

FRIDAY, 7 MAY

A tight beam of morning sunlight arrowed through a pinhole in the tin roof and landed on Tavo's forehead. How many days since they'd taken him? Two? Three? Did it matter?

Waking and sleeping, consciousness and oblivion had become part of the same endless gray mass of pain. He rolled onto his back, choked out a sob as the open wounds burned against the filthy mattress. Even with the broken ribs and broken leg, it hurt less to lie on his side. There was no position—sitting, standing or prone—that didn't suck the breath out of him.

What had he told them? No idea; he couldn't remember half of what happened to him in the other room, just a blur of agony and shouting and screaming.

Voices outside the metal door, the only way in or out of this cinder-block cage. They were coming for him again. Tavo felt no fear or dread anymore; he just wanted it over. He'd wanted to die since they'd taken him, but they were too good at their work to kill him outright. He hoped they'd shoot him before they cut off his head.

Had they granted that mercy to Pilar and the children? He was certain they all were dead; that was just what the Zetas did. Once again he saw Pilar's head cheek-down on the gravel just feet from him at the vineyard.

If only... No, he'd done what he had to. Nestor had to go so Tavo could finally make changes that were long past due, build on his family's work, and push back against these Zeta monsters. He'd never much liked his older brother, certainly never loved him. Nestor had always taken all the air from the room wherever he was. Tavo never had anything Nestor hadn't had first, including Pilar, as it turned out. If he'd waited only a few days more, Nestor would be here or dead by Zeta hands.

Unless he belonged to them.

SOUTH

The door clanged open. Two *sicarios* plodded in—balaclavas on, wearing the gray tiger-stripe utilities the Zetas had adopted, geared up but no weapons—hailed him off the mattress (an explosion of pain), looped his arms around their necks and half-walked, half-dragged him into the next room. More cinder blocks, a switched-off spotlight, blood pooled on the concrete floor and splattered on the walls. A lot of it was his. The smell reminded him of the times he slaughtered pigs in his barn. His vineyard, his horses, the children, fiestas. A short trip out of his mind until they dumped him in the solid-oak armchair, then tied him down.

His tormentor Ramon tugged on his heavy rubber gloves at the back table. A couple commanders in battledress stood smoking. But there was someone new with the commanders, a big *rubio* in dark tactical pants and a white polo. A *gabacho*, maybe one of those military contractors who had had been showing up looking for “opportunities.”

The blond *gringo* followed Ramon to the chair. While he examined Tavo, he scratched at a long scar under his chin. Finally the *gringo* put his hands on his hips and said in slow but clear Spanish, “Villalobos, I have questions. The *comandante* will let me ask and Ramon will help you to talk. The *comandante* does this because he values relations with my country. *Comprende?*”

Tavo nodded once. It was all he could manage. This wasn’t a reprieve or even a break. This was another tour of Hell, now with a new *Americano* guide.