La Santa Muerta

Chapter 1

Tijuana began to stir. The pale light of dawn woke the city that barely slept. The city, a modern urban jungle, lay at the meeting of two great countries. A twelve-lane tunnel, a high-pressure escape valve and three miles of fence filtered visitors to and from the United States of America. The area was intimidating, especially at night when the entire area was illuminated. Illegal and legal crossings took place every day and every night. The international marketplace, which Tijuana aspired to, meant that the border was now wider and easier to pass for the many who wished to escape the troubles of Mexico. The city, with its shanty houses and stores had reached the fence, so that everyone could see the other side; a stone’s throw away, yet beyond the hopes and dreams of many of those Mexicans who believed their future was there.

The neck of the funnel lay in the south of the city, where the old neighbourhoods provided shelter for the endless immigrants, seeking a better life and an escape from rural poverty and the agricultural cartels. The neighbourhood was a vibrant and noisy place. Delis and corner shops were open all day and all night. Their hospitality and cheap prices kept them in business. The bars were famous too, for their cheap liquor and an opportune shoulder to cry on. There was a sense of community.

The cramped apartments of those who could afford little else, spilled over onto the streets and it was not uncommon for family dramas to be played out for all to see. In the depths of the long, boiling summers, neighbours hung out on the steps that led up to their apartments. They often brought their dining chairs out onto the street. At least there the air seemed to be in motion. Tempers would rise, along with the temperature and noisy debates and arguments were inevitable. The neighbourhood saw everything. There was no point in trying to slip home un-noticed.

Maria Rodriguez lived in a tenement block over a Chinese Emporium. She had lived in the same apartment all of her life. The apartment consisted of three small bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen that was often the busiest place. The furniture and appliances were old but clean.

Maria was a pretty sixteen-year old girl, dodging the drama of city life with skill and dedication. She had long dark hair, a perfectly proportioned heart shaped face with straight, even teeth and bright inquisitive eyes. Eyes that knew just how long to linger over what interested her. She might have been considered shy. She was, without question, top of her class yet still innocent of the leverage this could provide her. Her parents, Pablo and Eunice Rodriguez kept her close, instilling in her the qualities of innocence and a devotion to family. She was the eldest daughter of five children. Her three brothers and sister were a long way behind her and so it fell to Maria to provide some of the care for her siblings, particularly her baby sister, Isabelle. Now in her final term of high school, the great wide world was finally in her sights. The thought of it filled Maria with was heady anticipation.

Maria woke to the usual sounds, the clatter of pots and pans from the kitchen, the distant rumble of trucks working in the scrap metal yard at the back of the apartment. Drivers yelling over the sounds of metal refuse and weeds being squashed together into manageable lumps. On this bright morning, she lay on her bed squinting against the sunshine filtering through her curtains, wishing she could slow down the process of change that was happening around her. She watched dust illuminated in the strong shafts of sunlight. She sighed as she heard her mother calling her.

‘Maria.’

She pulled herself up, slowly, reluctant to spring to her mother’s call.

‘Maria!’

It would be no use hoping that she would suddenly change her mind, thought Maria.

‘Coming.’ she replied.

‘So are the Saints, Maria, hurry up. I need help down here.’

‘Mama, I’m coming,’ she said with a level calm voice, determined not to be riled so early in the day.

She sat up and swung her legs down onto the floor, pulled on a hoodie that had seen better days and hitched up the drawstring of her pj’s.

She skipped down the stairs two at a time in good humour.

‘Maria, it’s a school day, remember?’ there was just, perhaps a touch of annoyance in her mother’s voice.

‘Of course, Ma.’

Maria sailed past her siblings, pulled open the rusty door of the fridge and took out a large jug of milk.

‘Is there anything to eat ?’ she asked as she poured herself a glass.

‘Yes, I have made pancakes, can’t you smell them?’

The small cramped kitchen was indeed filled with delicious smells of caramelized sugar, grilled pineapple and cinnamon-dusted burritos. There were further notes of coffee, chicory and chocolate, and underlying base notes of the gas from the stove. Layer upon layer of scents that never quite escaped from this badly ventilated kitchen hung around the ceiling. They were constantly being refreshed and this great symphony of scent was part of the fabric of home.

Maria hugged her mother, who pulled away and frowned at the indignity of her teenage daughter’s cupboard love. Maria piled burritos, syrup and pineapples onto her favourite enamel plate. The colours of the peonies painted on the enamel complimented beautifully, the yellow of the fruit. She sat down to eat and watched her mother quarrel with her brothers.

‘Shut that radio off!’ Maria’s mother demanded.

‘How can I think with all this noise? No-one seemed to take any notice.

Maria sensed that she was needed and she should intervene.

