

THE BREWER'S JUSTICE

Chapter One

July, 2012

Gleaming corporate towers and trendy boutiques, a little bit Manhattan, a little bit Beverly Hills, Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas pulsated with power and possibility. The most heavily trafficked thoroughfare in San Pedro showcased the successes of Mexico's affluent class and represented all the reasons Brad Peters had come to Mexico. He had given up a good job in Denver, moved to suburban Monterrey and committed all of his money and every ounce of his talent for the next two years for one reason: to brew the best damn beer in northern Mexico at the hottest new brewpub south of the U. S. border.

With vehicles darting around him, Brad tightened his grip on the wheel of the older, black Dodge Neon he had paid for in U.S. dollars his third day in Monterrey. Still uncomfortable with the aggressiveness of Mexican-style driving, he accelerated into a momentary gap between the cars to his right just in time to take the exit ramp. He exhaled a long breath at the first stop light on Avenida Gómez Morín. Here, among the densely packed one- and two-story buildings, traffic moved at a pace Brad could negotiate. The older commercial neighborhood had the comfortable, well-maintained appearance of a matronly *señora*. From lunchtime until late evening, corporate types in loosened ties unwound at the trendy restaurants. Families flocked to the nearby park and casual eateries. University students frequented the night spots. The only thing missing was an upscale brewpub, something Brad and Carlos Echeverría intended to remedy.

How Brad, a guy who had never lived outside Colorado, had ended up as the brewmaster of a future upscale Mexican brewpub was a story that not even he would have believed two years ago. Of course, none of it would have happened if he hadn't become friends with Carlos, now the senior partner and primary financial investor in MBC, Monterrey Brewing Company.

The light changed and Brad made it a half block before the diesel-belching bus ahead of him came to a stop. He watched a pack of passengers get off and new ones climb on to take their place. These were the maids, gardeners and employees who worked for the residents of San Pedro.

Brad was not looking forward to the conversation he and Carlos had to have as soon as he arrived at MBC. It wasn't that Carlos was a serious slacker. He was a good friend, a wealthy one, who given Brad an opportunity lots of brewers could only dream of. Brad would have preferred to forget the mess at the bank just now and simply get down to work, but he had stayed quiet more than once in the six weeks since he'd stepped off the plane.

He turned into the parking lot of the once elegant Quinta Saldaña Steakhouse, bumping over the patch of buckled asphalt and the pothole, on his way to the back lot. From the detritus piled outside the back door, he could see that the carpenters had started on the kitchen. The decades-old stainless steel cabinets looked worn and sad in the sunlight. Ditto for the commercial refrigerator.

Even with the car windows rolled up and the AC blasting, he could hear the carpenters' radio blaring *cumbias*. He parked in the shade of the sprawling oak tree, one of the few reminders of the *quinta's* early days, and killed the engine. As if on cue, a large tabby, minus the tip of one ear, padded towards the car. Brad pulled a handful of treats from the glove compartment. "Hey, Vagabundo, how's it going?"

The animal circled around Brad, rubbing against his jeans and purring, delicately lifting one paw, then the other, as though dancing to the *cumbias*. He had more or less come with the property. Officially, nobody claimed him, but several nearby restaurants all fed him. In return, the homeless feline kept the neighborhood rodent population in check. The two of them had hit it off from the start, maybe because neither fully belonged here. Brad had considered taking the cat to his sardine-can apartment—he would have welcomed the company. But Vagabundo was used to the outdoor life, and all the people who depended on his mousing abilities would have protested.

Carlos stood at the kitchen door holding out his cell phone. “Osorio,” he shouted over the *cumbias* and hammering. “He wants to talk with both of us.”

Given Brad’s mediocre command of Spanish, he should have liked the customs broker who spoke clipped East Coast English and dressed like a New York business mogul, but he’d never cared much for arrogant assholes. Besides, his plate this morning was already full. He nodded a hurried greeting to the carpenters and chased behind Carlos into the gutted dining room. The cinderblock walls underneath the plaster, and the concrete floors exposed last week when the carpenters ripped up the old tile, kept the summertime heat in the large room bearable each day until noon or so.

Carlos focused the hazel green eyes inherited from his Basque grandfather on Brad and motioned for him to shut the door. He tapped the cell in his hand, turning on the speakerphone. “*Aquí está Brath.*” Here, everyone lisped the end of Brad’s name.

“Good morning, Juan Pablo,” Brad said in the direction of the phone.

