

Contents

<i>Chapter 1</i>	<i>Sommers</i>
<i>Chapter 2</i>	<i>Enrique</i>
<i>Chapter 3</i>	<i>Turbulence</i>
<i>Chapter 4</i>	<i>Kevin</i>
<i>Chapter 5</i>	<i>Celia</i>
<i>Chapter 6</i>	<i>Cargo</i>
<i>Chapter 7</i>	<i>Rebels</i>
<i>Chapter 8</i>	<i>Robbie</i>
<i>Chapter 9</i>	<i>Where's Lorenzo?</i>
<i>Chapter 10</i>	<i>Elena</i>
<i>Chapter 11</i>	<i>Last Call</i>
<i>Chapter 12</i>	<i>Cracking The Eggs</i>
<i>Chapter 13</i>	<i>Lupe</i>
<i>Chapter 14</i>	<i>Ramon</i>
<i>Chapter 15</i>	<i>Jorge</i>
<i>Chapter 16</i>	<i>The System</i>
<i>Chapter 17</i>	<i>The Mountain</i>
<i>Chapter 18</i>	<i>Hunting</i>
<i>Chapter 19</i>	<i>Survival Of The Fittest</i>
<i>Chapter 20</i>	<i>Texas</i>
<i>Chapter 21</i>	<i>Paradise</i>
<i>Chapter 22</i>	<i>Campfire</i>
<i>Chapter 23</i>	<i>Storms</i>
<i>Chapter 24</i>	<i>The Boar</i>
<i>Chapter 25</i>	<i>The Grand Morass</i>
<i>Chapter 26</i>	<i>Lieutenant Rosa</i>
<i>Chapter 27</i>	<i>The Race</i>
<i>Chapter 28</i>	<i>The Locket</i>
<i>Chapter 29</i>	<i>Go To Ground</i>
<i>Chapter 30</i>	<i>Choices</i>
<i>Chapter 31</i>	<i>Turning Tables</i>

<i>Chapter 32</i>	<i>Accusations</i>
<i>Chapter 33</i>	<i>Hide And Seek</i>
<i>Chapter 34</i>	<i>Ambushed</i>
<i>Chapter 35</i>	<i>Unfriendly Jungle</i>
<i>Chapter 36</i>	<i>Massacre</i>
<i>Chapter 37</i>	<i>Mama</i>
<i>Chapter 38</i>	<i>The Well</i>
<i>Chapter 39</i>	<i>The Chamber</i>
<i>Chapter 40</i>	<i>Passages</i>
<i>Chapter 41</i>	<i>The One</i>
<i>Chapter 42</i>	<i>Game Changer</i>
<i>Chapter 43</i>	<i>Greed</i>
<i>Chapter 44</i>	<i>Spared</i>
<i>Chapter 45</i>	<i>Broken Trail</i>
<i>Chapter 46</i>	<i>Salvation</i>
<i>Chapter 47</i>	<i>Wrong Guide</i>
<i>Chapter 48</i>	<i>A Chance</i>
<i>Chapter 49</i>	<i>Liar's Poker</i>
<i>Chapter 50</i>	<i>Pushing Pedals</i>
<i>Chapter 51</i>	<i>The Pilot</i>
<i>Chapter 52</i>	<i>Jungle Music</i>
<i>Chapter 53</i>	<i>Mules</i>
<i>Chapter 54</i>	<i>Keeping It Together</i>
<i>Chapter 55</i>	<i>Masks</i>
<i>Chapter 56</i>	<i>Violations</i>
<i>Chapter 57</i>	<i>Negotiations</i>
<i>Chapter 58</i>	<i>So Go The Spoils</i>
<i>Chapter 59</i>	<i>Tracks</i>
<i>Chapter 60</i>	<i>Coke Bottles</i>
<i>Chapter 61</i>	<i>Just Press Play</i>
<i>Chapter 62</i>	<i>Raging Legs</i>
<i>Chapter 63</i>	<i>Unfinished Business</i>

