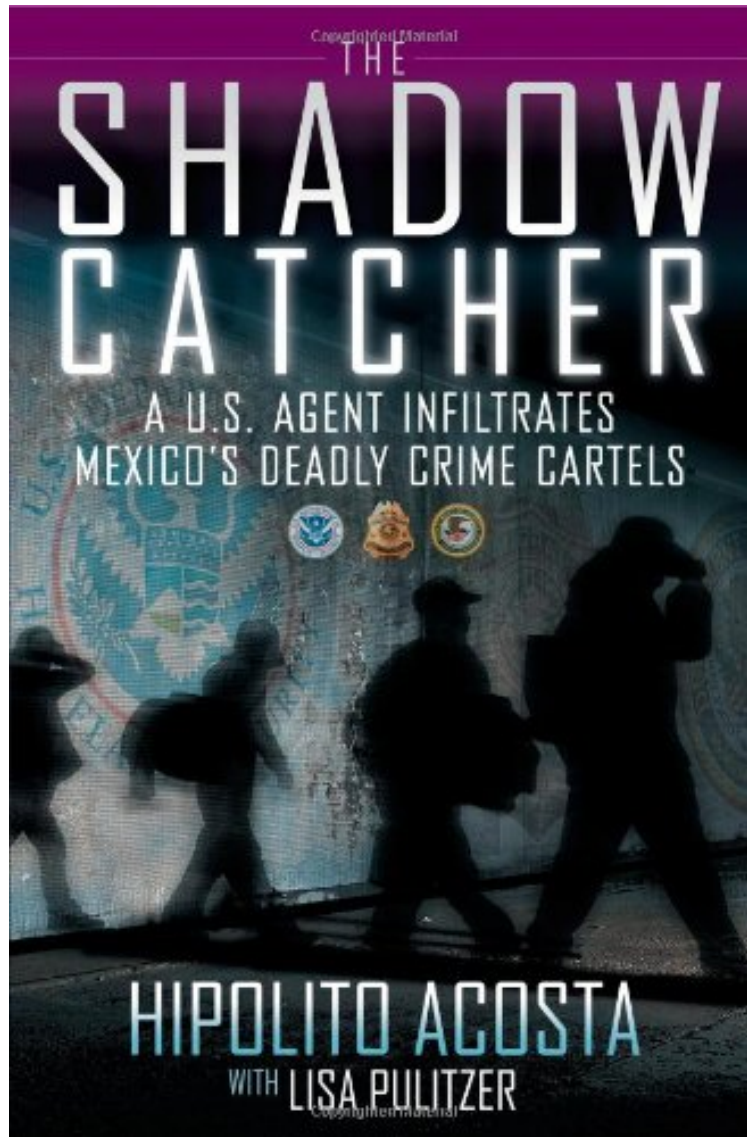


The Shadow Catcher: A U.S. Agent Infiltrates Mexico's Deadly Crime Cartels

Hipolito Acosta, Lisa Pulitzer
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Hipolito Acosta, Lisa Pulitzer : The Shadow Catcher: A U.S. Agent Infiltrates Mexico's Deadly Crime Cartels before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Shadow Catcher: A U.S. Agent Infiltrates Mexico's Deadly Crime Cartels:

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. All I can say is WOWBy D. J. SmithFirst of all I consider the

Author Hipolito Acosta a friend. I am also a retired Agent from the old INS, have spent nearly 27 years as a Border Patrol Agent and Special Agent. Mr. Acosta's book brought back many, many memories or cases I too had worked on. However, I never had the occasion to go undercover like he did and put my life at further risk. From start to finish I was almost unable to put the book down. His descriptions about how things worked in the old INS, how cases were run OR not run, was very very accurate. Only somebody who had been there and done it like him could relate to many of those situations. This book is very, very factual and accurate. There is no "sugar-coating" of anything in order to be more politically correct or to make it a better story. He pulled no punches when he talked about political in-fighting between the Border Patrol, INS Investigations and U.S. Customs. One of his best qualities as a writer, in my opinion, is that while he may have been the person going undercover, and in the greatest danger, he went to great lengths to praise and thank his partners who helped to back him up and keep him and others safe. Many people would have downplayed the parts of others, but not this author. Not only is Hipolito Acosta is a true hero as far as I am concerned for having done the things he did, he is a gentleman and a wonderful person too. In nearly 27 years I never met anybody like him. And now, he is a great author!

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. FANTASTIC BUT TRUE!!! By Christine
The book was kind of slow starting at the beginning, but as I read more, I was absolutely fascinated. Mr. Acosta is a man of unbelievable courage. Have to admit that I was disappointed in the fact that even though he endangered his life and the life of his family so greatly, that the people he arrested got off so easily. It "pains" me to think that the people responsible for properly handling these terrible criminals did not do their job and it is evident to me that they are still not doing their job. That is why there are so many illegals in the U.S. today. All of these problems with illegals should have been stopped properly. Yes, I feel sorry for the illegals, but their own country should be ashamed of not treating them properly - not us.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Great Read! By Lars Slate
I am only half way through the book but love it so far. Great stories and well written. Some brief history of the author and growing up which sets the story perfect unlike some books where there is 100 pages of the authors childhood and every little story in school, etc. This is not like that.

5 Stars all the way. Great Read!

In this gritty expos, a firsthand look inside U.S. undercover operations targeting the immigrant smuggling, counterfeiting, and drug rings of Mexico's dangerous mafia. Living under an assumed identity and risking his life were all in a day's work for U.S. Government Agent Hipolito Acosta. He worked regularly in high-stakes undercover operations infiltrating Mexico's murderous immigrant smuggling rings and drug cartels. Acosta's investigations are legendary, both inside law enforcement and the crime cartels he helped neutralize. He had himself smuggled from Mexico to Chicago with a truckload of poor immigrants; worked his way into the confidences of a gang of international counterfeiters; socialized with some of Mexico's most vicious drug lords; arrested a female smuggler by luring her across the U.S. border for an amorous rendezvous; and was the target of multiple murder plots by the criminals he put in jail. For three decades, Hipolito Acosta's work routinely made national headlines, and he quickly gained a reputation as a daring crime fighter who used his intelligence and audacity to stay one step ahead of those who would kill him if his cover were ever blown. Acosta's stories read like chapters from a page-turning crime novel, but *The Shadow Catcher* is more than a front-seat ride through the criminal underworld along the U.S./Mexico border. This heartbreaking expos goes beyond sensational headlines and medals of honor to divulge what an agent endures in order to ensure that U.S. law is enforced and to reveal the unseen human side of illegal immigration.

