

## ***Chapter 1***

### ***Chihuahuan Desert – Mexico- Texas***

**A**larico Damián Acosta sat in a 1994 Chevy pickup without air-conditioning. He stared east across the Rio Grande River at the State of Texas while desert sweat rolled down his back and soaked his thin shirt. The temperature on that late July afternoon rose to one hundred sixteen degrees in the shade and shade was non-existent. He had turned off Mexican Highway 2 onto the bleak, hostile Chihuahuan Desert sand, dodging cactus, the desert scrub, and a variety of desert creatures while driving east. Creeping to a point where he could see the river and the continuation of the desert on the American side, he stopped. At this point, the Rio Grande River flowed wide, swift, and dangerous. It looked ideal, and he grinned, pleased with himself.

Acosta had little money but hefty dreams. He grew up on the streets, alone and uncared for, stealing what he needed until a Mexican police officer caught him red-handed and used a hickory nightstick on his head. His employment skills were limited to manual labor, though he preferred illegal occupations as more to his liking. Therefore, he avoided work whenever possible leaving the more menial types of exertion to others. He preferred fast, easy cash whenever he could find it. Five years of his young life in a Mexican prison taught him to trust no one.

The truck itself was hot, ownership speaking, hotter than the outside air, though he doubted anyone would be looking very hard for it due to its age and condition. The paint was almost gone, and rust invaded the sheet metal in every corner.

Five years of incarceration had hardened Acosta while giving him plenty of time to think. It was during that prison stretch that he formed the idea. He had more than four of those years to perfect it, and his plan felt solid when he finished his sentence at age twenty-six. The only hitch was to find a suitable location. That mission took another six months of driving, exploring and hours of walking the banks of the river, sweating until his clothes were soaked through, checking and re-checking and discarding each possibility until this day.

Sitting in the pickup, ignoring the heat and the dampness of his clothes, Acosta smiled. Prison had made him crafty and withdrawn, but patient. His thoughts were his own, and he shared them with no one. The other inmates considered him a little touched in the head, and he did little to discourage the notion. After six months of beatings, verbal abuse and shower room exploitation, Acosta scored a new cellmate. He did not know it at the time but the big

man standing shackled hand and foot in front of his prison cell door would change his life, all for the good.

Pedro Ibarra was tall for a man with deep Hispanic ancestry. At near six feet, and weighing an unyielding two hundred and fifty-five pounds, every ounce was rock-hard muscle. Despite his size, Ibarra was good humored and easy going, up to a point. That point, reached for the first time when another prisoner tried messing with Acosta, forced Ibarra to put the aggressor in the infirmary for six weeks with a laundry list of injuries. After that day, Acosta did not have a problem.

Acosta was not used to someone sticking up for him, and later he asked, "Why did you do that, Pedro?"

They were in the prison cafeteria, and Ibarra chewed a mouthful of pinto beans and salt pork before answering. He looked at Acosta and said, "Because you are my friend, Alarico, no one messes with my friends." It was that simple and Acosta made sure Ibarra was close by anytime they were out of their cell.

While he studied the terrain around him, Acosta mused about his generous friend, still locked up, and would be for another three months. He planned to be there, outside the lockup on Ibarra's first free day. He wanted to watch the big man saunter through the sally port, liberated at last, and grinning wide. He had promised his friend *muchos dólares*, and all the *putas* he wanted in exchange for his help and protection beginning the day he left the prison.

Acosta knew he would need a *hombre grande* during his negotiations with the cartels. The local *jefe* was a man who had murdered his share and would not hesitate to add to the count. He would be difficult to deal with, and Acosta wanted insurance muscle on his side.

He shifted in the pickup seat, rearranging his soda cracker ass into a more comfortable position, and went through his plan one more time. It came to him years earlier, in the middle of a cold prison night. Starting as a small tunnel under the Rio Grande River, somewhere in a remote area, hidden on both ends, and secure from prying Border Patrol eyes, it grew and expanded into "The Plan."

