guts and responsibility to go through these years that you're about to go through. The body and mind yearn for life. The confusion of love and mating is going on inside of you like at no other time. These are your crazy-*loco* years, so you got to be strong, *mijito*, and keep both eyes open, especially if you're a man. Because, as my mother always said, it is not the men who carry the child in their bodies for those nine months. It is the women. So men have no idea or understanding of what life is really all about. My mother always said if men were the ones who carried the child, our whole world would be different. Oh, she'd go on and on, asking me to just imagine how different the Church would be if the Pope was a woman." He stopped and took in a deep breath. "*Mijito*," he said, "your brother is gone. You are our only masculine child

left, so I say to you, step forth, *míjo*, and become *un hombre de los buenos*. A man who knows how to respect all life and protect his mother and sisters. Do you understand?"

I glanced up into the huge old pepper tree. The sunlight was filtering down between the limbs and leaves. A breeze picked up. I could smell the ocean in the distance. And I'd just thought that my dad had asked me to walk across the grass with him so he could talk to me about transmissions and oil changes and stuff like that. I took in another huge breath. This was really tough.

"Do you have any questions?" my dad asked.

I almost felt like laughing or just telling him to keep the truck. But I didn't. I really loved the truck I was getting. I'd picked out the turquoise color myself. It reminded me of all the stars I'd drawn as a little kid. Turquoise was still my favorite color.

"No," I said to my dad, "I really don't have any questions, except maybe one. How does a person know when . . . when they've made a mistake? I mean, sometimes I've been so, well, dumb in the past, that I didn't even know that what I'd done was a mistake until a long time later."

He smiled another great big smile. "*Mijo*," he said, "you've just hit the nail right on the head. This is a question that few people ever ask. And the people who don't ask this question are the fools who never learn from their mistakes, or from the mistakes of others. Always go to your heart, here inside, *mijo*," he said, patting me on my chest with his huge thick hand, "and you will have a much better chance of instantly seeing your mistakes, and then, also, finding a way of learning from them, too.

"It is the people who don't listen to their heart and are always listening to other people's opinions that end up with the most *problemas* in life. You listen to your heart, here inside, and trust yourself, and believe me, you will come up with things that at times seem like miracles. This is our power as human beings. This was the strength of

*mi mamá* during the Revolution with all that starvation and bloodshed. And this has been my strength, too. If I'd listened to people, I would've never purchased this ranch on which we live. It took guts for your mother and me to step forward and buy this big *rancho*.

"Pearl Harbor had just happened. All of California was trying to get away from the coast, because they thought that any day the Japanese were going to come and attack California, too. But your mother and I didn't run. No, like I've always told you, where there's fear, there's money to be made, especially when the other guy has got the fear and you don't. So we stepped in, took the bull by the horns, and your mother and I bought this ranch for \$20,000, with cattle and horses and barns and tractors and new orchards of lemons and oranges and avocados. One year later your mother and I sold one hundred feet by one hundred feet down by the ocean on the 101 highway for \$20,000 and the ranch was clear and free. I could never have done all that . . . if I'd listened to people, *capiche?*"

"Well, then, *papá*," I said, "are you telling me it wasn't just you who stepped forward to buy this ranch. It was you and *mamá?*"

"Exactly. I value your mother's opinion very much."

"Well, then, are you telling me that in the next few years I not only need to learn who I am and who I'm not, but I also need to learn how to choose the right woman for my wife like you did with *mamá?*"

He smiled the biggest smile I'd ever seen him smile, and took me into his arms, hugging me in a big *abrazo*. "You got it! To know how to *escoger*, how to choose the right woman for your wife is the most important thing any man can do in all of his life." He took in a huge breath and blew out. "The right woman can help make a man. The wrong woman can destroy a man. But – and this is a big but – before a man can choose

the right woman for himself, he must first know who he is and who he isn't. It is the people . . . who don't know who they are and who they aren't that never, never find the right mate. Marriage, understand, isn't for weaklings or . . . built to make you happy. Being happy is a person's own responsibility. Marriage is for building a home. So, *mijo*, you are a boy no more. You are *un hombre*, and getting ready to build your own *casa*."

I felt like saying, "Yeah, dad, this all sounds good. But what if I fail? What if I don't learn who I am and who I'm not in the next few years? Then what am I?" But I didn't say any of this and just kept still.

Seeing my silence, my dad laughed. "Don't worry," he said as if reading my mind, "believe me, if you don't learn who you are and who you aren't in the next few years, then life, *la vida*, will just keep bringing it up into your face until you learn!"