<i>Chapter 64</i>	<i>Big Dog Barks</i>
<i>Chapter 65</i>	<i>Simple Plan</i>
<i>Chapter 66</i>	<i>Necklace</i>
<i>Chapter 67</i>	<i>Pale Riders</i>
<i>Chapter 68</i>	<i>Treasure Lost</i>
<i>Chapter 69</i>	<i>The Apothecary</i>
<i>Chapter 70</i>	<i>Ghosts</i>
<i>Chapter 71</i>	<i>Maps</i>
<i>Chapter 72</i>	<i>Valley Of The Lost Souls</i>
<i>Chapter 73</i>	<i>Death Leads</i>
<i>Chapter 74</i>	<i>The Marapa</i>
<i>Chapter 75</i>	<i>Swimmers</i>
<i>Chapter 76</i>	<i>The Oath</i>
<i>Chapter 77</i>	<i>Found</i>
<i>Chapter 78</i>	<i>Tourists</i>
<i>Chapter 79</i>	<i>Doctor Sommers</i>
<i>Chapter 80</i>	<i>In Plain Sight</i>
<i>Epilogue</i>	



1

SOMMERS

Mountain biking at the Big Bear Ski Resort, high above the Los Angeles basin in the middle of summer, was like being on a different planet. The once crowded, manicured ski runs where virgin powder once lay were now unpatrolled, barren, mountain bike trails. An accountant, who was also an extreme sports enthusiast at the corporate offices, had realized a ski resort could run basically year round, hence, greater revenues and stronger balance sheets.

Chairlifts carried both bikes and bikers up to the top, where lodges that fed hundreds during the winter months, now worked with a skeleton staff, parading in bikinis and shorts. It was in sharp contrast to the congested, smoggy metropolitan area below, as it was pure up there, the air and water clean. The crisp blue sky canopied any danger for the rough and tumble adrenaline junkies the trails attracted, making for an exhilarating place to go, as it was supposed to be fun.

It probably wasn't fair. At least that's how Dr. Brad Sommers saw it in that glimpse of time and space that passed before he was forced to react. Of course "fair" wasn't one of his favorite words at the moment.

An athlete, the twenty-nine year old Sommers was riding hard, too hard, stressing the mountain bike to its limits, pointing down a narrow, winding chute. The gravel and sand rooster-tailed up from the trail as his rear, knobby tire found grooves and then hopped between them, inches from peril.

Sommers tightened the muscles in his strong arms, gingerly maintaining and sensing his precious balance... shifting, leaning. He was a good biker, instinctive, but it was almost futile, as this

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downhill ride was equivalent to gliding over shiny black ice, and going down or catching an edge here meant falling off the mountain. But Sommers didn't care about that. He was on a mission, trying to forget, cope maybe; with the odd hand fate had dealt him.

The phones kept ringing in his head and cryptic messages about appeal decisions, court dates and where his case was headed if he didn't respond bounced around in his brain like his tires skirting between the ruts for precious traction.

His case.

Those two words pierced him. He was being sued, embroiled in what he thought was a frivolous legal battle for just doing his job. Frivolous or not, a career, his career and professional life, was on the line for, of all things... helping.

He was a third year resident on the internal medicine fast track. Being a professional, a physician, now made him a target. Over analyzing, he thought it perverse to stay buried in books in dank libraries or labs, work double shifts in a thankless environment in order to find some light at the end of the tunnel, to ultimately become vulnerable and twist in the wind in this unique profession that ultimately saved lives.

But that was the system. His hand.

Sommers had paid his dues and kept paying them, spending a fortune garnered from different crap jobs, a small trust fund and many, many high interest student loans. So where was the light?

"Sommers," bellowed the beleaguered voice of his attorney, friend and novice mountain biker, David Wethers. He had heard the voice earlier, but kept riding, plunging down the trail... cerebral wheels racing. Seeing Wethers, overweight and whale-like, awkwardly wrestle the high-tech two-wheeler would have been comical on any other day, but Sommers had brought him to the ski resort to get away, to escape the turmoil that was crippling him, and perhaps find a solution.

