THE WOLFPACK

THE MILLENNIAL MOBSTERS WHO
BROUGHT CHAOS AND THE CARTELS
TO THE CANADIAN UNDERWORLD

PETER EDWARDS
LUIS HORACIO NÁJERA

CONTENTS

MEXICO AND POINTS OF INTEREST
TO *THE WOLFPACK*

THE WOLFPACK'S GREATER TORONTO AREA,
HAMILTON AND NIAGARA REGION

before: here, a burned pickup truck; there, dozens of bullet shells fallen within a small radius as evidence of heavy gunfire; while a few metres ahead, drying blood adhered fragments of skull and hair to the rocks and betrayed the night's carnage. We encountered no bodies, though. As a police officer told us later, the dead had been quickly picked up by the government without following the forensic protocols for protecting and collecting evidence (fearing returning hitmen and wanting to obscure the true scale of warfare with the narco-criminals). Furthermore, our source told us, based on the traces of battle, there were likely more casualties among the Zetas than announced, including men who were severely injured or killed inside the cartel's fleeing vehicles.

This wasn't my first crime scene, nor was it Miguel's. Still it was hard to understand how one human being could inflict so much pain on another. Thinking back, it was even harder to report—without exaggeration or oversimplification—such cruelty with words and images to an audience reading about the mountain battle from a comfortable couch, or travelling on the bus, or drinking coffee at the office, hundreds of kilometres away.

We continued uphill for another forty minutes, then stopped to call the newsroom. While Miguel climbed a nearby rise to find a clear cellphone signal, I stayed outside my black Grand Cherokee, taking photos of more evidence dispersed over the road. As I continued to walk around, an unexpected noise rose from the road behind us: we were not alone.

III

Since the government of then-president Felipe Calderón launched its all-out war on drugs in 2006, journalism in Mexico has been under siege. Statistics, documentaries, reports and articles have been produced and published by activists, academics and think tanks across the world illuminating the mortal dangers faced by the country's media. The death of my former colleague Armando "El Choco" Rodríguez, a

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FOREWORD

I

My relationship with Juan Carlos began through his attraction to my close friend. As the new kid in our town, he approached me looking for a wingman to help set them up. Eventually I agreed and began organizing quick trips after class or during recess to a Mexican fast-food place near our high school. I invited Juan Carlos to join us under the pretext of helping him get to know his new peers. Despite his efforts, his romantic endeavours with my friend failed. I asked her why she had rejected him. She replied, in a sombre tone, "There's something in his eyes that doesn't seem right."

Juan Carlos was a quiet, discreet, slim guy with a big moustache and cowboy boots who enrolled in our school just to complete his final year. He had moved from Guadalajara to our smaller town, nearly six hundred kilometres away. Guadalajara was then, in the late eighties, home to the notorious group led by Mexico's original *Padrino* (Godfather), Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo. In his seventies today, Gallardo is a historic figure in the world of global drug trafficking. He transformed transnational organized crime by assigning territories across the country to distinct cocaine trafficking groups later self-identified as the Gulf, Juárez, Tijuana and Sinaloa cartels. Protected by corrupt authorities, Gallardo's own Guadalajara Cartel operated as an umbrella for smaller groups that worked mostly within the Golden Triangle, a mountainous area located between the states of Durango, Sinaloa and Chihuahua, towards the country's northwest. Because of its altitude, weather and access to the US border and the Pacific Ocean,

the region is ideal for harvesting marijuana and heroin and then smuggling it north into the world's largest illicit drug market. One of the organizations doing this work, and doing it under the protection of the Guadalajara Cartel, was led by the father of my new classmate.

As the school year continued, Juan Carlos revealed more about himself. He was the first person I had ever met with a connection to the drug trade. That said, he never offered me or any other students marijuana joints, heroin balls or carefully folded packages of cocaine. As I look back to 1988, it was clear Juan Carlos had learned to be careful. He was being groomed to inherit his father's place as the leader of a drug trafficking organization.