He continued laughing with *carcajadas*, great big belly laughs. But I didn't think this was funny in the least. My God, this was tough! And it wasn't like I could just do more push-ups and get stronger and in better shape to be a man. No, this I had to do from here, inside of my heart-*corazón*.

I took in another big breath, blew out, and looked up at the sunlight filtering down through the branches and leaves of the huge tree. The sunlight looked so soft and beautiful. Many a lazy afternoon had I spent alone under this old pepper tree when I was growing up, looking up into its twisted branches. It was easy to see that this tree had seen many storms and droughts in its life, and it also looked like much of its new luscious growth had sprouted up out of these broken, twisted places.

Maybe this was the answer. Maybe it was really okay for me to go out and make mistakes, and even big ones, like my dad had said and get broken and twisted. The breeze picked up, and the tree's branches began to dance. It felt like the pepper tree was talking to me, singing to me. I smiled and began to breathe more easily.

## CHAPTER TWO

Ben Weseloh called to say my truck had arrived. My dad said he'd drive me into town to pick it up. Pulling into the dealership, I instantly spotted my truck. It was the only solid turquoise pick-up on the whole lot. I rushed up and leaped into the bed of the truck. I couldn't believe it! It was even more gorgeous than I'd ever imagined. I jumped out, got into the driver's seat and started up the engine, a big V-8. I was careful not to gun it. The salesman, whom we'd known for years, had explained to me that there was a break-in period of five hundred miles before I could really goose it.

My dad paid Ben Weseloh for the truck in cash and went home. I headed for the beach. I met Dennis Tico by the Oceanside pier. I'd known him since grammar school when we'd both gone to Saint Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic School. Tico was really built and good-looking. He'd been voted the best-looking guy by the girls at Saint Mary's. I showed him my new truck and he really liked it, but I wasn't able to find Nick Rorick or Little Richard or John Folting or any of my other friends. Little Richard and

John Folting went to a private school, the Army Navy Academy in Carlsbad with me. Dennis and Nick and all of my other friends went to the Oceanside High School, where I wish I'd been able to go. But my brother Joseph had gone to the military school and liked it, so my dad and mom decided that I, too, should attend.

I cruised the strand along the beach about half a dozen times, waving at the guys and girls I knew, then headed over to Herb's drive-in across the 101 highway from the old cemetery to get a cherry Coke. I ordered a small one, because I was on the wrestling team at the Academy and had to keep my weight down. Our coach told us to chew ice if we got thirsty or hungry. At Herb's I met a lot of people I knew, and some really liked my new truck, but others, I couldn't believe it, made fun of its turquoise color.

I was just getting ready to leave the drive-in, when Little Richard drove up in his cherry red model-T roadster. Richard was about the coolest guy I knew. He had curly blonde hair and was small and wiry and very strong and athletic. A beautiful girl was sitting right next to him. People said that he looked a lot like Steve McQueen, except better looking. Little Richard and big Ted Bourland, who towered over everyone, were the only non-Mexicans I knew who were tough enough to work with me and the Mexican workers on the ranch. No one, but no one, knew how much guts and strength it took to work in the hot sun out in the fields, until they'd actually done it.

"Is that your new truck?" asked Little Richard.

"Yeah, this is it," I said, proudly. For two years I'd been working and saving my money to buy a pick-up. I'd wanted to buy my own vehicle, as my friends had done. But, then, a few months ago my dad had taken me down to Weseloh's and told me that he and my mother had talked it over and they wanted to buy me a new car, the way they'd done with my older sister Tencha. Seeing the turquoise colored pick-up in the brochure, my heart had leaped with excitement, and I'd said yes to my parent's offer.

Little Richard started laughing. He, like my other friends, had worked for years to buy his vehicle. "But why didn't you get it in a real color, like black, or forest green, or cherry red? Nobody drives around in a turquoise-colored truck!" he added, still laughing.

The girl next to him started laughing, too. Several people came around. Most of the local guys who went to the Academy were ostracized by the town kids, but Little Richard was real popular all over town, even though he went there.

"How long have you had it?" asked Little Richard.

"Not long. Maybe an hour," I said.

"Well, then, maybe you can still take it back and get yourself a real truck."

Little Richard was a good friend of mine, so I didn't know what to think or say. Everyone was now grinning and laughing at me. My mouth was as dry as cotton balls. I felt like was I going to cry, but I didn't want to in front of everyone.

"Bye," I said. "Good to see you, Richard, but I got to get back to the ranch. It's just about feeding time."

