

## CHAPTER ONE

The limestone facade of the Universidad Catholica de Isla Baconne glowed as bright as Sebastien Ochoa's future.

Sebastien checked his watch. Three-fifteen. Grandmama Garcia would pick him up at three-thirty with Juanita. He grinned. For once he could be confident his two fiercest critics would be satisfied. Had it really been little more than an hour since he'd been ushered upstairs for his interview with Professor Diaz?

Heady heights for a teenage mountain boy in more ways than one. He'd never before met anyone as august as the doyen of the university's school of humanities. Also the first time he'd ventured above the third floor in any building anywhere. The butterflies in his chest swarmed in such numbers that the flutter against his ribs echoed in the arteries of his neck.

He drew a long draft of warm summer afternoon air through his teeth, because he'd held his breath again, at the memory of his lungs ceasing to function as he entered the eyrie Diaz had for an office, high up in a tower with a view right across Hispanuela. Sebastien hardly noticed the splendid panorama of his nation's capital. The professor's round glasses magnified his eyes to frowning orbs, like a barn owl as he perched on a stool behind dusty old books that lined the edge of his desk like battlements. He'd studied for ten years in the tiny village schoolroom for a fifteen minute chance to secure sponsorship for a scholarship at the nation's most prestigious university.

He'd done it. Somehow. He had to purse his lips to hold in the pride that bubbled as he savoured the professor's parting words. "It has been pleasant to meet you, *Señor* Ochoa, and you can reassure Jacques that I'll have a quiet word to the

scholarship committee to see if we can't organise something for the first semester next year."

He could barely wait to pass on those kind thoughts to Papa, because without those memories of his former student Jacques Ochoa there would have been no interview with Professor Diaz, and without countless hours of personal coaching from his father he'd never have succeeded.

Sebastien crossed his fingers in his pocket where no one could see. A university education. So close now that he could almost touch it. The prospect as comforting as the sun-warmed blocks of the gate arch against his back. An almost impossible opportunity for a boy like him. He'd be a part of the exotic world laid out before him in the university grounds.

Self conscious among the confident young men who strolled the courtyard in animated conversation, Sebastien tugged the lapels of his suit. It had been wrapped in tissue in his parents' chest of drawers as long as he could remember and still smelled faintly of mothballs. Glamorous girls smiled and spoke to their friends behind their palms. Amused by the tall boy with the long brown hair and strange rustic clothes, he was sure.

When he came back to the university next year, he'd roll his shirtsleeves to his elbows and open his collar at the neck like the guy over by the dining hall. Two beautiful young ladies hung on his every word. Perhaps nice girls would flash their eyes and bob their ponytails at Sebastien when he returned as a student. They'd not remember a gauche kid in a baggy woollen suit. He'd make sure of that.

He checked his watch again. Fourteen minutes till his grandmama and sister would come to take him to the Club D'Andalusia. A ritual visit to view the portrait of Sebastien Garcia, a former president of the Club which offered social and

commercial opportunities for migrants from Andalusia and their descendants. His mother's dearest wish, repeated many times at their dinner table, was that Sebastien would go to the university, restore the family's fortunes and have his portrait raised alongside her grandfather's. He smiled at the thought of sharing his news with Grandmama, maybe breaking her perpetual frown. Perhaps even Juanita might say something pleasant. Most unlikely, but a seventeen year-old could dream.

A boisterous crowd of young men and women tumbled out of the dining hall and surged towards the gate. They called encouragement and insults to each other. Colts and fillies loosed to roam. He stepped out onto the sidewalk to make way.

A short guy in a dark suit, buttoned tight despite the heat, had a megaphone in hand. A few carried poles with furled banners.

A soft bundle in a pale blue cotton dress, jostled in a chain reaction from horseplay in the middle of the pack, stumbled, giggling, to barrel into Sebastien. She grabbed his coat sleeve. "Sorry. Hey! You should come with us. Everybody's coming. Come on."

A little plump, like the butcher's daughter, Carolina, she had rosy cheeks, light brown hair in a fashionable permanent wave and laughing green eyes. She brought the scent of lavender and an intoxicating aura of sophistication.

She hooked her arm with his and tugged him into the throng. "I'm Assumpta. I don't think I've seen you around before. I'd remember someone as good-looking as you."

