



*An excerpt from **The Second Guerrilla: M5M**, the second instalment of *The Guerrilla* trilogy, due for release in August.*

It features Luzmilla, Sebastien Ochoa's lover, who works for the revolution as a 'clandestino', and her boss and mentor, Monica Hernandez.

At this point, they're waiting for M5M's leader, 'Nando', to land from Mexico with a guerrilla force. Nando is a week late.

Sweat trickled between Luzmilla's shoulder blades, despite the cool of the evening. Every click of her heels on the sidewalk resounded off the walls of central Manzanillo. The base of her spine itched where she constantly imagined a gun pointed.

They'd go into the mountains soon. She would find a way to convince Monica. Somehow. Each time she raised the suggestion, Monica shrugged it away and lit another cigarette.

Nando would come tonight, surely, unless the boat had been lost or captured. She shook the doubt away with a shudder.

Anxiety gripped them all. Luzmilla saw it in Monica's chain-smoking, the set of her shoulders, drooping a little lower each day, and the chalk-white skin under her mentor's makeup.

"Hey beautiful, what's your hurry? Come and have a drink with me."

Luzmilla tossed a smile to the fat old man who called from a restaurant table. She patted her shopping bag to suggest she had other things to do and nodded to a policeman who stepped out from an alley, drawn by the greeting.

The uniform sent another shiver to her stomach. The lice were everywhere. In stark contrast to the rural guard and army who'd disappeared into thin air. An ominous development. Where were they?

Two blocks to La Rosa cafe.

Luzmilla's shopping bag flapped empty against her thigh. Her purse was light in her hand. She yearned for the weight of a revolver. Frank, the Santiago clandestine chief, had Sebastien and a host of armed men to protect him. Monica had one small, unarmed female companion because anything else would invite attention. Luzmilla had delivered messages at the tobacconist and the laundry — word would spread fast. M5M Manzanillo activists would come to the cafe in ones and twos for updates and new instructions, mainly for Monica's reassurance. She insisted on taking the risk, and she was right. If they met her in person, they stayed strong.

Luzmilla hesitated at the next corner. A black Pontiac blocked a side road, its engine ticking over. The driver wore casual clothes but sat suspiciously straight with both hands on the wheel. The policeman who stood guard at the bank should have moved him on, except the policeman was gone.

She covered the last fifty metres to the cafe as fast as she could without breaking into a run and broadcasting her fears.

The street tables outside La Rosa were deserted.

Luzmilla pushed into the cafe and choked down the warning she'd been about to blurt out.

Monica had her usual table, farthest from the street, her coffee untouched. A cigarette burned in her fingers, but her other hand gripped the table so hard her knuckles were white. Her eyes went wide. Monica didn't know fear. What had happened?

Luzmilla stopped so suddenly she skidded on the tiles.

The owner, Toni, an M5M stalwart, stood transfixed behind the cigar cabinet that served as his counter. In a white tee-shirt and straight-legged jeans turned up at the cuffs, a pack of cigarettes jammed under the shirt at his left shoulder, hair slicked into a duck's tail. No servers.

One customer, his back to the door smoking calmly.

Both Toni and Monica shifted their eyes from Luzmilla to him.

A small man in a neat suit, hair combed over a bald patch and greased to his scalp, a luxurious moustache, thick-framed glasses — the Chief of Police.

Luzmilla's heart turned to lead. She fumbled with her purse to cover her shock.

Monica and Toni's reactions, the chief's smug grin, could mean only one thing — Monica or both were under arrest. The suspicious car outside must be waiting to whisk them away. Why hadn't the police taken Monica already? Why wasn't she handcuffed?

Luzmilla pulled out her compact and flicked it open as if checking her lipstick. She jammed her elbow against her side to dampen the trembling while her mind whirled with panicked thoughts. The police hoped to pick up more M5M activists. *That would be it.* Monica was a decoy. Everyone who acknowledged her would be hauled away to the tender mercies of the secret police.

Monica flicked cigarette ash onto the floor. A perfectly normal gesture, except she'd never be so thoughtless. It meant 'run while you can', Luzmilla was certain of it. But no! She'd not leave her leader to the EPE while blood ran in her veins. She had to think of something. Fast. Her awkward cover movements with her mirror left her facing the table where the waiters kept a jug of water and glasses.

On a wild impulse, she tossed her empty shopping bag to Toni. He jolted but caught the bag in both arms — a reflex action.

"So sorry I'm late," she said. Her voice cracked, but she forced a cheerful trill. "The traffic is ridiculous with all these police. Where's Carlos?" She didn't know the La Rosa waiters' names. She hoped the chief didn't either. "Never mind. I'll get to work."

