

CHAPTER 1

JULY 30TH

GUERRERO STATE, SOUTHWEST MEXICO

Fifty thousand US dollars, sealed in watertight stacks of \$100 bills, was peculiar baggage for a hike in the foothills of the Sierra Madre del Sur.

Cristo slowed his pace to a walk on the rain-slickened dirt footpath and shifted the weight of the backpack on his shoulders. The battered pack smelled of wet leather and the sweat of previous bearers. Birds sang high in the sparse, waxy trees and rustled in the thin, semi-arid underbrush. A brief, late-summer thunderstorm had resurrected the fragrance of soil and blue gum trees and sun-baked rocks.

He paused to breathe and to savor the wildness of this place, far from fluorescent-lit laboratories and Rolex-wearing clients. He'd played hide-and-seek in these mountains as a child. Thirty years ago he didn't know that the full name of his favorite tree was *Eucalyptus globulus*, or that its leaves synthesized glucose from air and sunlight. A college education had deepened his appreciation for this ecosystem. Coming to this place restored him.

Which is why he regularly offered to do this errand for his boss, even though it was a far cry from his real job at the Palacio Centro Medico.

The first few times Cristo made the exchange of backpacks, the couriers from the Zeta cartel counted every single bill. Now that the Zetas trusted him and Vargas, they randomly opened and counted only a couple of stacks of hundreds. It was faster to do it that way, and if they later discovered anything was wrong with the cash, they knew where to find Dr. Vargas. Manuel

Vargas's elite medical center was no secret. The private hospital was famous not only in the Acapulco area of Mexico, but around the world.

Sun broke through the clouds and Cristo felt steam rise from his quick-drying shirt. The meeting place was a few hundred meters ahead. He couldn't see it; tall trees blocked his view. But he knew every step of the winding path that led uphill and then down into one of the many valleys along this trail.

Being outdoors put him at ease. Perhaps too much at ease for this kind of business. He reminded himself to stay alert.

He smelled their cigarette smoke before he saw them. Two men sat on boulders in the narrow, concealed valley below. A third meandered along the trail, carrying a rifle. He recognized them as Zetas, the same ones who'd made the delivery last time. His shadow, lengthened by the early morning sun as he crested the hill, caught the seated men's attention. They stood up. One plucked a handgun from his belt and held it loosely against his belly. The other lifted a tattered pack identical to the one Cristo carried.

"*Buenos dias.*" Cristo unzipped his pack and showed them the money. In turn, they let him check the packets of white powder in their bag. He felt a pang of yearning when he touched the cool, pliable pouches.

He knew this powder. How it tasted. How it puffed dust into the air, the way flour does. He knew the best way to package it inside a capsule or dissolve it in solution. He knew how a little bit could smooth the rough edges of life. It was the Palacio's special house narcotic. Everyone called it *plack*.

Vargas claimed *plack* wasn't as addictive as morphine, so it was his painkiller of choice for patients after surgery. He said eventually the drug would be legal in both Mexico and the United States, once the ponderous regulatory agencies finally got around to approving it. In the meantime, the Palacio Centro Medico had clients who needed *plack*, and Dr. Vargas wasn't the type to wait around for permission from some bureaucrat.

"*Bueno?*" said the Zeta.

"*Si,*" Cristo replied. He reached forward to trade packs with the courier.

A sharp *crack* and its echoes shattered the morning calm. Startled, Cristo jerked back. Two meters away, the rifle-toting guard toppled to the ground. Wet drops sprayed Cristo's bare arm. Blood.

Rapid repeated rounds followed. Chips of stone splintered from a nearby boulder. The courier dove for cover behind a rock. He nudged his weapon

over the top and returned fire. The third Zeta sprinted into the scrub. Cristo glanced up the hill he'd just descended and saw movement. Three men. Not Zetas.

Adrenaline kicked in. Blood surged through his arteries.

Move!

He swung the moneybag over his shoulder and ran.

Voices shouted behind him. Who called? What did they say? It didn't matter.

Get to the next valley. Get out of sight. Out of the line of fire.

Something snagged his backpack, yanking him to the left. He stumbled and his palm struck the dirt. He wriggled out of the shoulder strap and saw a hole in the pack. The tug he'd felt was the impact of a bullet. It had struck just off-center enough to miss his body. He cast the bag aside. Maybe the attackers would pick up the money and let him flee into the wilderness alone. A kilo or two lighter, he covered ground faster.

