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T. J. ENGLISH

THE



WILLY FALCON  
AND THE COCAINE  
EMPIRE THAT  
SEDUCED AMERICA

LAST

KILO



**THE** **WILLY FALCON**  
**AND THE**  
**COCAINE EMPIRE**  
**THAT SEDUCED AMERICA**

**LAST**  
**KILO**

**T. J. ENGLISH**

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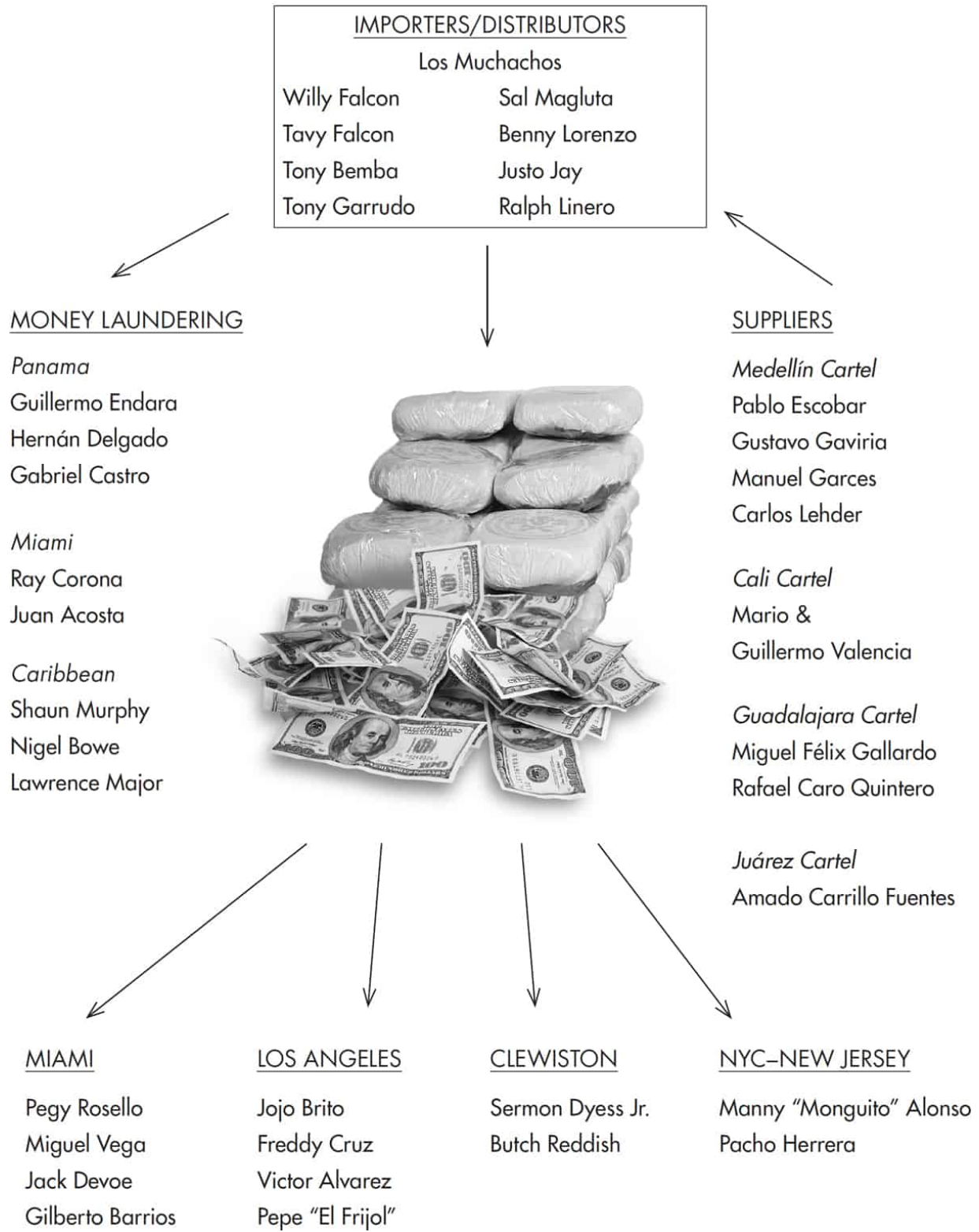