Toni stared in mute astonishment while Luzmilla picked up a glass and the jug and went to Monica's table, positioning her body to block the chief's view. "Water,

Señora? I'm sorry you haven't been served." She winced at her stupidity. Monica had a coffee, for goodness sakes.

"Oh, but I have, young lady," Monica croaked. "It seems I'm under arrest."

Luzmilla searched the rear wall for an escape route. There must be a back entrance, but there were only two doors. 'Senoritas' and 'Senors' — the restrooms. The kitchen was behind Toni.

"This gentleman is the chief of police." Monica pointed her cigarette.

"Really?" Luzmilla twisted to give him a smile, making sure to flick her hips so her skirt swung around her butt. That should get his attention.

His eyes flicked in the desired direction.

She ad-libbed, pointing at Monica's cup. "You must have some cake with your coffee, Señora. Oh, it's cold." She leaned over the table.

"They'll catch the others as they arrive," Monica said in a worried whisper. "Get out!"

Like hell! Luzmilla nodded, picked up the saucer and warm cup. "I'll get you another."

She went to the counter. "Toni, pour a new one. Do you want to lose all your customers? And add a piece of that gateaux. I need to freshen up."

She marched into the ladies restroom, her breath coming in tight puffs as if she'd run a kilometre. Two stalls against one wall, a faucet and basin under a mirror on the other with a single wooden dining chair. No door to the rear yard. How the hell did Toni get a bar licence without a fire exit? She threw open the first cubicle. A window. Thank God. Just wide enough for a woman to wriggle through. She gave it a shove, but it held. The latch was rusty. She flicked off her shoes, took one heel in her right hand, closed the toilet seat and stepped on to it. Luzmilla braced her hand on the wall and smashed at the latch with her shoe. After four taps, it sprang free. She opened the window wide.

Luzmilla slipped her heels back on, flushed the toilet and hurried back into the restaurant, ostentatiously tousling her hair.

Toni hadn't moved. The fool still hugged her bag to his chest.

What could she do? She surely had no more than a few seconds before the police chief saw through her charade.

She grinned at him. It felt like a grimace. "Just a moment."

He sipped at his coffee, eyebrows raised in a silent question. What the hell did that mean? Nothing good.

A thousand useless thoughts jammed Luzmilla's brain. In desperation, she swept up the cup and saucer she'd put down a moment before. Her hands shook so hard the teaspoon rattled in the saucer. She weaved through the tables and slid the coffee back in front of Monica. She adjusted the empty chairs at the table to make some noise while she whispered. "The toilet window's open."

Her startled chief covered surprise with a puff on her cigarette. *Excellent woman!*

Luzmilla marched over to the police chief.

"What can I tempt you with, Señor?"

Monica's chair rattled back. The police chief leaned to see around Luzmilla. She shuffled to block him. "Coffee, perhaps?"

The police chief scowled and pushed himself up from his table.

"I need the bathroom," Monica said, in her school teacher voice.

"Wait." The chief put his palm on Luzmilla's arm to ease her aside.

"Excuse me, Señor. Please let go," she grabbed his hand.

He tore it free and ducked around the table. "Stop!"

Toni grasped the moment and ran for the front door. "Hey, you!" Someone called.

The chief glanced Toni's way, distracted.

The restroom door banged shut behind Monica.

Luzmilla pushed the police chief with all her might. He stumbled on his chair. She kicked him hard in the shin with the point of her shoe and dived for the bathroom.

The chief yelled in pain, swung at her, missed and stumbled over a chair.

Luzmilla pulled Monica's table over behind her and shouldered the restroom door aside. She slammed it shut as the police chief untangled himself.

Luzmilla jammed the restroom seat under the door handle and dived into the toilet cubicle to find Monica half out of the window, humming frustration, her skirt

caught on the latch. Luzmilla grabbed both Monica's knees and pushed. The dress ripped, and her boss slithered out with a screech of surprise and a crash of tumbling bins.

The restroom door heaved under a tremendous blow. The chair flew out from under the handle. Luzmilla took a second to swing the cubicle door shut and lock it. She took one giant step onto the toilet seat and threw her arms through the window, eyes squeezed shut, bracing herself to land head first on concrete. Instead, Monica caught her wrists. She let out a startled "Oof" as she went over backwards, and Luzmilla's shoulder ploughed into her stomach.

Luzmilla bounced to her feet. "Thank you!"

Monica sprang up beside her, holding her stomach. "You're heavier than you look."

They were in a service lane littered with stinking waste bins from the businesses on either side. A few strides to the nearest street one way, a hundred metres the other.

