

Chapter One

When Mario Lopez returned to his hometown by the sea more than twenty years after the guerillas had taken it over, he felt as if he were walking into a dream of the past. As he strolled into the town square of Playa Negra, his memory flooded with pictures of growing up, of the last time he had seen his father, of walking those same streets as a teenager. The palm trees lining the brick walkways of the square looked several feet taller, and the fountain in the middle had gotten a good scrub-down, but the ancient *ceiba* tree that gave a generous shade during most of the day stood strong and majestic, just as he remembered. Mario came up to the corner in front of the Church of Saint Joseph and walked a few steps to the old stone building where the Fisherman's Coop Bank used to be. Then he stood there for a moment and recalled the last day he had spent in Playa Negra, the day when everything had changed in his life and his town.

The old stone building housed a big-name bank from the city now, with a shiny lobby and an ATM machine by the main entrance. When he approached the wrought-iron gate in front of the glass doors and touched the cold chiseled steel, he was transported to the day when he had delivered an urgent letter to Don Fernando, the bank manager, and set off the chain of events that later caused him such profound regret.

Now, after being gone for so long and having traveled so far, coming home was

bittersweet for Mario. He had paid too high a price in pursuit of an ideal of freedom in the United States that never came true, and he was tired of running. He was tired of maintaining eight aliases in five different states and moving his family endlessly from one city to the next. He wanted to come home again, to stay there and feel certain he would never have to leave again.

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The modern world arrived late in the town of Playa Negra, a small fishing village on the Pacific coast. By the turn of the millennium, cell phones and color televisions could be found in every home, yet despite the promises of countless politicians, a road to reach the town from the highlands had not been built. The only way in was by boat or on foot, on an ancient trail known as the Camino Real, and the few cars and motorcycles that rolled through the streets had been brought in by barge.

Mario Lopez, a tall young man with dark skin and broad shoulders, had recently graduated from high school and was making plans with his girlfriend to move to the city. He was looking forward to a new occupation, something other than the family business—a tough, often unwanted job that required brute physical strength and little intellect: he was a porter on the Camino Real, a trade that had been established in the days of the Spanish colonies and continued to thrive through countless generations, because of the road that had been promised for so long and never built. Mario had been doing this work since he was eleven years old. His father, Don Carlos, was the foreman of the porters.

That morning when Mario came to the Fisherman's Coop to bring a special delivery was like every other, except for the letter he was carrying, which came from the bank's head office in the city of San Andres. The manager read it quickly while one of the clerks signed off on it. Before Mario turned to leave, Don Fernando requested three porters to take him and some boxes

to Minas, the next town over. This was an unusual request, but it was Mario's responsibility, since he had returned to work full time, to take care of the mail and every odd job that came up throughout the day. He walked across the street to let his father know and then gathered the porters he would need from those standing nearby.

With a few minutes to spare, Mario decided to check in with his cousin about a money-making scheme they had going on the side. He jogged down the street toward the docks and took a left onto a promenade that ran alongside a black-sand beach and the Pacific Ocean beyond. In those days the street was lined with ice houses and boatyards and ended in a stone pier at the far end of the bay.

Among the noise and activity of more than fifty boats unloading fish from the first catch of the day, Mario found his cousin Felipe packing herring on the deck of a twenty-foot wooden boat with an outboard engine.

"Hey, Felipe. Are we still on for tonight? Were you able to get a boat?" Mario jumped onto the deck and lent his cousin a hand.

"Yes, but we need to make sure we bring it back in one piece. I borrowed it from Luis Cabas. His father doesn't know."

"That's great. You paid him, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. And compared to what we'll make tonight, it was nothing."

Together they closed a full sack of herring and heaved it onto the stone pier. Then Felipe opened another sack, lined it with plantain leaves, and threw in a bucket of crushed ice from a barrel.

Mario tossed in a handful of fish. "That's going to cut into our earnings," he said.

"I know, but it's worth it. We're going to make good money on this. And besides, I want

to move to the city too, eventually. It's going to be awful around here with you and Mercedes gone."

"You know you can come and visit any time."

"So have you guys set a date?"

"Yes, a month from now."

"Does her mother know?"

"Not yet."

"Good luck with that."

They filled one more sack, and then Mario said, "I have to get back. See you at seven."

He met the two porters he had hired in front of the bank, and when the clerk let them in, he asked them to wait near the back entrance. The three porters came in, the clerk looked nervous and was rushing around distractedly; he showed Mario to the manager's office and then returned to close up some boxes of documents.

"*Buenas*, Don Fernando," said Mario, knocking on the open door. "What is it we're carrying?"

The manager was stuffing sealed documents into a suitcase. The main safe was open and empty. He pointed to another, smaller safe that was closed and resting on the floor. "That, and six more boxes. Oh, and the suitcase."

A job of this size could have used an extra porter, but there was no time; they needed to leave quickly. Mario placed the safe and two boxes on the back of the first porter and helped him adjust their weight on his lifting belt. Then Mario hoisted the suitcase and four boxes onto his own back.