# **Dedication**

**In memory of  
Alina Rossique Falcon  
1956–1992**



# THE NARCOSPHERE (1977-1991)



## Epigraph

**The exile, I know this firsthand, has lost the place where he was and turned it into a source of myths, the root of his longing, and the aroma of his despair. For the Cuban, who had his exile coursing through his blood, nostalgia is, has always been, the cradle and grave of his passions. He cannot love without invoking loss and he cannot sing without his mouth filling with grief.**

**—Pablo Medina, Cuban poet**

**I am like any other man. All I do is supply a demand.**

**—Alphonse “Al” Capone**



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# Introduction

**THIS IS NOT A BOOK** about “Willy and Sal, the Cocaine Cowboys.” It is the story of a criminal organization known as Los Muchachos (the Boys) that was begun by Augusto Guillermo “Willy” Falcon and thrived as a major cocaine-distribution network in the United States from the late 1970s into the early 1990s. During that period, Los Muchachos were underworld royalty. Federal prosecutors estimated that they imported seventy-five tons of pure cocaine with a street value over \$2.6 billion. According to Willy Falcon, those numbers are low. He estimates that, over a fifteen-year period, he and his partners smuggled more like seven hundred tons with a street value today over \$50 billion, making them the preeminent cocaine smugglers during a period when the product, if it had been a legally traded commodity, would have dominated the New York Stock Exchange.

A primary source for this book has been Falcon himself, whom I interviewed extensively from March 2021—four years after he was released from having served twenty-seven years in federal prison—to September 2023, when the manuscript was completed and submitted to the publisher.

During the period in which I communicated with Falcon, his longtime partner, Salvador “Sal” Magluta, was not available to be interviewed. He was incarcerated, serving a 195-year sentence on cocaine-trafficking, obstruction-of-justice, and money-laundering charges—the same charges that ensnared Falcon back in the 1990s.

Over the years that Los Muchachos were in operation, and then later when they became notorious in the media and in courtrooms primarily in South Florida, the focus of attention was always on Willy and Sal. The two names were linked as if they were one and the same. They were not two individuals; they were one amorphous entity. This dovetailed nicely with the prosecution's theory of the case, which held that these two men were connected at the hip; they composed a single criminal conspiracy, so that anything one of them was involved with could be used as evidence against the other. This also became a central aspect of the media's fascination with the story. Not only were the names invariably lumped together as one, but their story was told as if they were Cuban exile Siamese twins. They were both "high school dropouts," "champion powerboat racers," "Cuban exiles and anti-Castro activists," "Cuban playboys," "*narco traficantes*." Willy and Sal, Sal and Willy—the beast with two heads.

This narrative not only put forth a skewed presentation of two individual human beings with separate life stories of their own, but it also obscured the nature of how and why this cocaine operation was so powerful and lasted as long as it did. Willy and Sal were not the same person. In the end, they had separate stories to tell. This book attempts to tell the story of Falcon, admittedly one version of the Willy and Sal story. I would argue it is *the* version, given that Willy, unlike Sal, was there from the beginning. He's the one who commenced the cocaine business as part of the clandestine movement to destabilize the government of Fidel Castro, so that Cuban exiles in Miami might reclaim their country. He is the one who brought together the key players who comprised what would arguably be the most efficient cocaine importation and distribution network the United States has ever seen.

One thing Willy and Sal did share was the historical context in which the events of this story took place. Miami in the 1980s was a unique place, a confluence of forces having to do with the residue of the Cuban Revolution, the Cold War, patterns of exile and immigration, and, most notably, the emergence of cocaine.

