

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## With Friends Like These

*La Puerta* AND THE DAMAGE DONE  
1990

*For if gold rusts, what shall iron do?*

GEOFFREY CHAUCER, *The Canterbury Tales*

I RUMBLED OVER the railroad tracks that lay east of Marfa just past seven A.M., when I crossed paths with Presidio County Sheriff Rick Thompson and his chief deputy, Steve Bailey. Sheriff Thompson was headed away from the fairgrounds, which was not an unusual event, since he stabled several horses that his youngest child rode in competition. We had business together that morning, and I followed the sheriff and his deputy to their office.

I was working with INS agents on a case involving theft and extortion by a notary public who officed on the border. Some Mexican nationals alleged that they had fronted the son of a bitch as much as \$600 to obtain a United States visa and then he burned them. Nothing riles me worse than a crook who preys on poor people. This guy was only a notch above your common coyote, in my book, or the scum who steal elderly people's Social Security checks. Lowlifes every one. Anyway, Sheriff Rick Thompson was interested in this criminal investigation, as he often was in others, and he asked to go along.

I had to be in Presidio by nine to complete preparations for the sting—wiring the victim, supplying him with the \$300 cash he still owed the notary, and briefing him on how this deal needed to go down to get a conviction. We also had to swear out a search warrant. All of this takes time, and it annoyed me that after Sheriff Thompson finished fiddling around alone in his office, he began orchestrating the presentation of coffee and doughnuts in the office lounge. For some reason, catering for the instructors and attendees in town for the New Mexico State Police course on drug profiling fell personally upon his shoulders. I was focused on a crook while he was arranging éclairs on a cutting board. It gnawed on me.

Thompson finally got himself together and loaded himself in my Jeep Cherokee—absolutely the sorriest vehicle I ever drove in the service of Texas. We drove south to Presidio. Sheriff Rick was normally a talkative sort, and when he failed to speak I asked him if something was wrong. He told me that he was worried about the upcoming election and that he

needed to get the required papers filed with the district clerk before the deadline.

We arrived at the Port of Entry, and I sat down to begin filling out the documents for the warrant. Rick Thompson, Joey Gordon (who was a DPS narcotics agent), and a couple of federal customs officers were milling around when a third customs agent came in carrying a printout from the teletype. She informed us that Robert Chambers had just been arrested for stealing a Presidio County horse trailer.

I knew Chambers. He was a young man of questionable character from a fine local family who deserved a better son. Chambers walked a hard road and a fine line, and even served as a sometime snitch for Sheriff Thompson. I suspected that his and Thompson's association went beyond that of a cop and his informant. It's not unusual for a good police officer to be on speaking terms with some seedy folks, and Chambers knew most of the bad guys on the border. I wondered if Chambers, along with being the sheriff's eyes and ears in the shadowy regions, performed little favors for Rick Thompson that were too dirty for his deputies. In return, Thompson always seemed to shield Chambers from scrutiny. "He'll only talk to me," Rick always said. Chambers's arrest was an odd development in a peculiar relationship.

I guess I'm not much on this multitasking. I had learned to rope one steer at a time. Although Chambers's arrest was definitely of interest to me, additional details would have to wait until after we nailed this dirty notary. Rick Thompson mustered a stoic reaction to the news. Chambers was in custody. I saw no urgency. I pushed the theft of a horse trailer aside to concentrate on the sting operation I already had in motion.

Later that same evening, the horse trailer theft started to churn in my head during the quiet drive back home with Thompson. Nothing about this situation really added up.

"Why would Chambers steal the trailer instead of just asking you to use it?" I finally asked the sheriff.

"I don't know," Thompson said before he resumed his uncharacteristic reticence.

We soon rolled up to the Border Patrol checkpoint located four miles south of Marfa. An exuberant young agent stepped up to the window and said, "Ranger, did you hear about the 2,500 pounds of cocaine found in the county horse trailer at the fairgrounds?"

What! Before I could react to this shocking news, Rick Thompson said, "Well, I guess they'll blame that shit on me."

