

## Chapter 1

### Last Day

As he penned the final word a building opposite exploded. Kelly looked up from his thoughts. Across the plaza objects of stone and flesh had broken apart and were flying in all directions. It was 10.14 a.m. and the world had no more room for horror, and yet still it came, marauding in wave after relentless wave.

A burly man passed his table and pulled down corrugated shutters, sealing out the city.

It crossed his mind to feel angry at the way in which events had transpired, that he should end up the lynchpin when countless others seemed infinitely more worthy. Kelly had made an art form of burying his aggression down deep, but could now feel it ascending and narrowing into a fine pinpoint of rage.

He stirred his coffee. The dark liquid formed serene, swan-like motions in the tiny cup as the spoon disturbed its stillness.

Doubt enveloped him. He wrestled with his demons. Between them they threw up the image of a woman. He closed his eyes and saw visions that caused him to shake. With the recollection of feminine features came a compassion that sat uncomfortably alongside the ferocity like vapour over water.

He took a sip from the tiny cup and winced.

‘Got any sugar?’

‘Eh?’

‘Azucar?’

‘Ah . . . si.’

The burly man signalled to the café’s one and only waiter, a dishevelled-looking young man in canvas trousers and an open-collared shirt.

*You could leave now, alone. Take what you have amassed and leave the city.*

His legs seemed unwilling to respond. He removed a beanie hat, and ran dirty hands through hair that had not been washed in days.

*I didn’t ask for this.*

The scrawny waiter approached his table with a bag of sugar. Kelly stared at him blankly. The man flinched with sudden recognition. His

eyes begged the question: *what are your intentions?*

Kelly took some time before opening his mouth, careful to transfer more in his phrasing than the two words alone should allow.

‘Speak English?’

The waiter looked confused. ‘A little.’

‘What’s your name?’

Now he understood. Some of the tension left his shoulders.

‘Ernesto?’

‘Strange name for a waiter?’ Kelly commented.

Ernesto grinned, revealing an impressive array of white teeth amid his straggly black beard.

‘Is good enough for Che Guevara, is good enough for me.’

Kelly took the sugar and shook his hand. ‘Quite right. My apologies.’

Their conversation was interrupted by a shower of hailstones that rose in volume from a gentle patter to deafening booms as debris started raining down on the outside walls and roof. There was the sound of breaking glass, a car alarm going off and disorientated shouting. A large slab of plaster fell from the ceiling, sending swirling stalactites of dust pirouetting to the ground. Kelly placed a weathered hand over the espresso to guard it from contamination.

‘Is Arty here?’

‘Eh?’

‘Arty? *Esta aqui?*’

‘Ah *si.*’

Ernesto disappeared into a back room, leaving the burly man drying dishes with a greasy looking cloth.

Kelly’s mind swung unexpectedly towards self-preservation and he found himself rising from his seat, taking the dark liquid to the back of his throat, absorbing the hit that flowed down through his exhausted body and making his way across the room. Fingers closed around the door handle.

He stopped.

*Indecision is out of character. What are you playing at?*

The handle began to turn.

*Your life is no longer your own. It was bought at a price.*

Kelly’s head came to rest on the doorframe and his hand fell limply by his side. There seemed no point to anything that had gone before and no hope in anything ahead.

*Esperanza, what would you do in my shoes?*

A tempest swelled in his heart, violently suppressing the urge to leave. Kelly turned around and met the gaze of the burly man who quickly looked to the ground with a shudder. It seemed inconceivable that life had come down to this, that he could be lured out into the open, only to be cheated by a fate crueller than his own nature. A cursory glance around the café revealed any number of potential weapons. Veins were standing out on his arms. He became aware that he had stopped breathing.

Kelly exhaled loudly and the menace left him as suddenly as it had arrived. A long-forgotten conscience stirred.

*You have to be cleverer than this.*

'*Uno mas espresso,*' he shouted. The burly man nodded subserviently and reached for the coffee beans.

His composure restored, he walked slowly back to the table and sat down.

Despite the wealth of its owner, the café had been allowed to fall into disrepute. Over the years the wallpaper had succumbed to tobacco-stained yellow and brown streaks. Formica covered every surface – chipped, scratched and in desperate need of repair. Angles were slightly off, shelves slightly warped.

*I will be glad to see the back of this place.*

'*Mister Kelly!*' a deep voice bellowed with vindictive relish. 'I'd say the chances of you living through the day are pretty *slim*, wouldn't you say?'

From the corner of his eye Kelly saw a shapeless mass enter the room. He didn't look up.

'Opinions vary.'

Arty sat down with a graceless thud that made the chair creak painfully beneath his bulk. Kelly felt greedy eyes scanning his body for potential gain, noting the various bulging pockets with anticipation of imminent rewards.

'What are you doing out in the open?'

Kelly shrugged. 'Who'd harbour me after this morning?'

'True.'

'Besides, who's gonna find me here? You never have any customers.'

'Now Mister Kelly,' the café owner chided, pretending to take offence, 'you know it hurts me when you say things like that.'

'Tell someone who cares.'

Only now did Kelly turn to face the man. Arty was wearing his

trademark pinstripe trousers, held up around his monstrous belly by thin red braces. A shirt, unbuttoned to the waist, revealed a thick mat of curly grey chest hair and shoulders that merged with his head. Tumbles of flesh hid any remnants of a neck.

'With remarks like that a struggling businessman might be inclined to bolster his modest financial position with the reward posted for news on your whereabouts!'

Kelly ignored the comment and gestured towards the front door. 'That'll be the department of sanitation then?'

Arty nodded and did his best to portray melancholy regret. 'It was only a matter of time – worth more as rubble.'

Ernesto returned with the second espresso. Kelly reached into his pocket for payment, but Arty grabbed his wrist.

'Money's no good here, except maybe for keeping the fire going.'

Kelly shook off the grasp and withdrew his hand. 'What then?'

'What else you got?' the café owner replied with a hawkish glare that swept once more across Kelly's clothing.

'Nothing you could afford.'

'Come on,' Arty teased, 'what about the liquor?'

From his inside coat pocket Kelly produced a small bottle of single-malt whisky. He appeared to mull over the proposition for a moment; a necessary part of the bargaining.

'The *whole* bottle? For that I'd expect free drinks for life.'

'Done.'

'And a favour.'