"Hipolito Acosta's world has been one of shadows and danger of a kind seldom seen or even imagined by the average American." --Hugh Aynesworth, *Washington Times*
A gut-wrenching law-enforcement yarn, simultaneously frightening and uplifting. Kirkus s"Acosta's account of his undercover activities is not only an exciting read but also a strong refutation of those who see illegal immigration as a victimless crime. He is a true American hero with a great story to tell." --Jeff Davidow, *Former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico*
"For much of its history, America's doors have been guarded by quiet heroes. Poli's story provides an unparalleled glimpse of their world from the front lines of the border wars. It was an honor to have seen his work in real time and to understand his work with the benefit of this book twenty years later. It is both timely and timeless in its lessons." --Former U.S. Attorney, Ira Raphaelson
"Acosta's rare glimpse into international organized crime from a federal undercover agents point of view reads like an action thriller jammed with shady characters and dreamers. Wheres the sequel?" --*El Paso Times*
"Hipolito gives an insightful look into a world in which few people are allowed to witness. His stories gives us an eye opening account of the harsh realities that many undocumented immigrants encounter while trying to reach the United States. " --Jose M. Hernandez, *Former NASA Astronaut*
"The *Shadow Catcher* is a page turner for our time. You will not think of the immigration the same after reading it." --Tony Diaz, author and founder of *Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say*
"An interesting and often gripping glimpse of the seamiest aspects of an ongoing problem that both the U.S. and Mexico must confront." --*Booklist*
"The *Shadow Catcher* is a heroic narrative in which you not only find yourself infiltrating the immigrant- smuggling rings side by side with Acosta, but you also operate deep undercover to capture the criminals." --*Texas Monthly*
About the Author
Hipolito Acosta is the most highly decorated officer in the history of the U.S. Immigration and Nationalization Service. The son of Mexican-American migrant workers, Acosta rose

through the ranks from Border Patrol Agent to a key position in the Department of Homeland Security. Acosta and his wife live in Texas. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER ONE Playing Pollo from Ciudad Juarez to Chicago

THE CHILL OF the river cut through my body like a jolt of electricity. The night was black and starless, and the water was creeping up to my neck. I felt like I was suffocating, the coldness of the water and air were sucking the breath out of me. My fear turned to panic as the current threatened to pull me under the surface. I was too far advanced into the river to turn back, and I was not close enough to the other bank to feel confident. Our slimy smuggling guide was moving effortlessly through the swift waters of the Rio Grande, but he did not bother to offer us encouragement. He had made this crossing many times. This was his livelihood. Behind us, closer to Ciudad Juarez, I spotted what seemed to be a separate group of mostly women and children. The younger ones were being carried on the shoulders of their elders. Everyone who made it this far was exhausted from days of traveling from Central America and other parts of Mexico to reach the Rio Grande. They were risking the lives of everyone in their families in the unforgiving currents. As many as four or five hundred people drown each year trying to cross the Rio Grande where it forms the border between Mexico and the United States, but many of the deaths are not officially reported or recorded. I was thinking of my young wife and sons in Chicago waiting for me to come home from this assignment, just as the immigrants behind me must have been thinking about family they had left behind. In our own ways, we all wanted the same thing. It was just that I was born and raised on the side of the river these people were willing to risk everything to reach. I had traveled to Ciudad Juarez five days earlier as an undercover U.S. government agent. My assignment was to infiltrate a human smuggling ring, the first time a mission like this was ever attempted by our agency. I had been forced to acknowledge that our effort in Chicago to capture and deport illegal immigrants was getting us absolutely nowhere, and I was determined to do something more proactive by going after the human smugglers at the starting points of their pipelines. One such staging area was La Rueda Bar, a crowded, smoke-filled, downtown Juarez lounge along a drag jam-packed with similar establishments, for block after block. It hadn't taken me long to find it. It was one of the primary contact points for smugglers and pollos in Juarez, according to my preliminary research. I was able to pick it out from the other drinking holes along the strip by its ugly, garish lime-green color and its trademark oversized wagon wheel hanging over the side entrance. The Mexican and American patrons loitering in the shade on the sidewalk outside were guzzling cold beers or tequila. Most were completely oblivious to the human transport wheeling-and-dealing in their midst. The city of Juarez, Mexico, is impoverished, dirty, and dangerous. It was settled in 1659 by Spanish explorers, but its population exploded in the 1970s, when streams of Mexico's migrants began arriving from all parts of the country with the hopes of finding employment at American-owned assembly plants, known as maquiladoras. These plants hired Mexican laborers to manufacture goods with American raw materials, trying to create a win-win situation for the unskilled Mexican laborers without necessitating border crossings. Despite the thousands of secure but low-paying jobs offered at the local plants, the vastly more lucrative trades of drugs, prostitution, and human smuggling attracted a ruthless criminal element to the town. Juarez was a hard-edged frontier town that was slowly drifting toward lawlessness. The town's nightlife was not suffering though. Americans crossed one of the three border controlled bridges from El Paso into Juarez for an evening of inexpensive fun on the Juarez Strip that contained more than fifty bars and nightclubs offering cheap drinks, dancing, dinner, and sex. La Rueda Bar was always a particularly popular destination. I had crossed into Juarez on two consecutive nights to stake out the location. Both times, the dive was buzzing, overflowing with locals, prostitutes in short skirts and their johns, and drunks at all levels of intoxication. I was disguised as a pollo, or chicken. A pollo is a person seeking passage into the United States illegally. They were called pollos because of the way they followed their smuggler like frightened chickens with their heads about to be removed. Many in the United States call them wetbacks, a derogatory term referencing their swim across the Rio Grande. Being Hispanic, my disguise wasn't much of a stretch. In my pre-mission investigation, I had gathered enough information from street-level informants back in Chicago, where I was based, to learn that La Rueda was a major clearinghouse for immigrant smuggling. As a pollo, I was the lowest creature on the human trafficking food chain. Other agents had posed as pollos before, but only in U.S. operations, and with backup. No agent had ever infiltrated a smuggling organization in Mexico, never mind alone. Going deep undercover would give me an inside view of the workings of a human trafficking organization, making it easier to identify ring leaders and dismantle the organization once I had gathered enough evidence. I would be dealing with the main smugglers firsthand. I would also have to endure the harrowing journey that thousands of illegal migrants were taking daily, risking their lives to escape the misery and poverty in their homeland. I had been working in the Chicago district office for the past several years, mainly deporting illegal immigrants, which was frustrating. Deportation was nothing but an inconvenience, not a deterrent to desperate people. I knew that immigrants deported one day were back on U.S. streets by the next week at the latest. The smuggling that got them here in the first place was the problem that troubled me most. The antismuggling unit had been a department in name only when my colleague Gary Renick arrived in Chicago two years before me. No agents were assigned exclusively to the unit, but there was one priority target, the Medina family. The Medinas were an extremely tight, impenetrable human smuggling and drug syndicate, well-known to INS agents in Chicago and El Paso. Their lucrative smuggling ring ran between Juarez and Chicago, and I decided to do whatever it took to take them down, including going undercover in