Outside in the alley, they waited for Don Fernando to mount the back of the third porter,

a ritual that had been performed for centuries, ever since the first slaves carried Spanish colonists on their backs up to the gold and silver mines in the highlands. The porter placed one knee on the ground to let the manager sit back-to-back with him on a wooden plank fastened to the lifting belt; then Mario assisted the porter back to his feet. The porter, Bernardo, was a short *mulatto*, an older man, and even though at first it seemed that his legs were going to snap under the weight, once he adjusted the leather strap over his head and pulled the weight up with his hands, he was able to walk steadily with quick, short steps.

The three porters walked from the alley onto First Street and headed toward the town square, where they joined a line of more than a hundred porters that stretched for over two blocks. The men all carried heavy burdens on their backs, mostly sacks of fish and produce but also parcels of all kinds, furniture, and home appliances. They reached the edge of town, then stepped onto the Camino Real.

Mario and his team picked up the communal pace of the group at the foot of the mountain, putting their feet in the same places as the porters before them and gripping the tree roots in the mud through their rubber galoshes. The path was lined with thick greenery and wildlife—three-toed sloths hanging from trees, hummingbirds darting across their path. They walked through ghostly forests draped with bearded moss, over high ridges and steep mountainsides, and as they climbed higher fog swept down from the highlands. The line of porters wound its way through a rich tapestry of sound from the birds and insects in the jungle, constantly present with its ebbs and flows, and the sweet smell of damp soil hung in the air.

At four thousand feet, after crossing a mountain pass, the porters reached the small town of Minas. They dropped their loads into assigned trucks parked in the town square. Mario's older brother Gustavo directed the loading of the trucks, which were all leaving for different towns in

the region, including the city of San Andres. Another brother, Raul, dropped off the mail and picked up letters and parcels bound for Playa Negra.

Mario and his team arrived late on account of their heavy loads and because Don Fernando had asked several times to stop, feeling sick from vertigo on the steep parts of the trail. As a result, the entire line of porters passed them by, going down, when they were just entering Minas, and they came into a nearly empty town square; the last truck heading to the city was just pulling away.

He couldn't miss the army truck unloading soldiers on the other side of the town square, and he suspected that the two incidents, the soldiers' arrival, and his job for Don Fernando might be connected. Guerilla activity had been rumored all over the region in recent days. He helped Don Fernando load the documents and the safe into a taxicab, he took payment for the job and ran back down the mountain to Playa Negra with the two porters, making a mental note as he set out to mention the truck full of soldiers to his father.

He arrived at the town square with only ten minutes to spare: the third run of the day would set out at eleven. His brothers assigned new loads to the porters and helped the fishermen unload sacks of fish and ice onto the sidewalk. Within minutes, the line of porters was ready to go back up the mountain.

"All porters, load up!" cried Gustavo.

Mario hoisted two sacks of fish onto his back and took his place at the end of the line.

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The heat and humidity that brought the town of Playa Negra to a standstill every afternoon was beginning to dissipate; the palm fronds that drooped tiredly were stirred by a gentle breeze and Mario remained fast asleep in a hammock in his room. He was woken by

Mercedes, his girlfriend, who had come looking for him when he didn't show up to meet her after she got out of work at the drugstore. She was still wearing her blue polo shirt from work, skinny jeans, and sneakers. Her silky black hair was tucked under a blue baseball cap that shaded her delicate face and a small bump was beginning to show under her shirt. She called out his name as she walked into the wooden home.

"Oh, no! Sorry, Merceditas, I overslept." Mercedes stood at the threshold and Mario quickly got up from his hammock, walked to a dresser and reached for a fresh tee shirt. "I have to go. I'm leading the last porter run." He leaned over and kissed her.

"It's all right, Mario. You don't have to rush out, there are still ten minutes left." Mario took a moment and relaxed.

"Thanks, *nená*. I was out until late last night with Felipe."

"So, how did it go?" They walked out of the room into a narrow hallway.

"Pretty good. We went out too far, though."

"Are you and Felipe going out again tonight?"

"That is the plan." A common space with several hammocks hanging from the rafters opened up before them.

"Hm. I was hoping you could come over to my place tonight."

"Don't worry, *nená*. I'll be making some good cash tonight. Then we'll have the rest of the week to ourselves."

Mario's mother, Doña Carmen, stood before a sink in the kitchen on the other side of the high deck—the house was raised on stilts. She had soft eyes and a pleasant smile, with long black hair braided down her back, and she wore a white skirt with a faded apron. "Well, hello there. I thought you were gone already, *mijo*."

“Hi, ma. Sorry, I overslept.”

“*Buenas tardes*, Doña Carmen,” said Mercedes with a timid smile.

