**THE FOURTH PERSPECTIVE
A C.J. Floyd Mystery
By Robert Greer
Book 5
*Excerpt***

They mockingly called her “Goat Head,” or “Pretty Babe,” or, dismissively, “the Guatemalan.” She was in truth from Nicaragua, and it would have been the height of flattery to describe her even in the most generous terms as pretty. She was noticeably disfigured, her appearance the result of the childhood onset of a develop- mental bone disease known as cherubism, a disorder that had robbed her of potential beauty, turned her squat and pumpkin- faced, and so altered and recontoured the bones in her face and jaws that her eyes were perpetually cast skyward as if forever searching for heaven.

Most of the obstacles she had encountered during her thirty-nine years—her cherubism, the childhood taunts, the loss of her parents, her struggle to raise a fatherless child, and growing up in the midst of revolution and civil unrest—had only made her stronger, more determined, more focused on rising above her assigned lot of a Central American peasant born to faceless migrant fruit-pickers, an anomalous, disfigured burden in the eyes of the world. Schooled by circuit riding American nuns, she’d largely beaten the odds, learning to speak impeccable English by the age of seven and becoming accomplished at math and music by the age of ten. Ever charming and deferential in spite of her handicaps, she was on the road to avoiding a life of poverty and toil by her eighteenth birthday. But at nineteen, after a year of college, she fell in love with a guerrilla freedom fighter, had a child, and found herself consumed by obstacles once again.

When her husband of thirteen years was killed, a casualty of persistent revolution, she reluctantly left her child with relatives and traveled by train to the United States by way of Mexico, hid- den inside the hopper of a rotary gondola car used for transport- ing coal. Still grieving and despondent, she rode for two days on a back corner of the coal car’s small iron sill between the gon- dola and the wheels of the train, knees folded, her feet against her buttocks, the lower half of her body dangling outside two feet above the rails as her muscles screamed in agony. Hanging on with her arms, she endured the train’s thundering starts and stops and dehumanizing jars as it made its way from Mexicali to Los Angeles, toward what she expected—no, demanded—to be a better life.

What she found in the City of Angels was a culture she was ill prepared for. The city’s streets teemed with tens of thousands of lost immigrant souls just like her. It was a land of desperate indentured hostages there to serve those who would use and abuse them. However, she found work and a place to live that was light years better than where she’d come from. Within two days of her arrival, Theresa Mesa Salas Del Mora was employed in the house- keeping service of a Century City hotel with a penchant for hir- ing and just as quickly firing a ready stream of illegal immigrants.

The job paid minimum wage, and the hours were graveyard and grueling, but Theresa stuck with her plan, enduring eight long months of physically demanding, often demeaning work, with only two days off. Always looking to better herself, she left that job for a better one, then discarded that job for another at a boutique hotel in the Wilshire district, followed by jobs at

European-style hotels in Beverly Hills and Bel Air. Eventually, laden with references that trumpeted her reputation as a tire- less worker, her honesty, and most of all her loyalty and humil- ity, she left Los Angeles and ventured east to the Rockies to serve as manager of housekeeping at a posh Park City, Utah, ski resort. From there she moved on to Colorado to take charge of a similar crew at a trendy Aspen getaway.

It had taken her six years to make her way to Aspen. She’d endured those difficult, long, and lonely years without the essence of her life, her now nineteen-year-old son. Finally, with a nest egg to fall back on, the woman whose coworkers in the City of Angels had once mockingly called her “Goat Head*,*” “the Guatemalan,” or “Pretty Babe,” uttering the names as if calling to a pet, took her biggest chance yet. She moved to Denver after being recruited in blatant big-business fashion by Howard Stafford, a man whose wealth was said to be difficult to measure even by those in the know, to oversee a service staff of eight who ran Stafford’s lush fifteen-acre compound. The compound comprised a twenty-thousand-square-foot main house and outbuildings that included her own residence; her salary would have made any MBA envious. Before accepting the position, she’d been told by envious acquaintances who knew the old-moneyed Denver land- scape that she would be working for an eccentric—a man who always sounded as if he had a high frontal cold; whose closets, TV cabinets, and kitchen pantry sported combination locks— an antisocial recluse who wore a newscaster’s ever-present painted- on smile and owned scores of identical silk shirts, alligator shoes, lizard-skin cowboy boots, and black gabardine trousers. Ignoring the possible downside and the advice of friends, she grabbed for her American dream. A month after signing on with Stafford, feeling secure and stable at last, she decided that it was time for her son, Luis, now two months shy of his twentieth birthday, to join her in America.

