

Finders Keepers



Roy Deering

THE ROADRUNNER PRESS
OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA



Chapter 1

Tomás Martinez adjusted his baseball cap and turned the corner toward the old Martin Five & Dime on West Main Street.

It was just after nine in the morning, but the temperature on the sign at the South Texas Bank of San Moreno already read ninety-two degrees. It was going to be a sizzler. Tomás patted his back pockets to make sure he still had his work gloves and flashlight. *Check. Check.* The job was going to be brutal enough what with the Texas heat and humidity without arriving ill prepared.

But if I finish by four o'clock, I'll be fifty dollars richer, and that will help mother.

Since his father had gone to prison six months ago, Tomás's mom had struggled to keep food on the table, but not from a lack of trying. Once again this morning she

Roy Deering

had been up long before dawn, on the way to her job as a housekeeper for the Days Inn out by the highway north of town. She was working twelve to fourteen hours a day to earn as much overtime as possible. It was hard on her, and hard on Tomás to see her doing it.

But what other choice do we have? Tomás shook his head. *No point in rehashing what can't be changed.*

He cupped his hands against the front window of the old store and peered inside. Dusty display shelves lay scattered about and chunks of insulation carpeted the floor like dirty pink snow. Mr. Martin had told him no one had been inside the store for more than five years, and he had warned Tomás he should be prepared to find rat nests among the debris.

Terrific. He hated rats.

He also had to hurry. If he didn't finish by four, he would not get paid. He turned the key in the lock and pushed open the old door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The musty stench of dirt and mildew was overpowering at first, but after a few minutes he was almost able to ignore the horrible smell. *Almost.* He heaved a heavy sigh, pulled on his work gloves, and began dragging trash out to the big blue dumpster in front of the building.

By the time the clock at the First Baptist Church chimed the noon hour, Tomás had cleared a path from the

Finders Keepers

front door to the main checkout counter of the old store. His face was covered with grime and his shirt was damp with sweat. The only good news was that so far no rat had shown itself.

He looked around. He was going to have to pick up the pace. Mr. Martin had made it very clear that if the building was not cleared out by day's end, Tomás would not be getting paid. *Wouldn't that be a drag—can't think of anything worse than working all day in a hot, smelly rat-infested building, except working all day in a hot, smelly rat-infested building for free!*

Tomás was excited about the prospect of making fifty dollars to help his mom, but he was also keeping an eye out for something for himself. Mr. Martin had told him he could keep anything he found in the old store. So far, other than a broken cash register and a few pieces of shelving he thought his mother might use, he hadn't found anything he wanted. But he hadn't given up hope.

Tomás knew the store's toy department had once been legendary among the children of San Moreno, though he himself had never been inside. Mr. Martin's father had opened the Five & Dime back in 1949, and everyone within fifty miles of town shopped there until the Walmart arrived out by the highway fifteen years ago. Old Mr. Martin finally closed the store, and within a year he was dead from a heart attack. *Looks like no one has been in here since the old man died.*

From the outside, the store still looked in pretty good shape, but inside the building was a disaster, a stinky, filthy

Roy Deering

disaster. Someone had vandalized the place about a year ago; Tomás knew Mr. Martin had publicly blamed the damage on “those Mexican kids.” It was possible whoever had vandalized the building was Hispanic, but Tomás also knew everything bad that happened in town was blamed on his people, even if they had nothing to do with it.

He poked behind the checkout counter where customers had once paid for their purchases. A thick layer of dust covered the counter’s surface, but luckily he didn’t see a lot of trash behind it to remove. He squeezed between the wall and the counter trying to make sure, catching his T-shirt on a nail in the process. He winced as he heard his sleeve tear.

Angry at putting a hole in his T-shirt, Tomás attacked the guilty nail with a scrap of metal. As he pried the nail loose, the paneling began to pull away from the wall, exposing a larger-than-expected empty space behind it. *That’s strange*—was Tomás’s first thought. His second thought made him shiver. *Perfect spot for a rat nest.*

He dropped the piece of metal and tried to push the faded brown paneling back into place. The panel would have none of it. It popped right back out as soon as Tomás let go. Tomás realized he had no choice—Mr. Martin would never pay him if the loose paneling were left behind. He grabbed the panel and pulled hard, ripping the rest of the four-foot section free from the studs. Nothing moved. Tomás breathed a sigh of relief.

With his fear of waking a nest of rats gone, at least for the moment, Tomás had to admit he found the hole

Finders Keepers

curious. It looked to be a dark crawl space about four feet high and three feet wide. It extended back several feet into the dark.

Tomás grabbed his flashlight off the counter and shined it into the bowels of the wall. The beam glanced off something. Tomás directed the light to that spot.

What was that by the back wall?

If his eyes weren't deceiving him, the dark recess held a stack of boxes wrapped in thick plastic, each box about two feet square and covered in a layer of dust.

Tomás now realized the hole was actually some kind of special storage place, like a safe but with only three sides and a top and bottom. The inside lining of the hole was hard, maybe concrete or plaster. As for the boxes, it looked like there were six of them—and they were just out of his reach.

Tomás did not even hesitate.

He dropped to his knees and crawled into the opening—all worries about rats or other varmints gone. Once inside, he pointed his flashlight at the box closest to him and wiped away a swath of the thick dust that covered it.

Using the beam of the flashlight, he made out the word "Topp's" through two layers of thick plastic wrap.

That's when he dropped the flashlight.