

CHAPTER ONE

THE TWO LISTS lay on the table, side by side, black ink on white paper.

The first set of names would be the easiest. Once a man was dead, he was dead.

It was the plans David Harris's boss had for the second set that would be more difficult.

"I want to see their faces," Javier Romero had ordered. "I want them to know what's happening to them. I want them to know why."

"It's risky," Harris argued at the time. "These aren't just normal people. They're professionals. One small error could have serious consequences."

"Then I suggest you make sure there are no errors."

In truth, the idea of bringing the men on the second list to Romero's hideaway excited Harris. It was a challenge, like the way things had been before the incident—as Romero referred to it—four years earlier. Back then, ridding his boss of his enemies had been an enjoyable weekly task. It was something Harris, as trusted advisor and head of security, had done very well, satisfying the occasional call of his mercenary roots.

But since the incident, there had been very little of that, only the promise of one last big project. As the kicker, Romero had promised him a healthy reward once the project was complete. Given the man's wealth and the dollars discussed, it had been more than enough reason for Harris to

stick around.

And now the time had finally come, the job that would allow him to get his hands dirty again, if only figuratively.

In another month, two at the most, he'd be gone from here, living his own life however the hell he wanted to, and never having to work for anyone again.

He picked up the second list. Seven names, two crossed out. They were already dead, not by Harris's hand or anyone associated with him or Romero, but by the nature of the work they did.

Unfortunate, but it still left the five.

He smiled.

This was going to be fun.

FOUR WEEKS LATER

CHAPTER TWO

NORTHEASTERN MEXICO

NATE'S PHONE RANG. "Yes?"

"It's going down now." The voice belonged to Kelvin Moore, the ops leader. The pause that followed lasted fifteen seconds. "All right, we're done. You're up, Mr. Quinn. We're clearing out now."

Nate started the van. "Any complications?"

"None." Moore hung up.

Nate shoved his phone into his pocket and dropped the van into gear. Since he'd taken over running his boss's business—temporarily or not was still to be determined—Nate had used Jonathan Quinn's name just to make things easier. Most clients only knew Quinn from his reputation, and had not met him in person, but it was that reputation that kept them calling, so it only made sense to continue utilizing it. Occasionally, Nate would run into a field op who knew Quinn, but so far, though there were a few raised eyebrows, there had yet to be any issues.

"Finally," Burke said, a sly smile pushing his cheek up on one side. He was the assistant Nate had been forced to hire for the job. Daeng, his de facto number two, had been called back to Asia on an emergency, and all the usual freelancers he would have hired to fill in were unavailable. Burke had been the suggestion of the job's broker, and guy named Pullman.

The termination site was a warehouse tucked into the foothills outside of Monterrey, Mexico. The drive from the staging point took four minutes. Per Nate's request, the ops team had left the gate open in the fence surrounding the building when they departed.

"Stick to the plan," Nate said, slowing the van as he drove onto the property. "No conversation. You need me, you get my attention some other way."

Burke waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah, yeah. I got it."

Nate pulled to a stop near the loading dock, and killed the engine. Out of habit, he tugged on his gloves to make sure they were snug on his hands, then nodded at Burke.

Staying inside the vehicle, they moved into the back. As they'd discussed ahead of time, Burke picked up the roll of black plastic sheeting while Nate donned the clean kit—a backpack with all the tools needed to do a proper job.

Nate grabbed the handle on the back door, but paused as he glanced at his temporary employee. "Ready?"

"Of course. Come on."

"Five minutes. No more."

"I know. I know. Let's get this started."

If Nate hadn't already decided this was going to be the only time Burke worked for him, the man's eagerness would have sealed the deal. Nate was a cleaner, and his was a cool, calm business, not something that should be considered exciting. That's when things were missed and mistakes were made.

Per the mission briefing, the building was supposedly secured only by an alarm system that the ops team had disarmed when they first arrived, but as his mentor Quinn always said, "What is supposed to be isn't always what is." A second, undetected alarm was not out of the question, or even security guards who might have hidden while the ops team did their thing.

