

CHAPTER ONE

The boy awoke and sprang to his feet, kicking the dusty blanket. No snakes came slithering out, nor were there any spiders, scorpions or other unwelcome nocturnal visitors. There rarely were, but their occasional visits made for restless sleep, as he felt the creeping and crawling under the blanket or across his skin, often imagined but sometimes frighteningly real. He always welcomed the daylight, even though it meant the beginning of another brutal and exhausting trek in the searing heat.

His stomach growled, but he ignored it. Two backpacks were on the ground nearby, where his father and their guide had been sleeping. The men were nowhere in sight. That made him nervous. He was 15 now and considered himself the equal of any grown man – strong, clever and resourceful. Still, he was out of his element, and he felt uneasy whenever his father disappeared without explanation.

He climbed out of the shallow ravine where they had camped for the night and scanned the horizon. People were easily spotted in this desolate place, but he saw no one. Fear evaporated as his mind switched into problem-solving mode. His father had scolded their guide last night, accusing him of straying off course. They must be trying to survey the area and get their bearings. The boy scoured the harsh landscape in front of him – nothing but an endless sea of dry sage, thorny mesquite and cactus spread out over an endless vista of rugged hills and

gulches. His eyes instinctively sought the highest spot around. On a rocky hill about a hundred yards away, he spotted two figures, peering northward while lying flat on their bellies. That was strange.

The boy hurried in their direction, doing his best to dodge the thorny mesquite bushes. Both men spun around at the sound of rocks giving way beneath the boy's boots as he climbed the steep hill. The father beckoned excitedly to the boy.

"Look, Sal! There it is – America!" Antonio Rios handed his son a pair of binoculars and pointed. "Stay close to the ground," he cautioned. "We need to watch out for unfriendly eyes from here on."

Sal scanned the horizon in the direction his father was pointing. "I don't see anything. What am I looking for?"

"Right there! See that dark line across the horizon? That's the border fence. If you look closely, you can see a gap dead ahead. That's where we're going."

Peering through the binoculars, Sal could see a dark fence extending west as far as the eye could see. Looking to the east, the fence also extended out of sight. However, directly in front of them was a gap where there was no fence at all. Although it was hard to gauge from that distance, the gap had to be a sizable one to be visible from this range.

"I don't see any guards there. Can we just walk right through that gap?" Sal asked.

"That's the plan," his father replied. "But the Americans have roving border patrols, so we'll need to be careful. That's where we'll really be counting on Juan," he said, looking at

their guide. “And, once we get across the border, the terrain gets even rougher than this,” he said, gesturing at their surroundings. “Then it’s another sixty miles before we reach our destination.”

Antonio Rios looked up at the heavens and made the sign of the cross. Then he put his hands on his son’s shoulders and stared intently at him for a long moment. The look of grim determination that had defined the father’s face for countless weeks was gone. His face beamed, his eyes were wide and bright. “This is the home stretch, Salvatore. You’re about to begin the adventure we’ve talked about for so long. Your new life is just over there,” he said, pointing north. “*Vamonos!* If we hurry we can make the border by nightfall.”

They shook the dust from their blankets and stuffed them into their backpacks, then set out on the final leg of their journey. The exhaustion they had felt from weeks in the desert melted away. Their strides were now brisk and purposeful. Juan marched ahead, father and son trailing behind by nearly half a mile, all of them keeping a wary eye out for aircraft, jeeps and people.

“Why don’t we all walk together?” Sal asked his father.

“What do you think?”

“Because you don’t trust Juan?”

“I trust very few people, Sal. But there are other reasons as well. I’m sure you can figure them out.”

They walked in silent contemplation for a few minutes. “If anyone is out there, they’ll see Juan first,” Sal observed. “So we’ll have a better chance to escape.”

Antonio nodded approvingly. “Better to sacrifice, Juan. If he gets caught, they will probably just send him back. No big deal. But our mission is far too important. We can’t take that risk.”

“His name isn’t even Juan, is it?”

“Of course not. And you needn’t concern yourself about him. Think about what lies ahead, just beyond that fence there.” They both stared at the fence, which was clearly visible just a few miles ahead. “That’s America. Right there! The wealth and the opportunities are mind-blowing, and they are ours for the taking.”

“The Promised Land, eh Papá? And we will blend right in and be living as Americans. It sounds amazing!”

