

## The Rules of Silence

### Chapter 1

Benny Chalmers stared through the opened window of his pickup. He wore a soiled and sweat-stained khaki shirt with long sleeves, dirty jeans, and beat-to-hell cowboy boots with tops that reached nearly to his knees. He was red-faced from forty-one years in the searing border country sun, and his forehead was as white as a corpse where his Stetson had protected it.

It was four-thirty in the afternoon, and Chalmers was sitting in the middle of twenty-one million acres of rugged terrain known to ecologists as the South Texas plains and to everyone else as the Brush Country. They were fifty miles from anything other than an isolated ranch house every twenty or so miles. But they were only two hundred yards from Mexico. The sun was white. As far as you could see in any direction was an endless parched landscape of head-high thickets of cat claw and black brush interspersed with prickly pear flats and mesquite.

Chalmers was watching a rancher's *vaqueros* load 126 head of mixed-breed cattle into Chalmers's cattle truck. He had been hired to take them to another ranch near Bandera two hundred miles north. The cattle were being held in a sprawling maze of pens made of rusty oil rig drill pipe. A long iron-and-wood ramp ran from the pen's chute into the back of the trailer, a massive twelve-wheeler, triple-decker Wilson.

Fifty yards to Chalmers's left, a helicopter had just landed in a tornado of dust. The 'copter had disgorged three men wearing guns, boots,

and the familiar deep green uniforms of the U.S. Border Patrol agents. They were interested in watching the *vaqueros* load the cattle, and they were interested in Chalmers's big rig.

"Goddamn it," Chalmers muttered, squinting into the sun. The cattle were bawling and rocking the huge trailer as they clambered up the ramp and into the cavernous belly of their transportation. The cattle that were still in the pens milled and shuffled around in the hot dirt, kicking up dust that hung heavily above the whole operation in a rusty haze.

Chalmers had trucked cattle for border ranchers for twenty-two years. He knew more backcountry roads through the remote border ranches from El Paso to Brownsville than any man alive. And he knew about the hidden airstrips, too, and about the stepped-up Border Patrol activity because of the increase in smuggling of drugs and humans. He also knew that the odds were getting shorter against him.

He watched the three Border Patrol agents huddled at the rear of the trailer, looking in three different directions from behind their sunglasses. They were talking among themselves without looking at one another, the dust from the loading operation drifting over them and sticking to the sweat that stained their dark uniforms.

Then the agents disappeared around the side of the sixty-five foot long truck and trailer, and when they emerged from behind the cab of the red Mack tractor, they looked toward Chalmers and waved. He waved back, sticking his beefy arm out the pickup window.

"Adios, boys," he said under his breath. He turned back and looked out the windshield again and stared at the rusty fog and the cattle and the *vaqueros*. But he didn't relax until he heard the chopper's engine start, its low whine cranking up slowly, revving to lift.

He wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt.

Chalmers smuggled people, but his operation was more than just a little special. To frustrate the noses of the Border Patrol dogs, he built two cubicles in the curved top of his trailer right in the middle of a big bunch of stinking, shitting cattle. The cubicles were twenty-four inches high (a little more than the thickness of a man lying flat on his back), sixty-two inches long, and twenty-four inches wide. He piped air conditioning from the cab into the cubicles and put long, narrow water tanks in there with hoses to

drink from. A man could live three days in there easy and hardly feel it.

Two people only. Delivery guaranteed. But the fee was high. And Chalmers knew damn well what that meant. Whoever came to him willing to pay his price had to have something more waiting for him in the States than working on a framing crew or wiping tables in a fast-food joint. This was elite human smuggling he was offering here.

And it worked. He'd made nearly \$750,000 in six months. Cash.

At dusk Benny Chalmers finished up the paperwork with the rancher, using the hood of the rancher's pickup as a desk. They shook hands, and he said that he was going to get a bite to eat right there in his truck and then head out. Leaning on the front of the truck, he watched the rancher and his vaqueros drive away from the holding pens in their pickups, pulling horse trailers.

