

# A Deadly Change of Course Plan B

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All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

# Chapter One

*Guadalajara, Mexico—July 1995*

David Powers fidgeted in the hotel lobby chair as he waited for his partner, Michael Norris, to finish the checkout procedure at the front desk. It had been an exhausting trip and the two DEA agents were anxious to get home.

Working undercover in conjunction with the Mexican Judicial Police, David and Michael managed to work their way inside the finance and accounting division of the largest drug producing operation in Mexico. Surprisingly, the administrative end of the business ran like many other legitimate Fortune 500 companies. The company, which represented itself as an agricultural operation, came complete with an accounting department, production and maintenance, quality control, management information systems, human resources, and even a sales and marketing division. David and Michael were introduced into the company as software engineers. They would be on site for a brief two week period to design and implement some modifications to the company's executive information systems. The two were picked for the assignment because of their extensive background in computer technology, especially network communications and software development. Once given administrative access to the network server, the pair could log into the computer from their hotel room at night and browse the entire network. Striving to be a near paperless operation, all important documents had been scanned into the system and stored in various folders online. The network had no firewall at all, making access to the information fairly simple. David's laptop computer was equipped with a read/write enabled CD unit. He spent hours downloading and saving documents onto a CD. He made it a point to make two copies of everything, just as a backup. On their last day in Mexico, he placed one of the CD's in his shirt pocket, and he packaged up the other with some souvenirs for his wife and daughter. He dropped the package, to be delivered to his home in San Diego, into the hotel lobby's mail basket.

"Hey, Mike. Ready to take your life into your own hands and chance another Mexican taxi ride to the airport?" David joked with Michael as the two picked up their bags and exited the hotel lobby.

"You bet. That's why I got into this line of work. I live for the sheer thrill and excitement of third-world public transportation," Michael replied as he grinned with a slight cringe and waved to one of the local cab drivers parked outside the hotel lobby.

"Great. Let's hit it. I can't wait to get home," David said as the pair loaded their bags into the trunk of the bright yellow Ford, then piled into the back seat. Once settled in, David elbowed Michael. "Roll down your window. I swear every cab in Mexico has a major exhaust leak."

"Here all this time I thought it was the tequila making me feel so bad," Michael said as he cranked the window handle.

Even though it was late, the airport was crowded. It seemed that everybody in the place had a need to reach out and touch someone. All the public pay phones were in use when David and Michael arrived. They sat down in some hard airport chairs and waited for a phone to become available. Finally, the woman on the end hung up the receiver, picked up her bags, and moved away from the booth. David jumped to his feet and made a dash for the vacant phone. While he waited for someone to answer his call, he checked his watch, but it had stopped. He glanced back at his partner. "Mike, what time do you have?"

Michael, oblivious to his partner's question, had that deer-in-the-headlights look. He was preoccupied watching a tall, elegant young woman walk by. She wore a fitted, cropped blazer—the color of the Mexican sky at sunset over the Pacific. She also wore a matching short skirt and high heels that accentuated her long, shapely legs. Her thick auburn hair—pulled back in a relaxed French braid—ended somewhere in the middle of her back. The beautiful color of her mane was even more striking set against the deep color of her suit. By the expression on his face, there could be no doubt what was going on in Michael's head.

Michael's wife had divorced him a year earlier. When he asked her why she wanted the divorce, she told him life with him felt more like seasons of the year rather than a marriage. She said he was like spring, a season that she loved, but spring only hung around for a short while, then turned to summer, and she tired of summer. Then the fall would arrive and bring the ever present threat of the long, cold, lonely winter. It wasn't until David translated it for him that Michael understood what she'd said. His undercover work with the DEA would take him away for extended periods of time. In between assignments, he tried to make up for his absences by being an overly dotting husband—always under foot. She hated being left alone for such long periods of time, but he drove her nuts when he was home. After ten years of marriage, she packed her

bags and said *adios*. Michael had taken it pretty hard and had only recently began to show interest in women again.

David grinned at his partner, who nearly fell out of his chair trying to keep the young woman in his view as she disappeared around the corner.

"I didn't pack your leash this time," David said.

"What?" Michael replied, unaware that he was being observed, and even less aware of how obvious his reaction to the woman was.

Finally, David's call was answered and he turned his attention back to the business at hand. "Hello. Victor? It's David. We're at the airport in Guadalajara. Our flight leaves in forty-five minutes."

"Great. Did you have any problems?" his superior asked.

"You kidding? Listen, we hit pay dirt here. You wouldn't believe the progress we've made with this Sanchez fellow. He's not only willing to have us work with his people to shut down the Juarez operation, he says he can't do it without us. It seems we're mostly responsible for the success of the business down here."

"What do you mean *we're* responsible?" Victor asked.

"We were able to get copies of documents identifying major U.S. investors who've financed ninety percent of the operation. Victor, you won't believe what we've got here. Copies of agricultural and business loan documents from Goldbank Corporation for millions of dollars. And Goldbank isn't the only one. We've got documentation implicating at least six major U.S. banks that have provided billions to finance the biggest drug operation in Mexico. And get this Victor, there are even loans to the operation from the Mexican government. They originated from the World Bank and actually state in writing that their purpose is to promote economic development. Can you believe it? You can bet your best pony heads are gonna roll when we get back. I think we finally have the evidence we need to shut the doors on the Juarez Cartel."