Tunnels were not an original idea, and Acosta knew it. The cartels and other enterprising individuals had tunneled under the U.S.-Mexican common border for decades. They were mostly hand dug, dangerous, and cave-in prone. In every case, months of hand excavation, cave-in deaths, inadequate ventilation, and American Border Patrol detection, resulted in a concrete plug. Few saw completion and even less an ounce of drug trafficking. Acosta's prison library research told him all the problems. It was during these late night studies that he stumbled onto the answer.

Back in his cell, he woke Ibarra in the middle of the night, "*Pedro, mi amigo*, wake up!" he said poking the big man's arm.

"What?" Ibarra said.

“Wake up, *mi amigo*; I have a plan that will make us both rich. We will drown in *pesos* and *puta* inside of a year.”

“What silliness have you thought up now?” the big man mumbled, having been the sounding board for any number of his cellmate’s schemes.

“It is not silliness; *mi amigo*. I have researched it carefully, and it is foolproof.”

For the next couple of hours, they whispered together until Ibarra began to appreciate that his pipsqueak cellmate had stumbled on a nearly flawless system. Despite his initial skepticism, Ibarra realized that Acosta was right. They could move drugs in large quantities across the border at very little risk. All they needed was a buyer on the American side. “I know just the person,” Ibarra said, “my cousin who lives in Texas. He is an American citizen who already dabbles in drug trafficking. He is also very rich and can provide us money to purchase land on the Mexican Side.”

“What about the cartels? They could become a problem.”

“Shit, man, within a year we will be a cartel.”

Acosta grinned at his large friend. “I like the sound of that, *Pedro*.”

Long nights of whispered secretive planning filled the months that followed until Acosta’s release. Riches beyond their wildest dreams drove both men to their limits, and made them stand for morning roll call heavy-eyed, and sleep deprived. After a while, the guards noticed but could not catch them at anything. The rule against talking at night only applied if caught. They made certain they were not.

On the day of Acosta’s release, they sealed the agreement. Acosta would come to the prison and pick up his friend Pedro Ibarra and then they would put their plan into effect. In the interim, Acosta would search for a suitable spot to implement their arrangement.

Acosta watched his friend Ibarra walk through the *poterna* into the open air for the first time in fourteen years. He knew his large *amigo* had killed a man in a bar fight. The fact the other man started the brawl meant little to the Mexican court and after a thirty-minute trial Ibarra gained a long span of free meals along with steel barred and locked accommodations.

Acosta stepped out of his old pickup and shook his friend’s hand. “*Ha pasado mucho tiempo, amigo mio. Es bueno verte libre al fin.* It has been a long time, my friend. It is good to see you free at last.”

“*Si, mi buen amigo*, it is good to be out.”

“Ah, you have been practicing your English, which is good. We will speak in English when we are alone to improve your accent. It will be valuable when we begin our little enterprise. Come; throw your things in the back. First we must find a cantina and after a couple of cold ones, a *prostibulo*.”

“I think maybe both at the same time, *quizás tan?*”

“*Si, mi amigo*, I forget you have been away a long time.”

After three days of emptying every tequila bottle within reach, interrupted only by short periods of debauchery, the two men were hung-over, cash poor, and still friends. Acosta pointed his pickup north with a sleeping Ibarra riding shotgun. He was anxious to show his friend the properties he had found abutting each other across the Rio Grande River. It sliced the property into two parts, one on the Texas Side and the other in the state of *Chihuahua*, Mexico. He had gained ownership of the Mexican side quickly using the money supplied by Ibarra’s relative. The previous owner mistakenly believed he had cut a fat hog by selling the scrubland to a stupid young man.

The owner of the forty desolate, hot, and windswept acres across the Rio Grande River on the American side, however, was not as easy. Almost as crafty and more sophisticated in financial transactions, the Texas owner figured he had a sucker on the line.