Half an hour later Chalmers stood at the edge of the brush, having a serious conversation in Spanish with four Mexican coyotes. His truck idled in the dying light behind him, its tiny amber lights glowing like long strands of embers. Real coyotes yipped and keened out in the endless night of desert brush.

The coyotes Chalmers was dealing with were heartless men who had lots of money, more than the U.S. government doled out to its law enforcement agencies. They bought the best electronic countermeasures that technology could produce, and here they were to prove it, bunch of sorry-ass Mexican smugglers wired up with headphones and mouth mikes like some damned singing kids on MTV.

Chalmers was sweating, nervous, wishing to hell he hadn't agreed to this particular load. He should have quit one load back. The last one should've been his last.

The kid who was apparently in charge of this spoke softly into the mike curved in front of his mouth, and they all turned and looked south toward the river and Mexico. Silence. A minute. Two. Three. Five. They all saw the chopper's distinctive blue light before they heard it, its baffled engine making no more noise than a quiet cough in the distance.

Suddenly Chalmers developed some respect. He'd seen this machine only once before, but he'd heard plenty of stories about it. He could've charged twice what he'd asked. Jesus.

The black chopper landed on a sandbar in the river, stayed no longer than a minute, then lifted up again and wheezed away into the darkness. They waited.

Soon a small group of men emerged from the grease brush, seeping out of it like shadows pulling loose from shadows.

There were three men with two black-hooded figures. The hooded men were dressed better than the others and communicated only by sign. He could tell that they could see through the strange sheen of the fabric. The more muscular of the two hooded men carried a cheap plastic net bag with a couple of mangoes and oranges in it.

One of the three escorts spoke with the young MTV smart asses, and then the little shit in charge turned to Chalmers and spoke to him in perfect, unaccented English.

“Okay, bubba,” he wisecracked, “this does it for us. We don’t have anything to do with the other end.”

Chalmers nodded, and the kid handed him a thick envelope. Chalmers calmly took a small Maglite out of his pocket and started counting. He didn’t care how many people were standing around waiting for him. This right here was what it was all about. He was looking after his end.

It was all there. He looked up. “Okay.”

“Let’s get these guys loaded up,” the kid said.

The two hooded men climbed up the side of the trailer and crawled feet first into the tiny compartment in the top of the cattle trailer. They never said a word. Once they were inside, Chalmers, standing on the rails on the outside of the trailer, started explaining to them in Spanish how to operate the air vents and the water hoses.

It was two-thirty in the morning when Chalmers delivered his cattle at another set of isolated holding pens on the Braden Ranch southwest of Bandera. This was the Texas Hill Country, rolling hills studded with oaks and mountain juniper. The Medina River was so close that you could smell it.

In the early morning darkness, Chalmers told the rancher he’d have to tidy up a few things on his trailer before he drove away, said adios to him, and watched the headlights of the last pickup ascend the caliche road

that climbed out of the shallow valley.

Then Chalmers turned and heaved his heavy body up on the rails of his trailer and climbed to the top. With a small ratchet he unscrewed two bolts and lifted out the panel that concealed the two cubicles.

*“Está bien,”* he said, and climbed down the rails again.

From the ground he watched as the first man wriggled from his cubicle in the near dark. He was no longer hooded, which immediately set Chalmers’s antennae to quivering. As the first man helped the second one—also without his hood now—negotiate the difficult exit onto the sides of the cattle trailer, Chalmers noticed that the first man was clearly younger and more muscular. Bodyguard.

They were stiff and moved slowly, but eventually they made their way to the ground. Even though it was dark, Chalmers deliberately kept his head down as the bodyguard produced a cell phone and placed a call. The older man walked a little ways from the truck, unzipped his pants, and pissed into the darkness, his back to them.

Chalmers made a big deal of being busy putting something in order on the tail end of the truck, but he kept a wary eye on the younger man’s hands. This was where Chalmers became a liability instead of a necessity. When the man finished his conversation, he came over to Chalmers.

“Which way’s the road?” he asked in English.

“Right behind you,” Chalmers said, his eyes averted, tilting his head toward the caliche track into the brush. His own rig pointed straight at it.