He reached the rim of the valley and glanced back. The Zeta who'd sheltered behind the rock was down on one knee on the trail. Three men surrounded him. One of them lashed out with a kick. The Zeta's head hit the ground. An attacker pressed a foot into the drug dealer's back and aimed a pistol at his head. With a loud report, he scattered the man's brains across the dirt.

Cristo choked and ran like an Olympian, holding nothing back. Terror masked any physical discomfort from the exertion. After seeing the gunmen, he knew the abandoned cash wouldn't save him. The killer was bald and bore a scalp tattoo so large Cristo had read it clearly. Two huge, Gothic capital letters: MS. The Mara Salvatrucha. The most ruthless, most violent gang in the western hemisphere. They would hunt him down and kill him. They didn't need a reason.

Running downhill into the next valley, he allowed his stride to lengthen dangerously. He prayed he wouldn't slip. For the moment, the MS boys couldn't see him. Could he outrun them, staying one slope ahead so they couldn't shoot him in the back?

But already his thighs were burning. He was a scientist, not an athlete or a thug. His pursuers looked like they were practically kids, ten years younger than he was. If his life depended on a flat-out chase, he was finished.

He flew by an unnatural tower of small stones next to the trail. A cairn. Decades ago, he and his friends explored up here, making piles like that one to mark their discoveries. Then he remembered. It had been a long time but he knew it was nearby. Could he find it?

He attained the lip of the next ridge just as the Mara Salvatruchas entered the valley behind. *Where? Where?*

There, at the low point of the canyon: an overgrowth of ferns.

The feathery fronds marked a stream that trickled out of the mountain. He sped to the ferns and plunged up hill, off the trail, following the water. Sucking air into his lungs to feed his overwrought muscles, he noticed a cool draft that stank like chicken coop mixed with moldy root cellar.

The stench of salvation.

He ducked deeper into the trees and didn't look back. The ferns thrived on the humidity near the stream. Their broad, green fronds concealed an old rockfall underneath. He scrambled over the uneven ground and twisted an ankle on a hidden rock. The entrance was close.

Another cairn peeked through the leaves. That had to be the place. Someone had marked the cave entrance. He knocked down the rock tower and spotted a fissure in the base of the mountain. The opening was two meters wide but less than half a meter high at its tallest point. If the MS weren't local—and he doubted they were, this was Zeta territory—they wouldn't know about the cave and they probably wouldn't see it in the shadow of all those ferns. Gulping one last breath of outside air, he extended his arms and forced his head and shoulders into the crevice.

It was a tight squeeze. If they found him now, they could fill him with bullets and leave him like a cork in a bottle. He crawled into the earth, hands grasping soft, wet mud. The crevice funneled into a tunnel and the sunlight dimmed. Odors he had whiffed outside now overwhelmed, a foul, dense, ripe miasma mixed with only a trace of fresh air.

Ever narrower and darker, the tunnel forced him to wriggle like a worm. His shoulders scraped an unyielding stone roof. Too wedged to look back at his feet, he guessed he was inside, his whole body swallowed by the mountain. So far, he hadn't been shot.

The earth muffled sounds from outside. No way to tell if the Mara Salvatruchas had seen him, if they were closing on the entrance to the cave.

He pressed forward into diminishing light. If he reached the chamber, his chance of survival would increase exponentially.

“Ooof.” Groping through total blackness, he struck his forehead on a low-hanging rock. Warm blood trickled down the side of his nose. To avoid more obstacles, he probed the invisible path ahead with one arm. Jagged rock above, wet clay below. He traveled a few more meters and the tunnel widened. He reached out, literally not seeing his hand in front of his face, and felt the floor slope sharply down.

The cave.

One more push and he slid down the slippery slope like a penguin on ice. On his belly, blind and accelerating head first, he lost control. Had he misremembered the height—

His face plowed into raw muck with a horrible stench. Bat guano. Piles and piles of it.

He lurched to his knees and dry heaved. The inside of his shirt was all he had to wipe the filth from his face. Stale air and total darkness made him dizzy. He listened. The uselessness of his eyes made his hearing more sensitive, but the only sounds were his breathing and a distant drip-drip of water. In the silence, his brain manufactured a ringing in his ears.

No sound of pursuit.

He relaxed a little. If the MS entered the tunnel, he would hear them. Unless they had flashlights, they'd be as handicapped as he was. And if they were waiting for him to come out, he could make them wait a very long time.