The scruffy little Hispanic, who approached him with a buy offer, had bought two rounds of tequila for no reason. That alone put the man on instant alert. They talked about whores, women in general, and the merits of cold beer and good women, before moving on to business.

The man had inherited the forty-odd acres of Texas desert scrub from an uncle he had never met, a tract too small to farm or ranch on and too big for anything else. He could not afford the tax bill and was already five years in arrears. Cash strapped county officials were hot on acquiring the tract. He did not have much time to spare before the bureaucrats grabbed his property. The cantina negotiations had lasted another two hours and more tequila before he agreed to sign over the land deed in favor of forty thousand American dollars cash.

The next morning, with both men hung-over and sweating pure tequila, they met again. Acosta had a cashier’s check for the forty grand, and his drinking friend forked over the signed deed. Both men walked away believing they had screwed the other, which made it a satisfactory exchange.

“Ain’t it great!” Alarico Damián Acosta said. His enthusiasm was evident in his speech.

“*Si*,” Pedro Ibarra agreed. So, what do we do next?”

“We build two big metal buildings, one on each side of the river.”

“And then we directionally drill between them,” Ibarra said.

“You have learned well *mi amigo*; soon we will be rich.”

“I also looked up directional drilling in my spare time,” Ibarra said, his newfound knowledge not lost on his partner.

“Time well spent my friend, and what did you learn?”

“It requires some expertise, and expensive equipment.”

“True, it does.”

“I know such a person.”

Acosta was not surprised. His partner looked big, tough, and dull, but only the first two contained truth. Underneath that exterior mask, the man hid a little used near Mensa's brain. Ibarra played the dumb role to a fault, yet his cellmate suspected early on it that was a ploy, useful in prison, but unnecessary on the outside. “Of course you do,” he said.

“I also suggest we start small with the buildings, no more than ten foot ceilings and a conservative size, say thirty by twenty. That would keep the casual observer from suspecting anything. Better yet, we only build a metal building on the American side. We make it look like a loafing shed. On the Mexican side, we use old barn lumber to make it look like a starving rancher's barn. Old semi trailers or railroad containers will work for storage.”

Acosta looked carefully at his former cellmate, pleased that he had made the right choice. “I think those are great ideas, *mi amigo*, let us make it so.”

They started on the Mexican Side with a thirty-by-thirty building sided with salvaged and weathered barn boards that made the structure look like it had been there forever. Inside, it was modern in every way with heat, air conditioning, sewer, water, and a freshly poured six-inch concrete floor. From the river, it looked, old, abandoned, and forlorn.

On the American side, construction was less problematic. The thick brush along the shoreline masked their building of a conservatively sized metal structure with dimensions slightly larger at forty feet long and thirty wide. This building had bathroom facilities, office, and sleeping quarters to satisfy the OSHA requirements for migrant workers. It took six months to complete. Acosta also included were calving pens, crowding chutes and a branding area, none of which would see a bovine. It also had a ten foot by ten foot sized hole in the concrete floor, the purpose of which would come later.

“So how's this going to work?” Ibarra asked after six months of construction.

“Simple,” Acosta said aware that his large friend already knew. “We pull the packaged drugs through by turning the large wheel there.”

They were on the American side standing in the recently completed metal building. In the middle of the poured concrete floor, a formed out dirt area had an eight-inch blue PVC pipe sticking out of the floor at a twenty-degree angle. A quarter-inch wire rope fed down through the blue plastic pipe and exited at the barn structure on the Mexican side where it attached to a similar large wheel.

“Seems simple, how much do you think we can pull through in a day?” Ibarra asked, studying the mechanism.

"It'll be slower at first until we get going, but in sight of a couple of weeks I'll bet we average close to fifty to seventy kilos a day of the hard stuff. A little Mary Jane mixed in will cover expenses.

"Holy shit!" was all Ibarra could say when he mentally calculated the cash flow.