Those words—and especially Thompson's tone and delivery—had the impact of a blackjack rapped against my head. I thought, *Why would they ever blame this on you, Rick?* But I said nothing. I dropped Sheriff Thompson back at his office, and then I drove home alone to Alpine. There was no silence in my solitude. Over twenty-four miles twisting

through some of West Texas's most beautiful country, a series of images and voices began to play in my head. I considered five years' worth of quirky little incidents, strange though seemingly benign conversations, imperceptible warnings from unproven informants who seemed worried about how I would react to the news, and a shift in behavior over the last few months by a man who was my friend. Taken piecemeal, none of these things meant much. But over every inch of those twenty-four miles I began to connect the dots. I had to step back from the blindness of familiarity and the routine to understand how the fragments and pieces all fit together into one ugly picture. When my car rolled to a stop in my driveway, I knew.

Man, I never saw this coming. I couldn't accept the fact that a man I had worked with and trusted for the last five years could possibly be involved in drugs. I felt this sickness in my gut. But I *knew*.

**I'D TAKEN A LONG** and twisting road before I arrived at the beginning of the Rick Thompson affair. In Texas, the responsibility to investigate the use and sale of illegal drugs rests with the Department of Public Safety Narcotics Division. Technically speaking, the Texas Rangers don't fool with drug cases, although some of the very best Rangers emerge from out of the DPS narcotics squad. As it turns out, a clear delineation between drug use and trafficking and theft and murder doesn't bear up in the field. It's like separating the wind from the rain in a thunderstorm.

My first exposure to criminal use of narcotics had to do with the heroin traffic spilling out of San Antonio into neighboring rural counties. I handled an enormous volume of daylight thefts and burglaries of items that could easily be fenced for some quick cash—stereos, televisions, guns, anything they could haul off to the pawnshop. The trail of these suspects almost always led straight back to the rough neighborhoods of San Antonio, and from there to some junkie who didn't give a shit about his life or yours. Most disconcerting of all was that most of these losers were on the government methadone program for heroin addicts. From a law enforcement perspective, methadone kept hardcore users straight enough to commit more crimes to buy the real stuff. They stole from honest, hardworking people. They killed some of them, too.

Once I connected the rural crime with a San Antonio "ring," I worked with that city's detective division felony squad. Chief Hutton, an able administrator, handpicked his skilled, seasoned detectives. I learned about the seedy world of illegal drugs from great veterans, men like Weilbacker, Lauderdale, and Beckett.

We tried to round up as many suspects as possible in one sweep, mainly because they operated in little rings. Once we had sufficient probable cause to swear out the multiple search and arrest warrants, we assembled a team of local, state, and federal agents and swooped down together upon the dopers in the wee hours of the morning.

One such agent was named Maurice Rose. He stood eyeball to eyeball with me and weighed 250 portly pounds of firm muscle. To supplement his law enforcement income, Maurice moonlighted as a wrestler. One early morning our team swarmed a suspect's shack in a part of San Antonio where even the dogs are nervous. Maurice charged up to the front door with me at his side and proceeded to kick it in. He stuck his leg right through it up to his knee.

Horried that some dooper might be waiting behind the door with a dull axe, Maurice violently yanked back his leg, and in the process he ripped the door off its hinges, and so while the rest of us were clearing a dark house with known felons, Maurice was dancing out in the yard with his leg through a door. I don't know how well Maurice fared with the wrestling fans, but he sure put on one hell of a show for us.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the heroin market began to taper off. Marijuana use became almost pedestrian, and cocaine emerged as the drug of choice. All of the small towns in my jurisdiction were infected with narcotics, shattering the myth that small-town Texas remained a bastion of American family values. In truth, we were fighting a war to salvage our young people from the grip of illegal drugs. On a percentage of population basis, I'd estimate that the problem was just as deeply rooted in Uvalde as it was in San Antonio and Houston. As law enforcement officials became more sophisticated in the ways of the drug culture, so did our investigative methods.

A reliable informant once approached me about a group of dopers in the Uvalde area looking to make a big hit. He suggested that we do a "reversal," which basically meant that law enforcement people posed as dealers to sell the dope to the bad guys. We proceeded to do just that in conjunction with the DEA task force active in Eagle Pass. The Feds fronted us two hundred pounds of marijuana, which we sold to some boneheads for \$50,000 in cash. They stuffed the stash in a truck toolbox and motored down the road.

Unfortunately, they had not properly closed the lid of the toolbox, which flopped up and down advertising their burlap sack full of dope before we arrested these incompetent wannabe Capones.

The courts gave the cash back to Uvalde County to purchase equipment and whatnot, while our daylong drug lords went to jail. The first-ever reversal conducted in Uvalde County had gone very well. Local cops got a little wild with this type of sting operation, which eventually spilled into other counties.