He had to lick his lips before he could force out a response. "No, we haven't met. I'm Sebastien."

She picked at his father's old brown suit. "You must be here for the scholarship interviews."

He nodded.

"Well, I'm sure you'll come here next year and we'll be great friends." She squeezed his arm a little tighter.

They'd gravitated into the group. About a hundred young people marching down the middle of the road towards the centre of the city, as if no cars or trucks honked their horns behind.

"What's this sardine you've caught, Assumpta?" A second girl pushed up beside them. Almost as tall as Sebastien, she had thick horn-rimmed glasses perched on a long nose.

"This is Sebastien, Celia."

"Hi Sebastien, where did you spring from?" Celia slipped her hand under Sebastien's unclaimed arm and bumped him with her hip.

"I've just been for an interview with *Professore* Diaz," he said. A woman on each arm made him feel like the groom at a wedding.

"You met the great man?" Celia raised an eyebrow.

"Yes." Sebastien shook his head. "I made a complete fool of myself for the first five minutes. He asked me something about Rousseau and my brain just froze, but I must have managed something coherent because he was quite encouraging."

"Well done," Celia said. "Diaz can be an absolute monster. He takes my Capitalist Society tutorial. I'm surprised he saw you. You must be terribly important."

"No. My father was his student, years ago. I'm just a Sierra Maestra boy, lost in the big city." Sebastien squeezed the arms linked with his as he thought a worldly student might.

"You live in the mountains?" Assumpta asked. "In a *palenque*, with bandits?"

"Well there's a fence. Rocks and wooden poles. I guess that makes it a fortified village. And Guzman, the village chief, pays a bunch of gangsters to scare off the police, so, yes, I suppose I'm a *palenque* kid." He grinned.

The girls exchanged a look. "Gosh, Celia, we've got ourselves a real live outlaw." Assumpta looked Sebastien up and down and chuckled.

"Not exactly. I mean, I'm not an outlaw." A grin twisted the corner of his mouth.

Celia patted his arm. "A big tough outlaw is what we need."

"Really? Why?"

"We're headed down to the Tribunal Supremo," Celia explained. "The fascists have arrested two Partido Accion Directa organisers. We're going to protest on the steps of the court."

The women both tripped forward as Sebastien balked.

"Whoa! Is that a problem, Sebastien?" Celia straightened her glasses, which had slipped down her nose. "Tell me you're not a supporter of our so-called president, the foul dictator Reyes. Are you?"

"Or one of those would-be Nazis from the ABT?" Assumpta asked.

To get his legs moving again, Sebastien shook away the image of his grandmother, sister and Mama's reactions if they found out he'd joined a protest march. Instead he concentrated on what Papa might say when the women in the family weren't looking. He smiled. "Never." He let his chest expand with pride. "My father fought against President Reyes' coup d'etat."

"Which explains why a handsome, intelligent chap like you would be exiled in a *palenque*, I guess. An outlaw revolutionary's son. You're in the right place. Excellent." Assumpta squashed his arm against the curve of her breast.

The pulse of heat in Sebastien's bicep dispelled any lingering thoughts of Juanita and Grandmama Garcia.

#

The protest leader in the black suit stood two steps above the rest at the entrance of the Tribunal Supremo and barked into the bullhorn. "Free them now!"

The students roared back. "Free them now! Free them now!"

Sebastien bellowed right along with them.

The protest filled five wide granite steps from the street to the doric columns of the court facade. Half a dozen entrance doors were thrown open for the day's court business. Armed guards lurked in the shadows. Shoppers and office workers passing on Avenida San Juan de Dios stopped to look at the banners that demanded democracy for Isla Baconne.

"Reyes must go," the bullhorn called.

"Reyes must go! Reyes must go!"

Celia and Assumpta bounced beside him. Sebastien punched the air. Shouting defiance from a crowd. The perfect climax for a wonderful day.

Brakes squealed, drawing Sebastien's attention to two black vans in a side street beside the court house just as men in dark blue uniforms flooded out of the doors of the Tribunal swinging batons.

The student with the megaphone went down first, slugged from behind before he had a chance to react.

Sebastien turned, seeking an escape route, but more police spewed from the vans.

Assumpta screamed and grabbed Sebastien's arm.