Mexico to infiltrate their operation at its source. The mission may have bordered on reckless, but we had no model to follow. We were becoming overwhelmingly frustrated at the usual immigration procedures, which were stale and ineffectual, almost like Band-Aids on a hemorrhage. We hungered to try something different. Since our intelligence was that the Medinas used La Rueda Bar for their base of smuggling and narcotics operations, this was the logical place for me to get at the family. I flew into El Paso several days before the operation was scheduled to commence. My sister Minnie and her family lived there, so I stayed with them until I did some reconnaissance of the Juarez area. On any night, La Rueda was hopping. During my two days of surveillance, I had seen peasants gathered on the street, most likely determining who would go inside to negotiate. Eventually, one of them would enter the bar, emerging shortly with a contact. They would exchange money on the street, not concerned about being arrested. Uniformed Mexican lawenforcement officials also entered and left the bar but only spent their time laughing and joking. They were likely crooked, too, probably on the take. Brutes driving huge pickup trucks came and went throughout the night. I watched them climb out of their vehicles with .45-caliber handguns stuck in their belts. They were obviously major players for the dope dealing business that also operated from the bar. My clothes an old pair of jeans and a faded flannel shirt looked like any other hardworking Mexicans, but my hairstyle was a problem. Before this case I had taken down several vengeful criminal groups in Chicago and had grown an Afro for the role. That hair blended in fine on the streets of Chicago, but here, I wasnt sure. Luckily, in the crowd of misfits, no one gave me a second glance. I asked my sister Minnie and her husband, Dick Hartnett, to drop me off a few blocks from La Rueda. Minnie had always been a pillar of strength for our family, and being with her as I was about to enter this shadowy world was comforting. While this assignment was dangerous, having Minnie and Dick bring me to Juarez was not. Day trips from El Paso and other southern U.S. border cities were common, since shopping and meals were a bargain in Mexico. Besides, I found comfort in knowing that a member of my family would know where to begin looking for me if I encountered trouble. No one spoke as we crossed the International Bridge into Juarez. As we neared my destination, my sisters worry-filled voice broke the silence. Do you really need to do this? she pleaded. What if something happens to you? Who is going to be there for you? Before I could even answer, my brother-in-law jumped in to defend my decision. He knows what he is doing, Dick said reassuringly. Somebody has to do it. He will be fine! Dont worry. I smiled, placing my hand on my sisters shoulder. Reaching beneath my seat, I pulled out the small bag of old clothing I had packed for my adventure. Carrying it would make me look more like someone who had been traveling through Mexico. My sister sat there silently as I climbed out of the van. I stood on the curb and watched as she quickly pulled away. It was showtime. I crossed the street and entered La Ruedas side door. Aside from my hair, my Tex-Mex Spanish was not the same as a native Mexicans Spanish, so I had to be careful about what I said. These people wouldnt hesitate to kill me, even if they identified me as an American undercover agent. I advanced nervously through the crowd toward the horseshoe-shaped bar. I would have felt more at ease with a partner, but our Chicago management team decided that I would go alone because of budgetary constraints. My eyes were slow to adjust to the dim lighting. The only bar patrons who stood out through the haze of cigarette smoke were the call girls. One of my favorite songs, Ramn Ayalas Tragos de Amargo Licor, was playing on the jukebox, but the loud laughter drowned out the lyrics, and nobody paid it any attention. I squeezed between two badasses doing shots of tequila with a couple of seoritas and sat down on an empty bar stool. I set my small mochila, or tricky bag, of old clothes, at my feet. I had brought a small .25-caliber derringer with me, which was hidden in my back right pocket. Without saying a word, one of the bartenders walked up and stood across the bar from me. I asked him for a beer, placing a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. My name is Jose Franco. I am looking for someone to take me to Chicago, I said. I chose Jose Franco for my alias because it was easy for me to remember. Jose was a common Mexican name and Franco was my fathers middle name. The bartender placed a beer on the bar and took my twenty. When he returned with my change, he demanded to know who had sent me. Somebody at the bus station sent me here after I asked how to get north, I said, slipping him a ten from the change. Wait, he told me. Lets see what I can do. When someone who can help you comes in, I will let you know. As I looked at the faces in the bar, I felt healthy amounts of fear and respect for what I had gotten myself into. Maybe my nerves showed and helped convince the smugglers I really was just another pollo. They were used to seeing trepidation in the faces of the disenfranchised peasants who placed their lives in their unscrupulous hands. I had to proceed cautiously. I was hoping to be selected by a member of the Medina clan. But whichever coyote ended up with me was out of my control, like so many aspects of this mission. I was carrying only slightly more money than I needed and I had no badge or backup to rely on if I met with trouble. I sipped my beer and casually observed the crowd. I watched five or six other pollos enter and leave the bar after speaking with a small group of men, presumably coyotes. After two hours, I thought that I had either been forgotten or fooled by the bartender. I wanted to approach a group of coyotes myself, but I decided patience was a better option. Finally, at close to one oclock in the morning, I noticed three men engaged in hushed conversation with my bartender. The bartender pointed at several people sitting around the room, and then he pointed at me. Each coyote selected one of the pollos and moved toward his choice. The man who came toward me had been at the center of their small group when they entered the bar. He was shorter and slimmer than the other two, but undoubtedly in charge of the posse. I recognized him. He was Jose Medina, one of the Medina familys top soldiers. I was in. I hear you want to go north, he said with an arrogant sneer. We agreed on a

price and I told him I would pay the whole thing when we got there. Jose had a sarcastic grin on his chiseled face. No, my friend, you have to pay half of the money up front, and you have to do it now. That is, if you want to go. I hesitated, acting like I was considering my options. Look, you got to have faith in us, Medina coaxed. He explained the system. Pollos were sent off according to a combination of factors—destination, number in the group, and first-come, first-served. I would not be departing immediately under any circumstances, but I still needed to accompany him to a staging area if I was interested. At the earliest, I would be crossing in one or two days. You have my word, he promised. Anyway, you can always find me here. The ringleaders of the Medina clan made pollos give them a down payment and commitment fast, or else someone else moved ahead of them. I pushed my crisp dollars toward Jose Medina and ordered another beer. Two companions joined him, generously passing several twenty-dollar bills to the bartender for his cut of the referrals. I downed my beer and got up as Jose motioned to me and a few of his other customers. He led us outside to an idling van. I'd heard too many stories about immigrants who paid their smuggling fees and then were herded into vehicles and taken several miles outside the city to be beaten, robbed, abandoned, or killed by the side of the road. Others were never seen again. But I got into the van with the other pollos anyway. To my relief, we did not leave town, but went straight to El Correo Hotel, a seedy establishment ten minutes away from La Rueda at this late hour, when the streets were mostly deserted. The dimly lit entrance hall was jammed with twenty men, women, and children ready to depart on the next trip, as soon as a guide and vehicles arrived. We walked past a small reception desk, manned by an old man snoring, his head slumped on the counter. If he was a hotel employee, he wasn't registering guests. The word hotel was a misnomer. El Correo was no vacation-guide spot. It was a human-smuggling and trafficking distribution hub, used by several different smuggling operators in Juarez. Like other clearinghouses, the activities that went on there were well-known and accepted by law enforcement agents who took a cut of the profitable business. Sometimes they raided the hotels to collect payoffs from the migrants, but they were usually bribed, so they stayed away. Jose pushed open an unlocked door that led into one of the hotel's dismal rooms. Inside, fifteen or twenty people were sleeping on the floor, either sitting in metal folding chairs or propped up against a wall, using their tricky bags as pillows. Five more people huddled on a single twin bed in the middle of the room. No one gave our group of two a second glance as we made our way inside, led by Jose. We squeezed in as best we could, stepping over people. Women clutched their children closer at the sight of Jose. I made my way to a corner next to a young man who was sleeping sitting up. When I placed my hand down on the carpet to sit next to him, I discovered cockroaches, fleas, and bedbugs on their own bloodsucking parasitic missions. Fortunately, only a half hour after I sat down, a smuggler opened the door and summoned four pollos by name. One of the men got up and I claimed his chair. But by the time I departed two days later, I was still itching from head to toe. Napping for long stretches was impossible, between the discomfort and the noise. Every two or three hours, a smuggler slammed open the door and called the names of a handful of pollos, who nervously gathered their meager possessions and followed him out the door in less than two minutes. By the second night, I was adapted to getting as much sleep as I could before falling off my chair. By day three, I was one of the veterans in the room. I took a cold shower, the only kind at El Correo. Despite the November chill, the water felt good. I quickly lathered and rinsed, dried myself off, and got back into my dirty clothes feeling like a new man. I had never been in captivity before and had been amazed at how quickly freedom melted away into darkness and despair. A quick cold shower was enough to remind me how grateful I was for liberties, no matter how small. For three days, I had been looking at the faces behind the stories of the people in the room. The sacrifices they had made to reach the United States were frightful and astonishing. Some had already lived there but had been deported after being picked up by our immigration authorities. Others were embarking for the first time. Each person had his own American dream—education for his children, food for his family, and maybe a visit back to Mexico to see relatives, if the opportunity arose. One young man announced he would join the U.S. Army to prove he would sacrifice his life for a chance to be a citizen of the United States. Some people in the room talked about what crossing the river was like, but I was surprised there wasn't a lot more fear. Nobody was turning back. Fear was saved for family members back in the villages with no beans or tomatoes in the garden, on the brink of starvation, and with a bleak future ahead with only the continuous cycle of sending relatives to el norte giving them hope. The fast currents of the Rio Grande and the untrustworthy guides seemed relatively tame. Many of the immigrants had borrowed money at grossly inflated interest rates just to be able to afford the down payment for the trip. The relatives who were waiting for them were going to pay the rest of the fee when they arrived. Children as young as my own two preschool-age boys huddled with their mothers, oblivious to dangers ahead of them. I prayed we would all be reunited with our families, regardless of the outcome of the smuggling case I was investigating. After I had spent three long days and nights in this ghastly hotel room that reeked of body odor and old urine, Jose Medina walked in and yelled out two names: Jose Franco and Alejandro Cortez. A dark, slender man with broad shoulders and a teenage mustache stood up with me and brushed off his hands on his already filthy jeans. I had previously overheard him telling another pollo he was going to Chicago to make money to send home to his parents and five younger siblings, who were down to surviving on handouts from already strapped relatives. His father had undertaken the same route when his meager farm earnings could no longer sustain the growing family. Unfortunately, he was never heard from again and in all likelihood was one of the many who perish along the way without being identified, buried in hundreds of nameless