Since addicts aren't particular about what they inject into their veins, methamphetamine labs cropped up all over the Texas Hill Country. We usually located them by their horrendous stench, second only to a decomposing human body. But even though they were easy to find, they were risky to raid. Any police officer will tell you that there is nothing more dangerous to confront than a subject high on meth. Speed freaks

believe that they're invincible, and I've had several occasions where we were forced to bleed them a little to change their minds. Speed kills, but surviving speed freaks stink. They don't eat or sleep. They're psychotic enough to inject chemicals in their veins that are strong enough to unclog kitchen sinks. And they'll kill you or anyone else who gets in their way when they use it. Horrible people. Horrible drug.

Hallucinogens, such as LSD and peyote, were sold to the youth culture as a spiritual quest. The books of Carlos Castañeda and the influence of Ken Kesey and Timothy Leary inspired thousands of young kids to drop acid and explore their inner mind. I can tell you that the experience was nowhere near as pretty a picture as the one painted by these irresponsible flakes.

Witness the call I once received from a frantic farmer in Uvalde County: His twenty-five-year-old son was standing out on the family tennis court with a .357 revolver in his hand, in the grip of a flashback, shooting out the lights. Sound like a pleasant trip?

No medical personnel dared to approach an armed man in the throes of drug-induced psychosis. The responsibility to disarm him fell to me, and I took Uvalde Sheriff Kenneth Kelley with me. The suspect stared at us like a wild animal as we approached him, moving with us as we neared the gate. I didn't see his weapon, but upon arrival his mother reminded us that he had a nickel-plated Ruger Blackhawk .357 magnum. I figured that if he fired at us, I was terribly outgunned because of the eight-foot chain-link fence between us. And so was Sheriff Kelley, who I noticed, after we were engaged with the suspect, hadn't bothered to bring any kind of weapon. I was sort of peeved at the time. I told the young man to put his hands up and keep them there. Thank God that he did. We handcuffed him and herded him off to the hospital for observation. (I stayed at the scene and dressed down Kelley in no uncertain terms. What was he planning to do if the kid had shot me? Challenge him to a quick tennis match or what?)

In the aftermath of this brief, unfortunate incident, I think mostly of the mother peering through the window at her lost son, of the hard lines etched into her face from worrying.

I've seen far worse when it came to the use of hallucinogens. Consider the fate of a young adult Native American, a member of some Northwestern tribe whose name now escapes me. It was my understanding that his nation had obtained a permit for the purchase and use of peyote during tribal religious ceremonies. This young man was entrusted with \$4,000 in tribal funds and dispatched to Zapata, Texas, where I understand that certain people are licensed to sell peyote to registered buyers.

But the Indian got hung up, as so many young men do, well north of Laredo and on the wrong side of the river in Villa Acuña. Somebody pumped him full of alcohol and God knows what all else, and then

liberated him from his money after debauching his morals. By the time Boy's Town was finished with him, he had access to a pair of faded jeans and his old truck, which he had to hotwire. Someone had made off with his keys. He plowed the vehicle through a barbed wire fence. Three hundred yards later, he came to a stop in the middle of somebody's pasture.

Those somebodies were South Texas ranchers. They owned plenty of guns, and they knew how to use them.

Whacked out of his mind on acid and alcohol, the Indian saw but one set of lights twinkling in that infinite ocean of brush, and he stumbled toward it. He reached the house. He heard people playing cards on the other side and also running water. He moved toward the sound of running water.

There was a young girl showering in the house. The Indian pulled back the curtain and gawked at her with his glassy eyes. For some reason, she wasn't completely alarmed. Her father hired lots of Mexican nationals to work on the place, and she assumed that this was yet another, sent in here by her brother or dad as some sort of sick practical joke.

When he dropped his jeans and stepped into the tub with her, however, she naturally came unglued. She ran screaming at the top of her lungs out of the bathroom and down the hall to the master bedroom. The naked Indian followed her. I have no idea what he thought he was doing, but I don't believe that he intended to rape or injure her. Or maybe he did.

He caught her in the bedroom and they scuffled. They fell on the bed together. And that's where they were when the rancher, responding to his daughter's screams, first saw them.