Blue uniforms swarmed around the protesters. The group shrank into a tight cluster as students shied away from the threat of injury and arrest. Bodies crushed against Sebastien. He couldn't breathe. His world filled with howls of pain and the sickening thunk of wooden sticks on flesh. The sweaty odour of fear. A shot rang out, then another. The guards fired at desperate protesters who broke like sand from a sack through openings left by snarling policemen too intent on beating one protester to worry about another getting away.

A blood-crazed sergeant smashed his club into the neck of a fat youth an arm's length from Sebastien. The student sank to his knees. Celia tumbled over in a frantic effort to evade the policeman's swing.

Assumpta wailed and clung to Sebastien's jacket. In blind panic, he raised his hands to ward off the next blow. His elbows slammed into the sergeant's chest sending the blue uniform back a startled pace. Assumpta howled and fell across Sebastien's calves. He spun, and ducked a savage blow aimed at Assumpta, only to take its full force across his back. Agony flashed in his spine and ribs but he hurled himself over his new friend's body, using his momentum to cannon into the second attacker's hips. The policeman doubled over and toppled onto his buttocks.

Assumpta staggered to her feet, screaming, hands in her hair soaked with blood.

From his knees, Sebastien grabbed her pretty blue dress and pulled her away as the sergeant stabbed his baton at her stomach. The missed thrust threw the policeman off balance and Sebastien jumped to his feet and hauled Assumpta clear. The second policeman rolled to his knees, panting indignation. Sebastien kicked him in the head and dragged Assumpta down the steps and away.

#

They ran for two blocks, Sebastien's back a sheet of pain, Assumpta sobbing, head in her hands. Only Sebastien's grip on her belt kept her upright.

A hundred metres from the court house, the shop-lined streets teemed with traffic as if nothing had happened. A girl with bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks met them.

"That way to the hospital." She pointed to the south.

The girl stopped Assumpta and pulled aside the hand she held to the back of her head. A sodden mass of burgundy clogged the right half of the elegant brown hair. "Take her." The girl pushed Assumpta to Sebastien.

Anger flared. What did the stupid girl think he was going to do, leave her for the cops?

Assumpta stumbled. Sebastien picked her up under the knees and shoulders and gritted his teeth as his back protested.

#

Sebastien pulled up short in the emergency room of the Clinica Central, too tired, too confused and his arms too cramped to release Assumpta. Each step brought a moan next to his ear. She smelled of blood.

Chaos reigned. Doctors and nurses dashed back and forth yelling conflicting instructions. Battered students filled every available seat. The less injured beckoned and called for help for their friends.

A nurse caught Sebastien's arm and eased Assumpta's chin from his neck. One glance at the bloody mess on her scalp was enough. "This way." She pulled Sebastien past the pleading students at the reception desk, down a hall lined with doors, to a six-patient ward. Every bed taken.



The nurse picked a male student who lay with his eyes closed and one arm cradled against his chest. "Get up!" She yanked on the patient's trousers.

Injured Arm blinked and sat up, mouth open to protest. He took in the determined nurse and the woman in Sebastien's arm and swore instead. He yelped with pain as he shuffled off the bed. Sebastien eased Assumpta onto the sheets as gently as he could and stood with both hands on the mattress as blessed relief eased his tortured forearms and spine.

"I'll find a doctor," the nurse said. "Keep her awake."

Privacy curtains blocked Sebastien's view of the rest of the ward, except the bed opposite, where the student who'd had the bullhorn clasped a handful of gauze to a red patch on his thigh. Good God, had he been shot?

Assumpta whimpered. Sebastien reached down to stroke clotted hair from her cheeks. "It's going to be fine. The doctor's coming." Soon, he hoped. His new friend looked deathly pale to his untrained eye.

Whistles and cries rose above the echoing din from the emergency room. Sebastien went to the edge of the curtain to see what had happened. A doctor ran past the ward, shouting and waving his arms. "It's the police!"

The student with the injured arm bumped past Sebastien in a hurry to get to the door at the far end of the ward. The bullhorn student swung himself into a sitting position and flopped his legs off his bed, each move punctuated with a small cry. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

Boots thundered in the hall.

Sebastien shot a glance at Assumpta, curled in the foetal position, a red halo staining her pillow. He couldn't move her. He couldn't leave her. Sebastien rushed to tug the curtains closed around the bed, just as a police officer strutted into the room.