Victor was silent for a moment.

"Victor? You there? Did you hear what I just said?" David asked, wondering if his boss had been disconnected or was just speechless.

"That's great, David. I have to admit I was skeptical when you called me last week and said you thought you could get your hands on this information. We've been trying to deal with these people for years. Have you got all the documentation with you?"

"All wrapped up and sealed with a neat little bow," David said as he patted the CD tucked safely in his jacket pocket. "See you in a couple days," he said, then hung up the phone.

David had one more call to make before heading to the gate. "Hey, it's me. Sorry it's so late."

"Oh, David. Where are you? I've been worried sick," she said.

"Still in Mexico, but I'm at the airport. I'll be home tomorrow. How are my two girls doing without me?" he asked.

"We're getting by. I just wish you were home. Emily fell off her tricycle yesterday and scraped her elbow up a little bit. She said she wanted you to come home and kiss it better. I told her you'd get here just as soon as you could."

"That's right. I'll be home before you know it. How are you feeling? Are you getting enough rest?" he asked.

"Morning sickness is still going on, but the doctor says it'll only last a few more weeks. I sure hope so. I don't remember feeling this lousy when I was pregnant with Emily."

"I'll be home soon and I'll take care of you. I wish you would've let my mom come stay with you while I was gone. You know she'd love to help out."

"I know, but your dad is so sick, and she really needs to be with him right now. It's okay, honey. I'm getting along just fine. I'll be much better tomorrow when you walk through the front door."

"I better go now, so I don't miss my flight. Tell Emily I'll be there to kiss her elbow just as soon as I can. I love you, Amanda."

"I love you, too. Hurry home."

David walked back to the row of chairs where his partner sat. "Come on Romeo, we've got a plane to catch."

The flight was nearly full. David and Michael squeezed their way to their seats in the back and settled in. David noticed the woman Michael had been admiring earlier and elbowed him. "Look who just walked back into your life."

Michael's eyes lit up and his mouth fell open.

"Mike, breathing isn't an option here. Just relax and go introduce yourself. I'll save your seat for you, in case it doesn't work out."

"You think I should? It's only been a year since the divorce. I'm not sure I'm ready."

"You've got to be kidding. I don't think you need to worry you're on the rebound. Wake up and smell the coffee, dude. It's been a whole year."

"But she's so—"

"You don't even think twice to bust down a door and nail a room full of malicious, armed drug dealers—but put you up against a beautiful, unarmed woman and you turn into the cowardly lion."

"Who said anything about her being unarmed? She may not have a gun, but she's got enough ammunition to put me out of commission for a long time," Michael replied in self defense.

"Come on Mike. You don't have to go and expose your guts to her. Just make some small talk. Introduce yourself. What possible damage can she do to you with just your name?"

Michael thought about what his partner said, then he stood up and stepped out into the aisle. “You’re right. I’m gonna do it,” he said with an initial confidence that weakened with every step as he got closer to the empty seat next to his dream woman.

Fifteen minutes had passed and Michael hadn’t returned. The woman, who introduced herself as Samantha, invited him to take the seat next to her. The pair seemed to hit it off like two puppies in a pile of socks. Michael resisted the temptation to talk about his divorce—a smart move on his part. Instead, he asked her about the camera equipment she carried on board with her. Samantha explained that she was a commercial photographer and was just finishing up an assignment photographing some of Mexico’s most stunning landscapes. Michael dabbled in photography as a hobby since high school and really enjoyed letting his creative juices flow while in the darkroom. Samantha, thrilled to have someone to talk to who shared her interest in photography, explained her techniques to Michael, who hung on every word.

It was very late and most of the passengers on the plane slept, except of course for Michael and Samantha, who were busy planning a trip to Disneyland the following weekend. David read a magazine article about natural childbirth and practiced the breathing techniques described in the third paragraph. He glanced out the window into the moonless night, wondering about names for his new son or daughter.

Suddenly, the plane surged straight up like a rocket, but without the horsepower needed to propel it into space. The strong thrust woke most of the passengers from their light sleep. Then the plane banked sharply to the left. David dropped his magazine and tried to shelter his head from the items falling out of the overhead storage compartments. Passengers who weren’t seat belted flew across the aisle onto the other passengers. He looked across the aisle at the mother and little boy in the seats opposite his. Terror shone in the little boy’s face as he cried and begged his mother to make it stop. She held him tight against her and told him not to worry—it would be all right.

Sheer panic raced through the plane as it continued to roll onto its back and then dove sharply downward toward the earth. People were screaming hysterically and praying loudly for the grace of God to save them from the hellish ride.

Samantha buried her face into Michael’s chest as he squeezed her, trying to calm her fears.

David’s life flashed before his eyes. He remembered his college graduation—seeing how proud his father was of him for graduating at top of his class. He saw every detail of his wedding—the beautiful bride walking down the long aisle of the church on her father’s arm. He remembered the day Emily, his little baby girl, was born and how elated and scared he was at the thought of being a father. His last thought was of Amanda and Emily and the new baby on the way, and how they would make it without him there to take care of them.

David spoke the words, "Please, dear God..." just as Flight 9602 crashed into the side of a mountain, exploding into a huge mass of flames and smoke. Burning debris flew for miles. Heat from the plane's nearly full fuel tanks was so intense that trees within a quarter-mile radius of the crash site were ignited. There could be no survivors.