Some have compared this era to the time of Prohibition in the United States, in the 1920s, when the sudden illegality of alcohol gave rise to a massive underworld structure of organized crime that, to an extent, still exists to this day. One major difference is that booze had been around for a long time when it was declared illegal in 1919. Most people who drank had been doing so already at the time it was banned, and therefore engaged in the illicit activity of manufacturing, selling, and consuming the product with full understanding of what it was.

Cocaine, on the other hand, was brand new to most users. When it arrived on the scene in the mid-1970s, it was as if America awoke one morning and a fresh layer of glistening white snow had carpeted the landscape. Part of what drove the era was the sense of discovery, the excitement of a new stimulant, something fresh and exciting, the ultimate party drug brought down to size and made affordable to the masses.

In 1981, *Time* magazine famously published a cover story on the cocaine phenomenon, citing its popularity:

No longer is it primarily an exotic and ballyhooed indulgence of high-gloss entrepreneurs, Hollywood types and high rollers. . . . Today, cocaine is the drug of choice for perhaps millions of solid, conventional and often upwardly mobile citizens—lawyers, businessmen, students, government bureaucrats, politicians, policemen, secretaries, bankers, mechanics, real estate brokers, waitresses. . . . Coke is a supremely beguiling and relatively risk-free drug . . . a snort in each nostril and you're up and awake for thirty minutes or so. Alert, witty, and with it. No hangover. No physical addiction. No lung cancer.

Cocaine broke down inhibitions, and, at least superficially, made people feel sexy. It made revelers dance and get it on. For a time, Willy Falcon and those like him—major suppliers, of whom there were only a few—became stars in their own right. They were the deliverers of good times, at least until the downside of persistent cocaine use became apparent: delusions of grandeur, psychological addiction, financial ruin. Thus, the War on Drugs

was born, and law enforcement came after people like Falcon and his crew with a vengeance.

**IN DECEMBER 1983, WHEN THE COCAINE** era was in full ascent, the movie *Scarface* was released in theaters around the United States. At the time, the organization of Falcon and Magluta was bringing in roughly \$100 million annually. To celebrate their success, the core members of the organization, along with their wives and girlfriends, every year traveled from Miami to Las Vegas for a week of gambling, floor shows, and a massive New Year's Eve party at Caesars Palace Hotel and Casino.

One afternoon in late December, Falcon and eight members of his group went to see *Scarface*. The making of the movie had touched off a controversy in their hometown of Miami, where it was felt that the depiction of Cuban exiles as narcos was slanderous. Willy Falcon, following the lead of more formal exile organizations like the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), forbid any of his gang from taking part in the production. Consequently, the movie was shot primarily in Los Angeles, using that city as a stand-in for Miami.

That afternoon in the Las Vegas movie theater, Falcon and his group found *Scarface* to be highly entertaining. They hooted and hollered during the outlandish depictions of cocaine violence and mayhem. They laughed at Al Pacino's thick Marielito accent. The movie was so cartoonish in its attempts to dramatize the cocaine business—but with enough verisimilitude that the Boys were able to identify with it—that they were even flattered. They didn't take it seriously. They thought it was a joke. But they could see that their lives were being elevated into the zeitgeist, and the movie offered the possibility of a kind of cinematic immortality.

Later came *Miami Vice*, another popular depiction of the city's narco universe. Produced by the NBC network, the show debuted in 1984 and ran for five seasons. Along with the crime stories revolving around the cocaine underworld, the show was highly attuned to surface pleasures of Miami: the

pastel colors, Armani suits, sleek powerboats that were right out of the Willy and Sal story, and popular rock, R&B, and Latin music. *Miami Vice* defined cool in the 1980s and suggested that it was all an extension of the city's illicit cocaine universe.