"Arrest them all." He waved and blue uniformed hoodlums clattered into the room behind him.

Sebastien straightened to full height. "What's the meaning of this?" He glared at the officer, striving for the withering authority Grandmama Garcia showered on servants and disappointing grandsons. "My sister is having a baby." He tilted his head to the curtains bunched closed in his right fist.

The head policeman squared his shoulders and ground his jaw.

For a horrible second, eye-to-eye with the officer, Sebastien braced to be hauled into custody.

"Okay, *paleta*." The officer stepped past Sebastien and hurried to end the protest leader's game attempt to hop to the escape door.

Sebastien breathed again. The old suit that made him look like a country bumpkin had saved them.

## CHAPTER TWO

Familiar aromas swirled around Sebastien. Rice and black beans with roast pork. The warmth of the family kitchen. Mama on her stool by the stove darning socks. Papa at the head of the table listening politely. The sights and smells of home. Which soothed him, at last, after the drama of the days passed despite the irritating whine of Juanita passing judgement on him.

"Grandmother was ready to call the police by the time Sebastien finally came back to her house, covered in filth. I can't imagine what he thought he was doing with that rabble at the Tribunal Supremo. Such an irresponsible fool." She turned towards him. "Do you think the Universidad Catholica will consider a scholarship for a candidate who fights with the police?"

"You mentioned that," Sebastien said. "Fifteen hundred times, so far, I think. And I didn't get arrested, you might remember."

"Grandmother was apoplectic. Of course. So disrespectful, so rude, so reckless."

Sebastien nodded. Grandmama had used those words and many more in a similar vein.

"I can imagine your Grandmama's reaction," Jaques said. He wiped his hand over his mouth to smother a grin.

Mama's eyes rose from her sewing to glare at her husband.

"Sebastien's behaviour was unforgivable," Juanita droned on. "Grandmother had gone to so much trouble to organise our visit to Club d'Andalusia. The Secretary met us at the door and took us straight to see Great Grandfather Garcia's portrait."

"I'm sorry I missed it." Sebastien had too much grateful affection for the woman darning his socks, if not his grandmother, to deliberately disappoint either of them, and their pride in Great Grandfather Garcia was justified.

"Father's suit is ruined," Juanita said.

"Perhaps." Jacques raised an eyebrow to his son. "How is the young lady you took to the hospital?"

Sebastien shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know how to find out if she's okay. I left before the doctor came. Assumpta told me to get away in case one of the policemen from the courthouse came and recognised me. A nurse dragged me out the back door."

"Good advice. My old suit would be ... distinctive." Jacques bit his lip to hold in the amusement flashing in his eyes.

"They thought you were a peasant because you are a *paleta*," Juanita said.

His papa's chuckle broke out. "Indeed. Who'd have thought the old suit would witness more acts of rebellion from the Ochoa males, eh Adriana?"

Sebastien's mama raised a thin smile. It didn't reach her eyes.

Juanita tapped the table for attention. Just one of the dozens of habits that made Sebastien want to strangle her. Her pomposity made her look like their grandmother. Brown eyes flecked with gold, the elegant Garcia features, nose in the

air and hair the collar of a nun's habit pulled back in a bun as if to defy anyone to notice the looks she'd inherited from her mother. "Sebastien has surely ruined his chance of a scholarship, hasn't he, Father?"

"I'm not so sure of that. I don't imagine *Professore* Diaz saw the protest, and Sebastien avoided arrest, so no harm done, eh ... *paleto*?"

How Sebastien wished he hadn't told anyone the police officer had called him that.

#

Jacques Ochoa took Sebastien out after dinner. They used the glow that spilled from carelessly pulled blinds to pick their way round the worst of the potholes. Stray dogs and buzzing insects were the only other creatures abroad. People stayed inside after the gates of the palenque closed for the night.

Jacques led Sebastien behind the school to the village engineering works, a tumbledown barn that leant groggily against the perimeter defences.

The forge fire cast a friendly glow over the diesel generator, a couple of lathes, a band saw, a vertical drill and four smiling men. One reclined in a deck chair, the others took advantage of a rickety stool, the anvil and a packing case.

"Hey, *companeros*," Jacques called from the door. "You all know my son Sebastien?"