One day that spring, classes finished early and Juan Carlos surprised some friends and me with an invitation to spend the day at his family's place in the suburbs. The "place" was a farm with a spacious two-bedroom house, a separate bungalow and a barn located in a semi-rural area outside of the city. The property was well known in the community because it was enclosed by walls as tall as any other house in the area and was often visited by small groups of brand-new pickup trucks with tinted windows. Word on the street was that the house was owned by someone influential, either a politician or a drug lord, who enjoyed throwing parties that frequently extended for days and included beautiful women and famous musicians, all hired to perform.

Minutes after we arrived at the property, our host left in his white Ford pickup. About thirty minutes later, he returned with beer, ice and chips—and lots of them. That was the first of many parties—all-inclusive ones—that Juan Carlos threw for his classmates, and they quickly turned him into the most popular guy in school. He seemed to enjoy his new status, despite the quiet, calm personality that he maintained even after drinking a few beers. I don't remember ever seeing him drunk, even as the parties raged around him.

Perhaps because our relationship had begun before his surge in popularity, and because my family made sure I wasn't a partier like most of our classmates, my friendship with Juan Carlos matured in

trust. That gave me a chance to know who he really was, and to confirm what my friend had meant when she'd said something about his eyes didn't "seem right."

"Do you like guns?" Juan Carlos asked me one day as we were driving across town in his pickup.

"Yes, I do like guns, who doesn't!" I replied. My attitude was typical teenager macho-stupid, deeply influenced by the culture of weapons that still exists in Northern Mexico.

He smiled and, as he continued driving, pulled a Colt .38 Super pistol out from under his seat. It was an automatic gun popular among drug traffickers—particularly among those working up in the mountains—because of its reliability, heft and firepower. "Have you seen one of these?" he asked, handing it to me.

I grew up in a small town where men carried guns, so seeing a pistol was not unusual, but handling a loaded one without adult supervision was a new experience, as exciting as it was imprudent. After holding the gun for a few minutes, and once the initial excitement passed, the future journalist in me came out. "Why do you need to carry a gun?" I asked.

Juan Carlos smiled. "You never know when it may be helpful to have it with you."

As the end of the term approached, my admiration for Juan Carlos was diluted by the excitement of plans to move to a new city to begin my undergrad studies in communications. One day after school, during the final weeks of classes, Juan Carlos and I talked about our futures. He told me he would move back to Guadalajara to study business administration at a private university. Again, my incipient reporter rose up and I asked: "Why do you want to study that?" I guess I judged the book by its cover, because in my view, Juan Carlos didn't fit the mould of an entrepreneur, store manager or businessman, particularly when driving a pickup with a loaded gun.

He looked at me and smiled, and bam! A glimpse of the person taking shape behind the moustache appeared. "My family thinks I need to go to school and learn business administration; they think it would

be best for us, and for *nuestro negocio*—our business," he said, as his facial expression hardened. Right in front of me, he transformed from a quiet high school student into a cold-hearted adult. I required no additional explanations to understand the nature of the business and the source of the money, the house in the suburbs, the need for a gun and the secrecy Juan Carlos always kept about his family and himself. His future plans involved becoming part of the new generation of drug kingpins: more educated, not addicted to drugs, tech savvy and with a less flamboyant lifestyle than their predecessors.

An awkward silence, then an unexpected invitation: "Would you like to work for us?"

II

On a sunny and hot day in May 2007, I was driving through a remote, mountainous area of Sonora in Mexico's northwest. Eight hours earlier, fifty members of Los Zetas Cartel had left a bloody trail along the road I was travelling. Overnight, they had kidnapped and killed five municipal police officers and three civilians from three different towns. When the government detected the operation, hundreds of soldiers and police officers gave chase. The manhunt only increased the bloodshed. Fourteen of the alleged criminals were killed during the pursuit across the mountains.

Accompanying me was Miguel Cervantes, an experienced photographer based in Tijuana. We had been assigned by the newspaper *Reforma* to report on the incident. Along the road, evidence of the night's violence was easy to detect. Outside the small town of Arizpe, where the police had intercepted the hitmen, thousands of empty bullet shells littered the streets. Broken windows and perforated facades pointed us up a dusty road, where the fighting had continued. A brutal display of Mexico's war on drugs unfolded as we moved into the mountains.

After a few minutes of driving, I was struck by how the natural beauty of the landscape contrasted with signs of the battle fought hours