Part of what made these works of popular entertainment so influential was that they appeared to be straight from the headlines. Movies depicting Prohibition had been popular, but they came years and even decades after the era they were depicting. *Scarface* and *Miami Vice* portrayed a phenomenon in real time, as it was happening, making those who were caught up in it feel as though they were living a dream.

In the decades that followed came many more movies and television dramas that used the cocaine universe for their storylines. Many took their cues from *Scarface*. Colombian, Cuban, and later Mexican narcos were invariably depicted as sociopaths or flat-out psychopaths in a business that politicians and people in law enforcement characterized as “evil.” If there was to be a presentation of the cocaine business in entertainment or even in real life—through reports on the television news—it was invariably steeped in violence.

“Say hello to my little friend,” Tony Montana’s business motto in *Scarface*, was a prelude to violent mythmaking, and that seemed to be the way the American public was primed to receive any and all stories related to the cocaine business.

As is usually the case, the reality was more complicated.

For most of its existence, Willy Falcon and Los Muchachos’ operations in the cocaine world involved little violence. The Boys did not seek to eliminate rivals through murder and intimidation. They did not punish their members internally with torture or killing or even the threat of killing. They did not pull out chain saws, à la *Scarface*. They did not mow down hordes of partygoers with Uzi submachine guns.

It was true that the world in which they were operating was a violent one. The narcosphere, as it was sometimes called, involved violence from top to bottom. Lowly street dealers used violence, and so did Pablo Escobar,



believed in the 1980s to be the godfather of the business. And yet, the example of Los Muchachos suggests that it was possible to succeed at a high level without a reputation for murder—especially if your forte was importation and distribution, not dog-eat-dog entrepreneurship at the retail level.\*

The story of Los Muchachos shows that it was not violence that was the dominant characteristic of the cocaine business.

It was corruption.

Dirty cops, agents, lawyers, judges, and politicians feeding off the profits of the narcosphere is what made the world go round. This existed at every level of the business, in every country, state, and city where kilos of coke passed through grubby hands on its way to and up the nostrils of the consumer. Falcon and Magluta played this game. With what seemed like unlimited resources, they bought off representatives of the system, from a county sheriff who made it possible for them to land their product at a clandestine airstrip, to a high-level money launderer who became the president of a country.

Corruption represents a human failing. It is usually practiced by people who, out of need, convenience, or necessity, choose to violate the principles by which they claim to live their lives. When it comes to corruption, greed is the most obvious culprit, stemming from a celebration of wealth, avarice, and the accumulation of more and more and more. Sometimes a person takes illegal payoffs to pay for a friend's or relative's medical costs, to deal with a family crisis, to put a kid through college. Whatever the reason, corruption as a shortcut to the American dream became an operating principle that would turn the cocaine business of the 1980s into the most lucrative illegal endeavor on the planet.

**THE NARCOSPHERE IS NOT A** physical place; it is a realm of operation and a state of mind. It spans sovereign boundaries, physical space, borders, and political jurisdictions. Bolivia and Peru, where the coca plant is grown and

cultivated, are parts of the narcosphere, as is Colombia, where the plant is processed into cocaine hydrochloride. For a long time, Panama City served as the central money-laundering domain of the narcosphere. The Caribbean islands, and later Mexico—which would become the preeminent region of transshipment—have been and are corridors of the narcosphere. The United States of America, the primary marketplace for the product, with more users of cocaine than anywhere else in the world, is arguably the engine that runs the entire operation. Regional players—narcos, cokeheads, drug mules, people in law enforcement, judges, politicians, distributors, dealers, citizens who look the other way—are all participants in this field of illegal commerce that still thrives in the present day.

For more than a decade, Falcon and his partners not only operated within this world but also succeeded at it to a degree that was unprecedented.