"Welcome, Sebastien." The man on the anvil raised a beer bottle in salute.

Jacques took Sebastien's arm. "You know these old warriors?"

He nodded. Sebastien knew all his papa's cronies by sight.

Juan, Jacques' oldest friend in the village, made room for the youngster on the packing case. He pulled an unmarked bottle from a bucket by his feet. The

blacksmith brewed beer at the back of the shed. "Here, young Ochoa, to what do we owe this honour?"

Jacques answered for him. "He's our new recruit. A companion in the struggle against dictatorship and oppression. Sebastien found time while he was in Hispanuela to join a protest march and fight with the whoreson Federales on the steps of the Tribunal Supremo."

The men hooted delight and raised their bottles.

"He got blood on my best suit. Fascist blood I hope, but I fear its from the young lady he helped."

Pablo rose from his deck chair to slap Sebastien on the shoulder. "Truly one of us then. Well done, young man. Our first recruit in a generation. The youth wing. We should have thought of it years ago."

"Ah, ha." Fabricio, the blacksmith, chimed in from the anvil, "but which faction will you join, Sebastien?"

"Good question. Which will it be, Sebastien?" Juan asked. "You're a fighter, and you look like a true believer. You should join Partido Revolucionario Autentico. The real revolution. Serious adults. Or maybe Confederacion Orbrera. The workers. You have the shoulders for it." He waved to Jacques. "You should try manual labour, old man, instead of waving your skirts at children all day. Fine solid contributors, the Confederacion. Like Pedro, here. He was with them."

Pedro waved his beer.

"Just don't go with those nancy boys in Directorio Estudiantil. All fancy talk and debates, no action! Tell me it's not them!" He pointed his beer bottle at Jacques, who chuckled.

Sebastien scratched his chin. He knew his father had been with Directorio Estudiantil – the students' party - in their brief, failed insurrection. "The students I was with are Partido Accion Directa, I think. I thought you all fought together," he said.

Fabricio considered that. "We were all on the same side, I think." They all nodded. "Leftists. Democrats. Not fascists like Asociacion Blanco Terror. I think there are a few of those ABT monkeys in Moreno's village over the ridge, but we're all democrats here."

Jacques rested his palm on his son's shoulder. "Different times, different battles, different parties. You know how it is in Isla Baconne. We have an election. All sides cheat and intimidate the candidates. The biggest frauds win. The losers take up arms. The army chooses its side. Always the fascists. The losers run to the hills. It's always been that way."

"So here we are, Ochoa." Fabricio thrust his beer forward and they tapped the necks of their bottles together. "Hey, who was in Hispanuela when that corrupt bastard Valdez stood for ABT? That was a time. We tore down a wall and put bricks through their windows. You were there, weren't you, Juan?"

Sebastien had drunk a lot more beer than his father knew, but Fabricio's strong home brew and the warm glow of adult acceptance put a muzzy cloud between his ears. The men joshed him to make him welcome while they reminisced about old battles.

"How many got arrested that day?" Pablo asked.

Juan shook his head. "Too many. Too many."

"Was that the day Echevarria got away on a number twenty-seven bus?"

They laughed together.

Pablo sighed. "Echevarria was shot in Guatemala, wasn't he?"

They nodded silently.

It hit Sebastien then, as he sucked on his second beer. For all the sardonic jokes and friendly insults, every story ended in failure. And every incident had been over before the end of the Second World War. His father and his friends were living in the defeated past.

Fabricio produced an earthenware jug from a hiding place in a pile of discarded vehicle parts and poured spirits into mismatched tumblers.

Each of the men took one. Sebastien declined with a wave of his half full bottle.

The conversation turned to local gossip and lengthy, companionable silences until at last Jacques had had enough. "One more for me *campaneros*, and you, Sebastien. You must have one small glass. It's a night of firsts for you, son. A ceremony of induction to our retired revolutionary cell."

He poured liquor.

The men raised their glasses in salute. Sebastien lifted his glass and hesitated. The only time he had drunk spirits he had vomited. The boys ribbed him for weeks.

"*Salute*," Fabricio called.

Sebastien drained his glass in a single gulp just like the others. The *cantina* gin burned down his throat. It warmed his stomach. His half-digested dinner rolled, but he held it down.