Sommers twisted his bike into a perfect power slide and skidded to a halt. Moments later, the pudgy Wethers wobbled down the narrow trail. Upon spotting Sommers, he panicked and turned the bike into the hill, riding up a few feet before promptly

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falling over in a heap. Coughing up a lung full of dirt, he ripped off his helmet and wheezed for air.

"Why are you trying to kill me, Sommers?"

"The hill will do that without my help. Here, have some water."

Staggering up, Wethers almost lunged for the water. "Why did you bring me up here? How much farther to the bottom?"

"Three, maybe four--"

"MILES?"

"Yes, miles. You're on top of the world here. Look around. Enjoy it."

"Right," Wethers whined sarcastically, gulping more of the quenching fluid, a trickle dripping on his chin and shirt. "We need to talk."

"I didn't bring you here to--"

"Yes, you did." Wethers took on a serious tone. "The Medical Board isn't backing you."

"Bunch of hypocrites--"

"Be that as it may, your appeal, and how and when it's filed, is all you have. That is, if you still want to be a doctor in this country."

"Forget 'em. I didn't do anything wrong. Nothing!"

"Ethically and morally, no. Believe me; any attorney can put a defense together. But these guys have momentum. It's high profile. My suggestion is we cop to a lesser charge. Go the probation route and in, say, six months--"

"I'm not copping to anything. I did my job."

"And someone died." Wethers didn't like ramming the point home, but he knew his friend was in trouble, career trouble. A cautionary fine line needed to be delicately walked. "Look, it's not your fault it was a Senator's daughter. Wrong place, wrong time."

Sommers adjusted his chin strap. "I suppose her alcoholic, ex step-mom, whose blood alcohol was three times the legal limit, driving a hundred and five down Pacific Coast Highway into oncoming traffic was my fault too."

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“Sommers--”

“I’m not taking the fall. You didn’t see her face, Wethers. You didn’t see--” At a loss and disgusted, Sommers swung his bike around.

“Sommers... Sommers,” came Wethers’ pleas to no avail. “We have to file the appeal-- and I’d cancel your vacation--”

Wethers’ voice became an echo, as Sommers pedaled quickly away. The angry tires bit and spewed, and Sommers’ focused mind raced into another state, another time.

The police report read like a bad headline from a second rate newspaper. “Traveling at a high rate of speed, the singular car drove into the oncoming traffic lane and made no attempts to correct direction. The Mercedes clipped a swerving car head on; then was propelled upside down for approximately sixty feet, where a nine year old girl was thrown from said vehicle into the sand, sustaining fatal head, neck and spinal injuries. Female driver was killed instantly. Autopsy later found her to be intoxicated from alcohol and three different prescription sedatives.”

Sommers didn’t care about the bimbo driver or the gory details. If the old Senator wanted to shack-up with Bambi and party every day in Malibu, so be it. The problem, his problem, was when Bambi decided to take her act on the road.

In order to cover his sins, the Senator launched a full-out campaign against Sommers in particular and the medical profession in general, gaining sympathy mileage from his young and innocent, dead daughter. Sommers thought it diabolical how quickly the political spin machines went into action to save the politician’s fading career.

All Sommers wanted to do that day was bike to the beach through one of the traileed canyons that dot the Pacific Coast Highway landscape. It was late spring, everything was blooming and he had a new bike.

About a mile from the beach, he heard sirens and wailing horns. Continuing, he spied a plume of black smoke billowing above the trees. Reaching the highway, he encountered total chaos.

A fire truck was spraying an upside down, burning car. One occupant was obviously dead, still inside, hanging from the

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seatbelt. There was a group huddled on the sand seeming to give aid to another.

Sommers dropped his bike and serpentine through the makeshift police barriers shouting, "I'm a doctor; I'm a doctor." The exhausted firemen, though medically trained, were definitely relieved to see him.

Sommers went to work on the child's body, but could never get her to respond. The firemen watched, as he did all he could, but Sommers wouldn't quit. Not quitting doesn't carry much weight in legal briefs. Nothing was enough in Sommers' mind, as he repeated CPR, trying to breathe life back into the child.