In the years since this story was in the headlines, some would rather minimize and diminish its significance to the point where one of the prosecutors of Willy and Sal, in an interview for this book, made the statement: “Falcon and Magluta were probably the most successful and biggest drug dealers in South Florida, but they weren’t into importing drugs. They were receiving the drugs from smuggling gangs, and then they would distribute it, but they weren’t importing.”

This is a breathtakingly erroneous statement from someone who prosecuted Los Muchachos. As you will see from reading this book, Willy and Sal brokered major importation deals from around the narcosphere. In lore and legend, they have been portrayed as Cuban American playboys, high school dropouts, and amateurs who stumbled onto a hot property and exploited its popularity throughout the Dionysian era of the 1980s.

There is much more to this story than has been previously known. Partly, this is because Falcon and his closest associates have never talked about or been interviewed on the subject—until now. Back in the day, when they were facing prosecution, it was not in their interest to talk openly and honestly for the record. But the passage of time has a way of rearranging priorities. Most

of these people have paid their debt to society, in many cases with long prison sentences. Over the decades, Falcon and his former partners have read accounts in the press or online, or seen documentaries on television and the internet, that present a dubious version of their personal histories. Falcon, for one, has waited a long time to give his version of what happened. His willingness to do so opened the door for many others from Los Muchachos to come forward and cooperate with the writing of this book. They represent a generation of people—mostly Cuban born or Cuban American—who got caught up in this wild era, have paid the price, and now live with the memories of their involvement in the golden age of cocaine.

It is time that this story be told from the point of view of those who lived it. Certainly, from a historical perspective, these events are significant to an understanding of the American process during a time of unprecedented crime and mayhem. But it is also important to understand that many lives, on both sides of the law, became enmeshed in the events of this time, and that their experiences—which became fodder for criminal indictments and media accounts—deserve to be recounted, preserved, and acknowledged on a human level.

History is not simply a cavalcade of big events—wars, elections, or public policies that shape the flow of human endeavor. It is also a consequence of simple people making choices—good, bad, or indifferent—that lead them on a life-altering journey, a singular adventure that maybe shapes the times in which they live. In the case of those who comprised Los Muchachos, the passage of time has shed new light on troubling personal events, unearthed deeply buried emotions, rattled the cages of ghosts, and flung open the doors of repressed recollections from long ago.

**MOST OFTEN, ACCOUNTS OF THIS** type are written from the point of view of those who cooperated with the government. On the street, they are called snitches, and they are the lifeblood of criminal prosecutions in American courts. Theoretically, informants are the people most able and willing to tell

their story to an author, since they were likely given a plea deal to provide information and testify on behalf of the government. In the criminal world, these types of books are sometimes criticized as being the informant's version of events, and therefore suspect.

In my career as a crime writer, I have published a number of books in which the story is told from this point of view. For a nonfiction author, people who have testified for the government are often the only sources available to tell such a story. Convicted criminals are buried away in prison. Even if they wanted to submit to an interview, which is rare, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) generally does not allow it (unless it is, somehow, beneficial to the government to do so). The common bromide that underworld history is most often told by the informants has more than a grain of truth.

This book is different. I have steered clear of sources who cooperated with the government. Not that I discount their version of events—their testimony at various criminal proceedings is readily available. For the most part, I have incorporated their version of events and relationships as they recounted it from the witness stand, or, more recently, through interviews they have done for documentaries, books, and podcasts. For some, their accounts are well known and have become the standard version of the Willy and Sal story as it exists in popular culture.

My goal with this book has been to provide an account primarily from those who did not cooperate with the government. This is the version of those who submitted to long sentences in prison rather than snitch on their friends and associates. I have also interviewed detectives, prosecutors, federal agents, and many others who played a role in taking down Los Muchachos as a criminal organization. However, the inner workings of the group—the relationships and motivations that sustained the gang for more than a decade—are here portrayed by those who did not snitch.

Theirs is a version with crazy highs and even crazier lows. For many of these people, the most astonishing fact is that they survived it, did the time, and have lived to tell the tale.