Alert, Nate approached the door at the end of the loading dock. This, too, the ops team had left unlocked for them. Pushing it open a few inches, Nate moved his ear next to the gap and listened. Dead silence. With a nod to Burke, they

slipped inside.

The main warehouse area was a larger room filled with rows of neatly stacked boxes and crates. The overhead fluorescents were off, but a dozen scattered safety lights were still lit, giving the two of them more than enough illumination to find their way around.

The area they were interested in was a quarter of the way down the third aisle. Nate signaled for Burke to wait at the end, then headed quickly between the boxes alone, so he could make sure everything was as expected.

The body lay on three thick layers of cardboard in a nook created within the row of boxes. Nate had been the one who prepared the flooring the previous evening, putting plastic sheeting between the cardboard layers and the floor to prevent blood from leaking onto the concrete. He'd also installed the boxes at the back of the nook, none of which contained the liquid soap or paper plates the rest of the containers held. Instead, each had been filled with a lightweight material that was deceptively strong, and very adept at stopping projectiles. He did a quick scan and spotted the bullet hole in a box just off center, second from the bottom, and was confident the bullet would be inside.

As for the dead man, Nate had no prior knowledge of his identity, nor did he recognize him now. That was often the nature of the job. For whatever reason, someone had decided the man needed to be eliminated. Nate's only concern was getting the body out, and leaving behind no trace that anything happened.

He signaled Burke to join him.

The first thing they did was to roll up the body in the cardboard flooring, then package it all in a double layer of black plastic. It would be heavy to carry, but doable. They then set about pulling down Nate's wall of boxes, and dumping the material from inside onto another piece of sheeting. When Nate reached the box with the hole in it, he found the bullet resting comfortably in the fourth fold of the material.

The damaged box was added to the pile, but the others

they closed and left. In a day or two or maybe a week, someone might wonder why several boxes were empty, but that would be the only clue that something had gone on here.

They carried the discarded materials out to the van, then returned and did the same with the body.

“Piece of cake,” Burke said as they were driving away.

Nate gave him a noncommittal grunt. It *had* gone smoothly, and he had to admit Burke had done exactly as they had discussed ahead of time. They had even finished the removal with nearly half a minute to spare. That said, Burke still rubbed him the wrong way, and the guy’s chances at being rehired remained zero.

The next step was to make the body and the other items from the warehouse permanently disappear. After that, it would be straight to the airport and a flight back to L.A. that would get Nate home in the afternoon. He’d sleep in his own bed tonight, and then tomorrow Liz would arrive.

He started to smile, but stopped himself. He couldn’t think about Liz, not right now. She would only distract him.

Finish the job first, buddy. You can think about her once you get home.

The plan for the body was simple. There was a lot of empty space in this part of Mexico. Nate had chosen a quiet ravine about fifteen miles away from the warehouse. The previous afternoon, he and Burke had dug the grave. Once they dropped the body into it, Nate would cover it with a healthy amount of a chemical powder blend Quinn had developed, and he and Burke would fill the hole with dirt. The chemicals would eat away at the body. Within a day, most visible identifying marks would be gone. Within a week, pretty much any method used to try to figure out who the dead man had been would fail.

The sun was still a good half hour from rising, but the sky in the east was beginning to pale. It was going to be close, but Nate was hopeful they would be done by the time daylight peeked over the horizon.

He checked the odometer. Their turnoff was a mile and a half away. From there, it would be a two-mile ride along a

dry, flash-flood wash through a narrow valley.

Nate reached for a bottle of water next to his seat, but paused before he could grab it, his eyes focusing on a point in the distance.

What the hell?

At right about the point where they were supposed to leave the road, there were headlights of at least three cars parked on the side of the highway.

He slowed the van, wanting to give himself enough time to assess the situation before deciding whether it was something to worry about. The situation was not made easy by the brightening sky. It was screwing up his vision, making the ground and anything on it seem even darker than when the night had been in full control.

He checked the odometer again, and looked back at the headlights. No, they weren't close to where he wanted to turn off. They were parked at the exact spot.