Arty's eyes narrowed as his fat fingers sort to prize the object from Kelly's hand. 'Depends.'

Kelly relinquished the bottle without protest. 'Good, then we have a deal?'

'I said it *depends*.'

'Come with me.'

Before the café owner had time to react Kelly jumped up from his chair, crossed the room at pace and opened the front door. The room was immediately filled with clouds of billowing black smoke and ash, rolling in across the floor and up along the walls, snuffing out any remaining light and making the darkness complete. Behind him he heard a tremendous crashing of chairs as Arty fell backwards in response to the shadowy arms that reached for him.

'You son of a bitch!' he shrieked.

'Stop whining and follow me.'

'And how am I supposed to do that you miserable thief? I can't see!'

At the far side of the room Ernesto felt someone press a scrap of paper into his palm. He later found it to be a napkin; the words '*Meet me behind the café at 12.00*' scrawled on its surface.

Outside the sky was like an eclipse. As ridiculous and unnerving as the phenomenon was, it seemed almost fitting; a life compromised beyond repair.

Kelly closed his eyes and stood silent in the street, feeling the tiny shards of glass and brick-dust strike his face, coating his skin and outer clothing in a layer of grey and terracotta. The stillness was intoxicating. The staggering hurt and losses of the past weeks, months and years felt at bay, held aloft for a brief moment.

For those fleeting, fragile seconds he believed himself to be someone else, a person of principles – ethical, upstanding, free from damnation, a believer of some description, light-headed and unbothered by guilt.

'Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me?'

A stranger's voice sucked him back from his delusion. He was *not* a good man but an opportunist – a liar, a swindler and a usurper, spiritually broken and corrupt.

'Hello? Knock if you can hear me?'

There were footsteps over loose-moving ground, searching hands brushing against unseen obstacles. It hadn't occurred to Kelly to look for survivors. He shrunk back towards the café door, frightened and intimidated by the selfless deeds of others.

Shielding his opening eyes from the debris he could now see shades in the dark, the corners of buildings, a path beneath his feet, edges of the road.

The far left-hand corner of the plaza d'armas has vanished; lost in the choking murk rising up from a crater. The blast had rippled out across the adjoining streets and broken their many paving slabs into unintentional mosaics.

Arty was by Kelly's side, squinting into the aftermath.

'*Man*, you'd think those clowns would've worked out how much explosive to use by now!'

'Show some respect, for crying out loud. There are a lot of bodies lying out there.'

'Since when did you care?'

'I don't.'

The years of slow-burning tension had painted central Corderro with a pale, gaunt, yellowish skin. Whole suburbs had fallen into disrepute; a transformation from proud districts to bowed and burdened slums. Even the most ancient parts of the city were blotted with foul eyesores, smouldering trenches, burnt-out vehicles, dogs hanging from lampposts and vacant vessels lying in the road.

The relentless barrage of cruelty had always washed over Kelly, but now he felt its weight bearing down on him, crushing the air from his lungs.

There was a man across the plaza, scrambling frantically in the rubble, tears pouring down his face. Kelly felt the absurd notion to join him in his search.

'El Rey must be getting pretty short on funds to stoop this low,' Arty commented.

'With you everything always comes down to money.'

Arty scoffed. 'Pot – kettle – black.'

As the dust cleared Kelly felt the eyes of the city upon him, telling him he was no longer welcome, that he had taken much without giving anything back in return. He was used to inconspicuous movement, and the wide-open building-less plaza left him suddenly exposed.

Arty was relishing the spectacle with a look of unrestrained awe.

'Come on,' Kelly whispered, 'I want to show you—'

Something caught his eye.

Behind the café owner, barely visible beneath the soot and ash, he made out a large 'A' spray-painted onto the shutters. The letter was framed within a circle with its tail punching through the circumference:



The sight of it momentarily lifted his spirits. 'Why *Arty!* It seems you've joined the revolution!'

Arty was not amused. 'Ernesto!' he screamed. 'Clean this obscenity from my café. *Putá!* I hope they string that delusional do-gooder up by his thumbs, defacing my property.'

'Hardly the worst of his crimes.'

'I'd like to wring El Ambiente's neck.'

'Never happen.'

'They'll find him.'

'No, they won't.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Trust me, they won't.'

Arty composed himself and peered into the miasma. 'So, what am I looking at?'

'It's nearby. We need to walk a short distance.'

'Forget it. You know my policy on exercise!'

Kelly took Arty's arm; a gesture of intimacy that embarrassed both men. 'It's really important that you see this. An awful lot rides on it . . . please?'

He hid his true intent. The café owner took the plea for a compliment.

'This had better be good!'

'It is.'

He led Arty from the plaza d'armas, along the remnants of downtown and into the market district. The raw destruction of moments ago was replaced with a more subdued and anaesthetized carnage. They passed into a labyrinth of dark alleyways and bohemian courtyards; small pockets of colonial beauty that did their best to mask the rack and ruin beneath colourful drapes, music and movement. Down they continued, squeezing through nooks and crannies, bars and bargaining dens, a metropolis that had been Kelly's dwelling place for the past four years; never his home.

The road rose steeply to a plateau overlooking the ocean. Arty began to snort and rasp. Kelly watched with mild amusement as he stumbled every few steps hiking up his enormous trousers.

'Is it much farther?'

'No.'

'You're a liar!'

'This is not news to either of us.'

They came at last to the Hotel El Sacramento. Large oak doors opened out into a central atrium that reached up into rafters without either ceiling or roof. On each of its many dishevelled floors precarious wooden balconies branched off into unseen bedrooms. The black and white chequered foyer tiles were awash with rainwater, twigs and leaves. Upturned chairs had not been righted, but instead left to soak up the moisture.

'Why on earth would you bring me here?' Arty whined.

'As I said, I need your help.'

'This place is beyond help.'

Kelly ignored the comment and walked into the hotel.

The reception desk stood as an elaborate centrepiece. Its black marble counter was flanked by immense wooden horses rearing up on their hind legs. Behind the desk stood an equally elaborate-looking man – short and bald, sporting a gargantuan Zapata moustache and dressed in a three-piece lilac suit, lime shirt and bright-orange silk cravat. Upon seeing the two men he reached below the worn surface, one hand rising with a set of keys, the other with a shotgun.

'Wasn't sure if you'd come back,' he said.