“*Buenas tardes*, Merceditas.” Doña Carmen turned to Mario. “You’ve been going out to sea at night again. You need to be careful. Remember, you have Merceditas here to take care of now. And that little creature that’s coming, too.”

Mario took a leather belt and a folded rope from a peg on the wall. “It’s okay, ma. Felipe knows what he’s doing.”

“I don’t know. He may be the son of a fisherman, but he makes me wonder sometimes.”

Mario took Mercedes by the hand, and they said good-bye to Doña Carmen.

“I’m sorry we have so little time today, *nena*,” said Mario as they walked on the gravel street below.

“That’s okay. Soon we’ll be living together, so I don’t mind too much.”

Mario smiled. “I’m so looking forward to it. Just you, me, and this little guy.” He looked at her slightly round belly showing.

“How do you know it’s a boy?”

“I have a feeling.”

They walked over cobblestone streets into the colonial quarter. “Did you get a hold of your brother in San Andres?” Mercedes asked.

“I did. He said we’re welcome to stay at his house any time. It will be a little tight, but you’re okay with that, right?” They approached the town square.

“Oh, of course. That is such good news. Thank goodness! Hopefully it will only be for a couple of weeks until we find a place for ourselves.”

In the town square about thirty porters were gathering. Mario’s father, Don Carlos,

handed him the mailbag.

“Sorry I’m late, *padre*. I overslept.”

“That’s alright, Mario. Can you excuse us for a moment, Mercedes?” Don Carlos pulled Mario aside and asked him in a low voice, “Did you notice the folks from the Savings Bank leaving on the third run?”

“Not really. I was so busy trying to get back in time after dropping off Don Fernando.”

“Was there anything strange about that job? Why did he need two porters?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, father. I meant to tell you earlier. We left with a safe and a bunch of cash, and they had boxes of documents and receipts. It looked like they were clearing out of town. And then I saw soldiers up in Minas. I think we should report it.”

“Already did, *mijo*.”

“Do you think it has something to do with the guerillas?”

“I’m sure of it. But keep it under wraps, we don’t want people to panic.”

Gustavo called for the porters to get ready, and Mario came back to Mercedes.

“What was that all about?” she asked. “Sounded serious.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, *nena*. Just work stuff.”

Mercedes pulled out a colorful thread bracelet from her jean’s back pocket, she had been weaving it for days and wrapped it around Mario’s left wrist. He had accumulated many over time.

“All porters! Load Up!” Cried Don Carlos.

“Good luck tonight, Mario,” said Mercedes. “I love you.”

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Up in the rarified air of the Chunco highlands, skirting the peaks that loomed over Galeon

Bay and Playa Negra, a deployment of more than five hundred guerilla soldiers, armed and ready for battle, moved to their positions on a trail that cut through a wet tussock plain.

Under a misty rain at dusk, Comandante Once, a medical doctor by training and a veteran of the insurgent ranks for more than thirty years, ran past a line of soldiers moving along the trail, escorted by a radioman behind him and a personal guard in front. He was thin and wiry, a middle-aged man of medium height who possessed the gaze of a jaguar and covered his shoulder-length hair with a green canvas hat. He looked for his second-in-command as the troops came to a halt near a mountain pass. “Mocho! What’s the latest?”

“*Mi comandante*, I just checked with the fourth detachment on the southern trail. They’re in position to take the road to Buenavista and fall into town at your command. The third detachment will be in position at the Faro Point in about five minutes.”

“That’s fine.” The comandante looked behind him and saw the troops massing at the mountain pass. “We should keep things moving. What’s going on in Minas?”

“A platoon of soldiers was brought in this morning. The count is fifty-two. Most are positioned within the town limits.”

“What did they have, twenty-eight last night? I’m going to add one of my platoons to back you up—that will give you a four-to-one advantage. That’s two hundred and forty men to secure Minas; use them wisely. Adjust tactics as you approach, and remember: Minimum casualties, few bullets fired. These are not hostile towns.”

“*Si, mi comandante*. Should we come down with your platoon to Playa Negra or leave it in Minas?”

“You can leave them there. We have enough men for Playa Negra. Just come down with a security escort when you’re done.” The comandante drew Mocho aside, out of earshot from the

soldiers. “Now listen: I spoke with El Indio this morning, and he confirmed that all his labs and stash houses have been cleared. There should be none of his people around for the next five days. You know the reminder to your squad leads—no one, and I mean *no one*, takes a goddamn thing from those labs. If even a single coca leaf goes missing, you find out who did it and cut off their balls, you hear?”

“*Mi comandante*, you know you can count on me.”

“The last thing we need is for El Indio to sour on us. He’s letting us use his trails, and that’s a big advantage. Now get your men in position. Go.”

The comandante returned to the rearguard as the insurgent army continued their advance toward the towns of Minas and Playa Negra, moving as one, like a swarm of fire ants. As night descended, long lines of soldiers crawled on the hidden paths in the jungle and the coastal trails, ready to take control of the entire Chunco region with overwhelming force.

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