Coincidences didn't exist. Not in a cleaner's world, anyway. Believing in them was a quick path to a short career. He had to assume the vehicles were trouble, which meant scratching his primary dump site.

He pulled the van to the side of the road, and killed the lights.

"What are you doing?" Burke asked.

"Not now."

"Something wrong?"

"I said not now."

Before the van could roll to a complete stop, Nate swung the wheel to the left, tapped the gas, and pulled a U-turn. Driving dark, he headed back the way they'd come, his mind switching gears to his backup plan.

"Hey, you going to tell me what's going on or not?" Burke asked.

Nate ignored the question as he flicked his eyes back and forth between the side mirror and the road ahead. If the cars had really been waiting for them, their occupants would be experiencing the same predawn vision issues Nate had been having, which, hopefully, would mean the last they'd seen of

his van had been when the headlight switched off. If that were the case, they'd grow concerned and send a car to check what happened. If, on the other hand, they were just there by chance, then the cars would remain where they were.

In twenty seconds, he had his answer. But it wasn't just one car racing down the road. It was all three.

Nate increased their speed.

"What the *hell* is going on?" Burke demanded.

In the mirror, Nate could see the cars slow as they approached the spot where he'd doused his lights. They paused there only seconds before accelerating again.

"We've got company," he said.

Burke twisted in his seat and looked into the mirror on his side. "Who?" He stared at the reflection for a moment. "Those cars back there? How do you know?"

"Because they were waiting at the turnoff."

"No way."

Nate said nothing.

"Probably just some kids," Burke suggested.

"Not kids."

"Who else could they be?"

"Trouble."

Nate pushed the van as fast as it could go, but knew it wasn't enough. At the moment, they had just over a mile's lead, and their lights were still off, but both those advantages would soon be wiped out by the faster cars and rising sun.

They had three or four miles, maybe, a few minutes at best, and then the others would be on them. Their only chance was to reach the outskirts of Monterrey, where they'd have some city to hide in. Roads, buildings, whatever they could find would be better than open countryside. It would be close, but maybe.

"What are we going to do?" Burke said.

"I'm going to drive, and you're going to shut the hell up."

Nate scanned the road ahead. Shapes were starting to appear out of the shadows that had covered the earth. Hills and trees and the still-distant city.

Too distant.

Come on. Just give me something.

Thirty seconds later, he spotted a sign about three quarters of a mile ahead. It was still too far away and too dark to read, but he'd seen its shape a dozen times before—a Pemex gas station sign.

Nate's mind skipped over contingency B *and* C, and went straight to D. Though minor details within contingency D varied from job to job, the nuts and bolts were the same: ditch vehicle, set it on fire, and run.

He checked the mirror again. The gap between the van and the other vehicles had closed to three quarters of a mile. Before he could move his gaze back to the road, a new light flashed in the mirror.

Son of a bitch.

Pulsating now on the roofs of all three cars were police lights.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PEMEX STATION was on the left. Just beyond it was a road that cut between the station and a row of cinderblock buildings that stretched along the highway for several hundred feet. If Nate could get the van behind those buildings without being seen, the cops might drive straight by and not realize their mistake for several minutes.

“Hold on tight,” he said.

Burke grabbed the back of his seat with one hand, and braced his other against the dash.

Now that the gas station was only a few seconds away, Nate had a much better idea of how it was laid out, and could see that instead of having to take a sharp turn onto the intersecting road between it and the other buildings, he could cut diagonally across the Pemex lot and whip behind the row of shops, all without having to touch his brakes.

He waited until the very last second, then yanked the wheel to the left. The van careened across the road, bouncing Nate and Burke in their seats as it hit the uneven asphalt surrounding the filling station. Keeping on as straight a line as possible, Nate aimed the van just to the right of the pumps, then off the curb on the other side.

“As soon as we stop, get out and run,” Nate said as he whipped the vehicle around the back of the first cinderblock building.

“Run? Where?”

“Anywhere. As far away as possible. I’ll contact you in a

few days.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nate could see Burke nod, but if the other man said anything, it was lost in the squeal of brakes as Nate brought the van to a halt.

“Go!” Nate yelled.

