

Prologue *Outside Tijuana, Mexico, 1991*

Dr. Juan Niera squinted through the microscope in his little lab. It was in the company's old corrugated aluminum building located in a clearing on the six-acre patch of hillside jungle outside Tijuana. While the area surrounding Tijuana was mostly arid, this hillside was particularly humid because it captured moisture from marine breezes that helped propagate jungle foliage.

The birds seemed to be squawking louder today, like chattering grandmothers, and their songs echoed across the open, divoted lawn. The steam on his window reduced the natural illumination for Juan, so he positioned a rusty gooseneck lamp on the wooden lab table, scarred with many cigarette burns and knife gouges. He adjusted the microscope's mirror.

Did my crazy idea finally work?

He looked again into the microscope. For months, Dr. Juan had tried to splice a small stem of the delicate plant onto an innocent flowering variety, all for the sake of achieving his boss's long-term plan: formulating a special new substance that could be used as a food additive and would increase the sales of many greedy American clients, especially those who sold Mexican food products.

After all, not many people realized that the stinging associated with the "bite" of salsa triggered pain receptors in the brain that prompted an increased release of endorphins pleasurable enough for people to easily get "hooked." So, what could be so wrong with Dr. Juan's research? Adding a mild "kick" to the salsa's natural effect would only make that effect greater and longer-lasting.

He ratcheted the microscope closer to his plant and saw at last what he'd hoped to. Not only had the splice taken, à la Luther Burbank, but Juan could now see that fuzzy pale green

hybrid seeds had begun to form.

“*Bueno!*” he called to no one. Juan would surely be rewarded for his discovery—that is, if he could scale up this finding to a production batch. He would plant these seeds and generate several plants, then whole crops of the hybrid plant!

Blam! The doctor looked up. Another blast had just rattled the window. It was Chico, using Juan’s remote control landmine device, clearing more ground for planting. Juan had invented the device while he was a demolition specialist in Vietnam. Back then, he never imagined that someday he’d be able to utilize his demo expertise at a company. Now, to plant more and more of these hybrid plants, the crew of five obedient *hermanos*, each not more than twenty-one years old, would have to clear new acreage with the device.

If the General rewarded him for his efforts, Juan, Clara, and little Adolpho would be able to move away from the shores of the bug-infested Tijuana River and away from the diseases that had taken his little Oscar’s life. And Juan would no longer need to live amid the poverty he had grown up with, the same poverty he had tried to escape by going to school in America. Adolpho would no longer sit on the bridge in town with his poor little friends, rattling his old jar and begging for coins from *touristas* before they spent all their money in the souvenir shops on *Avenue de Revolución*.

Maybe Dr. Juan could even escape his obligation to the General and start life anew in Guadalajara, where other companies would likely emerge if a new trade agreement was ever passed by the U.S. Congress. As he chewed on a shriveled coca leaf he had picked up from the table, Juan wondered, *Who can imagine what my discovery will lead to?*