“It is amazing. The riches, the opportunities, the education – like no place else. El Jefe has trusted me to expand his businesses on that side of the border. And he has big plans for you, too. But we must never forget the real mission. We are part of a great battle. It is a just and righteous war and we will be fighting it from within. America is the enemy, and she is utterly clueless about what is happening. The war is mostly invisible now but that will change over time. We are soldiers in this fight and soldiers do what must be done to serve the cause. Never lose sight of that, Sal. You will face temptations. It will be easy to be seduced by America’s riches and get caught up in all the trappings of material wealth. Don’t let that happen! Always remember that we serve a higher purpose.”

“I will. And Mamá, and the girls? When will they be joining us?”

“It may be awhile – a year or so, maybe longer. I’m not happy to be apart from them, but it’s not safe yet. Family is so important and being apart is a big sacrifice for all of us. But like I said, we do what we must.”

Daylight was fading. They were just over a mile from the border. Juan had vanished. Father and son settled in on the side of a hill covered with thick brush, shielding them from any eyes looking southward from the other side. They waited. Darkness came. Antonio’s eyes darted from the gap in the wall to the surrounding brush to the rising moon, which was nearly full and becoming far too bright. It helped light their pathway but also acted as a massive searchlight, eliminating any possibility of crossing unseen in the darkness if anyone was watching. That meant they would have to hope no one was waiting on the other side. He didn’t like the idea of just hoping for the best. They had come too far and had too much at stake to take foolish risks.

They were no more than twenty minutes’ walk from the fence, ten minutes if they ran. The gap was about a quarter mile to the east. It was so close, beckoning them and taunting them at the same time. An hour passed, then another. Still no Juan.

“Should we make a run for it?” Sal whispered.

“Shhhh! We stay put. I don’t know why Juan’s not back yet, but he’s not, and that means we have a problem.”

Antonio opened his backpack and reached in. Sal saw the moonlight glinting off the shiny Smith & Wesson revolver. Antonio whirled at the sound of footsteps behind them and pointed the gun in that direction.

The footsteps stopped. “Pssst ... *Señor* Antonio? It’s me ... Juan.” The guide stepped out from behind a large cactus, hands raised as he stared down the muzzle of Antonio’s 38 Special.

“Where the hell have you been?” Antonio demanded. He kept the gun trained on the guide and stared at him with unblinking eyes.

“Scouting, *Señor*. So sorry, I couldn’t get back sooner. It’s not safe.”

Antonio rose from his crouch and slowly approached his guide, keeping the revolver levelled directly at Juan’s forehead. “What do you mean it’s not safe? Where were you exactly? Who were you talking to?”

“Please *Señor*, believe me.” Juan’s voice quaked as his arms remained raised in the air. “I talked to no one, but this place is crawling with people waiting to get across. I didn’t see Border Patrol or anyone else on the other side, but it’s hard to see. There’s a gully just past the fence, so you can’t see what’s going on from this side, but the brush is full of people. I saw at least twenty. Maybe thirty. Maybe more. They’re all over, taking cover, just this side of that no-man’s land there.” He gestured to a long strip of barren area that had been cleared of all vegetation, forming a buffer several hundred yards in width between the brush and the fence.

Antonio lowered his gun but kept a tight grip on it. “So what do we do?”

“We wait and watch, *Señor*. Pretty soon they’ll start running through that gap. If they get through, that means there’s no Border Patrol here tonight, and we can watch and wait a bit longer. If the Border Patrol is nearby, the runners will flush them out. Either way, we’re not going to follow them. There are too many. They’re bound to attract attention. I know another way.”

“Look!” Sal pointed. In the darkness, they could see two shadowy figures sprinting toward the gap. They crossed and then vanished from sight. About ten minutes later, another lone runner bolted through the gap, following the path of the two previous runners. After another few minutes, six figures could be seen following the same path. Then small groups began appearing from everywhere, all following the same route.

“Looks like it’s safe!” said Sal, gripping his father’s forearm. “Do we go now?”

Antonio looked at Juan, who shook his head. “No, we can’t be sure. Sometimes the Americans wait until a large group has crossed before they round them up. That way they don’t have to cross over onto this side. C’mon, we’re going this way,” he whispered, motioning westward, away from the gap.