graves on both sides of the border. We picked up our tricky bags and silently followed Jose to a minivan, where at least ten other pollos and guides were crowding into the backseats. We were heading toward Zaragoza, a dusty village on the outskirts of Juarez teeming with cheap hotels and rowdy bars. A few miles before the village, we stopped at a location known as la curva, where the river bends and obscures the view from the opposite shore. I knew this spot well. U.S. border agents aggressively patrolled the American side nightly, arresting as many smugglers and their payloads as they were able to apprehend. Of course, many others took advantage of the agents being busy, and bolted, like drivers speeding past a cop writing a ticket on the shoulder of the highway for someone else. Bandits on the Mexican side preyed on immigrants foolhardy enough to cross the river unescorted by coyotes. Smugglers were known to conspire with these petty thieves, pointing out targets they suspected of having lots of cash or valuables. Everyone but Alejandro and me was instructed to get out of the van. Jose was the head coyote in the group and was taking special care of us. He explained that we were breaking into smaller groups to attract less attention. The van continued a few hundred yards farther before pulling behind some tall bushes. Jose, Alejandro, and I got out there as the minivan sped off with its lights still extinguished. The night air hit me with a cold blast after the cramped, humid van. The desert temperature was close to 32 degrees. We slowly made our way to the river and stripped down to our underwear. We tied our street clothes into our tricky bags and held them above our heads. My gun was safe, rolled in my jeans. Then we followed Jose Medina into the frigid Rio Grande. Summoning all my strength, I inched forward. I was in great physical shape, but still I was barely a match for the rivers pull. I did not know much about Alejandros stamina, but he appeared to be holding his own. We completed the crossing in about ten long minutes. I could see a green U.S. Border Patrol vehicle in the distance, but we were behind a levee and it was facing in the wrong direction to see us. Our coyote knew his job well. Jose didnt need any time to recover. I was hoping for a few minutes to catch my breath, but Jose walked over and gave me a rough nudge on the cheek with his foot. My hatred for him was growing by the minute. Put your clothes on, he ordered. I had been so focused on staying alive that I had forgotten how cold it was, until I realized I was shivering. I dressed as fast as I could and joined Jose and Alejandro. Lets go before the Border Patrol turns around, Jose directed Alejandro and me in a hushed voice. Following his lead, we darted away from the river toward the lights of El Paso, first traversing the dangerous stretch of road known as the Border Highway. Besides being heavily patrolled, the four-lane interstate has had a sobering number of pedestrian deathimmigrants who had managed to cross the Rio Grande but not the highway. It had been three days since my initial contact with Jose Medina. I had waited in a Mexican fleabag hotel, crossed a frigid, fast-running river, and jumped an interstate highway to cover a distance of less than one mile, a twenty-minute walk under normal conditions. I had traveled such a short distance that I could still see the illuminated billboards of Juarez on the other side of the river as we reached the Medina drop house. The tiny ranch was right along the highway, separated by only a fence of stone and chain link wire. Jose ordered us to jump over it into the backyard. We entered 5500 Flower Drive through a porch door with the light on in the back. It was 4 A.M. according to the wall clock in the kitchen. Guadalupe Medina, Joses mother and the family matriarch, was waiting for us in the kitchen by the stove, boiling a pot of beans. She grunted a greeting. She was chunky, rough for her fifty-eight years. Her straight brown hair was pulled back in a clip; her loose long skirt fell below her knees. When I asked her for something to eat, she refused me. We eat once a day and you are too late. You will wait until tomorrow to be fed, she coldly informed me. Besides Alejandro and me, thirteen other immigrants were waiting for passage to Chicago. We all stayed in one bedroom, but it had no furniture. Almost everyone was asleep when we entered, crowded on the cement floor. Through the low light streaming through a small window with an aluminum foil shade, I saw a teenage girl with long black hair lying in a fetal position. She was dressed in jeans and a dark-colored sweater, staring straight ahead, not trying to take advantage of the darkness to sleep. Whats wrong with her? I whispered to a woman who identified herself as Consuelo Marquez. She was raped before we crossed yesterday, she whispered back. She has not eaten or said a word since we arrived at this house. The girl had been part of Consuelos group, which was led across the river the day before. The fourteen-year-old had no relatives traveling with her. While at the river, Jose and another smuggler had singled out her and another young girl, convincing them that they did not have to cross the river but could cross at the International Bridge instead. The two smugglers attempted to take one of Consuelos daughters, but she told them that her family would not be separated. They would cross together or not at all. Consuelo was traveling with her five children: eight-year-old Jose Pedro, six-year-old Fabiola, and her three teenage daughters, Hermelinda, Elia, and Brinda. Brindas new husband, Raul, was also with them. Pedro Marquez, Consuelos husband, had hired the Medinas for several thousand dollars for the seven of them. They had traveled more than twenty-four hours by bus from Jerez, Zacatecas, to get to Juarez. During the bus ride they had heard stories about smugglers taking advantage of immigrants along the border and U.S. agents beating up on the pollos coming across. After they arrived at El Correo Hotel, Consuelo told the person at the desk that they were going to Chicago. She and her family were escorted to a hotel room and instructed to wait for Jose Medina for the crossing. Everything had gone according to plan, except for the disturbing separation of the two young girls at the river. Around midnight, only one of the girls showed up at the Medina drop house in El Paso; she was disheveled and crying. She told Consuelo that she had been raped. The second girl was not part of the group going to Chicago, so she had been brought to the stash house but was immediately sent somewhere else. Jose Medina was later heard bragging