Kelly smiled coldly. 'Neither was I.'

The man led them into the hotel. A series of twists and turns brought them to a corridor where the carpets ran thread bare, and the walls swelled. At the end of the passageway a stairwell led down into a series of small sub-rooms, and finally to an underground garage. The man left without a word.

The only source of light came from a tiny window. The room was vast, but most of its features were hidden. In the far right-hand corner Arty distinguished the outline of a vehicle.

'My patience is wearing thin, Kelly.'

'Almost there,' Kelly replied. 'Tread carefully.'

The vehicle was a blue van. Even in the poor visibility it was evident that there had been a collision of some sorts. Attempts had been made to hammer the bodywork back into shape, but its original white colour was still visible beneath the lumpy panels of a clumsy, haphazard respray.

'You think you can walk a few more feet?'

'Drop dead!'

The two men made their way through the fog-like haze, the loose ground moving and tumbling beneath each step. Kelly tapped lightly on the side panel, inserted the key in the lock and flung the back door wide open. He didn't look inside, but instead watched the expression change on the café owner's face.

'Here is the favour I seek.'

Arty stared at its contents for some time, first in disbelief, then in confusion, finally bellowing with raucous laughter.

'*Mi Dios!* How the mighty have fallen. Did Katrina put you up to this?'

'Let's just say that she redeemed my shitty life.'

'And what the hell does that mean?'

*'I don't know.'*

Arty pulled at his jowls and shook his head from side to side. 'You want my advice? Leave this van, leave the keys in the ignition and walk away, find somewhere quiet and lie low for a couple of days.'

Arty spoke with such vigour that he almost sounded sincere, but Kelly knew of his ulterior motives.

'What are you, an *idiot*? Take a look around – the city is falling. This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are too many people disappearing. It's become too unsafe.'

Arty smiled. The many folds of his flabby face parted in deep satisfaction. 'I know their patterns, who they're looking for.'

'They're not always targeting, you *know* that. Sometimes it's just random.'

'There are ways and means of becoming immune, Mr Kelly. You'd do well to take a leaf out of ole Arty's book and check your allegiances.'

Kelly regarded the man with intense scrutiny, as if taking him in for the first time. In his mind he reached into the man and ripped the tar-infested lungs from his chest.

'You're remarkably well informed for a café owner.'

'I thrive on the trafficking of information, not the skin trade.'

'It's not like that, and you know it.'

Arty waved his arms in mock protest. 'Fine, my mistake, you're a *saint*, and the last four years have all been a charade.'

The trap was set, the bait hanging ripe and succulent. Kelly lowered his defences.

'Tell me something, Arty. What on earth does life amount to, I mean really?'

True to form the café owner jumped on the uncharacteristic honesty, smelling what he thought was weakness. 'Bit late to be searching for a sense of purpose, wouldn't you say?'

Kelly switched back, his abrupt actions implying regret. 'I'll need travel documents.'

'By when?'

'Midday.'

'You're joking?'

'If I was joking I'd say, "Why did the fat man cross the road?"'

'It'll cost you.'

'Fine.'

'Five hundred – dollars or gold – no petras.'

'I said fine.'

Arty chuckled to himself, enjoying the good fortune that had fallen into his lap. 'Ah, the blessings that war bestows.'

Even by Arty's standards the comment was mercilessly poor, but ever the pragmatist Kelly took what he could from it.

*Thank you. Now my path is set.*

'I'll call you in a few hours.'

'Make it three, a guy's gotta eat!'

'OK, three then, but be ready.'

'Of course – give me a lift back.'

'I'm staying here. Why don't you flag down one of your black sedan friends, seeing as you're so close?'

'You ungrateful little—'

'I'll express my gratitude in money.'

Kelly extended his hand. When the café owner begrudgingly shook it Kelly gripped tight and locked eyes.

'I'm trusting you, Arty.'

'Sure thing, Slim.'

Arty walked back through the rolling, churning debris, cursing under his breath. Only now did Kelly look into the van. Something within flickered in the darkness. He closed the door.

Back in the hotel someone shouted, '*Lo siento, mas gordo.*' ('I'm sorry, too fat.')

Moments later Arty replied with, '*Hijo de puta.*' ('Son of a whore.')

Kelly got into the driver's seat and let his head fall back.

*It's a strange sensation to realize that your life amounts to nothing.*

In an even stranger way Kelly felt some measure of gratitude for the misfortune that had befallen him, stripped of everything he'd once held dear, but standing none the less.

'There may yet be time.'

His own words failed to bring comfort.

*Time for what?*

The revelation wouldn't come. Kelly shook the thought from his head, put the van into gear and cautiously pulled away.

## *Chapter 2*

### The Port of Green Waves

#### **Six weeks earlier**

#### **1.**

Nowhere was the economic chaos felt more acutely than in El Puerto de Las Ondas Verdes. It was situated to the east of the city and got its name from the high algae content that turned the water a brilliant shade of emerald as it neared the coast.

The port formed the commercial hub of Corderro. Despite international laws preventing tourists from visiting its shores the principality still traded freely with the outside world. Boats arrived on an average of five an hour. Most were empty, hoping to bleed the city dry and leave the next day heavily laden with cheap goods.

In recent months the emperor, El Rey, had appointed a new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Tito Majagranzas. Within days of his employment the national currency, La Petra, went into freefall, and had now disintegrated to a point where it was virtually worthless. The Chancellor's efforts to rectify the situation created hyperinflation on an unprecedented scale. Prices rose into the echelons and a barter culture effectively replaced the currency. Vague notions of value were chalked up on huge blackboards in relation to US dollars, euros, petras and gold, to give some indication of relative worth, but these values changed dramatically from minute to minute, the boards were constantly out of date and fights were frequently breaking out with traders accusing one another of loading the figures in their favour.

The Chancellor's latest attempt to restore equilibrium was to introduce a whole raft of measures – taxes, levies, extortion, arson and creative accountancy – none of which had proved successful.

Corderro's financial instability was equalled only by its civil unrest. Law and order had long since been abandoned as a mythical, unobtainable concept. The significant military presence at the port was largely corrupt, and generally turned a blind eye to the unorthodox and mostly illegal activities that took place in favour of supplementing their meagre salaries. El Rey's spies were rife in the trading area, but were fairly easy

to spot due to their general ineptitude in buying and selling. Even so, it was considered wise to avoid them, or at the very least show ignorance as to their true disposition.