Burke fought with his seat belt for a second, then wrenched open his door and disappeared.

Nate jammed the transmission into Park, grabbed his clean kit, and moved quickly into the back. From the main section of the bag, he removed a can of lighter fluid and a box of matches. He doused both the wrapped body and the package of materials, and removed a match from the box.

Just as he was striking the head against the side of the container, he heard the siren. But it wasn't coming from the highway on the other side of the buildings like he'd hoped. It was quickly approaching the back of the van. Though it sounded like only a single car, it was still one too many.

His ploy hadn't worked.

Cursing under his breath, he threw the lit match onto the plastic covering the body. As the flames ignited, he raced up front, pulled the backpack over his shoulders, and exited through the same door Burke had used.

He kept the van between himself and the police car, and ran as fast as he could, but was sure it would only be a matter of seconds before they saw him. He spotted a break ahead between the buildings. Knowing it was his only chance, he ducked into the gap, and was relieved to see it went all the way to the front. He moved rapidly down the space, crouched down as he neared the end, and eased his head out for a look.

There was another police car, lights flashing, sitting across the entrance to the road that ran next to Pemex. Nate had to fight the urge to jerk his head back as he slowly rotated around and looked in the other direction. The third police car was stopped on the shoulder, about a hundred feet away, on his side of the highway.

He carefully drew his head back into the safety of the narrow alley.

Escaping via the front wasn't going to work, but neither

was returning the way he'd come. He was surrounded. Either he stayed where he was and waited for someone to find him, or...

He looked up.

The roof?

Did he really have a choice? The walls were too close together to effectively spider-walk to the top, but there was a pipe running up the side that looked like it might be secure enough to use as an impromptu ladder. He gave it a jerk, and decided it would hold.

Just as he started up, he heard footsteps. Close, no more than a dozen feet around the front corner, moving in his direction. No way he'd make the top before the person reached the passageway.

He had but one option. He scrambled upward as high as he dared, and wedged himself between the walls and moved as close to the front end of the gap as possible. There, he hung, ten feet up and two feet back from the corner.

The steps approached from the other side, and stopped. Several seconds passed, then the end of a gun and top of a police hat peeked around the corner below him.

That's right, Nate thought. Come on in for a look, but just keep your eyes down.

The man's gaze swung from one side to the other across the ground, and seemed to freeze on the spot at the base of the pipe.

Nate's footprints.

The cop moved all the way into the opening, and kneeled down for a better look. A moment passed, then he raised his head, his gaze continuing to move up toward the roof.

A split second before he would have seen Nate, the cleaner dropped from the sky like a stone.

The cop tried to raise a hand in front of his face, but Nate plowed into him feet first before he could, slamming the man to the ground.

Something popped along one of the cop's legs, a knee perhaps, or an ankle bent the wrong way. Whatever it was, the cop wasn't feeling it at the moment. He was out cold, thanks

to his head thudding hard against the ground.

“Lo siento,” Nate whispered, apologizing.

He grabbed the man’s gun, and checked the main street again. The two police cars were still there, but now that it was a little lighter, he could see both vehicles were empty. He scanned the buildings in case another cop might be working his way toward him, but there was no one.

Directly across the street was a small dirt field, and on the other side of it were several cinderblock homes. There were no fences around the properties, just more dirt and the occasional patch of grass or brush.

So, go for the roof or take the chance?

Hell, the roof was a chance, too. Perhaps even a bigger one, because he could easily get trapped there.

He glanced at the road again. Nothing.

Option two, then.

He slipped out of the gap, and scooted along the front of the building to his left, alert for any movement. Reaching the end without incident, he snuck a look around the corner, down another road that led back toward the rear of the buildings. There were two cops, fifty feet away. Each had a gun drawn, but their attention was focused in the other direction, as if they expected Nate to come barreling around the back.

Nate glanced toward the highway, intending to pick the best path across the field on the other side, but his gaze strayed to the nearby police car. It was vibrating, its engine idling.

Like coincidences, there was no such thing as luck. “Opportunity, yes,” Quinn had once said. “It’s up to you whether you take it or not. But no luck.”