about his conquest to several other men. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to investigate the allegation, but if it turned out to be true, I promised myself the scum would pay dearly. It pained me so much to see this young and vulnerable child suffering the way she was, probably wishing she had her mother or father to hold her and tell her everything was going to be okay. This bastard had violated her vulnerability, her belief in the goodness of humankind, and there was nothing I wanted more at that moment than to walk into the next room and beat the total living shit out of him. Consuelo propped the heads of her two youngest children on tricky bags. She dressed them in their Sunday best for the big trek north. The boy was curled up next to his older sister Hermelinda. He wore a full suit and bow tie, and Fabiola had on a frilly pink dress. These would be their outfits for when they were united with their waiting relatives in Chicago. Other family groups were also traveling north. Three cousins in their twenties from a small village south of Chihuahua were restlessly using each other for pillows. One had crossed twice in the past but had been deported both times. The other two were making their maiden voyage. All of us were anxious to get under way, but our Medina coyotes were in charge. And as the days passed, the mornings bean soup seemed to get more and more watery. The Border Patrol still posed problems, even though we were in Texas. Every morning, a smuggler left 5500 Flower Drive to reconnoiter an immigration checkpoint nearby. The station was manned sporadically, and our guide needed it unmanned to proceed. The circulating rumor was that our address was being staked out by agents, which increased the tension. In fact, the rumor was true. Every so often, I peeked out a window and caught sight of the agents car parked almost a block away in the shade. I figured they were not raiding the house but only watching it, because they knew I was on an undercover mission and they were my backup. Gary and I had finely tweaked the plan and solidified our signals ahead of my departure for Juarez. The day before I went undercover, we had met with our counterparts from the Border Patrols Anti-Smuggling Unit in El Paso. We briefed them on the entire operation and reviewed what to do if I needed assistance or backup. The agents were already savvy to the Medina family. They had even identified some of the safe house operators, knew where the movers stashed their loads of immigrants and narcotics, and had other details about their operation. We were so confident that everything was under control in El Paso that Gary had stayed in Chicago to coordinate the takedown. Unbeknownst to me, personal conflicts at the El Paso Border Patrol office had interfered with shared intelligence, and there was no backup. Either way, the very presence of the agents was delaying our trip. Activity around the house really picked up on the third day. The smugglers were as anxious as we were to get going. Their operation depended on quick turnovers in El Paso. Their clients were backlogging in Juarez, and the Medinas were afraid of losing business to competitors. My heart sank when our transportation finally arrived. A large rented U-Haul truck, parked in front of the house, was to take us to Chicago. From the cargo hold, in which we would be traveling, I wouldnt be able to tell where we were going or what was happening outside. Everyone would be at the mercy of our driver, Gonzalo Manzano. An illegal immigrant himself, he was a faithful employee of the Medinas. He acted like a real badass with the illegal immigrants. He appeared to be in his early twenties and was in dire need of a shave. The points of his cowboy boots stuck out from the bottoms of his beat-up jeans. I couldnt see his eyes behind a pair of dark aviator sunglasses, but his ugly mood was clear. Guadalupe Medina was urgently directing us to assemble in the front doorway, ready to move. She knew that with agents watching the house, the U-Haul would alert them, so she was trying to ship us when there was a lull in the surveillance. It didnt matter to her if we returned to Mexico or went to Chicago, she just wanted us out. Around lunchtime, Gonzalo backed the truck into the driveway and we began to load. Gonzalo placed a long board from the trucks loading platform to the ground. The rape victim, still traumatized, was helped up the board by other pollos, and they all settled into the cargo compartment. I wanted to be able to identify the smugglers, so I stalled before moving toward the truck, making visual snapshots of the coyotes. This did not sit well with one of the smugglers. Annoyed and aggressive, he pushed me up the plank and yelled, What the hell are you doing? Get your ass in there, and dont look around! I lost my balance and struck my head on the edge of the platform, momentarily stunned. I crawled into the back with a deep pain shooting through my neck. Gonzalo aimed a kick at the last pollo, but missed, connecting with the truck instead. I took satisfaction in the small payback for his cruelty, watching him jump up and down in pain. He had to tear a hole in the toe of his boot to relieve the pressure from the swelling. One woman from our group who refused to sit in the cargo hold was abandoned to fend for herself, and we were finally under way, fourteen paying customers and Gonzalo, our driver. A decoy unit sent out a few minutes before came back to inform us that vehicle spot checks were down, and we were given our final clearance. The back gate was pulled down and locked, and we departed for Chicago. For a long time, we rode in silence, thinking any noise meant wed be discovered. The ride was bumpy, and we were all trying to find comfortable positions, knowing wed be in this dark hole for at least three or four days. The smugglers had not given us food or water. Seora Medina had even confiscated a wheel of cheese, brought all the way from Zacatecas by the Marquezes to give to Pedro in Chicago. The lump where I had hit my head was large and painful, adding to my misery. Eventually it would require surgery, but there was nothing I could do to ease the pain at the moment. My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, and I saw the teenage girl sitting near me, still in distress. When I tried to comfort her, she pulled away from me in fear. She stared at me without responding. Everything is going to be okay, I assured her. Your relatives in Chicago will take care of you. I rolled up my tricky bag and placed it under her neck. She closed her eyes and seemed to feel safe for the first time. But I was filled with

anxiety. I prayed we would reach our destination without anyone getting hurt. I admired the courage of my fellow travelers, especially the exceptionally brave six-year-old Fabiola and her eight-year-old brother, Jose Pedro. Despite the hardships, they were polite and obedient. They held child-sized sombreros, souvenirs of their homeland, in their laps. No one complained. The U-Haul was filled with dreams about a new beginning in Chicago. I hoped and prayed that when the journey was over, some of these desperate, humble people, whose crime was to cross into our country without documentation, would find legal ways to stay. Ultimately they would be granted amnesty under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, but the fact that I was going to have to arrest them after the takedown was not easy to think about. Three hours after being on the road, the truck came to an abrupt stop, started backing up, and came to a stop again. Gonzalo pulled open the U-Hauls sliding door and let in the blinding sunlight. When our eyes adjusted, we were dumbfounded to see that we were back at 5500 Flower Drive. Guadalupe Medina was running toward us at full speed, screaming at Gonzalo. What the hell happened? she cursed. Jose just called saying they had gone through a checkpoint, but he didnt know where you were. You dont have the balls to drive! We couldnt have made it through, Gonzalo explained meekly. Well have to try again tomorrow. Guadalupe continued screaming at her driver, ignoring the passengers in the hold. I took the opportunity to step forward. Seora Guadalupe, I said calmly, your chauffeur is gutless, but I am willing to drive to Chicago without pay. I have nothing to lose. Please give me a chance. You see, Gonzalo? Seora Medina snapped, glaring in his face. Even this ignorant pollo can do better than you. He will help you drive when you take off again. With that, she stormed back to the house. Gonzalo was livid. Ill deal with you later, he threatened, but I was equally hard-ass. You know where to find me, I shot back. I knew the Medinas were partial to their driver, and I was expendable. But I had to pursue my chance to be in the cab. Jose Rodriguez, the scout car driver, returned to the house with a couple of cases of beer for the coyotes, and the cargo of pollos was once again herded into a bedroom. Another load had arrived since our false start, so space was at a premium. Everyone was as pleasant as possible. My group, in admiration of me now that I had stood my ground against Gonzalo, gave me approving glances. Many of us stayed awake talking about our journeys to this point and our hopes for the future. Consuelos story was as memorable as it was courageous. Pedro Marquez, her husband, had started crossing into the United States during the Bracero program, back when braceros, unskilled farm laborers, were allowed to enter the country and work seasonal crops along the southwest border before returning to Mexico at the end of the harvest. In 1964, the Bracero program was terminated. Pedro, like many other Mexicans, stayed in our country illegally because crossing the border before and after harvests became prohibitively expensive and dangerous. Eventually he moved north to Chicago and landed a job cleaning out cargo cars for a train company. He sent remittances to Consuelo for their nine children in Mexico. When his oldest daughter, Irma, was diagnosed with a heart disease and told her life expectancy was eighteen years, Consuelo and Irma crossed into the United States, aided by smugglers. After Irmas condition stabilized, Consuelo returned to Zacatecas and her other children, who had remained with relatives. Pedro and Consuelo didnt want the family to be separated, so Consuelo was bringing everyone left to Chicago. They also knew it was only a matter of time before their children would want to venture north to escape the dire poverty they lived in, with few educational opportunities and even less of a chance of ever making a decent living. Pedro had not been able to locate the same smugglers his wife and daughter had used for their first journey, so he asked for a referral from other newly arrived Mexicans. The Medina name kept coming up, and Pedro decided to call them. He made contact with Jose and was assured that his family would be well cared for. Safety was important to Pedro. In addition to his wife, four of his daughters would be traveling, and he had heard of smugglers who abused females. He wanted smugglers who were trustworthy, if such men existed. The Medinas werent to be trusted. I felt like I was now carrying the responsibility for the safety of everyone in our group. The next morning, I found Guadalupe Medina alone in the kitchen preparing the bean soup for the day. She was far from pleased to have two loads, twice as many mouths to feed. Buenos das, I said to her in greeting with a disarmingly soft tone. It smells good in here. Can I help you with what you are doing? She asked me to wash bowls, welcoming the chance to have someone new to complain to. As I cleaned the dishes, she explained the dilemma with Gonzalo. He has been working for us for a long time and I know his family, she said. He lacks guts, but he is loyal and I cannot choose you over him to drive. Thats okay, I just want to help, I answered. I do not want his job. I just want to get to Chicago safely and quickly. I did not want to look suspiciously eager. I knew Gonzalo was more likely to seek my assistance on his terms. After washing the grime from the pots and pans, I returned to my group in the bedroom to wait for our second stab at departure. Soon checkpoint scouts began hollering and directing us back into the U-Haul to take advantage of another window of opportunity. I picked up four one-gallon containers of water from the kitchen without asking anyones permission and passed them to my fellow passengers. I brazenly asked Gonzalo if I should join him in the cab. He responded with a shove so hard that I found myself in the bay of the U-Haul unaided by the plank. I took a position near the tailgate to overhear any last-minute instructions between the Medinas and their driver. I wasnt as anxious as I had been the previous day. Again we all arranged ourselves in our positions. Being in the back of a windowless truck was aggravating, especially when our prior journey had been three hours of getting nowhere. We had to rely on faith that we were advancing this time. Gonzalo seemed to be taking a local route. The truck jerked into and out of stops and starts every few minutes, suggesting traffic lights and heavy congestion. I later overheard that he had gotten lost in El