The levies and taxes had been steep even before Tito came to office. Now, with the rates rising almost daily, the only way to make any serious money was not to declare anything. As a result smuggling had become second nature, and a large number of individuals were attempting to steal pretty much everything that arrived in El Puerto de Las Ondas Verdes.

The most successful of these were three men – Paolo, Raoul and Kelly.

Paolo and Raoul worked together. Both men were tall and scruffy with unkempt shaggy brown hair. They dabbled in all goods that arrived, but their preferences were for food and clothing.

Kelly worked alone – a dark, brooding, selfish man. His single-minded but modest approach had honed his skill to the point where he was both the most successful and the least noticed tradesman in the port. Under his watchful eye sizable quantities of every conceivable commodity went astray from under their masters' noses day after day, reappearing in a variety of black market warehouses and bartering dens.

All three men had worked in the port for four years.

The average life expectancy of a smuggler was two.

## 2.

Katrina met Paolo and Raoul at the quayside. She tipped the taxi driver twenty petras – a handsome sum a week ago, now nothing. The man snorted his disgust and pulled away. Seeing the two men, particularly Paolo, always made her feel anxious. She was stretched and misshapen from living perpetually at the end of herself, and yet for all her sacrifice Katrina was merely treading water in a sea her friends had been immersed in their entire lives.

The pathway was littered with haggard-looking fishermen hunched hopefully over their lines. She drew glances as she passed by. With her shock of red hair and pale complexion she always stood out amongst the mix of Hispanic and Indian features.

Paolo's smile was so warm and genuine that Katrina felt as if she would fall to her knees and weep. Its presence on his face defied the immense misfortune he and his family had endured.

'Esperanza,' he greeted, 'this is a mistake.'

Overlaying the smile Katrina saw deep tracts of angst. Raoul's head angled down toward the wooden jetty.

'I have to agree, señorita, this is foolish. *He* will not join us. There is much to lose, and little to gain.'

Katrina had learnt from bitter experience to hold their words in the utmost regard, but she was stubborn, and desperately wanted to prove herself.

'Is he as good as you say he is?'

'Better.'

'Then I must try.'

Her usual obstinacy had been expected. 'OK,' Paolo conceded reluctantly, 'but watch what you say and don't expect a warm reception.'

They led her down a series of gangplanks to the outer circle. Here those who were either too poor or else too notorious to venture beyond the tollgates gathered to sell smaller items, mostly scraps and oddities stolen from anyone who entered without their wits about them. It was commonplace for traders to work in tandem, one selling an item and the other stealing it back before the buyer had even left the stall.

Gambling was also widespread in the outer areas. It was the one vice that could be afforded no matter how low a social standing. The unspoken rule was that a person could never bet what they didn't have. To be found short when debts were being settled was worse than murder in the eyes of El Puerto de Las Ondas Verdes. Loan sharking of any description was abhorred and anyone found in contravention was lynched there and then, or else excommunicated and banned from trading forever.

Katrina was overcome by an unwelcome clash of smells – thick enveloping cigar smoke, sweaty blood-soaked cockerels fighting in cages, gutted fish, rotting fruit and beer-drenched folding tables with card games in full swing; various foreign currencies soaking up the froth in heaped piles. Raoul took her hand and pulled her through groups of overenthusiastic men thrusting a variety of objects in her face – sharks' teeth, coral necklaces, squid, lobster and bottles of intoxicating liquid.

Through the din of smoke and demanding voices Katrina was dragged into a clearing where the masses petered out. Two heavily armed but lethargic-looking men stood guarding the rusty iron gates to the inner port.

Raoul and Paolo presented IDs that named themselves as Federico

and Julian. Paolo's was accompanied by a roll of notes.

'My sister,' he indicated towards Katrina. 'She doesn't have an ID, but isn't here to trade. Am I OK to bring her in as an observer?'

The lie was ridiculous. Paolo had clay-coloured skin and was at least twenty years older than her. Katrina felt herself being looked up and down. The guard slipped the notes into his pocket and handed back the IDs. 'Of course she is.'

The gate was opened without another word.

Once inside, the stalls and tarpaulins were replaced with huge steel containers the size of double-decker buses. It was like the eye of the hurricane. The hectic people sounds fell away into a background hush. Here the select few worked their subtle arts, free from the distractions of vice.

They passed under a watchtower. Katrina was mesmerized by the rifles that aimed down into the trading pits, looming over them with the ever-present threat of a sudden, unforgiving eruption.

'There he is.'

The man Raoul pointed out was stooped over a mug of coffee. He was dressed in a crumpled leather jacket, brown cords, heavy-duty boots and a beanie hat.

Katrina found herself wondering why she had not singled him out beforehand, given his piercing eyes and sharp features. He appeared preoccupied and introspective. Like so many before her Katrina was lulled into a false sense of security. She approached far more boldly than was wise.

'Kelly? Can we have a word?' Paolo asked.

The man looked up from his coffee and calmly panned across from left to right before glancing away dismissively.

'Why?'

'It'll only take a minute.'

He shrugged. 'OK, but make it quick.'

'This is Katrina Esperanza.'

'Please to meet you,' she greeted him, stretching out her hand. Kelly did not shake it.

'I'm sure.'

'My colleagues have told me a lot about you.'

'What do you want?'

She looked to Paolo for clarity. He rolled his forefingers around one

another as if to say ‘Get to the point.’

‘I work for an organization . . . called Satellite. We’re a humanitarian organization.’

‘We?’

‘Yes . . . us,’ she indicated the men on either side of her, ‘and many others throughout the city. It’s—’ she noticed Paolo and Raoul exchange glances of annoyance ‘—growing all the time.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘We’d like to enlist your help.’

‘With what?’

‘Well, it’s a little sensitive.’

‘My time is precious, lady. You don’t have the liberty of being sensitive.’

Katrina was clearly riled by the smuggler’s rudeness. Paolo held his breath and prayed that she would keep her temper in check.

‘OK,’ she replied slowly and started again. ‘Well, there’s a greater need for supplies than ever before amongst the poor and homeless . . . food, medical sup—’

‘Satellite, you say?’ Kelly interrupted.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, well—’ his mouth slid into a sinister smile revealing tiny teeth ‘—that explains a lot.’