The rancher's gun case sat in the master bedroom. He snatched a .20-gauge shotgun, pumped a round into the chamber, and hollered at the Indian to knock it off then and there. The problem was that the rancher assumed that the Indian was a Mexican. He spoke to him in Spanish, and the Indian couldn't understand a word of it. They ran out of things to talk about in a hurry, and the rancher peppered him good with the shotgun. Full of birdshot, the Indian made every attempt to pull himself together.

About that time, the daughter's brother entered the room with a .222 rifle that he carried with him in his truck. It didn't seem to matter to him that his father already had the situation under control. By then, I'm sure they saw that the suspect was out of his mind on drugs. But it was too late. Their blood was up. The kid shot the Indian through the heart with a .222 round. The intruder was dead before he hit the ground, and I don't think he ever understood what he had done to offend these people.

I didn't see any call for the boy to kill the Indian and said as much to a grand jury. But this is Texas, the deceased was deep onto private property, and there was just no explaining that a naked man on a bed with a naked woman didn't have rape on his mind. The jury No Billed the

case. The rancher replaced the carpet and painted the walls and went on about his business.

I tracked down the man's parents and told them what had happened to their son. Ultimately it wasn't the rednecks who killed this boy. Drugs led him to a place where there was no turning back.

We saw it every day during my time in the Rangers—the wasted youth of Texas, lured to their own destruction by a culture that convinced them that drugs were a hell of a lot of fun. I watched so many trip their way into a prison cell and many more dig their own graves with a coke spoon. I saw so many stunned parents suffer the pain of burying their children. Lord, I hope we've turned back the tide of this tragic epidemic.

**THE GREATEST THRILL** for any law enforcement officer is to bust the commercial doper. The most interesting criminal I ever disappointed was John Webster Flanagan, a native of Crystal City who earned a law degree, opened a practice in Austin, and soon set the standard for shady deals and debauchery in a town where it's really hard to stand out.

Flanagan's clients included a who's who of local scum, including the ringleader of a notorious gang involved in white slavery, narcotics, and upscale burglaries, as well as the madam of the local whorehouse, who I assume paid his legal fees in kind. It was only a matter of time before Flanagan crossed the line. After he was disbarred, Flanagan returned to Crystal City looking for a new line of work.

He stuck with what he knew best. His clients soon became his colleagues, and God only knows what manner of crimes this affable guy got into. But he excelled in only one: flying dope. Flanagan soon emerged as the greatest bush pilot in the business. He didn't fly above the brush, he flew in it, blowing through thickets as well as any mourning dove. Flanagan never required much of a landing strip, which made him really hard to pattern. The boy could hang a Cessna on a mesquite thorn long enough to unload and then drop into some dark hole before he soared back into the clouds.

A task force including three DPS narcotics agents and myself once staked out Flanagan's stolen plane for four days. Flanagan had stashed this bird under black plastic in the brush. A rancher alerted me to its presence, and we were waiting for Flanagan to show when we received a call that the pilot had dropped eight hundred pounds of marijuana west of Crystal City. Damn.

U.S. Customs confiscated the load of dope and seized three other airplanes at the Crystal City airport. We dusted the hidden plane and found a single fingerprint on the yoke, which we later identified as belonging to John Webster Flanagan.

We secured a search warrant on his Crystal City residence and were stunned by the amount and variety of stolen property he had stashed

around the place—ski boats, guns, appliances. In all, we seized four airplanes. I found a Ranger badge in his house in Austin. We turned in the hundreds of pounds of drugs and all the stolen merchandise, but I threw the badge in the Nueces River and it's still there. Anyway, knowing that he was a wanted man, Flanagan slipped across the border into Mexico. The only difference was that he now wore leather gloves when he flew.

He continued to smuggle dope for years until we finally arrested him on seven or eight state criminal counts. He cut a deal with the Feds, who gave him a ridiculously short sentence down in Florida. It didn't matter, because he never served it. The authorities claimed that one day he was standing in a line when he simply disappeared, but that's horseshit.

Flanagan turned up again behind a cockpit in Mexico, flying loads into the United States. In 1986 or '87, some agency finally caught him flying cocaine into Kansas City and locked him up in the pen. He may be there now. Or he may be back slipping in under the radar, the ultimate stick and rudder man—too smart for his own good, and too good to stay straight. John Webster Flanagan flew dope for close to twenty years. That's a lifetime career for his kind.