Paso trying to shake possible Border Patrol agents, and he had wasted two hours getting back to Interstate 10 before heading to New Mexico. After three or four hours of smooth travel, Gonzalo brought the U-Haul to another abrupt stop. With a loud screech, he yanked up the tail door and looked straight at me. We were on a rural stretch of road in the middle of nowhere. I positioned myself so I could reach my .25-caliber pistol if I needed it. Get out! he ordered me. I wasn't sure what to expect. It's your turn to drive, he growled, much to my relief. He motioned for me to follow him. I jumped to the ground before he slammed the gate shut one more time. After I had entered the driver's side of the cab and he had settled in as the passenger, I asked him where we were and which direction we were going. Once again we were lost. He had taken a wrong road somewhere and we had to figure out our bearings. No problem, I told him as I started up the engine. I knew the area, but Gonzalo was under the impression my sense of direction was good luck. Unfortunately, we were still on the wrong side of a border checkpoint near Alamogordo, New Mexico. Approaching the post, I saw agents setting up traffic cones, only minutes away from beginning vehicle stops. I proceeded cautiously past them without being stopped. As before, I thought my fellow agents were dutifully protecting me while following the progress of my case. I felt more in control now that I was driving the truck. I was in the middle of a fantasy about pulling into a roadside diner and pigging out, recovering some of the ten pounds I had lost in the last three days, when I spotted the flashing lights of a New Mexico State Police vehicle in my rearview mirror. We are fucked, Gonzalo said, thankful he wasn't driving. Tell them I am only a passenger and I will make sure you can drive for us again, he said to bribe me. If you mention Seora Medina, her sons will come after you. I knew I had to do business with the officer outside the truck, so I jumped out and began to approach his cruiser. I assumed that either he wasn't aware he had interrupted my undercover operation, or he was aware and was looking for a discreet update. Stop where you are! Don't move! the uniformed trooper yelled as I approached. I appreciated what I hoped was play-acting, but I couldn't answer him in English because I was beside the truck within earshot of Gonzalo. My unkempt appearance and dirty smell would certainly not make me look legitimate. I might not have believed me, either. The officer unsnapped his holster, and I raised my hands in the air so he could see I had nothing threatening. I moved slowly closer to discuss the situation with him in private. In a low voice, I told him I was an INS agent, but he either didn't hear me or didn't believe me. Open the back of that U-Haul! he demanded. When I didn't respond, he walked toward the gate himself and grabbed the handle. You do not want to do that, I warned. He turned back toward me in disbelief, positioning himself defensively with his hand on his gun. The trooper was unaccustomed to Mexicans speaking fluent English, let alone giving orders. He used his walkie-talkie to request backup, keeping his gaze dead on me. I decided my best bet was to crawl into the backseat of the squad car, leaving my door open. The trooper slammed it closed before pulling himself into the front seat. As he picked up his radio to contact his dispatcher, I addressed him by the name I read on his badge. Officer Skinner, I am a federal agent engaged in an undercover operation, and we have a load of immigrants in the back of that truck. This is a legitimate operation and I need to ask that you allow us to proceed. If you are an agent, can you explain why there is an APB on your truck, issued in El Paso? he inquired. I was completely caught off guard. I had assumed that the El Paso Border Patrol had judiciously given us clearance, and I now realized with a sinking feeling that this trooper was not part of my protection. I was angry. I was on a dangerous undercover mission and absolutely no one had a clue where I was. Skinner agreed that I had a cargo of immigrants in the U-Haul, but as for my role, he thought I was a dirty, lying coyote spinning a tale to get away. The week before, he told me, another Mezzzzzican had tried the same thing during a narcotics stop. Dispatch, would you send a backup to assist with a load of immigrants and one suspect already in custody? I heard him project through the radio's static. He began filling out his report, recording the time and circumstances of the traffic stop in his log. Officer Skinner, I continued, if I were a real criminal, I could have put a hole in the back of your head. I wasn't comfortable making him feel so vulnerable, but I was running low on options. He had neglected to pat me down, standard protocol for allowing a suspect to enter a squad car. I handed him my small pistol as a gesture of good faith and promised him that a single phone call would prove my story. Skinner again radioed his dispatcher, to postpone backup, and relayed the phone number I had pulled from my wallet, a contact from the El Paso sector. To my shock, that bastard had given me a nonworking number and the call was unsuccessful. I offered another contact, a dispatcher at the Border Patrol headquarters who might or might not remember my name and identity. This time it worked, and Officer Skinner gave my weapon back and opened my door without saying a word. What an asshole: he could at least have said good luck. I know I would have had I run in to an undercover agent on such a dangerous mission. Although I was incredibly relieved, I still had the task of explaining the whole thing to Gonzalo. I returned to my driver's seat trying to think of a believable story. Gonzalo had been following my actions in disbelief through the rearview mirror. I took my place behind the wheel and drove off without a word. When he was certain we weren't going to be pulled over again, he asked me bluntly what had happened. It was easy, I said. I gave him my last hundred-dollar bill and I expect you to repay me when we get to Chicago. Gonzalo muttered that he thought crooked cops were only in Mexico and laughed off his debt to me with a yeah, right. For the next hour, we rode in silence. We pulled into a rest stop in Tularosa, New Mexico, to change drivers and refuel. I pumped gas while Gonzalo went inside the store. During his absence I checked on the passengers in the cargo hold. They were hungry but otherwise comfortable, and I promised them I would somehow get food to them after dark. Making them travel all the way to Chicago under such deplorable conditions was extremely difficult