A faint whisper of sound and breeze attracted his attention. He spun his head around but saw nothing. The profound blackness affected more than his vision. He could feel it, like a woolliness inside his skull. Disoriented, he tried to recall the chamber's shape.

Something brushed his cheek and chittered softly.

Bats.

At this time of year? The cave was always bat-free in the summertime. In warm weather, the colony migrated north.

Already hunted and half-sick, he felt a new distress. His father always said a summer bat was a bad omen. Cristo was now a grown man, an educated man, and he didn't believe in omens. It wasn't his father's fortune-tell-

ing that filled him with dread when he pondered why the bats were here out of season.

What worried him was rabies.

Rabies affected animal behavior. A colony of bats infected with rabies might migrate at the wrong time or place. It could explain why the bats were here now.

He huddled in the sludge and covered his head with his arms. Because of the unique nature of his work at the Palacio, he had a fighting chance against the rabies virus. Against the Mara Salvatrucha, he had nothing.

Bats or no bats, I'm staying put.

Time passed. He started to shiver. Anxiety blossomed in his chest with every flap and squeak. His phone was lost with the backpack so it was impossible to tell how long he'd been in the cave. Minutes? Hours?

Be patient.

The year-round chill of the cave gradually vanquished his sweaty exertion. He shivered and his teeth chattered. Gingerly he stood up. If memory served, the chamber was big enough to move about, to get his blood moving. He stretched his arms and hopped in place.

He must have touched one of the bats. Or maybe they were startled by the movement which they could "see" even without light. He didn't know. The only certainty was he'd made a mistake.

What had been an occasional whisper of a wing exploded into a hurricane of flying mammals. Bat wings, fur, claws touched him everywhere at once. He recoiled but no direction was safe. The entire invisible space around him became thick with bats. He swatted at them, trying to keep his head in the clear. Bats scratched the skin on his arms and face. He whirled in place, losing all sense of direction. He was on his knees. His elbow struck a rock. He flailed in a black void, drowning in a sea of bats.

By chance he found the waist-high opening in the wall. He scrambled up and plunged into it on his belly. The swarm of flying mammals went with him. Pinned in the tunnel, he couldn't keep them off. Bats nipped his arms and bit his ankles. He kicked and crushed a bat against the roof of the tunnel. Then another. Warm wetness from the animals' bodies seeped into his sock. He gasped. Was the air getting fresher?

Bats swept past him. Yes—the tunnel was lightening. He could *see* the bats fly ahead. Towards the outside.

Recklessly he pushed forward and burst into blinding daylight.

On his hands and knees, Cristo dragged himself into the ferns at the mouth of the cave. Water trickled peacefully in the adjacent stream. He wavered in the hot air and bright sun, trying to open eyes adapted to total darkness. His stomach heaved with disgust as he scraped the mashed carcass of a bat off the front of his shirt.

“This one is a very big *murcielago*, eh? But he has no wings,” said a voice with the timbre of sandpaper.

Cristo’s heart skipped a beat. He was not alone. He lifted his head and blinked furiously, struggling to bring his vision into focus.

The unknown man chuckled savagely. “Maybe he’s a rat, not a bat. Good thing I brought a trap.” More voices laughed in agreement.

The cold steel of a gun barrel pressed against the back of Cristo’s head, forcing his gaze groundward. He thought about the rats he’d sacrificed at the lab and doubted his own death would be as humane.

“Rats can crawl. Crawl. This way.”

A kick landed on Cristo’s backside, encouraging him to move. Keeping his head down, he crawled painfully over the rockfall to the path.

He deeply regretted leaving the cave. The bat storm was horrifying but he could’ve survived. Men grabbed his arms and yanked them behind his back. His chest dropped to his knees as he sank back to sit on his heels. They handcuffed his wrists. The gun barrel stayed glued to his skull.

A pair of snakeskin boots entered his limited field of view. A worn leather backpack plopped into the dust between him and the boots, stirring a small cloud.

“Zetas are rats,” the voice said.

Cristo glimpsed the shadow of the speaker’s arm in motion. The gun was pulled away from his head. The man reached forward, grabbed Cristo’s chin, and lifted to face him.

Cristo glanced left and right. Not far off, he spied a helicopter. He was surrounded by at least seven or eight men. Gangsters. Several sported the elaborate three-color tattoos of Mara Salvatrucha on their faces and bald heads. All the men were armed.

He thought of his elderly mother, and how she would mourn for him.