Somehow through the trauma, she had an angelic face that was at peace, even though he pounded, massaged, willed and called upon everything he knew about medicine to revive her. After thirty-three minutes, the firemen pulled him off. He had lost himself on that beach in that half hour. He knew it wasn't his fault and so did everyone else, but in his mind... he had failed. The little girl was dead. The doctor was out.

Then it started. There was an investigation, accusations, proceedings, legal wrangling and the lawsuit, which threatened to break him financially and spiritually, and prevent him from ever practicing medicine. The grieving Senator wasn't backing down. He wanted someone to blame, a fall guy to deflect upon and rallied support from key people on the Medical Board. Their view was that, yes, it was a terrible tragedy and Bambi shouldn't have been driving. She was under psychological care, medicated and after all, a third year resident couldn't possibly know what he was doing, as he wasn't a fully licensed practitioner. Why should the Senator's pretty young friend be responsible? She was just out for a drive.

It was disgusting to him, as it was all muck and mire, shadows and mirrors within a cruel machine. But if Sommers didn't fight, he would be at its mercy... their mercy and his life, as he knew it, would be over.

He was so fed up at the machinations and the possible, unthinkable outcome that he withdrew into himself. He lived at the beach, hermit-like and there were evenings and mornings when he could be found sitting on his bike in the foot deep surf, gazing at the sea. Staring. Thinking... the grand morass.

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The mountain bike trail suddenly hair-pinned downward into a tight, grooved turn, propelling Sommers back into the moment. A simple maneuver of setting the back tire and shifting his weight would slide the speedy bike through the apex, and he would quickly emerge with quite a rush.

Sommers set his tire, but aimed the sleek machine into a flat area off the trail. Vegetation grew thicker here on an untouched part of the mountain, leading nowhere... cliffside.

Determined and balanced, he pedaled, gaining speed toward the edge... the end of the world. It was him now, no medical boards, schedules, lawsuits or lives. Sommers and the bike... flying.

The grass ended and the mineral geology of the cliff began. Gravel, rocks and surprisingly, no sound... Sommers and the bike.

There is a point of no return one reaches. Speed magnifies it and proximity defines it. Sommers passed it; then something went off inside him. Perhaps it was a subconscious voice or some primal instinct. Maybe it was the dead girl's face, her eyes opening, but somewhere, synapses fired... collided, changing his thoughts, causing him to drastically shift his weight and lay down his bike, hard.

Sommers wasn't ready to quit; to die.

The bike's back end whipped around and Sommers' body landed with a rifling, rolling thud, scraping flesh, banging bone. The bike fought to free itself from his grasp and Sommers released. His choice.

The beautiful, fiber composite machine flew gracefully off the cliff's edge into breezy space, soaring, spinning. He remembered it glistening, thinking it would make a great YouTube video. He lost sight of the bike, as it started its descent, disappearing over the edge.

Sommers' hands clawed the earth to stop his deadly momentum. Dust rammed into his mouth, eyes and nostrils, burning on every membrane. The pain meant he was alive, but was that good or bad? He didn't know.

Lying there alone, the reality of what transpired hit him. He was angry at life and himself. Ashamed. Now he was in the same place and circumstances, except he'd trashed and lost a two thousand dollar bike. He needed some stitches and would ache for days. He had no idea what he would tell Wethers.

2

ENRIQUE

The mountains on the eastern seaboard of Mexico are riddled with villages and small farms with families, who have struggled and barely survived for generations. The economy and government had always thwarted a middle class presence and the offspring who didn't escape to the cities have been doomed to a minimal existence, surviving not too far above hand-to-mouth. History has shown the Mexican poor that it's been a lose-lose situation without much incentive or upside.

In the poverty stricken, third world economies, barter and trade emerged as the grease that lubed the wheels of commerce. The Mexican Peso, extremely devalued and completely unstable because of the whims of a corrupt government, took a back seat to the almighty U.S. dollar. The Mexicans might dislike "gringos" but they love "greenbacks." Nature of the beast. Supply and demand. Reliability.