for me. I genuinely liked them. The coyotes and their bosses were the ones I was after, yet I had to remember that the pollos were breaking the law, too. I tried to focus on the fact that I would look out for their well-being as best I could until Chicago. Gonzalo emerged from the convenience store with a six-pack of beer and chips and took over the driving. We lumbered along, with me liberally drinking the beers I pulled from the plastic rings. I was a co-driver now, and I didnt want him driving after six beers, I reasoned. I dozed and woke often over the next few hours, as Gonzalo assured me he was not in need of relief. Hours into the night, I woke up to snow pellets hitting the windshield. A sign illuminated by the trucks headlights indicated we were one hundred miles away from Amarillo, Texas. It was three in the morning, we had been on the road at least fifteen hours, and we still hadnt reached Amarillo. I was warm enough in the cab, but the cargo hold was not heated. Dnde estamos? I asked Gonzalo. His blank response told me everything. The snow picked up until we were driving in whiteout conditions, low on fuel, and lost. Gonzalo said he had gotten off I-40 to look for a rest area and had kept to the back roads thinking they would have better services. I played with the radio and learned we were in the middle of the worst snowstorm in fifty years. I took over the driving, and just as I was imagining the U-Haul filled with innocent people falling into a ditch in the blizzard and running out of gas, we came upon a country store in the middle of nowhere. To my utter amazement, it was open for business, confirmed by lights we could barely make out through the blowing snow. I told Gonzalo we needed to let our passengers warm up inside, but he was without compassion. Fuck them, he mumbled. Find out where we are, get gas, and lets go! I pulled up to the old fuel pumps and let Gonzalo handle the gas transaction while I slipped inside and purchased four blankets from a small pile of bedcovers the store had for sale. I threw them quickly into the back of the truck, not wanting the blowing snow to invade what little warmth had been created by the passengers body temperatures. The group was cold, exhausted, and in extreme discomfort. They had been bouncing around without cushioning or heat for two days. The temperature in the cargo hold was barely warmer than outside, and it was 22 degrees outside. Alejandro and another young man were propped up toward the gate, the coldest part of the truck, knowing they were in better shape. They all suffered the journey through needlessly inhumane conditions. They had not stretched or been given access to a bathroom. They had not been allowed to leave the truck under any circumstances and had resorted to using empty water jugs to relieve themselves. They had been wearing all the clothing they had been carrying to stay warm. I stayed on as the driver and managed to get us back to I-40, helped by directions I received in the store. Slowly, the storm eased off and the conditions improved. The U-Haul plodded toward Oklahoma with Gonzalo snoring away. By daybreak we were nearing Oklahoma City via the Oklahoma Turnpike. For a stretch we were followed for thirty minutes by a marked Border Patrol cruiser, who began tailing us at a tollbooth, but he never intercepted us and eventually peeled away. When we finally passed Tulsa, I wanted to begin planning an endgame with Gary, but I needed a pay phone. Gonzalo refused to let me out of the truck to make a call or check on the passengers in the hold. He chuckled as he callously told me, What difference does it make if someone back there is dead? There is nothing you can do. I was disgusted to the core by the cowardly worm, but logically, I couldnt mutiny. I would be putting the lives of everyone in the load in danger. Hed get his due at the takedown. Several hours later we pulled into a gas station just north of Springfield, Missouri. I ran for the restroom without waiting for Gonzalos permission. Secured in a stall, I used a paper napkin I had grabbed from the food counter at the last stop and a pencil in my pocket to scribble my home telephone number and a message for my wife, who was almost certain to be home because of our two young sons: Terrie, we are in Missouri. Please tell Gary we will arrive around midnight on November 21st at the Standard station in Joliet where we took down the Arizona case. We can take the load down right there. Keeping an eye out for Gonzalo, I waited until the clerk at the counter was alone. I whispered to him that I was a federal agent and I needed his help. I gave him the note, begging him to pass the message to my wife. He didnt believe me, especially in light of my disheveled appearance and rank odor. The clerk threatened to call the police, but nonetheless, cued by the desperation in my stare, he hid my note from view when Gonzalo approached. Whether he made the call or not was now beyond my control. I got back to the U-Haul ahead of Gonzalo and claimed the drivers seat. Being behind the wheel was essential to my plan, even if Gary did not receive the call with my instructions. If I didnt take charge now, I would end up at the Medinas Chicago safe house without backup. I knew Terrie must be sick with worry about my condition and whereabouts. She always was when I went undercover and she hadnt heard from me in several days. The road through Missouri seemed to go on forever. Gonzalo dozed off and on, occasionally offering to drive. During a rare conversation between us, he told me he planned to keep the young girl a day or two, having his way with her before she called her relatives. He was taken aback when I told him that no such plan was going to happen. Our power struggle was intensifying, but I was sick of the pig and could no longer take it. We crossed the state line into Illinois at nightfall. The passengers in the cargo hold had spent close to thirty-six torturous hours without food, exercise, services, or water beyond the four gallons I had stowed for us in El Paso. I pulled the U-Haul into a service station with a diner at a freeway exit, told Gonzalo to refuel, and placed a takeout order with the three-hundred-pound cook flipping patties at the grill. I want nineteen hamburgers with fries, seventeen hot chocolates, and two coffees to go, I announced. I didnt care what Gonzalo thought. I returned to the truck, pulled open the hatch, and distributed the meals. Everyone seemed to be in an acceptable medical condition, except for one man with frostbite. However, even he wanted to continue to Chicago without further medical attention. I invited anyone who wanted to stretch their legs to

