

Chapter 3

Did you know that trouble can come as quick as lightning? It cracks off like gunshots. And one night trouble came to the commune. I remember Mama shaking me. She had come into the communal hut where I slept with the other children. One of her hands covered my mouth and there was fire in her eyes. In the lantern light they looked like shining jewels.

‘Pepe,’ she whispered, ‘go to your tree house and be careful you are not seen. Do not leave, no matter what you hear.’ I knew from the sound of her voice that every word she said must be obeyed. Mama was shaking. I felt like gasping for air and rubbing my stomach to make it stop heaving.

The moon was at the top of the sky and it lit the path to my hideout, a long run away from the huts. I climbed up to the tree house and pulled the rope ladder up after me. I was safe then, looking down over the commune and the river. The bright moonlight clearly showed our little village, with all its familiar huts. I could see the adults busily running about, moving things. The television, the computer, boxes of food and other valuables were loaded into the truck. Gonzales got in and drove slowly, without

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headlights, until he stopped some distance away and switched the engine off. Others were slashing branches from trees with their machetes and collecting the leaves to camouflage the truck. The horses were led quietly in amongst the trees and tethered in a hidden place.

Then the women and the other children all hurried over the bridge to the secret hut on the other side of the river. All the commotion ended quite suddenly, and the commune grew very quiet.

The moon had seen it all and her face stared down blankly. At least she could tell no-one our secret. I curled up in my hideout, yawning and gripping my knees. Everywhere there was silence, except for the sound of the river. Even the jungle was quiet that night. My gut instinct told me that something would happen.

I do not know which I noticed first, the noise of the jeeps or the headlights. The engines were revving as they bumped their way up the mud path along the river bank. My eyes and mouth were wide open and I sat like a statue as the headlights showed up parts of the trees and then the huts. Loud music blared from the sound system in one of the jeeps, music with drums, bells, trumpets and guitars. The music was so loud, I felt as if my ears would burst. I was dizzy with fear. It was the guerrillas, the dreaded AGRA. I was glad now that Mama and all the other women and children were in hiding across the river, but the men were still in the huts, taking their chances.

The jeeps stopped in the middle of the commune, honking their horns, their headlights shining starkly on our huts. I was frightened of what would happen, but I could not look away. Soon the men of the commune were rounded up at gunpoint and counted. They huddled together in a line, shivering, their faces down on their chests. The guerrillas marched around them shouting abuse and questions. It felt strange to be sitting there in my tree house, watching everything that was happening, but invisible to everybody below. I was as safe as a bird in my tree, except I could not fly away.

'No tenemos nada aqui,' Gonzales muttered to one of them that had poked him in the stomach with a weapon. That's Spanish for, 'We have nothing here.' The AGRA guerrillas searched the huts, dragging Paul Rooke with them as their prisoner and beating him occasionally. I heard him telling lies when they asked about the women. He said that they were working for a month at the *trapiche*, the sugar-cane mill. The guerrillas said they did not believe him. Their leader fired shots across the river and went halfway across the bridge. He looked like a horrible ghost in the moonlight carrying a gun. Soon he came back to our side of the river.

I do not know why Gonzales became the butt of their jokes, but he was made to light their cigars, using a stick reddened in the fire. They laughed as he came to each of the guerrillas. I saw the glow on the cigars as they inhaled on them. Then Gonzales was dragged down to the hard,

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dry mud along the river bank. Two of the guerrillas pointed rifles at him. Gonzales began to beg for his life, but after a few moments they both shot him. His body twisted a few times and he fell over in a heap. My eyes widened in shock at the sight. I nearly cried out, but clamped a hand tightly over my mouth.

The guerrillas seemed to go crazy after that, threatening the others with their jerking guns. I thought they would shoot them all. I began to feel as if I would choke and lose my breath. The men knelt down and begged for their lives. One of the guerrillas started to laugh and said they looked like *sapos*, frogs. Another called them a bunch of young girls, along with other names that I will not repeat. Their wailing made me choke a sob that was rising from my stomach. I wanted to rush down and attack those thugs, but I knew that it would do no good.

Gonzales was then dragged out along the bridge. He was fastened onto the boards with thick ropes and left there. I crouched down on the floor of my tree house and forced myself to peep at him, hanging in the moonlight. I felt sick each time I looked. Finally, I lay down on my side with my arms wrapped around my head.

I must have fallen asleep, because I was woken by voices. It was bright outside. The guerrillas were near the bridge, arguing. Two of them were holding machetes. Gonzales was still hanging from the bridge. I could not see his face, but gashes and bloody bullet holes were visible in his head and back. One of the guerrillas walked

out to the middle of the bridge and cut through the ropes that were holding him. Gonzales' body hit the water with a loud splash and disappeared. Then the body came up again and floated away on the river's strong current. I covered my eyes with my hands, trying to pretend that it wasn't really happening.

Around noon the AGRA thugs who had brought such evil to our commune left. They seemed to have lost interest in terrorising the men any longer. Eventually, as the afternoon grew less hot, the women and children came back across the river. Nobody said anything, but just stared in all directions, unable to believe how our peaceful lives had been shattered. When my friends came to call me down I could not move. I thought that if I stayed where I was and kept my eyes shut, maybe I would discover that it was all a bad dream. Mama called me but still I did not move. I lay on my back and told her to leave me alone. I stared up at the blue sky and thought of Papa and began to feel even worse. My throat was dry and my stomach ached a bit but I did not care. When it was nearly dark, Mama cooked some rice and beans and the smell of the food finally dragged me down from my tree. Mama said nothing, but folded her arms around me and squeezed me tightly. Her familiar smell made me feel a little safer.