“*Buenos días, Brath. Miren, aquí tengo una persona conmigo.*” There was someone with Osorio who didn’t speak English. The customs broker launched into a long monologue, speeding up as he spoke and slowing losing Brad. MBC’s brewing equipment had arrived from Milwaukee early, great news, but there was some complication. Osorio spoke like a father talking to small children. Brad’s limited Spanish frustrated him on a daily basis, but what threw him now was the scowl on his partner’s face. “How can that be?” Carlos snapped, interrupting Osorio.

“A *something fee*,” Osorio kept repeating, “a *something fee.*” Carlos’s eyebrows knitted together as the conversation spun further out of Brad’s orbit. Carlos had started to run his fingers through his tousseled hair, a habit when he wasn’t totally comfortable. Brad wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

“He’s putting somebody else on the line,” Carlos mouthed.

“*Buenos días.*” The man spoke in a low, raspy voice and proceeded to use more words Brad didn’t know. The ones he did understand—*delinquents, criminals, insecurity, protection*—he didn’t like.

Carlos frowned but didn’t interrupt. When the man finally paused, Carlos only asked, “How much and by when?”

“One hundred thousand pesos. Call Osorio when you’ve got it.”

“It may take us some time,” Carlos said so softly that Brad strained to hear his words.

“Then it may take some time before you see your equipment.” Arrogance and control oozed around the stranger’s words. “And no cops. It’d be a shame to lose two hundred thousand dollars-worth of equipment.” Brad watched Carlos clench his teeth.

“Understood, Echeverría?” the man demanded in an impatient tone.

“Understood.”

Silence.

Carlos dropped the phone into his shirt pocket and blew out a long breath that puffed up his cheeks. In the kitchen, the carpenters and *cumbias* continued as if nothing had happened.

Brad rubbed his throbbing temples. “Okay, Big Guy, here’s what I got. Even though we’re paying Osorio a small fortune to get our equipment through customs, suddenly we owe him and the guy with the Godfather voice nearly seventy-five hundred dollars, cash only, money that we don’t have.”

Carlos threw his head back. “That guy’ is from a drug cartel and he claims we owe them a safe-passage fee.”

The words repeated themselves in Brad’s head until he finally found his voice. “That’s extortion.”

“And either we pay or we lose our equipment and, possibly, our lives.”

“We can’t go to the police?”

“Are you whacked?”

“What about your father and uncles and all your connections?”

“They’d all tell us to pay.”

“The Chamber of Commerce or the U.S. Consulate?”

“The Monterrey Chamber of Commerce can’t do anything, and there’s no way your Consulate’s going to take on the most violent drug cartel in Mexico.”

“I can’t believe that you—*we*—are just going to hand our money over to criminals.”

“I can’t either, but we are.”

“There’s got to be somebody who can help us.”

“*Ah, Güero.*” Here, he was either *Brath* or *Blond Guy*. Never mind that his wavy hair was light auburn. Somehow, in Mexico, his blue eyes—unremarkable in the States—and his fair skin entitled even strangers to call him *Güero*.

“Carlos, just say whatever the hell you’re thinking.”

“You Americans still have a wild west mentality. Just have the sheriff gallop into town and run off the bad guys. It doesn’t work that way with drug cartels.”

“But it’s wrong.”

“Hello! People who say no to these guys turn up in plazas minus their heads or hanging from overpasses.”

“All that time in Denver when you were talking up a Mexican brewpub, you never mentioned drug cartels or safe passage fees. ‘San Pedro is the nice, safe, affluent suburb,’ you said. ‘Practically like living in the States’.”

“Because, honest to God, these things almost never happen here in San Pedro.” Carlos ran his fingers through his hair one more time.

“*Almost* never. Terrific.”

“Are you coming?”

Brad didn’t like the impatient tone. “Where?”

“The bank.”

“We’re really going to do this? Pay off a Mexican drug cartel?” Brad said, hurrying behind Carlos who was already in the kitchen.

“Yes, we are,” Carlos shouted over the *cumbias*.

Brad dropped into one of the two folding chairs at the shaky card table, the only furnishings in the otherwise cavernous dining room. His headache had evolved into a dull, nonstop throb like the tapping of a small gong inside his head. Back home in Denver, he would have gone straight to the police. By now, they’d be hot on the trail of the scratchy-voiced creep. Helplessness wasn’t a feeling he was accustomed to, and he wasn’t liking it.

He watched Carlos, slightly taller, slightly leaner than himself, pace a meandering path around the large room as he talked softly into his cell phone. Inside the fat envelope bulging from his back pocket, one hundred purple one-thousand pesos bills waited, seven thousand five hundred twenty dollars. Carlos roared through life with boundless confidence, taking everybody around him along for the ride. Christ, in a tuxedo, he looked like the latest James Bond. He made things happen, from a good party to getting a Mexican work visa for his American brewer. But the tremble in Carlos’s hand had been unmistakable when he punched in Osorio’s number.