#

Two weeks later, an umbrella of calm hung around Sebastien's desk. The rest of the *palenque* school's single classroom heaved like a riot in a monkey cage. None



of the others present had the slightest interest in the lessons Jacques Ochoa taught. Of course, none of the other pupils had reached ten years of age.

The afternoon classes with the older students were more orderly. Sebastien went to the morning class because Jaques had more time to coach him. He sat in the corner furthest from the blackboard. The formless bedlam faded into the background while he worked. Algebra, because the Universidad Catholica scholarship tests always included mathematics. Probably not exactly the fifteen year-old Matriculation-level curriculum in the text book he had, the newest available in the Sierra Maestra.

He finished a problem, checked his calculation and turned to the answers at the back of the book. Apparently  $x$  equalled five and  $y$  equalled four. He had three and six. He sighed. Three more hours of torture to endure. Enough to make him look forward to hacking weeds in the family field after lunch.

Sebastien looked up to see if his father had a moment to show him where he'd gone wrong, but a hush had fallen over the classroom.

Two men stood at the door. Sebastien recognised them both. Raul Diallo, the acne-scarred second in command of the village thugs, hands on hips, so big that he blocked out most of the light. He had a holster strapped to his waist. The second man, shorter and skinny, wore a bright red shirt that was too big for him. Another senior man among the *palenque* gunmen. He had a rifle on a strap over his shoulder.

"Ochoa," Raul said, with a flick of his greasy ponytail.

"What is it?" Jacques asked. He moved to put himself between the class and the intruders.

"Not you. Him." The *palenque* second in command pointed to the corner.

Sebastien's heart rose in his throat.

Jacques glanced at Sebastien, eyebrows furrowed, then challenged Raul.

"What do you want with my son?"

Sebastien shook his head, willing his father to be quiet. He closed the algebra text and his notebook and stacked them at the corner of the desk. He wanted to leave the classroom tidy. For a wild moment he wondered if he would ever open the books again.

Jacques took a half step towards Raul and Sebastien jumped to his feet.

"Don't, Papa," he said. "It'll be okay."

Twenty frightened kids and one frightened adult watched slack jawed as Sebastien trudged to the door.

### CHAPTER THREE

A gaggle of women on the steps of the village store took a break from their gossip to watch Sebastien's walk of shame to Guzman's compound. Sebastien couldn't meet their eyes. What had he done to upset the headman?

The compound stood out from the wooden and mud brick *palenque* homes. A half acre of grounds surrounded by a high, plastered wall. A guard stood in the arched entrance. He adjusted his shotgun across his forearm and inclined his forehead to Raul.

Sebastien's best friend, Jose Duarte, stood beside the guard. He wrung his hands and his beady eyes darted from Raul to Sebastien and back to Raul, his chief in Guzman's private army.

"What's up, Jose?" Sebastien asked.

The smaller boy flicked his head, so his mop of black hair shook around his collar. "I don't know, I told the chief ..."

Raul glared at him. "Shut up, Duarte. Get back to the bunk house."

Sebastien had never stepped inside Guzman's compound. The *palenque* kids had sneaked up and climbed on each other's shoulders to spy, so he knew

Guzman's villa was large. It had a red roof, white painted walls and wide arched verandahs in the Spanish-Moorish style.

The wide screen doors were open to a tiled reception room crowded with plump couches. Potted plants lined the verandah and flower beds hugged the courtyard. A ceiling fan throbbed. Sebastien's mouth dropped open in wonder. Electrical goods were rare, precious and used sparingly in the Sierra Maestra. Few could afford the generator required to produce power, certainly not Jacques and Adriana Ochoa. Sebastien had never imagined the villa behind the stout plastered walls would be so comfortable or civilised. After his mother's rants about Guzman's crudity he had half expected chains on the walls and sawdust to soak up the blood.

"Stand here, boy." Raul pointed to a spot near the front door and strode off into the house. The second gunman stayed on the verandah. Sebastien put his hands in his pockets and studied the bare walls. He nodded to the gunman, who grinned and shook his head. What did that mean and why did he need the rifle? Sebastien reminded himself that the *palenque* guards always went armed. It probably meant nothing. He told himself to relax.

After a few minutes, Raul called from a hidden hallway, and the second guard led Sebastien in. A tinkle of girlish laughter floated from the kitchens as they passed making Sebastien jump. Their boots clicked on the tiles.