"Amen, brother," Acosta said, "even at wholesale prices, the cash flow is staggering. We are going to need some armed bodyguards on both sides."

"I know someone who would be perfect."

"Who would that be?"

"He's still in prison, but I bet some cash in the right places would get him out."

"Is he good?"

The best, he is an American citizen, a trained enforcer and one tough son-of-a-bitch."

"All good qualities," Acosta said.

"We are going to need mules on both sides, also."

"True, but we will have no border crossing problems, no walking mules, no hiding the stuff in cars crossing into the U.S. through Border Patrol stations. Our mules will drive in both countries without having to cross the border and losses should be minimal."

Acosta was not far from right. Inside of ninety days, they were taking in just under two hundred-thousand dollars a month and needed a vault to store it.

It did not take long for Tomas Fuentes, head of the local Los Lobo Cartel, to realize his drug receipts were declining. He had doubled his mule count, the peóns who carried his drugs across the border for distribution in the U.S., and found his buyers were no longer interested. For the last couple of months, the U.S. Border Patrol seemed to know exactly where his shipments would be and confiscated them all. Worse yet some shipments had never reached the border, the mules gunned down en masse, and the shipment stolen.

When his second in command entered the room and said, "I have bad news my leader, we have lost another load."

"And the mules..."

"All dead, not one survived."

While mules, the cartel name for conscripted carriers of illicit drugs across the border into the US, were expendable to an extent, losing the numbers that had occurred in the last month was unacceptable. The cartel boss exploded into a string of expletives at his chief of transportation, "God damn it, José, find those bastards and kill them all. These thefts must stop and stop now! If you do not do it, I will find someone who can, *comprender!*"

"*Si, mi lider,*" the man said and left.

The mules were a mixed lot and in a small way, José felt sympathy for them, but only a bit. He could not afford much empathy since many died during the trip or the American Border Patrol captured them.

Their only commonality was that they mostly spoke Spanish. Nationalities ranged from Mexican to Venezuelan and nearly every Central American country in between. Mixed in were a few Orientals, and some Middle European and an occasional Muslim. The Spanish-speaking mules were easy; they did as instructed with no qualms. Desperate to reach the U.S. where rumors abounded that work was available, they followed instructions. Many had young children with them in response to the new U.S. policy to allow illegals with children to remain in U.S. and evade deportation. It was inconvenient to keep changing mules, but the numbers increased exponentially which simplified recruiting. The Orientals were willing but had trouble understanding either Spanish or English. The Middle Europeans and the Muslims stuck to themselves and gazed upon the coyotes with a distain that bordered on hatred. In addition, they moved like snails. A mile into the trip one of the Muslims swore at him in Arabic, at least José assumed it was a swear word, and refused to pick up his load. José promptly shot him in the face with his old Model 1911 .45 caliber automatic and ended the rebellion. Everyone else moved. They left the body where it lay; bleeding into the Chihuahuan Desert sand knowing it would disappear before the new day. The advantage, José quickly discovered, was that the rest of the mules did not hesitate, walking the next few hours of the trip smartly.

At two-thirty in the afternoon, they were five miles short of the U.S –Mexico border. They stopped when a military armored vehicle with a fifty-caliber machine gun mounted in the truck bed appeared at the top of a dune a hundred yards away. José saw it and yelled at his comrades in the few seconds before gun noise reached his ears. It was the last thing he heard. Minutes later, a single man walked among the bodies and dispatched any wounded. He stopped at the prone figure of a young girl. He prodded her with the barrel of his AR-15. The girl yelped, and the man grabbed the back of her shirt pulling her upright and stared into frightened tear-filled eyes. She was young, not more than fourteen, with a small amount of blood on her blouse. She seemed able to walk, so he prodded her along among the prostrate bodies while he finished off the others. His work completed he walked back to the armored vehicle, dragging the young girl behind. He threw her into their ride and they sped away. Moments later a dead mule silence fell over the Chihuahuan Desert.