On January 1, 1987, I moved out to my new jurisdiction in the Big Bend. I stayed on the 101 Ranch, managed by my good friend Jim Phillips, until I bought a home. To be effective, a Ranger needed to learn his territory and the people who lived there. I'd been on the border all my working life, but everything out here was different.

I started exploring the Rio Bravo and the small villages that hugged her northern bank. Information about criminal activity began to trickle in after I developed a ring of reliable informants. The stuff going on seemed as exotic to me as the desert terrain. And at the time, most of it revolved around the network of the local drug lord, Pablo Acosta.

There was a lucrative exchange of automatic assault weapons for narcotics. One lawless character who went by the name of "Rosenthal" accepted cheap Chinese semiautos for his stash of marijuana. He then converted the weapons to full automatic and sold them to Pablo Acosta's men for more drugs. Rosenthal was so brazen that he once exchanged gunfire with Presidio County Sheriff Rick Thompson over some sort of running feud that had erupted between them. Thompson later sent his crony, Robert Chambers, to hold Rosenthal at gunpoint until the Mexican police could drive up from Ojinaga and arrest him. Rosenthal somehow escaped into the desert, with Chambers popping a few caps at him as he ran. Rosenthal returned a couple of nights later to dig up his stash of weapons. He was wanted by two nations.

Two weeks later, officials found a body in the Rio Grande in Big Bend National Park. The FBI assumed that it was Rosenthal, who had finally succumbed to wounds inflicted by Chambers during Rosenthal's escape attempt. Turns out that we weren't even close.



One of Pablo Acosta's nephews had been tortured to death during interrogation by Mexican cops. Acosta retaliated by kidnapping a deputy federal officer and torturing him in an attempt to learn who was responsible for the death of Acosta's nephew. I was told that Robert Chambers, who I believe was on Acosta's payroll, was present when one of the two armed guards accidentally fired a round into his own foot. The second gunman was so startled that he accidentally fired his weapon, striking the Mexican officer in the heart, killing him.

Enraged by the incompetence of his henchmen, Acosta ordered them to bury the body high in the mountains in a place only the coyotes would know. Instead, they cut it open to resemble the work of competing Colombian cartels operating in the area, and threw it in the river.

And Rosenthal? He later shot it out with Mexican federal police in the mountains a few miles west of San Carlos. The *federales* confiscated his stash of automatic weapons and buried him in a shallow grave. Or so the rumors went. His body was never found. But not too many were really looking.

Pablo Acosta's turn to reap the whirlwind came in April of 1987—the same month that Captain Alfred Allee and Ranger Arthur Hill passed on. I served as a pallbearer for both Texas Rangers. I wasn't invited to lay the drug lord to rest.

Acosta was a colorful character. Raised in Santa Elena, he worked as a roofer in Midland and Hobbs before he found himself an easier and far more dangerous way to earn a living. Like his Colombian counterpart, Pablo Escobar, Acosta generated millions from the drug trade and spread it around the local communities. He was a hero to the poor in and around Ojinaga and the villages downstream. They wrote traditional *corridos* to celebrate his exploits, particularly his success in foiling the gringo's attempts to destroy him. It didn't seem to bother the locals that their downtown plaza was a war zone while he eliminated most of his competition. There were cold-blooded killings in broad daylight every week.

Pablo Acosta was a ruthless murderer, but he also had a genius for organization. He paid off the right cops and influential politicians. Probably bought himself a general or two. If the local people didn't love him, they at least accepted him. He only killed other dopers. He quickly accumulated immeasurable wealth and power. He thought he was above the law—and, for a while, he was.

Two weaknesses ultimately toppled his mountain fiefdom: he developed a fierce addiction to his wares (and even hired one man to reroll his cigarettes laced with cocaine), and he had a flair for self-promotion, especially when it came to humiliating the Mexican government during media interviews. The local authorities were in his pocket, so Mexico City sent in the *federales*, who cooperated with American agents. Together, they stalked Acosta, waiting for the right

moment to strike.

My local informants later told me that an American woman who ran with Pablo's lieutenants set him up with the FBI. She crossed the river, entered Pablo's compound in Santa Elena, ascertained which house the drug lord occupied, and then returned to notify waiting agents. The FBI, in turn, alerted a force of Mexican officers, waiting nearby in a Huey helicopter. In twenty minutes, they were on Acosta and his men, who fought to the death like the desperadoes that they were.