Juan began running parallel to the fence line, father and son following closely behind, dodging rocks and brush. After several hundred yards, they stopped and looked back toward the gap, where runners were still visible in the bright moonlight. Following Juan’s lead, they bolted across the no-man’s land to the fence, then veered left, away from the gap, and continued running in the shadow along the fence line.

“Stop where you are!” It was an American voice booming over a loudspeaker. They looked back toward the breach in the fence and saw runners abruptly reversing course. Bright vehicle lights bounced behind them in the distance. Then they heard the unmistakable sound of automatic weapon fire. “Stop and turn yourselves in. You will not be harmed,” blared the voice over the speaker.

“Let’s go, keep moving!” Juan shouted as they continued their sprint along the fence line, in the opposite direction from the commotion.

“Should we turn back?” asked Antonio.

“No, this is good!” Juan said. “They are looking in the other direction. I know a way.” They ran until they could run no more, then walked for a stretch, and ran some more. After about three miles, Juan stopped. “There!” He pointed to a ladder perched against the twelve-foot-high corrugated steel fence.

“What’s with that?” demanded Antonio. “Is it a trap?”

“No, *Señor*. This is private ranchland. Sometimes the ranchers leave ladders out so their fences aren’t knocked down. They don’t want their livestock escaping. I’ll check it out.” He scurried up the ladder and disappeared over the fence. Ten minutes later, Juan called out from the other side. “C’mon. It’s safe! No ladder on this side, though. You have to jump.”

Antonio went first. He climbed the ladder, sat for a moment on top of the fence surveying the darkness beyond, then hung from the top of the fence and dropped to the ground. Sal followed right behind. He leapt off the wall and rolled in the dusty earth. As he stood up to dust himself off, his father embraced him. “Welcome to America, Salvatore Rios. This is the beginning of your new life!”

They set out in the darkness, stumbling on unseen rocks, but feeling energized and light on their feet. They hiked due north for several miles, then abruptly veered west, in the opposite direction from the activity at the border. As dawn broke, they stopped to rest and to get their bearings.

Juan pulled out a crude map. “This is where we are,” he said, with the confidence of a man who was thoroughly familiar with his surroundings. “This is good. Most people do what the runners did last night. They cross through the gap in the fence. There are no border stations there

but there's a road less than a mile to the east. There's a border station on that road about twenty miles north, so they hike parallel to the road until they get past the border station. Then they find their way back to the road to meet their rides or they just keep walking near the road. Lots of them get caught. That's where the Americans will be looking after last night. Not many people come this way. If they do, they mostly don't make it. This is rough country – even rougher than where we've been.”

They looked around them. The vista was the same in every direction. Rough, scrubby brushland with no water in sight and little shelter from the blazing sun.

“It's about sixty miles to the nearest town this way, but it's a lot safer,” said Juan. “Not much living out here except snakes, bugs, and coyotes. Oh, and those nasty buzzards and the wild hogs. They'll devour any poor souls that come this way and don't make it.”

As Juan and Antonio strolled to the top of the nearest hill, Sal sprawled out on the ground, resting his head on his backpack. Sleep overtook him immediately. Juan provided Antonio with a thorough briefing regarding the map, their route and landmarks they could expect to find along the way. Antonio insisted that Juan walk him through it a second time, and then he recited it back to him.

“Now you know the route as well as I do, *Señor* Antonio,” said Juan, as he folded the map and handed it to his employer.

Antonio held out his hand. “I can't begin to thank you enough, my friend,” he said shaking the guide's hand warmly. “You provided safe passage for my son and me. I will never forget it. On behalf of my entire family, please know that you have our eternal gratitude.”

“It was my pleasure, *Señor*. I don’t know your business but know that you are an important man with an important mission. It has been an honor serving you. In just a few more days, we will reach our destination.”

Antonio reached behind his back and pulled the revolver from his belt. He held it up against Juan’s forehead. The guide’s eyes grew wide and his mouth opened, but no words came out.

Sal’s peaceful slumber was shattered by the sound of the gunshot. He leapt to his feet and stared eastward toward the spot he had last seen his father and Juan. He shielded his eyes from the blinding morning sun and saw his father striding down the hill, the motionless body of the guide behind him. “Why?” he asked in a trembling voice as his father approached.

“We do what we must, Salvatore.”