An elaboration wasn’t forthcoming. ‘Well, as I was saying,’ Katrina continued, ‘there is an urgent nee—’

‘Ever hear of Rodriguez Santiago, Miss Esperanza?’ Kelly interrupted once more.

‘No . . . can’t say that I have.’

This time she waited.

‘Ask your man here,’ Kelly said, pointing towards Paolo. ‘No one’s quite sure what he did, but the port guards, they strung him up just over there, ropes around his arms and legs, a modern-day crucifixion, you might say – sun beating down, nose and ears blistering, breathing getting laboured. Anyway, round about noon on the *fourth* day the guards start asking him questions – his name, how old he is, where he was born, where he is now. He’s too far gone by then, doesn’t know the answers. All he keeps saying over and over is Satellite . . . Satellite . . . Satellite.’

Kelly took his eyes off her for a moment and examined his shoes before surreptitiously looking over his shoulder at an incoming ship.

'I wonder . . . how is it a person could be a member of an organization, and not know something like that?'

'I—' Katrina felt impotent anger.

Kelly stood and turned on his heels; body language that blocked her from further conversation.

'Paulo, did you see the crows pecking out his eyes, Rodriguez still alive, trying to fend them off, his arms bound, no resolve left, not even for a whimper?' His voice was more upbeat now, mocking in its tone.

'Yes, of course I saw, Kelly, we all did.'

'You think I want to hang up there with the crows pecking at my eyes? You think they'll look kindly on this *monkey* just 'cos she's a *girl*!'

'Hey!' Katrina began to protest.

'Come on, she didn't mean you any offence,' Raoul interjected. 'She's just trying to do the right thing.'

'Well, that's the thing about smuggling, isn't it? It's essentially a selfish venture for selfish people. You take what doesn't belong to you. You get good at it by not being noticed. Now if I hook up with your Samaritan over here, blundering around with her big boots and her red beacon hair announcing to the world 'Here come the clowns', how successful and inconspicuous do you suppose I'll be then?'

'She made a mistake, Slim, that's all. Sorry to disturb you.'

'Let's not speak again. In fact, don't let me see either of you amateurs here in future, and that goes especially for Coco.'

'Hey!'

'Like my friend said,' Paolo reinforced, 'we're sorry, but don't presume to threaten us. We'll be down here tomorrow as we are every day.'

Kelly didn't miss a stride. 'Four years you work with a pair of guys, happy as Larry, and all the while they're playing Russian roulette! This is a cessation of all business dealings.'

'That is unfortunate,' Paolo replied coldly.

'Not unfortunate, *necessary*, given your stupidity, and begging your pardon, but I'll threaten whomsoever I like, and here's another for your troubles. If I *ever* see your lady friend on the docks again I'll be gift-wrapping her and sending her to Eleanor Blake.'

'Hey!'

'There's no need to—'

'Personally I have no problem seeing her strung up and blinded by beaks, but I *do* have a problem with her pointing me out first.'

'Hey!' Katrina finally broke through. 'Don't talk as if I'm not here.'

Having shown her strength and indignation she expected to be rewarded with a guarded apology, but instead her outburst caused Kelly to turn on her with such ferocity that she stepped back and gasped. It wasn't so much in what his aggression possessed, but in what it lacked, for while his words were growled with a tumultuous fury, Katrina realized now that in all that time his voice had never risen above a whisper.

'Do you understand the concept of being black-sedaned?'

Katrina held his gaze. 'Of course.'

'Then why are you here? The innocent disappear every day as a direct result of people like yours involvement. Where's your bleeding heart for them? If just one person on this dock thinks our meeting looks suspicious we're already marked – *all of us*. Doesn't that arouse the slightest sense of shame in your do-gooder's heart?'

Katrina took a further step back under the weight of his accusation. 'It's worth the risk.'

'Not to me it's not, you arrogant bitch. I take great offence when someone takes it upon themselves to sign my life away on a whim.'

'All right, Slim, all right. She's only trying to help. There's no need to upset her.'

'Upset her? I'll ring her neck if she doesn't take her idealistic, misguided notions out of my face, and that goes for you too, Santa Paolo.'

### 3.

As soon as they were clear of the port Katrina's lips began to quiver. Paolo grabbed the flesh of her upper arm and squeezed.

'Do not cry, Esperanza, or we shall abandon you.'

'Do not draw attention to yourself,' Raoul added.

'You are relatively new here. You are not accustomed to being spoken to in such ways. It will become commonplace. Get used to it.'

'But do not get used to being our spokesperson,' Paolo continued. 'Your vanity has cost us dearly.'

'*What?*' Katrina remonstrated as she was dragged along against her will. 'I was trying to—'

'You were trying to bag the lion with a water pistol,' Raoul finished. 'I told you he would not join us, *we both did*, but your arrogance told you that you could convince anyone.'

'You gave over far more than you realize, Esperanza—'

'You exposed us—'  
'After four years of anonymity—'  
'Just as Kelly said you had.'

Katrina bowed her head under the verbal barrage. It had all happened so fast. One minute she was confidently taking on the world, and the next she was under attack from all sides, unsure of what her response should be, hopelessly out of her depth.

'I'm sorry,' was all she could muster, channeling all of her energy into fending off tears.

'I know,' Paolo replied reassuringly and released her arm.

'Can't be helped now,' Raoul surmised. 'Let's go get a drink.'

They walked the rest of the journey in silence. The two men shed all signs of tension and assumed an air of indifference. Katrina by comparison marched rigid and intense, unable to shake off the horror of her humiliation.

The plaza d'armas existed as an oasis of serenity at the centre of an otherwise anarchic city. Giant yucca plants flanked its four corners – green leathery leaves hanging above beds of royal blue delphinium. In the absence of care the flora had grown beyond its boundaries, reaching over the unkempt lawns and grasping at the roadside. Water had not flowed through its fountain centrepiece in many months. The stone harp-playing cherubim stood patiently on one leg, his mouth and throat bone dry.

The ornate structures that surrounded the plaza had stood tall and proud since colonial times, the most grandiose and beautiful of which was El Edificio Exquisito ('the exquisite building'). Filled with high-ceilinged, chandelier-laden banqueting rooms, it had once been the home of visiting diplomats who would wave to the hopeful crowds from one of its many verandas and balconies. Somewhat ironically it had now become the temporary home of the Department of Sanitation.