Consider it taken, Nate thought as he moved silently over to the car and around to the driver’s side. He carefully lifted the handle, and eased the door open.

No yells. No one heading in his direction.

So far, so good.

Staying low, he slipped inside, and positioned his foot above the accelerator while grabbing the transmission lever with his right hand.

On three. One. Two.

The moment *three* passed through his head, he sat up, dropped the shift into Drive, and jammed the gas pedal to the floor. As the car jumped forward, he whipped the wheel around and pulled a quick U-turn so he would be heading toward the safety of the city.

The door was still partially open as he finished the turn, so he had no problems hearing the shouts of alarm. He reached out and pulled the door closed just as the crack of a gun echoed behind him, but wherever the bullet went, it didn't hit the car.

He checked his mirror in time to see the men run out onto the highway. They were small and getting smaller fast, but that didn't stop them from firing several more rounds in his direction. Again, none of the bullets hit their mark.

Then the road curved to the right, and the men dropped out of sight.

Nate knew it would only be moments before the other police cars took up chase. He needed to get off the highway and into an area where it would be next to impossible for them to find him.

The good news was that the city was starting to rear up around him. At the first major intersection he reached, he turned right, drove down four blocks, and made a quick left in front of oncoming traffic.

Two more turns, and he was confident there was no way the others would know where he was. A few minutes later, he pulled into an alleyway behind a clothing store and parked the car tight to the wall.

His gloved hands made doing a wipe down of the interior unnecessary, but he still did a check for any hair he might have left behind. Once he was sure the car was clean, he tossed the keys onto the dash so they'd be visible to anyone interested in taking a joy ride, and walked down the alley to the far street.

For the first time since things had gone sideways, he allowed a thought that had been pecking away at the back of his mind to come forward.

The police had been waiting *at* the turnoff for his dump site.

How had they found it? And how had they known what time to be there?

It seemed unlikely that someone had discovered the hole in the ground and reported it. But even if that were the case, the hole wasn't long and narrow like a grave. It was a five-foot-deep square. Odd, perhaps, and they might be curiosity about who had dug it, but jumping to the conclusion that it was criminal in nature was a giant leap.

There really was only one possibility. The cops had been tipped off.

But by whom? The only ones who knew about the pending death of the target were Pullman, the ops team, and Nate and Burke. Well, the client, too, of course, whoever that was. But he or she was unlikely to know any of the operation details. In fact, the only ones who knew about the dump site were Nate and Burke.

That son of a bitch sold me out.

As anger began to build in his chest, Nate fought it back down. He did not have time to worry about the whos and whys right now. What he had to worry about were the hows, as in how he'd get out of town. Given the gigantic fiasco the operation had become, there was no question Monterrey should already have been in his rear window.

Once he was safely away, the next thing he'd need to do was get in touch with Pullman so the broker could handle any damage control that needed to happen. Hopefully the fire in the van had taken care of the body. It wouldn't be the most satisfactory conclusion to the assignment, but the target *was* dead, and Nate had followed procedure, doing all he could to make identification of the body difficult.

Then, and only then, could he start thinking about Burke.

The closest entrance to the US from his current location was along the Texas border. There were several small crossings, but the busy one at Reynosa would be easiest. Busy was good. He could lose himself if he had to. And if anything looked screwy there, he could head east to Matamoros and

cross over into Brownsville. Worst case, he could continue over to the Gulf Coast and hire a fishing vessel and work his way north.

The one thing he couldn't do in a timely manner was walk the one hundred and forty miles from Monterrey to the border. But most of the traditional transportation options—planes, buses, rental cars—were out, too. Cops would be watching those. Even if they didn't know exactly what Nate looked like, if they'd been tipped off about the operation, they probably knew he was a *gringo*, too, and would question any Caucasian male traveling alone.

A taxi? Same problem. A quick warning broadcast over their radio, and suddenly the driver would start to wonder about his passenger. Nate could just steal a vehicle, but most of the cars he was passing looked like they'd be unlikely to make it halfway to the border before giving out.

At the end of the block, a delivery truck turned onto the street, grinded its gears for a moment, and drove right by Nate.