Luis Alejandro Del Mora arrived in Denver on a Mexicana Airlines flight, with all his papers in order and a newly minted student visa, on a crystal-clear, picture-perfect early-November afternoon, eight weeks to the day after his mother began working for Howard Stafford. Dressed in sandals and a peasant’s poncho, sporting a revolutionary-style Nicaraguan mountain highlands guerrilla’s straw hat, and carrying a backpack filled with two thirty- two-ounce bladders of wine, Luis walked arm in arm with his mother down a Denver International Airport concourse bustling with Americans. During Theresa’s six-year absence, Luis had been taught to despise all such people by the cousins of cousins and the friends of friends with whom he had lived. Luis had arrived on American soil not as a child seeking maternal reunion and comfort, as his mother envisioned, but as a young man soured by years of separation, embittered by a lost child’s disappoint- ment, and angry at having had to live in the underbelly of a Nicaraguan caste system underpinned by American capitalism. He was suspicious, agitated, insular, and independent.

“You’re in America now,” Theresa said, beaming as she stopped to wrap her arms around her only child. “You’re safe.”

Luis forced a half smile and squeezed his mother tightly as he watched the people around him scurry disjointedly in every direc- tion, aware that the place that had given his mother such hope and purpose could never do the same for him.

Within weeks of his arrival, Luis Del Mora was doing what he had learned to do best—what in six years of living with the cousins of cousins in Nicaragua he had been taught to do—steal.

In Nicaragua he had stolen cars and stereos, fruit and furniture, and carted away truckloads of computers and TVs. In America he would do the same. However, he wouldn’t steal the trivial tokens that Americans, fat with opulence, toyed with briefly and then discarded. His sights were set much higher, and thanks to his mother’s perseverance and position, he planned to extend his thievery to include the rare and priceless.

And so it began. On days when he was supposed to be attend- ing Denver’s Metro State College, he instead honed his skills as a thief—selling, fencing, and bartering stolen goods. Things went well enough that two months after his arrival, with his mother able to see only warmth, charm, and goodness in her son, Luis informed Theresa that he had secured a part-time job as a trans- lator’s aide at a Denver language school. With his nonexistent college courses and fabricated job that kept him far from the watchful eye of his mother, Luis began to lay the groundwork to steal from Howard Stafford—from a house filled with books and art objects that stretched back to the fourteenth century. Ulti- mately, Luis knew he would be able to cherry-pick gems that included rare books, ephemera, pottery, textiles, and art; he hoped that a reclusive pack-rat hoarder such as Stafford, steeped in his own eccentricities, might never even miss these things.

Luis started with a series of trial runs, stealing unimportant history books, railroad timetables, and what he took to be insig- nificant things that Stafford was unlikely to miss in a thirty- thousand-volume library before setting his sights on the real prizes in the Stafford kingdom. Starting small, he told himself, would give him the inspiration he needed to complete the gam- bit. With his run of the grounds and Theresa’s run of the house, it was easy to learn from the cooperative staff, and from a mother wearing blinders, what things in the hacienda were the most precious. His most significant moment came one day as he walked through the main house with his mother. They passed the door of the library, and Theresa told him that the room, with its mas- sive oak doors and fourteen-foot-high cross-beamed ceilings, was forbidden territory.

“The library is off limits,” she said as they walked by. “Even to me.” She grabbed Luis by the hand and pulled him with her toward the kitchen. That experience moved Luis to read up on Stafford—study the man who was his mother’s employer—infil- trate his thinking in order to find out what treasures he might have locked behind the massive oak library doors. It took some digging to ferret out the reclusive rich man’s passions, but Luis spent days combing through books, newspapers, and the Inter- net. In the end, he learned that what mattered most to the fifty- eight-year-old reclusive native Coloradan was to amass the world’s ultimate private collection of rare Western maps, vintage West- ern photographs, and books. With that knowledge in hand, five months after landing in America Luis Del Mora decided that the time for trial runs had passed, and the time for the serious busi- ness of stealing had arrived.

**CHAPTER 2**

The neon sign above the door to CJ Floyd’s recently opened twelve-hundred-square-foot South Broadway Antique Row store screamed in glowing red letters: *Ike’s Spot: Vintage Western Col- lectibles.* CJ had chosen the name to honor his deceased uncle, Ike Floyd, the man who had raised him, taught him right from wrong, loved and nurtured him while fighting his own lifelong battle with alcoholism. Ike had snatched CJ by the arm and thumped his “narrow ass” whenever his nephew had strayed from the straight and narrow.