El Edificio Exquisito had stood as a testament to Spanish ingenuity and craftsmanship for over 350 years – it would only stand for another forty-one days, torn apart by a blast that would interrupt Kelly's coffee and extinguish over 200 lives in a single instance of financial madness.

They took a table at El Café Empressario. Its owner, Arty Bey, a Greek Cypriot and known informer, strode larger than life into the sunshine and greeted them with his usual sniping sarcasm.

'Ah, a frowning contest! I would partake but I fear you have already beaten me hands down.'

Having fallen under the Emperor's grace, Arty was the only café owner for miles around with regular access to half-descent coffee beans, which afforded him the liberty of doing away with such unnecessary trifles as manners and service. He knew that he had his customers over a barrel and was not proud when it came to exploiting that position.

'For you, my friends, I have a fresh treat – Jamaican blue, dark roast, very hard to come by. The only question is – what do *you* have for *me*?'

'Wow,' Raoul replied with equal sarcasm. 'Times are tough when you have to brag about your beans!'

'Yeah, three cups of Blue will be perfectly adequate,' Paolo added. 'Now, run along, *camerero*,' ('waiter').

The good humour left Arty's face.

'I said what do *you* have for *me*?'

'Dollars, US, now that will be all.'

As soon as they were alone once more Katrina made an attempt at reconciliation.

'OK, what could I have done differently?'

'How many people were watching us at the port?' Paolo replied.

'Besides Kelly?'

'Yes.'

'No one.'

'Wrong, everyone was watching us, and we–' Paolo pointed to Raoul then himself, purposefully missing out Katrina '–were watching everyone. This is what you are missing, Esperanza. You are blissfully unaware of the subterfuge. A guy like Kelly, he walks around in broad daylight and *no one* sees what he does! You don't approach him cap in hand or he will strip the shirt from your back, and you certainly don't try and appeal to his better nature!'

'Then why on earth did you let me?' Katrina's face burnt red with childlike rage.

'Because you wouldn't take no for an answer and because sometimes it is better to pick someone up after they have fallen on their face than it is to prevent them from falling in the first place – a greater lesson is learnt.'

'Your passion is your greatest strength, Katrina,' Raoul elaborated, 'but it will also be your greatest weakness unless it is tempered with caution and instinct. Two qualities you do not currently possess.'

Katrina sat back in the chair and threw up her arms. 'Anything else you'd

like to point out, just to make the character assassination complete?’

Paolo and Raoul looked at one another as if telepathically comparing notes. ‘No . . . no, I think that’s it for now,’ the former replied without a hint of irony.

The real waiter arrived with coffee that smelt just as rich and earthy as Arty had claimed. Paolo stretched out a hand.

‘Ernesto! *Mucho gusto.*’ (‘Pleased to meet you.’)

‘*Y tu tambien.*’ (‘And you also.’)

‘Ernesto here’s a freedom fighter, just like his namesake – a leader of lattés, a campinero of cappuccinos.’

‘Hey, don’t blow my cover,’ Ernesto retorted, placing the cups on a wicker table. ‘Enjoy!’

Katrina brooded over her beverage as if it were an infant to protect from the wolves. As she dissected the morning’s disastrous meeting a question came to mind. ‘Slim?’

‘What?’

‘Back at the docks you called him Slim?’

‘Oh, a nickname – it’s short for Seriously Lacking In Moral-Fibre.’

### Chapter 3

## The Key with No Door

The day after the sanctions were lifted a boat arrived carrying the first passengers from the outside world in over a decade. Amongst the vagabonds, exiles, orphans and miscreants returning to a long-forgotten homeland was a young woman called Isabella Derecha.

Isabella had fled Corderro hurriedly one night almost fifteen years before. She had been a child at the time and her recollections of the city were sketchy at best. Mostly she remembered people – running, ducking for cover, shielding one another, dipping when passing windowsills. She also remembered being passed around like a baton, changing ownership as one by one her protectors disappeared. The chaotic site of El Puerto de Las Ondas Verdes did little to stir any further sense of memory. Even so, the excitement and expectation that she felt were unbearable.

Isabella was Latin American by birth, but had spent most of her life in England and spoke only pigeon Spanish. The conversations around her all seemed to be of the same theme – a lost father here, a separated daughter there. The specifics weren't clear, but she felt a connection with them nonetheless – the hope, the blind faith.

The boat was tied to cleats on the jetty and a makeshift gangway hastily hoisted into position.

The port was a sea of worldly weary faces struggling to make a living. Crates of every conceivable commodity were stacked precariously, forming a maze of markets where men and women shrugged and pleaded in the throws of bartering rituals.

It was wonderful to behold.

Less welcome was the sight of soldiers and officials, bringing order where none was needed. Checkpoints and guard towers surrounded the port.

*Why now of all times?*

*Fear begets fear begets fear.*

Smoke was rising all around. Many fires were raging uncontrollably in the city.

People poured out of their quarters and onto the deck, jostling for

position, squeezing up against the railings, glancing at one another anxiously and tugging at clothes. It was as if secrets that had waited an entire generation could not wait a moment longer.

A gateway was opened, and the masses formed into a spearhead. Isabella was dragged forward in a surge of bodies. She held tight to her tiny suitcase to prevent it being ripped from her hands.

A man at the front of the queue turned around and looked directly at her. Like Isabella he was young, mid to late twenties, with scruffy brown hair and a confident expression that oozed boyish charm. Seeing that he had her attention he mouthed '*Buonos días,*' with lips that broke into an enormous smile. He winked and was gone, skipping nimbly down the gangplank and into the crowd.

*A good omen?*

She saw that her boat was just one of many, a river joining an ocean, or a ventricle joining an artery. The crowds were literally charging across the concourse to a gate, at least twenty people deep, clambering over one another and rocking the flimsy fence that kept them penned in.

*I'll be torn limb from limb!*

Holding the suitcase out in front of her like a shield Isabella plunged into a myriad of arms and aggression. Disgruntled faces loomed up and faded past. Shoulders closed in, vying for space. Vehicles cut across the masses, honking horns and being swarmed over.

A woman a few feet ahead stumbled and fell. The ripple passed over and subsumed her. Isabella tried to stop and offer assistance, but was pulled out of reach. She was eventually spat out over a dining-room table that passed for an immigration desk.