"We've got to get out of here," Monica said.

A splintering crunch of breaking timber in the restroom underlined the point.

Monica took off down the alley, the long way, tearing her skirt aside to lengthen her stride, bumping bins out of the way.

Luzmilla cast a long glance at the road a few feet away, remembered the black car and chased after her boss.

Monica tried the rear door of a shop.

Locked.

She dashed on.

The chief's head poked out the restroom window. "They're getting away!"

Something snapped past Luzmilla's ear and whined off the wall.

"He's shooting at us," Luzmilla cried.

A door opened two shops ahead. "Run," Monica yelled. She skittered around a stack of wine crates and raced on, a hand in the air waving Luzmilla forward.

The pistol cracked again, giving Luzmilla wings. A thumped into a crate near her ankle as she plunged past a bemused young man in a butcher's apron.

He shut the door behind Luzmilla and dropped a length of timber into hooks to bar it. “This way.”

Luzmilla followed Monica straight through the boning room, elbows in the air to avoid contact with carcasses, animal blood splashing around her shoes. They dodged around the serving counter, ignored the cries of the butcher and a matron buying chicken legs to bust out onto another street.

“There.” Monica set off for a patch of waste ground where vans and trucks parked.

Did she mean to steal one?

With a quick look over her shoulder for the black car or men with guns, Luzmilla charged on, her knees straining against her skirt.

Monica ran straight past the parked vehicles to a patch of maruba — twenty metres square, two metres tall, the spiked branches tangled like a fantastic cactus octopus.

Monica hesitated, searching for a gap. “Here.” She pulled her skirt up and stepped over a low branch, hissing through her teeth as her ankle rolled between spike-encrusted roots. She wriggled to free thorns caught in her blouse.

Luzmilla girded her loins and followed. Spines sliced at her legs and arms. Her long hair caught. She yelped as she pulled it free.

Monica took the worst of it, plunging and twisting to find body-sized spaces between the spiked branches that tore her clothes to shreds. Deep red slashes crisscrossed her arms and back.

Luzmilla pressed on, jamming a maruba needle into her knee — exquisite agony. She gasped, pulled it free and limped into the gap Monica just vacated.

Monica stopped, sinking to her haunches. “There’s room for us here.”

Luzmilla squeezed in beside her on one shoe. She’d lost the other somewhere in the bush. Something incredibly sharp scored her back. She sucked in the pain, rose a fraction, tore her dress off the spine and found space to kneel at Monica’s side.

She could barely make out the trucks in the square through the thick clumps of razor-sharp maruba. Hopefully, in the heavy shade, they’d be invisible to anyone looking the other way.

Monica's breath puffed in her ear. Luzmilla squeezed her eyes against the torment of a dozen deep scratches.

Monica put a trembling arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "You saved my life, Luzmilla."

"You saved mine."

"They were there when I arrived. Toni tried to warn me, but there was no time. He earned a pistol barrel across the back of his head for his trouble. There were four of them."

Luzmilla hugged her back. If Monica was babbling, she must be in terrible shock.

"They sat me at that table and went for the chief. He ordered his men to wait in hiding. I'm sorry. I expected them to take me away in chains or shoot me." She sobbed, flicked a tear away, careful not to stab her forearm on a spike. "I should have run. Let them kill me. I couldn't think. You were so nearly caught. Someone betrayed us, Luzmilla."

"No." She said it only as a salve to Monica's conscience, but the thought took root. "The chief didn't come with his men. Suppose they've been watching M5M suspects and sympathisers, they could have narrowed down the meeting places we use and left policemen to watch each one."

Boots thundered on the square's paving slabs. They froze together.

Policemen swarmed around the vehicles. All ran past but one, who paused. He checked under the vans, then glanced up at the bush.

He looked directly at Luzmilla.

Her heart soared into her throat.

But he looked aside, took a couple of steps after his comrades, then stopped again and reached for something at his feet.

Luzmilla's shoe. He raised his pistol and turned again to the bush.

"This way, I saw them!"

The shout stopped him in his tracks. He whirled and ran off.

"Oh, my God," Monica said. "I thought we were dead. We can't stay here."

"No, they might come back. It will be dark soon."

“We have to warn the others,” Monica said.

“Then we go to the mountains.” Luzmilla insisted.

Monica sighed. “Yes.” She looked around. “It’s going to be a long night.”

I hope you liked it. The Second Guerrilla: M5M will be out soon. It’s a standalone story, but if you’d like to know how Sebastien and Luzmilla got involved in guerrilla warfare, here’s [The First Guerrilla](#).