Mavis Sundee, the lifelong drop of feminine sweetness in CJ’s hard-edged life, and fiancée of eight months, had suggested the name. When he’d asked her why, Mavis had emphasized the point with a palm slap: “For the same reason Mae’s Louisiana Kitchen isn’t called Mavis’s Place after me, or Willis Sundee’s after my father.” Aware that Mae’s, the landmark seventy-year-old Denver soul food restaurant and one of the three businesses that Mavis ran for her aging father, had been named for Mavis’s mother, a civil rights pioneer who had been born and bred in New Orleans, CJ had smiled and agreed.

Eight months earlier, after a brush with death in a remote New Mexico wilderness, CJ had stepped away from life as a bail bonds- man and bounty hunter, the only job he’d known since coming home from two naval tours of Vietnam. After the New Mexico ordeal, he was determined to open a vintage Western collectibles store on Denver’s famed Antique Row. He had worked the streets and sewer-rat haunts of Denver for more than thirty years, but that case had nearly claimed Mavis’s life, so after dispatching it and leaving his bail-bonding business in the capable hands of his Las Vegas–showgirl–sized partner, Flora Jean Benson, CJ was happy now to call himself a former bail bondsman.

 Flora Jean, a U.S. Marines intelligence sergeant during the Persian Gulf War, now operated Floyd & Benson’s Bail Bonds out of the first floor of the stately old Victorian building on Bail Bondsman’s Row that Ike had left CJ. CJ, who still lived upstairs in a converted four-room apartment, had sold Flora Jean the busi- ness and a partial interest in the building during a Christmas Eve title-document ritual. A month later, with a three-year lease and every dime he’d managed to scrape together, he’d invested in Ike’s. CJ was now an antiques dealer.

Business had been slow for the entire month of March, and CJ was having second thoughts about his career move, but Lenny McCabe, an aging hippie antiques dealer, and CJ’s land- lord, who operated the shop on the other side of the duplex CJ leased and was one of the few dealers who’d welcomed CJ onto the street with open arms, chalked up the lull in business to springtime in the Rockies. In pep talks to CJ, he’d claimed that people don’t like to part with their money during the time of slush and mud.

CJ wasn’t certain he could believe a man who braved Den- ver’s fluctuating springtime elements in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts, wore his hair in a ponytail down to his belt loops, and trudged around in flip-flops in the snow. But he had to trust some- one’s experience, and since Lenny, a ten-year resident of the Row, had gleefully leased him space and helped him move into it, CJ was willing to have some faith in him.

CJ had started amassing his collection of antiques, folk art, and Western memorabilia during his lonely preteen years, when his uncle’s drinking and erratic hours had forced CJ to find some- thing stable to immerse himself in. Although sports had served as a partial fix, the world of antiques and collectibles had been his permanent elixir.

His apartment was cluttered with coffee cans full of cat’s-eye marbles, and jumbos and steelies too. In the basement of the building he had stacks of mint-condition records—78s, 45s, and vintage LPs stored in tomato crates gathering dust. In his four- decade quest to collect, he had amassed hundreds of tobacco tins and inkwells from all over the world, along with maps in every size, color, and shape, maps whose pages folded and zipped and accordioned into place as they documented every place CJ had ever been and many more.

CJ’s collection of antique license plates said more about him than any other items in his collection. He had started that col- lection during his teenage years, when Ike’s drinking had reached its peak and street rods and low riders had taken the place of fam- ily in his life. The prides of his license-plate collection were his 1916 Alaska plate and a 1915 Denver municipal tag. Both had been fabricated using the long-abandoned process of overlaying porcelain onto iron. Although the collection was impressive, it remained incomplete, and Mavis, one of the few people who had ever seen the entire collection, suspected that, like CJ, it very likely would never be whole.

It was approaching twilight as CJ and Lenny McCabe stood near the back of Ike’s Spot behind a glass display case that housed the bulk of CJ’s lifelong collection of antique tobacco tins, shoot- ing the breeze and trying to guess the temperature as snow fell outside. Lenny was the first to see the customer walk in.

“You got business, CJ,” Lenny said, tugging his ponytail and giving CJ a go-for-broke grin.

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