Raul met them. He grabbed a handful of Sebastien's shirt while he rapped on a heavy wooden door. It opened and Raul shoved Sebastien into Guzman's office. Another fan chopped the air above the chief's desk. Guzman slouched, his bald, bullet head fringed with a grey tonsure, like a monk. He stroked his chin with thumb and forefinger. A half smile played on his lips.

Raul swaggered to lean against the wall beside Guzman's desk. Sebastien stood in the centre of the room.

"Señor Guzman," Sebastien found it a little hard to breathe.

Guzman's grin widened momentarily to acknowledge the lad's politeness. He unwound slowly until his back was straight in his high-backed chair.

"Young Ochoa," he greeted his visitor. "I hear you have been fighting the police in Hispanuela."

"Señor Guzman?" Sebastien fought down an irrational urge to apologise. His mind raced. Had the police tracked him down? Why would Guzman cooperate with the Federales? Wasn't the whole point of *palenques* that authorities couldn't reach people there?

"I didn't take you for the type to fight the police."

Something itchy trickled down Sebastien's spine. He hadn't previously considered the possibility that the village chief knew he existed.

Guzman grinned at Raul, who sneered at Sebastien.

"Tell me about this fight."

Sebastien shrugged. "The police had batons and guns. The students didn't."

"An unfair fight." Guzman nodded. "Did the students fight well?"

"Some fought. Some ran." Sebastien couldn't remember any students do anything more than protect themselves or flee for their lives, but he felt a need to defend the smart, confident youths he had so admired.

"So, why did you go with these students?"

Sebastien didn't think the truth - because a girl asked him - would be the right answer.

"Do you hate our president so much?" Guzman asked.

"Everyone should hate a president who hides behind goons with clubs," Sebastien said. An easy answer, the thought of muscle bound thugs with batons descending on unarmed women filled him with impotent rage.

Guzman turned to Raul. "See, the boy is his father's son." Raul glowered and the itch in Sebastien's back spread to his shoulders. He cursed himself. Guzman used armed guards, had the chief's second-in-command taken his comment as a threat?

The headman turned back to Sebastien. "I admire your father. A man of education. A man who made a sacrifice for a cause he believed in. Perhaps you're cut from the same cloth. I heard you beat two policemen mano a mano." His eyebrows quirked. "You must be quite a fighter. Perhaps you should join my squad. An intelligent man who fights. You could go far. What do you think, Raul?"

The pockmarked gangster bared his teeth.

"And what say you, *Señor Ochoa*?" Guzman asked.

Sebastien bit his lip, maybe he should show a little more care who he bragged to about his lucky escape. "I think you should maybe take what you hear round the village with a pinch of salt."

Guzman roared with laughter. "Good answer. I like this boy, Raul. These students, were they prepared? Did they fight back well? Are they committed to their cause and ready to make great sacrifices?"

"Not prepared for an attack by hoodlums with clubs, no. I can't say if they're committed. It was over in a few minutes."

"And you spent time in the university."

"I had an interview about the possibility of a scholarship."

"And did that go well? I'm sure it did."

"The response was encouraging."

"It's a great thing for our village. Well done. Who did you speak to?"

"Professor Diaz."

"Did you meet any of the other professors?"

"No."

"Professor Sastre? Ferdinand Sastre?"

"No."

Guzman rested his elbows on the desk with fingers entwined as if for prayer. He stared for a full minute while Sebastian wondered who the hell Professor Sastre might be and why Guzman would think he had met him.

"Okay," Guzman said at last. "I think you can help me. Professor Sastre has contacted me. He wishes to meet. He has a proposition. He'll be at the bridge in Penyas Blancas tonight. He'll need an escort, of course." No outsider could follow the maze of trails to their village without a guide. "I fear my guards might be a little intimidating." He nodded to Raul and smirked. "I think it would be helpful if one of my representatives who met this Professor was a fine looking young man with potential as a scholar at his university." He nodded to himself and raised a finger as if he'd just had a brilliant idea. "And you should come to dinner with us. I'd value your impressions. Can you help me, Sebastien?"

"Of course." There'd be a difficult conversation with his mother, who despised Guzman, but no one denied the village chief.

"You can go with your friend Duarte, on the motorcycle."