In a bartering economic system, rules and unwritten codes are established. Cartels are formed and the players are forced to heed them. On the flip side, in any financial universe, there's an unsavory element, playing both sides of the fence. Legal or not, everything is fair game, because ultimately, where the money is and who controls it, is all that matters.

Enrique Salerno, a burly fifty year old with strong features, was a known trader with ties to the government, black marketers, cartels, local militia and rebels. Mexico had morphed into a mule state, a transporter of contraband, whether it was goods, arms, people or drugs, on a river of greenbacks. If one could use the local players for services, one could develop an advantage in his business plan. Enrique knew this and wasn't shy about exploiting

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anything or anyone, as long as it benefited him. Conflict requires at least two opposing sides and Enrique could play them both.

Born in Mexico City, he was shuffled at an early age between relatives in the city and country. He had rebelled, joining the army, as soon as he was able. He then quit, as soon as he could, realizing there was no payoff being a lemming in the Mexican military. Instead, he turned his energies to learn the ins-and-outs of life. "Follow the money," was his mantra. It didn't matter what the deal was, as long as there was a profit in it for him and the risk fit the reward.

After he had pulled the trigger and tasted blood, Enrique soared into the big leagues of black market commerce. He was fearless and his "colleagues" knew and respected this. Enrique had come into his own, his way, and after three decades he was a force to be reckoned with.

Based near Vera Cruz, he had relationships with the local constables and a new faction spreading across the country, the loosely knit bands of rebels. Tired of the two-faced, corrupt government and relegated to a lower economic class, the rebels wanted their place, their moment in the sun to change things. On the surface, it sounded good, positive. In reality, it was violent and bloody, and there was a strong case that the rebel movement hindered any type of progress.

Enrique couldn't care less. If there was a way to do business, that fattened his wallet, he was in. If the rebels needed guns, he would deliver. If the militia needed information, he was there. The devil can play both sides of the fence; creating the illusion both sides needed him. Enrique was a master at this.

On this day, south of Vera Cruz in the foothills, it was raining. Weather was nothing when conducting business and Enrique's Range Rover had no difficulty maneuvering up a narrow, muddy pass.

He was on his way to meet with an acquaintance, whom in public was anonymous, but in private was a respected rebel leader. They had met numerous times before, for many different undertakings. Today was no different. There was a shipment to transport and a percentage to split. Business.

Enrique rounded a corner into a small village. He exited the Range Rover and walked into town. Twenty-five yards from his

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destination, he was joined by an escort and they guided him down the main road, past adobe type huts and a few tents.

Enrique wasn't surprised or afraid. Lupe Ferrar, the rebel leader, had his protectors and protocol. Everyone knew there wouldn't be any trouble. No one needed that.

Outside a pavilion type structure with no windows, Enrique was searched and then allowed to enter. Lupe had half a dozen men with him at a table. They were sipping beer and waiting on food. Lupe was glad to see Enrique.

"Hola, Amigo," erupted Lupe's greeting.

"Hola," Enrique responded, hugging Lupe and sitting close.

"You braved the unpredictable weather?"

"Of course. We have business, Lupe."

"Yes, business. A beer for Enrique," he snapped. "Always business with you. Can't you enjoy the rain, my friend?"

"Of course, but my time is money and I don't want to muddy my pants."

Lupe laughed, "So be it then."

"I was thinking of the meadow camp for the exchange."

"Yes, the facilities are adequate. What are we getting?" Lupe eagerly asked.

The food arrived and Enrique buttered a tortilla. "The usual goods, but a large shipment. My clients have also promised a bonus and I am assured it will be profitable."

Lupe smiled, relaxing. "All right then. How many men?"

"A dozen. Men that can move quickly on short notice."

"Of course, Enrique. And when will be the payoff?"

"Three, maybe four days. Sooner rather than later."

Lupe laughed at the remark and began eating, slathering beans on his tortilla. He had what he wanted, a commitment from someone he had done business with before. He believed the demons known were better than the ones unknown. To him, Enrique's word about business was enough. "We have a deal."

"Good," Enrique responded. "Then I think I would like some frijoles too."