He smiled. That was the solution he was looking for.

There would be hundreds of trucks running between Monterrey and Reynosa, carrying goods bound for the US. If he could get to where the highway started—find the Mexican equivalent of a truck stop, perhaps—he should be able to bum a ride, or, even better, stow away and then hop out when the rig reached the border town.

He consulted a map of the city on this phone, walked four blocks over to a main road, and took a chance on flagging down a taxi for a short ride.

“La Condesa,” he told the driver. It was on the outskirts of the city, along the highway to Texas. “*Métele velocidad.*”

NATE WASTED NO time picking out his target. It was a tractor-trailer rig with license plates for both Mexico and Texas, parked in a big lot beside a Pemex station on the side of the road headed toward the border. The trailer was locked up, but there was an area behind the cab surrounded by metal partitions just wide enough for Nate to sit between if he drew

his legs up to his chest. It certainly wasn't the safest place to ride, but there were several things he could brace himself against, and as long as he didn't fall asleep or the driver didn't get into an accident, he'd be fine.

He went inside the store attached to the station and picked up some water, all the while keeping an eye out the window in case the driver returned. When he was done, he hung around the side of the building until the trucker finally showed up. As the man was doing a walk around his rig, Nate made his way over to the semi parked in the adjacent spot. He waited there, out of sight, until the driver started to climb into his cab.

As Nate heard the door open, he scooted out of his hiding spot, rushed into the space between the truck and the trailer, and took his self-assigned seat. The engine rumbled and the truck pulled out.

Nate was on his way toward Reynosa.

THE RIDE WAS hot and windy. Nate kept his head tucked down most of the time. With nothing else to occupy his mind, he allowed himself to go over the possibilities of why the job had gone wrong. No matter which scenario he considered, his thoughts always circled back to Burke. There was just no other solution.

His motivation?

Money?

It was the root of all evil, right? And the easiest answer. But even that brought a set of unknowns. Who had paid Burke for the information? And what was that person's motivation?

Was it a friend of the dead man? No, that wouldn't make sense. The person would have wanted to stop the operation from happening at all.

The police? Wouldn't they have been more interested in catching the ops team in the act of killing the target?

Neither choice satisfied Nate. But if not them, then who?

Nate wondered what Quinn would have thought, but immediately knew the answer. Quinn would have never taken the job in the first place.

Pullman hadn't been on Quinn's Preferred Clients list, and Quinn had reached a point in his career where if a job were offered by someone he didn't know, he would have just passed. Nate was not in the position to be as picky. So when the gig coincided with a hole in his schedule, he'd done some due diligence, and found out that Pullman was a mid-level fixer with a decent enough reputation. Nate had seen no reason to turn the job down. It was all experience, he'd told himself. The more he had, the better he would be.

If it was a unique experience he'd been going for—mission accomplished.

He checked his watch. They'd been on the road for almost an hour and a half. Another thirty minutes at most, and they'd be in Reynosa.

His backpack was sitting between his heels and his thighs. He unzipped the top, pulled out the nearly empty bottle of water, and downed the remaining liquid.

As he put the bottle back in his bag, the truck whined loudly, the driver downshifting and reducing speed. A hill, maybe, Nate thought. It certainly wouldn't be Reynosa yet. They hadn't been driving *that* fast.

The truck downshifted again, but the road remained level.

Nate took a cautious peek around the thin metal partition. On the passenger side were the dotted line that indicated the edge of the highway, and the scrub-covered, semi-desert plain. There were no hills or mountains anywhere he could see. He looked to his right. The car in the fast lane next to them was slowing, too, and behind it, he could see the front bumper of the trailing car.

Traffic. Great.

The truck's speed continued to decrease until Nate could have walked faster. Then, with a final hiss of its air brakes, the rig stopped completely.

Nate didn't like it one bit. By his estimation, they still had at least twenty miles left to go before they reached the border. He highly doubted traffic would be backed up this far south. An accident, then?

The truck's engine roared as the semi moved ahead a few feet before halting again.

Nate knew he needed to take a look and get a sense of what was going on. It would be a gamble, but he figured if he stayed low and leaned around the passenger side, there would be little chance someone would notice.