“They’re on their way,” Carlos announced, slipping the cell into his pocket and perching on the edge of the chair across the table.

“There’s more than one of them?”

“Apparently.”

“Great.” Brad winced at a spate of loud hammering that sent Vagabundo flying from the kitchen into the dining room and his lap. He tickled what remained of the cat’s right ear and reminded himself to relax his shoulders.

“What is it with you and that *gato callejero*?” Carlos asked.

“He’s not just any alley cat. He’s a survivor, as macho as they come. You’ve got to admire that,” Brad said, defending the animal, as they stared at each other. Carlos bounced his leg the way a nervous drummer absentmindedly tapped any surface his fingers came into contact with. “How much longer you think?”

“No idea.”

Brad studied the cat in his lap and the plaid pattern on his shirt, one of six he’d bought on sale at a big box store shortly before leaving Denver.

“Look, I’m sorry about this morning,” Carlos began.

Brad waved a hand, as though swatting at an imaginary fly. He wanted to bat away the bad vibes that hovered in the room like a fog. “We’ve got other things to deal with right now, Big Guy.” He stared through the dust-coated windows at the empty front parking lot.

“We need to discuss it sooner or later. I admit it was foolish of me to play poker until three in the morning when we had a nine o’clock appointment.”

“Asinine.”

“Asinine?”

“Nobody under thirty uses the word foolish.”

“Asinine as in ass,” Carlos said, repeating the word.

Brad’s irritation rose like hackles on an angry cat. “As in how I felt lying to the loan officer this morning after he sat there and watched me call you. ‘Tell him I’m caught in traffic,’ you said. Oh, please.”

“I won’t oversleep again. I swear.”

Brad exhaled and forced his shoulders down. “It’s not just the appointment this morning. Carlos, either you commit to MBC one-hundred percent, or both of us might as well walk away now before we lose all our money and our reputations. And this,” he made circles in the air with his hands, “this thing with Osorio adds a whole new dimension.”

Outside, a small white car entered the front lot too fast, somehow avoiding the pothole, and came to a sharp stop at the front door. Brad jumped up and sent Vagabundo scampering to the ground. The car’s occupants took their time getting out. In spite of the heat, the driver wore a light-weight runner’s jacket. He entered the front door and pulled off his sunglasses. Brad tried not to stare at the bald giant beside the driver but winced at the thought of having his head tattooed.

While the large man blocked the door, the driver advanced toward Brad and Carlos with slow, deliberate steps. Each one ratcheted up Brad’s tension. When the man was within three feet, he planted himself, legs wide apart and crossed his arms. He stared at Brad and Carlos before rasping, “*Bienvenidos al barrio*.” The voice left no doubt this was the man on the phone. What did he mean, “Welcome to the neighborhood?”

“*Carlos Echeverría*.” The narco said, pronouncing the name slowly as if enjoying the taste of each sound. A question, not a statement. He lifted his chin in a tough-guy gesture to which Carlos nodded.

“*Y Braht Peters*, gringo brewer of Monterrey Brewing Company.”

“*Sí*,” Brad responded, sounding confident but surlier than he had intended.

“They call me *El Míster*.” The thug waited as though giving them extra time to mentally register the information. What kind of name was that? And who, exactly, were the “they” who called him that?

“You’ve got the money?” the man asked.

With none of his usual confidence, Carlos pulled the envelope from his back pocket and held it out. The thug yanked it up and counted the bills in the same purposeful way he had walked in. He

returned them to the envelope and tapped the top with his index finger so the bills nestled down inside. He locked his eyes on Brad and Carlos as he stashed their money inside his jacket. It was then that Brad noticed the man's intense cobalt blue eyes—and the large, black pistol holstered to his belt. He watched numbly as Carlos asked, "When do we get our equipment?"

"Ask Osorio," the narco said in a bored tone, already walking toward the door with his back to them. "*Hasta luego.*"

As soon as the small car had disappeared into the heavy traffic, Brad shoved his way past Carlos, past the carpenters and their *cumbias*. Running out the back door, he nearly tripped over Vagabundo. Hidden by the pile of ripped-out equipment and the overflowing Dumpster, he collapsed against the back wall, panting while the cat rubbed against his legs. His damp shirt clung to his body. Rivulets of sweat rolled down his face. The intense sunlight made his eyes ache. He coughed and gagged, stumbling over the cat to heave the remains of his breakfast into the Dumpster. The traffic out front roared by in a deafening mix with the *cumbias* and the blood pounding in his ears.

He had come to Monterrey to brew beer. How the hell had the most violent drug cartel in Mexico discovered Brad Peters?