Sebastien couldn't hide a grin. He'd love to ride on the motorcycle.

#

When the door closed behind Sebastien took his first full breath in while. He shivered, either from the chill in the centre of the house or his reaction to the release of tension.

A giggle drew his attention to the kitchen. Huge brown eyes smiled at him. Girl's eyes. In an oval face with a pretty upturned nose and eyelashes as lush as the models in Juanita's magazines. They fluttered in his direction. Sebastien stared, transfixed, like a cornered rabbit. He opened his mouth to say something, anything to bring the girl into the corridor where he could see her properly, but his tongue had glued itself to the top of his mouth.

A hand tugged the girl out of sight. Another pretty face appeared in its place for a fraction of a second, then two girls giggled out of sight somewhere in the kitchen.

"This way, boy." The guard on the villa verandah beckoned.

Sebastien chanced one last glance as he passed down the hallway but saw only a waft of white cotton skirt.

#

"Sebastian! Hey, Ochoa. *Paleta!*"

Jose had been among the first to latch onto his new nickname. Perhaps he should look for a new best friend.

Sebastien dropped the short handled hoe he used to hack at the weeds and stretched. The small bones in his back crackled in relief. He'd worked for four hours. "What do you want?" he asked.

Jose had a dusty jacket over his shirt, despite the wet summer heat, and Levi Strauss jeans like the bad boy in one of the American films the travelling movie man projected on a sheet tacked to the walls of Velasco's barn. He snatched a look over



Sebastien's shoulder. Sebastien knew exactly where Jose's eyes had strayed. He had that hungry look often since he had noticed Juanita.

His sister had her back to them, probably deliberately. Two years older than Sebastien, the same age as Jose. Nineteen. A woman already. In her own mind at least. Silky raven hair escaped under her scarf and her shabby dress strained against her curves. Sebastien wasn't at all sure he liked the way Jose looked at her, even if she was a pompous shrew. Juanita hacked at each weed as if it alone was the reason why she had to sweat in the fields instead of sipping coffee in a stylish city cafe.

"Aren't you done here? The day's gone," Jose called, loud enough for Juanita to hear. He glanced over Sebastien's shoulder to see if she'd reacted.

Juanita's hatchet paused above her shoulder long enough to give Jose a pitying scowl.

"What happened with the chief? I told him all about what happened in Hispanuela."

"Yeah, thanks for that. Did you have to tell him everything?" He pulled a dirty rag out of his belt and wiped the sweat away from his eyes. A waste of time. The rag was sodden already, and the perspiration ran in rivers.

"What do you mean?" Jose asked. "He was impressed. I could tell."

"Yeah, so much that he sends his goons to drag me out of the school. Raul Diallo frightened the life out of my papa." Scared Sebastien pretty thoroughly too, but he wouldn't admit that. "I think I pissed him off somehow."

"Raul hates everyone, except Guzman." Jose shrugged. "Maybe Guzman as well."

"Well, anyway, I have a job to do tonight for Guzman. He wants me to go meet some professor from the city and bring him back to the compound."

"Great. A job. Maybe I can get you onto the guard." Jose had never quite grasped the idea that Sebastien might have a future outside the *palenque*.

"Maybe, but it won't happen. Mama would have a fit."

"Hey, the guard squad is a good job. The best in the village."

For someone whose ideal future involved dodging bullets in the occasional feud with neighbouring *palenques*, Jose's logic couldn't be faulted.

Sebastien glanced over his shoulder to make sure Juanita had her head down and clapped his friend on the back. "Hey, that girl. In the kitchen."

"The kitchen? Which girl?"

"Brown eyes, long hair ..."

"Luzmilla? Jesus! Don't even think about it, *paleto*. Playing with fire there, my friend. Real bad idea. Anyhow, she wouldn't look at you."

"Like Juanita then. Luzmilla won't look at me. Juanita won't look at you. I guess we're even."

"No way, you're a *paleto* and a schoolboy. I'm a man with an important job."

"I'll tell Juanita. I'm sure she'll be impressed."

"Okay. So long as you know who's boss."

Sebastien patted Jose's shoulder. "You can be boss tonight. Guzman said you're taking me to Penyas Blancas on the Husqvarna."

**What did you think? Please let me know via the contact forms on the website, especially if you'd like to get a copy of the book when it's published!**