The official's blank, timid, wide-eyed face said it all. He was completely overawed with the impossible situation in which he found himself. Hopelessly unable to control the influx of people, he'd resorted to checking through the limited number he was able to collar. Huge swathes circumvented him on either side without incident. Isabella was one of the unfortunates.

'*Que país?*' he asked.

'I'm English.'

'*Como?*'

'*Inglesa?*'

'What-is-the-purpose-of-your-visit? Business-or-pleasure?'

'Neither.'

'I do not understand.'

'Business, I'm in the finding business.'

The official pointed at her stomach and uttered something that was lost in the din.

'What? Que?' she screamed to be heard.

'Is that your only luggage?'

'Yes.'

'Open it please.'

Isabella looked up at the endless flow of people passing through the checkpoints without so much as a stamp in their passports. The table rocked violently under their assault. 'Come on? My possessions won't be safe if I open my bag here.'

'I do not understand. Open it please.'

'How about a bit of privacy, you know, basic human rights?'

'Open it please,' the official repeated mechanically.

'Uh,' she scoffed showing her obvious disgust at the man's pettiness.

'You're a robot, you know that word, *robusteza*, eh?'

The official did not smile, nor did he look offended. 'Open it please.'

Isabella put up her hands in defeat. 'You open it.'

She checked herself.

*Are you really going to let your temper get you barred from the country after fighting so hard to get here?*

Isabella tried to find a little grace and restraint as she watched the official haphazardly pull items of clothing from her suitcase. Carefully folded blouses were heaped in creases, underwear was paraded for lecherous eyes and then came the journal. Isabelle flinched.

*Leave that alone.*

The official casually leafed through its leather-bound pages, found nothing but English and discarded it on the desk. Recalling one of the journal's entries Isabella breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

*Dear Jonathan,*

*You wouldn't believe what a feisty little madam I am! Or maybe you would?*

*I did what you asked. I made something of my life. I am quivering with anticipation at the possibility that I might soon be able to show you all that you have given me.*

*Come and see . . .*

*I am ready . . .*

'Everything appears to be in order. Sorry to have troubled you.' The official's eyes passed across her body before moving on to the next person. Isabella swept her possessions from the table, crammed them into the suitcase and fled.

Beggars tugged at her clothes and tradesmen fought to gain her attention with shouting and waving. She forced her way through the trading pits and up into the outer perimeter. From here the enormity of her task hit home. Through the port gates she could see high up into the hills. Miles and miles of elaborate architecture filled the landscape before her, a fallen glory laid bare like an autopsy. Shanty huts filled the spaces like sand, and, despite the years of war, El Rey's palace stood unblemished above it all. The street teemed with activity. It was like a beehive, or a colony of ants, people orbiting around one another, busy learning how to live again.

*So much in one moment, so much more in fifteen years.*

*How will I ever find you?*

Unseen music lifted her spirits. She followed it to an enclosed courtyard where a Corolli band were playing and dancing within a gazebo. Isabella counted twelve musicians dressed in cream-coloured suits with dark-brown cravats – a large double bass flanked by percussionists, a guitarist and mandolin player at either side, and numerous horn players. At their centre stood an elderly woman in a ball gown, pouring every ounce of her gravelly voice into a microphone. She remained immaculately still, careful not to dislodge the fantastical hairpiece balanced on her head. After a few minutes of jumping around and swapping positions the men fell in behind their leader, and together they began to sing the same phrase over and over.

*'El Oh mi Dios, que soy an extasis*

*Realmente encuentra el reconciliation?'*

The small crowd present applauded and wolf-whistled. Movement was staccato and limbs were stiff. It was as if they had forgotten how to express themselves.

*'Hola, mi chica bella!'*

The winking man from the port stood by her side. His grin was infectious. Isabella tried to remain aloof. 'Are you following me?'

'Not at all,' the man answered, reverting to English. He held an open

palm to his heart as if mortally offended. Isabella frowned to show that she didn't believe him and turned back to the musicians.

'What are they singing about?'

'They are saying, "*Oh my God, I am in raptures. Can we really find reconciliation?*"'

'Do you think they can?'

'I think—' the man brought his hand up in order to suppress a smirk '—I think all things are possible. Pleased to meet you. My name is Charles Neblin. You can call me Carlos Neblina.'

'As in *mist*?'

'The very same.' He gave a little bow. 'Your Espanol is good.'

'It gets me by.'

'And yours?'

'Isabella.'

'Ah, I thought so!' Carlos gave a knowledgeable nod. Isabella got the distinct impression that he was deliberately trying to annoy her.

'How could you think so?' There was a sense of familiarity. 'Have we met before?'

'Did you arrive today?'

'Yes.'

'Then how could we have met before? This port has been closed for fifteen years.'

'Have you ever been to England?'

'Señorita, I have been to many places.'

The band struck up another number. Their liveliness made Isabella feel tired. She needed to find her hotel, get a hot meal and some respite from the chaos around her. Carlos's presence further heightened her sense of unease. His good nature appeared genuine, but there was something calculating in his approach. Isabella felt as if she was being manipulated.

'So, what brings you to this fair city?' Carlos inquired.

'I'm looking for someone.'

'What's his name?'

'I didn't say it was a man.'

'A presumption on my part . . . so, what is his name?'

'Why so many questions?' Isabella's body language became closed and hostile. Carlos's remained loose and open.

'Because I am flirting with you, *mi chica bella*. Please don't raise your

voice to me. It only seeks to convince me further that you are in need of cheering up. Once I get that kind of idea into my head I am unbearable.'

'What makes you think you're not unbearable now?'

Carlos laughed. 'Uh, such rudeness in one so attractive. What's his name?'

'If I tell you, will you leave me in peace?'

'Absolutely.'

'OK, his name is Jonathan Pemburton.'

Carlos knew the name instantly, and was filled with a mixture of joy and sadness. 'How long is it since you've seen this man?'

'What happened to leaving me in peace?'

'Humour me. I am a curious soul.'

Isabella decided that there was no harm in telling him. 'Many years.'

'And what do you want with him?'

'To give him this.' She reached down into her satchel and produced a leather-bound journal.

'What is it?'

'The story of my life.'

'Ah, a woman of mystery and intrigue. How exciting!'

'Something like that,' she replied softly.