"Sorry if I hurt your feelings," he said as I was leaving. "But really, you can't go around in a turquoise truck without expecting people to laugh at you."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I said.

"See you around."

"Yeah, see you around," I said and I drove off.

By the time I passed through the front gates of our ranch, I felt so crushed that tears were running down my face. And there were my parents up ahead of me on their horses taking an afternoon ride alongside our lemon orchard. They looked so happy to see me driving in through our big white gates in my brand new turquoise Chevy. I didn't want to spoil their day, so I quickly wiped the tears from my face and tried my best to give them a great big smile.

Two days later I took my truck down to L.C. Settle's body shop and I asked L.C. to paint it black for me.

"But why?" said L.C. "This is a factory paint job and it's brand new and in good shape. I can't do a paint job as hot as the factory does, because when the factory does it, it's just the body. No motor or tires or windows to worry about."

I nodded. I understood what he was saying, but still I said, "Please, paint it. I need it black."

"Why black?"

"Well, not necessarily black," said. "Just any color different than this... this turquoise." I had to fight back my tears.

"How about white," he said. "Black is hard to keep clean and it gets real hot in the summer when you're working on the ranch."

"Okay, white then," I said.

"Does your dad know you're doing this?" he asked.

I started to lie and nod my head, but couldn't. I shook my head. "No, he doesn't," I said.

"Maybe you should talk to him first," said L.C.

I took a big breath. I'd known L.C. all of my life. He was a local cop who ran a body shop on the side.

"Sir," I said, "I really need to do this on ...on... my own. I'm sixteen, you see, and I need to start doing things without going to my dad all the time."

I took in another deep breath. I'd already decided what to do if L.C. wouldn't paint it without my dad's permission. I'd simply drive over to Carlsbad or even as far away as Vista and have it done somewhere else.

"Well, all right," said L.C., "putting it that way, I'll do it. But if your dad says anything, you tell him that I warned you. I hate to paint a vehicle that already has a good paint job on it. But you're a good kid and you must have your reasons. It'll cost you \$29. I'm not cheap. I do the best paint job in town. You can get a \$19 job done just down the street if that's what you want."

"I know you're good. That's why I came to you first, sir."

"And I appreciate that."

The next day I picked up my all white truck, and feeling really good, I drove into our local drive-in. Little Richard was there with a different girl at his side. The moment he saw me, he started laughing again.

"What in the hell did you do?" he yelled, walking up to me and my truck. "Trade in your new pick-up for a milk wagon?"

"No, I had it painted."

"You had it painted!" he shouted loud enough for everyone to hear. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know factory paint jobs are baked to the metal? You've ruined your truck. Now you can never trade it back in as a new truck."

I didn't even wait for the cherry Coke I'd ordered. I gunned my big V-8, peeling rubber, and drove home as fast as I could. At the gates I took the fork in the road that went up to the barn and I parked my Chevy with all the tractor equipment. I never wanted to see that truck again. Little Richard was right. It did look like a milk wagon. I'd ruined my beautiful turquoise Chevy truck. I'd been the biggest damn fool I knew to have listened to what people thought. I should have just listened to myself, down deep inside, just as my dad had told me to do. I began to cry. I'd failed. I'd really failed!

The following day I called a body shop in Carlsbad – too embarrassed to call L.C. – and asked them if a new paint job could be removed with paint remover. They asked what was under the paint job.

"A brand new factory paint job," I said.

"Is it a Chevy pick-up?"

The question startled me. "Yes," I said.

"Are you the Villaseñor kid?"

"What?"

"Aren't you the one who had L.C. paint your truck over a brand new paint job?" he asked, laughing. "I'm Ray Chávez. I knew your brother José before he went to that military school. He was a good guy. No, not too much can be done about removal. What you'll probably have to do is paint over it again. What color is it you'd like today?"

I felt devastated. Everyone knew about my stupid *pendejada*. "No, thanks," I said. "I was just wondering."

"Tell your dad and mom hello for me," he said.

"Okay," I said, "I'll tell them," and I hung up the phone.

My hands were trembling. What a stupid damn fool I was. I'd done exactly what my dad had told me not to. I'd listened to other people's opinions instead of listening to what I'd felt inside. I'd loved my turquoise Chevy and I'd ruined it. My dad and mother would never have purchased the ranch we lived on if they'd listened to what other people thought. Here I was only a couple of weeks into my sixteenth year and I was already the most confused, stupid person I knew on the face of the whole earth!