“Okay,” the man said, his voice saying a kind of thanks and a kind of good-bye. “Wait half hour,” he added, then turned and walked away toward the other man, who was pacing back and forth.

They exchanged a few words and then, without turning around, walked away into the cobalt darkness, headed for the only road out of the valley.

Slowly Chalmers eased over to a toolbox under the steps of his rig and took out a pair of binoculars. He moved away from the truck and sat on the ground, his legs pulled up, and rested his elbows on his knees. He put the binoculars to his eyes and focused it on the two men. The night vision lenses illuminated them in a slightly fuzzy, green world. They were still together. They didn’t look back.

He sensed it a millisecond before he felt it, the cold, thick tube eased firmly against his right ear. He knew. He went weightless, and his heavy, weary body levitated slowly and then stopped a few inches above the ground, the cold tube pressed against his ear keeping him from tilting. He was still watching the two men walking away in a green world when his head exploded.

## Chapter 2

The Lincoln Navigator climbed over the caliche track to a larger caliche road, this one wider, flatter, and graded. The Navigator turned right and quickly picked up speed to a fast clip. Behind the SUV the dust churned up into the cloudless darkness, where the glow of the three-quarter moon caught it and turned it into a plume of powdered silver that hung momentarily in the night and then slowly sank and settled away into the dark landscape.

When the Navigator hit the highway, it turned left and headed west. The man in the front passenger seat handed back two paper sacks with hamburgers to the men behind him, who hadn't had anything to eat except a few mangoes and oranges during the past twelve hours.

As the Navigator sailed over the rolling, winding highway through the Hill Country, the two men in the backseat ate, staring out through the windshield at the headlights threading the darkness. They all listened to the terse transmissions in Spanish coming over the complex of equipment stuffed under the dashboard and in the console between the two front seats. The space was so cramped that it resembled a cockpit.

Wearing headphones and a mike, the front-seat passenger occasionally spoke a word or two in flat, dispassionate Spanish, often changing frequencies. A computer screen in the center console displayed a map with remarkably sharp resolution and a stationary bright red spot in the upper right corner. The Navigator's progress was represented in the lower left center of the screen by a green pulsing dot, jerking its way on an irregular trajectory toward the upper right corner.

They turned north.

"What about those guys?" the older man said in English, referring to something he'd heard on the radio. He wanted to speak in English now. Get his head into it. His neck was stiff, and he could smell cow shit in his clothes. Riding in the top of a cattle truck was not his usual mode of travel.

“They’re in place, both of them.”

“You’ve checked with them, about the techniques?”

“Many times.”

The older man sighed in disgust and dropped the rest of his hamburger into the sack. Fucking hamburger. He wiped his mouth with the paper napkin. It would sit like a stone in his stomach. He tossed the sack onto the floor. Fucking stupid American hamburgers.

“And the other two?” he asked.

“The same.”

“The same what?” he snapped.

“They’re ready. Their techniques are well planned. They are waiting to hear from you.”

Outside, the countryside was lit by the waxing moon that raced along beside them. Hills rose up the size of pyramids, mounded and disguised by time, mile after mile of them. Occasionally they would fall away and a valley would open up, and sometimes fields, and sometimes meadows, rolled out under the moonlight. Now and then, in the distance, the windows of a solitary ranch house burned like isolated embers.

“Planning something like this, on this side,” he said to no one in particular, looking out the window, “we can’t be too careful. This time there’s no such thing as too much planning.”

The men listened. They were already nervous, all of them. The stakes this time were higher than they had ever been, and everyone knew that the older man behind them had a short and deadly fuse when the stakes were high. They had been planning this a long time, and now with the arrival of the cattle truck, there was no turning back.

The Navigator turned west again.

The older man liked the sounds of the radio transmissions. It meant his men were tending to business. There was always something to double-check. There was always a tiny, bothersome oversight to eliminate. He settled into the corner of his seat.

“This guy’s going to think the devil’s got him by the *huevos*,” he said. “He’s going to wish his mother had choked him to death the minute he was born, right there between her legs.”



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