For a short while after that, the plaza in Ojinaga was again up for grabs by anyone strong enough to take it—when the violent cycle repeated itself. I witnessed all of this during my first year in the Big Bend. But it went on year after year, same game, different players, always ending in an early grave.

The Mexican attorney general's office put an agent named Calderoni on Pablo Acosta's case. I was led to believe that he was paid \$90,000 in blood money by the Americans when Acosta was finally shot dead. I knew Calderoni back when he was the *comandante* of the *federales* in Reynosa, Mexico. He was a short, thick, confrontational man who made no effort to hide his contempt for Anglos. He was rumored to have earned millions in drug money payoffs from the cartels, but in the end he still failed to play both frayed ends against the middle. During the writing of this book, Calderoni was gunned down in McAllen, Texas, as he left his attorney's office.

As they live, they die. In between those two events, they infect good, honest people with their corruption and greed. In 1991, they ruined a good friend of mine.

**GODDAMNIT**, I knew.

Even though it was ten at night, I stormed into my home and phoned Dale Stinson, the agent in charge of all DEA operations in the Big Bend.

"I need to know, Dale," I said. "Is Rick Thompson involved in this horse trailer cocaine bust?"

Stinson hesitated. I didn't know what that meant. To some, Dale Stinson was an unemotional bureaucrat. But I knew he had years of field experience under his belt, including serving as an undercover agent in Mexico, an assignment that is not for the squeamish. Dale was an intelligent, resourceful, disciplined man who played his hand close to the vest. His conservative manner caused some to dismiss him as a pencil pusher. His effectiveness earned him enemies. God knows I've had my run-ins with the Feds, but I respected Stinson.

"We can't put anything at the moment on Thompson," Stinson said. "But at best his involvement looks suspicious."

I spent the next two days reconsidering the facts. I had never

questioned why Thompson had always seemed curious about where I would be on this night or that day. I always assumed that he was trying to hook up for a cup of coffee or lunch. And why had his conversations with Chambers been so damned private? What could Chambers have told him that I shouldn't hear?

There were too many times when Thompson was out of pocket. Even his men did not know where he was. He spent a lot of time either in El Paso on "sheriff's business" or running around in his political duties as president of the Sheriffs' Association of Texas.

A few of my informants on the river had occasionally gutted up and told me that Thompson was involved in drug smuggling. They referred to the Presidio County sheriff as *la puerta*, the door. All attempts by me to corroborate this information failed. These tips smelled more like personal or political attacks by Thompson's enemies. I never got enough to go forward with anything close to a formal investigation.

Plus, these accusations just never rang true for me. I never saw Sheriff Thompson flash an unusual amount of money. He lived in a modest home in Marfa. He owned and traded horses, operated a trailer park with a friend in Fort Davis, and owned a dry cleaning business in Marfa, all of which were going concerns before I moved to Alpine. If any of these were lucrative enterprises, however, it didn't show in Thompson's lifestyle. I couldn't imagine what Stinson and his agents had on Rick Thompson to connect him to the 2,500 pounds of cocaine confiscated at the fairgrounds, but by then I knew they had something.

Two days after my first telephone conversation with Dale Stinson, the DEA agent phoned and we had a second conversation. He asked me if I had any business with the Presidio County sheriff's office. I told him that sooner or later I certainly would. Stinson then advised me that he had sent a couple of agents to interview Sheriff Thompson about this cocaine bust. Thompson had run them out of his office and told them not to come back. Pretty ballsy, I thought. And also predictable. Thompson never cared much for Stinson. His contempt reached outright animosity once Stinson's wolves began to circle him. I told Dale that I'd be glad to have a word with him.

The Presidio County sheriff's office exuded an atmosphere of doom when I entered to visit with Rick Thompson. The sheriff busied himself with files and documents, avoiding my stare. I could tell by his expression and body language that the pressure was really gnawing on him.

"Rick," I finally said. "Stinson would like for you to come down to his office and talk to him."

"You can tell that son of a bitch that I won't say one word to him," Thompson said. "But I might talk to the U.S. attorney."

I reminded him that even if he went to the attorney's office, there was no getting around Dale Stinson. As the case agent, he would be sitting in

the same room. We made our first strong eye contact before I added, “Rick, if you, your friends, your family, or anyone else you know is involved in this cocaine bust, you need to go and talk with Stinson and the U.S. attorney. As long as you’ve been in law enforcement, you should know that the first to talk is the first to walk.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “But I ain’t gonna talk to Dale Stinson.”