'Right then-' Carlos stood up straight and saluted '-well, in that case I have no choice but to help you find this man.'

Isabella laughed at his eccentric behaviour. 'Why ever would you do that?'

'For the honour of helping a beautiful woman in distress.'

'I'm not in distress.'

'Ah, but you admit to being beautiful? Well, you may not be in distress now, but just think how distressed you'll be if you let an opportunity like this pass you by.'

'Oh God, you're infuriating!'

'You look tired. We should discuss your quest over a coffee.'

'Ah, now we get to the grift.'

'I do not know this word - "grift"?''

'As in "scam".'

'Oh certainly not, I am a prince amongst men. Come on, I know a great place just round the corner.'

'You've not been here in fifteen years. How could you possibly know a good place?'

‘My dear, this place is so good it would survive fifty years of war. El Rey would not dare bomb it for fear of an uprising. Its beverages practically support the economy, no word of a lie.’

Isabella turned her head so that Carlos would not see her smile.

*He’s grinding you down. Get a grip of yourself, woman!*

‘You’re a very charming man, Mr Neblina, but I must tell you that I already have a boyfriend back home.’

‘You have a high opinion of yourself, which is well deserved, but alas for both of us I am a married man.’ Carlos flashed his left hand in front of Isabella’s eyes revealing a wedding band.

‘You could have got that tin ring anywhere!’

‘An outrage,’ he shouted flamboyantly and slapped his chest. ‘This is platinum. My wife bought it for me in Russia.’

‘You don’t look Russian?’

‘As I said, my suspicious one, I have been to many places. Let us make a deal. If the café is not there I will leave you in peace. If it is you will have a drink with me – deal?’

‘What’s this café called?’

‘It is called “Sal de la Tierra” – “Salt of the Earth”.’

‘OK, Mr Mist, let’s go and call your bluff.’

*‘Estupendo!’*

Café Sal de la Tierra was around the corner, just as Carlos said it would be. A fresh lick of latte-coloured paint had brought out the building’s decrepitude. They found a nice spot on a terrace filled with mismatched furniture. Despite the crowded port they were the only customers. Even before they were seated another band rushed onto a makeshift stage and began hastily setting up.

Carlos applauded before the first note was played. ‘*Hermanos*, I salute you. Such opportunism would make a vulture blush!’

They launched into a folk song that slowly rose in tempo to a rapidly paced reprise:

*‘Miro. Veo. El rey no tiene ninguna ropa.  
Envuelta para arriba caliente en su capa mágica.’*

Once again Isabella asked for a translation.

‘They are saying “*I look – I see – The king has no clothes – Wrap up warm in your magical coat.*”’

'Dangerous lyrics!'

'Perhaps. The people have no means of protest and so they sing.'

'OK,' Isabella said, 'so you've got me here for a drink. What's next?'

'Next?'

'In your plan.'

'Plan? There is no plan, only the thrill of discovery.'

A waitress approached and furnished them with menus. 'Can I get you anything to drink?' she asked.

'Just an orange juice for me,' Isabella replied.

'Very good, and for you, sir?'

Carlos scrunched up his features in an exaggerated show of deep thought. 'I'm not sure. What do you recommend, Teresita?'

The waitress took a step back and made a face that was half frown, half amusement. 'Do I know you?'

'No, no I don't think so.'

'Then how do you know my name?'

Carlos tapped the bridge of his nose. 'I'm a wizard.'

Teresita laughed. 'I guess stranger things have happened in the last few weeks!'

'Absolutely,' Carlos agreed. 'Impressed?'

'Very.'

'Just a coffee, thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

'Ohhh no señorita, *my* pleasure.'

Teresita walked away with a noticeable skip in her step.

Isabella folded her arms and shook her head. 'Your wife must be long suffering.'

'My wife is a saint, and I thank God for her. *Bendecido sea Dios.*' Carlos made the sign of the cross. 'Life is for living, *mi querida!*'

Carlos asked no further questions. Over the course of his coffee he told Isabella several stories of the city, recollections of his childhood and snippets picked up over the years abroad. He talked less of himself and more of everything else; became less animated and more engaging. Isabella's suspicions abated and were replaced by gratitude. As Carlos drained the last of his drink Isabella didn't want their time together to end. She considered asking him to stay for another, but then thought better of it. She decided instead to wait and see how long their conversation played out. Carlos in turn neither offered another nor excused himself.

*He seems attuned to my concerns.*

*Perhaps he can help me find Jonathan?*

*Now that's an evolutionary leap in thinking!*

*Why would anyone want to help a complete stranger? There has to be an ulterior motive.*

The suspicions crept back in.

'Would you excuse me a moment? I have to use the ladies.'

'Of course.'

Isabella walked into the café. Teresita was behind the counter making a latte.

*'El baño?'*

'Straight to the back, then right. You can't miss it.'

*'Gracias. Nice place you've got here.'*

'Thank you señorita – we try.'

'Out of interest – how long have you been open?'

'Couple of months now. Business is booming.'

*Carlos lied to me. Why?*

'That's good to hear.'

*You left your bag under the chair.*

'Excuse me,' Isabella exclaimed, suddenly flustered, and made her way towards the exit.

*Of all the stupid schemes to fall for!*

The terrace came into view. Carlos was not there.

*The bag?*

Beneath the chair where she had left it. On the table she found a note, hastily scrawled on a napkin and held down by Carlos's coffee cup:

*Lo siento, mi chica bella,*

*It is not usually in my nature to abandon princesses to the hungry eyes of other men, but alas something came up – a matter of life and death you might say. My sincerest apologies. Enjoy the OJ. I will look you up in due course. I hope you find what you are looking for.*

*Much love,*

*Carlos*

*How's he going to find me? He doesn't know where I'm staying.*

Isabella shook her head and laughed at the absurdity of the encounter.

*Strange guy – like a Lothario who hasn't quite mastered moving in for the kill.*

The music came to an end. The lead singer asked if she would like to hear another song.

*'Por favor,'* she nodded. This time the tune was slow and waltz-like, skipping every few bars into syncopated salsa. The melody was illusive, skipping around unexpectedly. She was in the grip of a journey, an adventure.

*I will find you Jonathan.*

The song concluded. Isabella finished her orange juice, placed some coins in a bowl by the congas, bowed to the musicians with an appreciative smile and left the courtyard in search of her hotel.