walk around outside, but no one accepted, too scared of being reported or abandoned. They graciously took the food and insisted we keep driving, especially when I told them we were only a few hours from Chicago. Gonzalo surprised me when he ordered the young lady to get out of the hold and into the cab. The girl, squeezed between Gonzalo and me, was thoroughly terrified of us both. She did not respond to any of Gonzalos crass overtures, and when he grabbed her chin to make her look at him, I demanded that he stop. Thankfully, he obliged and did not bother her again. We continued our journey in silence, the time passing slower and slower the closer we got to our destination. I had estimated our arrival time perfectly. At ten minutes before midnight, we approached the exit leading to the Standard station, where hopefully Gary was waiting with a backup team. We had used the gas station before, taking down an Arizona case in which smugglers had transported a cargo of Mexicans in a motor home. The station had served us well then, and I was anxiously anticipating a similar outcome now. As I slowed down to exit, Gonzalo grew agitated. Just keep going, he demanded. We can easily make it to Chicago with the fuel we have. I continued to the service station anyway, and parked the U-Haul away from the gas pumps. Gonzalo was becoming suspicious. I pulled the keys from the ignition and went inside the station, not knowing what to expect. To my delight, Gary and several other agents were there waiting for us. The restaurant clerk at the diner had called my wife, and she in turn had contacted Gary. Gary, the other agents, and I now quickly finalized the details of the rest of our mission, and I returned to the truck, newly energized. Get out! I ordered Gonzalo. Without hesitation, Gonzalo leapt out of the truck, fists up. I gave him a straight cut to the jaw, causing him to fall to the pavement. When he got up, I successfully stomped on his injured toe. He was howling as I put him under arrest. The young lady in the cab was overwhelmed with disbelief. With law enforcement on the scene, her already horrific journey was ending in another nightmare. I tried to reassure her, but from her point of view, I was now her enemy. Even though our undercover operation was going to have us continue in the U-Haul to the Medinas Chicago clearinghouse, I gently removed her from the truck and placed her in an agents car, hopefully sparing her additional trauma. We searched Gonzalo and found a small book with many of the Medinas telephone numbers, including a local Chicago number. I dialed it from the pay phone in the Standard station, hoping to reach someone at the safe house. Where the hell have you guys been and where the hell is Gonzalo? inquired the angry man on the other end. I explained that we were in danger of being caught, that Gonzalo was busy with the cargo, and that I was a co-driver and needed the address and directions fast; policemen were all over the area. He complied and said we would need about an hour to get there from where we were, and to be sure we werent being followed. Gary and I decided to keep the sting a secret from the cargo passengers. I pulled open the gate under the pretense of telling them we were only an hour away, and no one seemed aware of any of the commotion that had taken place with Gonzalo. They were patient and composed, waiting for their final leg to end. The drive to the clearinghouse address seemed to take no time at all. I soon found myself in an alley on the south side of Chicago. I had a walkie-talkie now so I would be able to communicate with Gary and the team. The man who had answered the phone had told me the apartment was on the second floor of a three-story building, and I was to come through the alley to the rear door. Because of the late hour, no one was out on the streets of the dreary neighborhood, and the graffiti-riddled gates of the storefronts were closed and locked. Knocking on the back door of the second-floor apartment, I was met by a middle-aged Mexican man with a thick mustache and a beer belly protruding from a dirty white T-shirt. He was the same man who had answered the phone. Dnde est Gonzalo? he asked again. The back door of the U-Haul had been pulled up to allow the passengers to follow me. I told them to wait a few minutes so I could get to the apartment and have the door opened before they joined me. As instructed, they started arriving, and the head honcho had no choice but to let us in. Collecting smuggling fees and efficiently moving people to their relatives was now his priority, but the situation remained extremely tense. The other smugglers in the house were not comfortable that Gonzalo was missing. I was less worried that they would suspect I was a federal agent than that they would think I was a smuggler from a competing syndicate, trying to steal their payload. Before the situation could escalate, I pulled the gun given to me by an agent at the gas station and screamed for everyone to freeze. Youre all under arrest! Get on the floor! I commanded. If my appearance was not official, my weapon made it so. I summoned my backup officers, who were waiting in the shadows of the alley. We herded all the people who had traveled with me more than 1,500 miles, from the desert in El Paso to the dark alleys of south Chicago, back into the U-Haul so we could transport them to the federal building downtown for processing. I had witnessed their suffering firsthand from a perspective no other U.S. immigration agent had ever experienced, and their plight had a strong impact on me. It was not a great feeling knowing that everyone in the load was going to be detained, but the law was the law. Poverty and desperation drove these otherwise decent people to violate legal U.S. immigration policy, which I was sworn to uphold. That did not make my position much easier for me. All of the immigrants, who were now witnesses, were terrified and confused. The man with frostbite had to be hospitalized on account of his medical condition. A total of four smugglers were arrested that night. We obtained warrants for six others in El Paso, including Jose and Guadalupe Medina. Unfortunately, Jose Medina was not at the El Paso house when agents served the warrants, and he was not apprehended. Rumors circulated that he knew about the warrant and had fled to Mexico. I was going to have to be patient, but I had no doubt the bastard and I would meet again. Throughout the undercover mission, I knew that my rights were protected by the U.S. Constitution, and that when the job was done I would return home to the comfort of my wife and family. My life might have been in danger,

but my freedom in the United States was secure. The pollos, on the other hand, were leaving their homeland for a world completely unknown. They risked exploitation, victimization, deportation, and even their lives at every turn. They were illegal and vulnerable, always in jeopardy, living in fear in the land of their dreams. The Rio Grande flowed between their desperate poverty and their cautious hope. The problem, however, was that their sojourns in the United States were against the law. The ordeal from the border to Chicago had been harrowing for all of us. My oath to enforce the law and all its responsibilities had been ingrained in me from the very first day of my twelve weeks of training at the U.S. Border Patrol Academy. An equally important lesson was to always keep our emotions in check. There was no gray area here: if we did not uphold the law, we were not fulfilling our oath. In spite of the harsh conditions and maltreatment I had witnessed during our journey north, my fellow passengers had broken the law and entered our country illegally. They had joined in a conspiracy with criminal defendants to be smuggled to Chicago. From the beginning of the case to its finality, there was no doubt in my mind what I needed to do and what I would do: arrest everyone. There is no room for emotion during these critical points in an undercover case. Showing weakness or hesitation during a takedown could make for a volatile situation. The safety of everyone, from the agents to the victims to the witnesses to the criminals, is the top priority. But that didn't mean that I was immune to the plight of others. My ability to remain stoic and in control during an assignment came from having methodically thought out a situation and considered all the possibilities, from its beginning to any and all possible conclusions. I had reviewed my role in the Juarez to Chicago assignment in my mind a great many times. After a raid or a takedown, I always had a period of emotional reflection. I was human, after all. I'd often meet with my fellow agents. Our inflated egos needed boosting and we loved meeting at a bar where other agents were ready to glowingly receive us with pats on the back. My comrades and I could commiserate in a supportive group about the emotional difficulties of our job. Working in human smuggling was different than working in drug smuggling. We couldn't just tag the evidence and shelve it to complete the assignment. A case needed to be built and defendants had to be prosecuted. Our range of emotions was extreme; there were highs and lows, with no in between. I thought of myself as the nicest guy in the world, but when I worked those cases I was a hardened agent. Consuelo and her children hadn't believed my reassurance that they were going to be released on their own recognizance, so they were pleasantly surprised when Pedro picked them up at Chicago's U.S. immigration office. They had agreed to testify against the Medinas and, in fact, were interviewed numerous times by federal agents and assistant U.S. attorneys. The immigrants were the commodity. They had been smuggled in, and in turn, they were the best witnesses to describe all the events and people involved in their illegal entry. In defending themselves, defendants have a right to confront their accusers. Our two options were to keep the witnesses locked up until the case was over and then deport them from the United States, or to allow them to post a bond and be released. The first option would quickly fill up all our jail space; thus in most cases the immigrant witnesses were released on a recognizance bond, as long as they agreed to present themselves when called to testify. They were not considered a threat in the community and not likely to abscond. Although all of the passengers in our case presented themselves during court proceedings against the smugglers, ultimately only Consuelo testified. The others had their cases handled by the agency's Deportation Branch. They were given eighteen- to twenty-four-month permits, which included the authorization to work legally in the United States if they were older than eighteen. In the end they were instructed to voluntarily return to Mexico or their native countries. I often wondered how many did in fact return. Gonzalo, Guadalupe, and the others arrested later pled guilty to smuggling charges. Manzano and Seora Medina were each sentenced to three years on two felony counts and two-thousand-dollar fines. However, their sentences were suspended. Manzano was deported to Mexico, and Guadalupe Medina, an American citizen, returned to El Paso. Gary and I were frustrated that the length and danger of my undercover mission had produced a bonanza of criminal smugglers but with minimal impact on the big picture. Ten smugglers was a coup for the agency. The problem was that immigrant smuggling sentences were not nearly as severe as we would have liked, probably not even harsh enough to deter those just busted from returning to the smuggling trade as soon as they were out. In light of the absolutely subhuman treatment of most immigrants in transit, like what I had just witnessed, this was a travesty. However, that reality in no way diminished our satisfaction in the success of our mission. We had put the lowlife Medinas on high notice that they were not as untouchable as they might have believed.