Several uneasy weeks passed. Rick Thompson was still a free man, but I knew the DEA was taking its time and tightening the noose. Thompson was a high-profile sheriff, active in national associations and recognized throughout Texas. He was also admired and respected in a community that is contemptuous of the Feds. A number of honest, rational people, including many in law enforcement, truly believed that Thompson was being framed.

My last conversation with Rick Thompson took place the night before he testified before a grand jury. I called him at a hotel room in Pecos, where he was staying with his wife. I begged him to play it straight with the grand jury. “I’m going to tell it like it is,” Rick said.

He didn’t. The DA indicted him the next day. After he was arrested, Thompson was talking to Dale Stinson whether he wanted to or not.

But I know that Thompson told them nothing. He was 6’ 3” and 220 pounds of pure hombre. His polite manners and looks concealed one tough, iron-willed son of a bitch that had been tested in combat in Vietnam and in countless scrapes since. Stinson could’ve ripped Thompson’s fingernails out with a pair of pliers and Thompson wouldn’t tell him anything. He figured that his friend Robert Chambers, the only man who could tie Thompson to the horse trailer full of cocaine, was cut from the same cloth. Thompson was pretty sure that he’d skate on his record and reputation. And that probably wasn’t a bad bet.

What Sheriff Thompson didn’t know as he prepared to defend himself was that Robert Chambers had already rolled on him. Thompson was the only man who didn’t know that Chambers was scum—which is a pity given that Thompson was the man who relied on him most.

Chambers implicated Thompson in a long list of smuggling activities going back to before I was ever assigned to Alpine. If Chambers was involved in the Pablo Acosta organization, Thompson must’ve been, too. We always assumed that Chambers was little more than Thompson’s snitch. If we were to believe Robert Chambers, Thompson worked directly under him, monitoring local, state, and federal law enforcement movement and radio bands during numerous shipments.

Dale Stinson knew all of this and more before he made any effort to speak with Thompson. After Rick stonewalled the DEA’s investigation, Stinson yanked the noose tight around Thompson’s neck. He had the man he needed to make his case. What he wanted then from Thompson was to make a very public example of what happens to a dirty cop.

Thompson chose an attorney that the Rangers were already investigating for misappropriation of seized drug money. From a publicity standpoint alone, Rick had made another poor choice in his associates. It didn't bode well.

I was in agony when I watched his press conference on Midland/Odessa television. He seemed out of his element trying to persuade the cameras of his innocence. Thompson claimed that he had obtained the 2,500 pounds of cocaine in order to conduct a reversal drug buy.

I shook my head. No one who has worked in narcotics would ever consider risking his life to sell one kilo to a dooper without substantial backup. Rick Thompson would have us believe that he aimed to sell over a ton of cocaine alone without any discussion of the case with other law enforcement officials. That's not a sting operation, that's suicide.

In the end, it didn't matter much when it came to Thompson's explanation of the horse trailer cocaine seizure. He was arrested and arraigned, and eventually pleaded guilty to all counts in a Pecos courtroom. The judge sentenced ex-Sheriff Rick Thompson to two back-to-back life terms with no possibility of parole. Rick Thompson will die in prison.

**THIS CASE DID NOT** sit well with me. I felt used. I felt humiliated. I felt dumb. One of the primary functions of a Texas Ranger is to support the local law enforcement community. I had developed a great working relationship with Rick Thompson, the very same I enjoyed with Harvey Adams of Jeff Davis County, Terrell County's Chel Duarte, and Sheriff George Jones of Brewster County. I considered all of these men to be friends of mine. Only one of them betrayed my trust.

I've tried to stand by other friends in trouble, even when they faced criminal charges. I supported Johnny Rodriguez when he was tried on murder charges. I testified to the character of Kinney County Sheriff Norman Hooten when he was arrested on misdemeanor charges of attending a dog fight. Hooten's attorney, Charlie Butts, was a close personal friend and had consulted with me at no charge on Don Joaquin's case. At Charlie's request, I testified to the integrity of a man I had known both personally and professionally. Everybody knew Hooten bred and raised pit bulls, but he once told me point-blank that he never fought them and I believed him. All hell broke loose when Hooten was arrested, and the battle lines were drawn. I had no knowledge about the facts at issue in Hooten's criminal case. I simply told the jury that I knew Hooten was a good man and a fine sheriff, which he was. My testimony, however, couldn't overcome Hooten's mistakes and poor judgment. He was convicted and fined, and then the Feds amped up the case by filing additional related charges. The incident ruined Hooten's career and, as it turned out, splashed a little mud on mine.