The leader, in those snakeskin boots and a pair of jeans, let go of his chin. He was a hard, slender man, shorter than average, clean-shaven, with close-cropped black hair. He had no facial ink, only a modest mark on his left forearm. His age was indeterminate, fifties maybe, unless the gray hairs and furrowed skin were premature. Cristo guessed that the MS worked for his group, whatever that was, probably as hired thugs.

“You’re no Zeta,” the leader said. “Who are you?”

He saw no use in lying. In fact, his association with a powerful friend might be the key to getting out of this alive. “My name is Cristo Castillo. I work for Dr. Manual Vargas. Of the Palacio Centro Medico. He’s a good customer.” Hastily he added, “For anyone. We buy plack. For cash. No risk.”

His interrogator studied him and did not respond. Cristo swallowed hard.

The man took a step and turned his attention to something behind Cristo, to his left. Cristo heard a whimper, and looked.

One of the Zeta couriers, the only survivor, kneeled in the dirt. The center of his face was painted with blood, apparently streaming from a broken nose. Like Cristo’s, his hands were bound behind his back. Two men pointed rifles at him. His whole body trembled as the rival gang leader approached.

“Is this true?” the leader asked.

The Zeta wagged his head up and down and blubbered ‘yes.’

“A new client for Sinaloa?”

More blubbering. Despite fear for his own safety, Cristo pitied the courier. He sensed the tide was turning against this fellow.

The scratchy voice continued. “Because this is Sinaloa territory now. Zeta rats are...not welcome. Right boys?”

The gangsters shouted their assent, raised their arms, and fired bullets into the air. For a moment, Cristo shut his eyes.

When he opened them, a pistol had appeared in the leader’s hand. The man brandished it as he addressed his troops.

“Maybe he’s not a rat. Let’s find out.”

He gestured to one of his men. Cristo held his breath in terror as the man came toward him. But he did not lay a hand on him. Instead, he put on a work glove and picked up a half-dead bat that twitched, flightless, on the ground nearby.

The leader said, "I don't think a bat will bite a rat. Do you?"

The men laughed. The one holding the bat brought it close to the Zeta's face. The bat screeched a soft, high-pitched wail. The Zeta tried to pull his head away.

"Or, does a rat bite a bat?" the leader asked. He looked at his prisoner. "Which should we try? Who bites?"

The Zeta sobbed and pleaded and shook his head.

"Let him bite the head off the bat," the leader said. "I've always wanted to see that."

Horrified, Cristo watched the amusement in the leader's expression as his lackey pressed the bat head first toward the Zeta's mouth. The Zeta squirmed and twisted and moaned.

In a flash, the injured bat lashed out and bit the prisoner's lip. Startled, the gangster lost his grip on the animal. It hung there like a ghastly beard, mixing with the blood dripping from the courier's chin.

Then the gruesome sight exploded in gore. The Sinaloa boss had fired his weapon at point-blank range, executing his prisoner. The body tumbled to the ground.

He turned to Cristo. Cristo's back stiffened.

"Sinaloa knows of Vargas," the boss said. He tapped the backpack with his toe. "Sinaloa has something Vargas needs."

Desperate to justify his own existence, Cristo spoke up. "Vargas has much to offer. The Palacio is the finest hospital in Mexico. I can—"

"You can't. So shut up."

He shut up. The leader stowed his weapon into a shoulder holster and stroked his chin. "The Palacio..."

Was he pondering a deal? Cristo wondered, but he dared not open his mouth again.

The gangster ambled toward the corpse. The bullet had missed the bat, which flopped where it had fallen to earth. The man lifted his boot and stomped his heel on the creature, smashing what life remained. He crossed his arms and looked at the sky. Then he gestured to his men and strode swiftly toward the helicopter. Cristo dared to hope.

The leader's back was turned to Cristo as he walked away. He called out, "Tell your boss he will hear from Luis Angel de la Rosa."

Several gangsters trailed after de la Rosa and boarded the helicopter with him. The three Mara Salvatruchas who had originally arrived on foot and ambushed the plack deal, lingered. One approached Cristo with a sneer on his face. He raised his fist and Cristo braced for a blow. Instead, the man laughed scornfully, stepped behind Cristo and unlocked one of his hands. Cristo fought back tears of relief as the trio picked up the pack of money and walked away.

He put some distance between himself and the dead Zeta and sat against a rock, nervously fiddling with the handcuffs still locked to his right wrist. He lingered until the bat bites on his body had crusted over and the sun was low in the sky. Then hoping his tormenters were gone, he followed in their footsteps down the trail.