He snaked his head and shoulders around the lower end of the metal partition. He checked the side mirror first to make sure the driver couldn't see him, then looked down the road.

There were at least thirty vehicles ahead of them, inching forward at a mind-numbing crawl. Farther down the road, he could see a few flashing lights, but couldn't tell if they were from police cars or fire trucks or perhaps even an ambulance.

Though part of his mind was thinking that it might very well be an accident, his intuition was saying, *Get out of here.*

Again, the truck moved, this time traveling about a dozen feet. At the front of the jam, another truck also pulled forward, but it was able to keep going, having cleared whatever the problem was. Once it was out of the way, Nate could see three of the emergency vehicles.

There wasn't an ambulance among them. Not a fire truck, either.

Police cars only.

"A roadblock," he whispered to himself.

Even if the cops there weren't looking for *him*, given his unconventional seating arrangements, he would not go unnoticed.

He examined the side of the road. About thirty feet ahead, the highway crossed over a bridge that spanned shallow wash. The scrub grew tall along each bank, while scattered patches of bushes had sprung up down the middle.

It was a better opportunity than he could have hoped for.

He waited patiently as the truck continued to move foot by foot toward the bridge. When the cab finally reached it, Nate grabbed his bag, stepped onto the road, and dropped down into the gulch. Ducking under the bridge, he held his position as the truck and the next few cars behind it passed

by.

No one honked or shouted at him.

He was just starting to think he'd made it without being seen, when he heard a *whomp-whomp-whomp* approaching. Using the bridge to conceal his presence, he looked toward the sky and spotted a helicopter descending toward the road.

It was dark in color and large, and though there were no discernible markings, it looked distinctively official, not private. He crawled farther under the bridge, hoping they were just doing a flyover and he hadn't been spotted, but the rotors continued to increase in volume until their constant beating echoed through every inch of the semi-enclosed space.

Suddenly a voice crackled over a loudspeaker. "*El hombre que está abajo del puente, quédese en donde está. No intente correr, o le disparamos.*" The voice then switched to English. "Under the bridge. Do not run. You will be shot."

Even if Nate hadn't understood either language, the message was clear: He was screwed.

More orders were shouted over the speaker, telling the cars parked on the road to move out of the way so the helicopter could land.

Nate moved to the far side of the bridge. Beyond were twenty feet of open space, then a thick growth of shoulder-high scrub shooting up out of the soft sand.

The helicopter sounded like it was nearing the ground.

Now or never.

He sucked in a breath, then raced over to the brush and kept going. He wanted to look back, *had* to look back, but forced his eyes to stay forward.

Go, go, go!

He weaved back and forth through the scrub, trying to build up as much of a gap as possible between himself and the cops who would soon be chasing him, and searched for a place to hide.

Instinctively, he'd been counting off the seconds since he left the cover of the bridge. Thirty-seven turned out to be the magic number. That's when he heard shouts from back near

the bridge, and knew they had discovered he wasn't there anymore. Add a few more seconds for them to get organized, and he figured he had, at best, a forty-second lead. Not great, but not as bad as it could have been.

He came to a fork in the wash. To the left, the dry bed rose gently as it narrowed in width. Most likely, it went on for only another fifty feet or so before petering out. The fork to the right, though, continued as it had been.

Knowing the latter would be the direction they expected him to go, he chose the shallower route. Ten feet shy of where the wash disappeared, he found what he'd been looking for. A portion of the sidewall had been cut away by a recent storm, creating an overhang just large enough for him to fit into. If he could pull some dirt on top of him, or cause the overhang to collapse, they might never find him.

As he dropped to his knees and started to roll into the space, a loud roar raced overhead.

"Do not move! You are being covered, and you will be shot dead." The voice from the helicopter didn't even bother with Spanish this time.

To emphasize the point, a bullet slammed into the dirt three feet from Nate's head.

His mind raced, trying to come up with something else he could do. He'd made it this far; there *had* to be some other way out. But the pounding feet nearing his position forced him to realize all his options had been exhausted.

The job was over.