Most retired DPS officers receive a special Ranger's commission—basically an honorary status that still allows us to carry handguns. Mine came up for renewal shortly after my involvement in the Hooten case. Ranger leadership at the time—or at least one senior official, so I was told—was of the opinion that I had perjured myself in Hooten's criminal case. No one can perjure himself when it comes to testifying about another's character, but enough of the politically appointed civilian DPS commissioners bought in to this absurd accusation that they denied the renewal of my special Ranger badge. It was a real slap in the face for the DPS to punish me for telling the truth. Assistant Director Col. Thomas urged me to appeal their decision and clear the air, but I couldn't see why I should have to jump through hoops to get something I had earned long ago. But the point I'm trying to make here is that standing by my friends has cost me plenty. I have no regrets. I wasn't raised to be a fair-weather friend. Jim Bowie once berated a friend who had abandoned him in a barroom brawl.

“Where were *you*?” Bowie demanded.

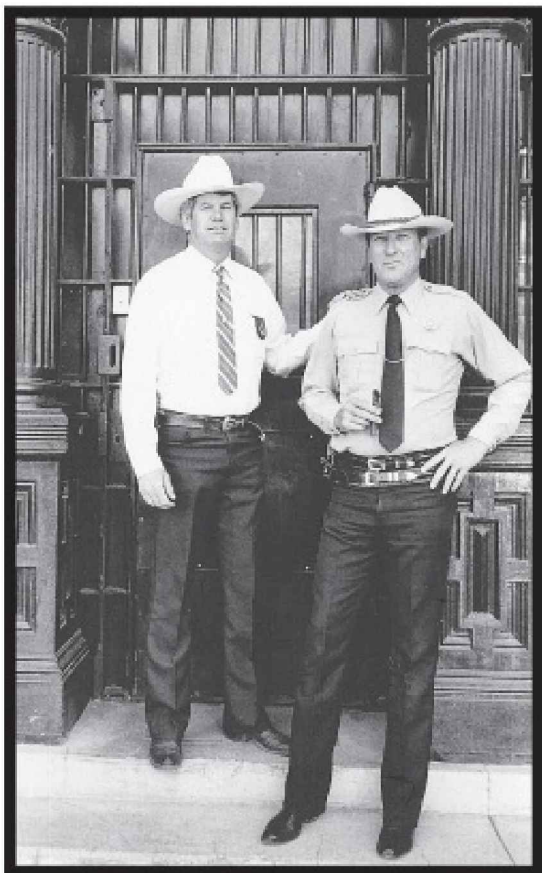
“You were in the wrong, Jim,” his friend said.

“That's when a man *needs* a friend,” Bowie said.

And so it was with my friends when they strayed.

Rick Thompson had been a good friend to me. If there were trouble under your roof, Rick would be the first to knock on your door and ask about what he could do to help you. The bad things he so suddenly dropped at our feet in 1990 had come along after he'd done so much good. I liked him, and I trusted him. As his case unfolded, I was at first conflicted about how I should treat him.

But by the time of Thompson's arrest, I knew that he was dirty, and that was the end of any personal conflict for me. A lawman gone bad is the worst kind of criminal. There is no gray area between an officer of the law and a criminal. The badge signifies the public's faith in one person. Whom do the people look to if our cops are corrupt? My friendship with Rick Thompson couldn't survive that. I distanced myself from him. I have not seen him since he's been in prison. My only regret is that I didn't put him there myself. Rick Thompson went to great pains to avoid my scrutiny, and he was wise to do so.



Sheriff Rick Thompson and Joaquin Jackson, Presidio County Sheriff's Office, Marfa, Texas, late 1980s

During the writing of this book it came to my attention that some people still believe that I was somehow involved with Thompson and his criminal acts. Such slander is guilt by association and I understand that. But nobody who knows anything about me or the facts of Thompson's case has ever accused me of any such thing. I've got no time or patience for gossips. Nearly fifteen years after the fact, I think more about Thompson's wife and children, and the many people who believed in this faithless man. Thompson left behind a community in shock when he was led away in chains. My sympathy lies with the innocent people who have suffered in the wake of Thompson's corruption.

*Ahora, la puerta está cerrado ...*