‘Mama’, she said, ‘it’s ok, I can help now, let me feed Isabelle.’

She scooped Isabelle out of her mother’s arm and took hold the bottle of milk that the baby was toying with.

‘Isabelle, look at what you’ve done to my t-shirt’, she scolded, laughing.

‘Sit down and she will take it properly.’ Her mother counselled.

Maria sat at the kitchen table, Isabelle settled down for her feed. The boys got bored, ran off to another room and calm was restored at least for the next few minutes and her mother sat down with her coffee.

‘Thank you,’ Eunice said.

Maria smiled and then glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. She was running late but she reassured herself that she had time and it hardly mattered so much with the end of term looming.

Maria washed and brushed her teeth and found some clothes that she wanted to wear.

As she made her way to school she brushed her hair, running the last block, so that she could avoid the attention she would invite by entering class late. The bell rang for first lesson just as Maria slipped through the front doors. She breathed a sigh of relief and made her way to her classroom.

Chapter 2

Maria sat with her friends, Elsa and Alicia, towards the back of the classroom. English was her favourite subject. She loved the open space and other worlds that poems and stories inspired and she loved the Romantic poets and classical literature. She was completely absorbed in her essay. Her body curved slightly around her desk. Her long dark hair was wound into a knot and held onto the back of her head with a pencil. Around her neck, a delicate gold chain glinted in the sunlight. She wasn’t wearing any other jewellery; she wasn’t wearing any make-up. But it was no surprise that her natural beauty caught the attention of the basket ball captain, who was probably the most handsome and popular member of the class. It was no surprise either that their teacher Miss Menguez noticed.

‘Antonio, what is so interesting about the back of Maria?’

Maria glanced up at Miss Menguez then turned around to look at Antonio and smiled.

The class laughed, some of them jeered. Antonio shrugged and smiled back at her then turned his attention back to his books.

The bell rang for the end of the period.

‘That’s all today’, said Miss Menguez . ‘Please get your essays in for next week and leave your desks tidy.’ Her pleas were inaudible against the stampede out of the room. Maria lingered behind. She really liked her teacher and felt for her because she was the constant butt of student jokes. She was a short and unfairly proportioned woman with artificial red hair and too much make up. Maria often sensed an air of justified hostility about the way she looked at her students. She wanted to say something so that Miss Menguez would feel that she was appreciated. But the silence was proving awkward and Maria lost her courage.

Footsteps clattered down the corridor, prompting Miss Menguez to ask,

‘Maria, did you enjoy class today? Would you like to work on an extension project?’

Before Maria could answer the classroom door burst open and a group of students tumbled in.

‘We’re looking for Maria, Miss.’

Miss Menguez peered at the students over the top of her spectacles and then turned to Maria and said, ‘Well, you are popular today, Maria. Go and get a break before lessons start again, but I would like you to find me after school.’

‘OK, Miss Menguez.’

Maria closed her bag and turned to join her friends but at the last moment she stopped and she found the courage to say, ‘Thank you, Miss. I shall really miss your classes.’

Maria didn’t give her time to respond but when she saw miss Menguez smile she knew her words were appreciated.

Out in the corridor, Alicia took Maria by the arm and they made their way outside.

‘I’m starving, let’s eat.’ Alicia said as she looked at Maria.

‘Ok. I was just thinking. I am going to get an extra essay to do for English. Don’t wait for me after school.’

‘Maria, that’s boring, what’re you doing that for?’

‘I like English and I like Miss Menguez. She’s cool.’

‘She’s not cool, she’s got no life, Maria. And she’s grumpy.’

‘How do you know she’s got no life?’

‘We asked her, if she’s married and stuff.’

‘Well I think she’s interesting and the stuff we read in class is interesting.’

‘Oh, please!’ Alicia rolled her eyes, ‘So, what are you going to do with all that stuff you’re learning about? I thought you were coming to college with us to do beauty therapy?’

Maria twisted her hair. ‘I am’

‘Ok, cool.’ Satisfied, Alicia skipped off towards the tennis court, where the girls hung out at break time. Maria hung back. A group of boys barged past her, Antonio was amongst them, following his friends.

‘Hey, Maria’ He grinned at her, ‘Sorry!’

She smiled at him.

‘Why don’t you come and play softball? We need some more girls.’

As Antonio spoke, his coach walked by and stopped to remind him about the lunchtime game. He turned to Maria and asked,

‘Will you come to watch us? We need more cheer leaders too.’

Maria turned to Antonio but he had already run off to join his friends.

She wished that she had answered. She was surprised at how many different emotions Antonio stirred in her, but mainly she was annoyed with herself for being nervous and shy. She hovered for a moment before joining her friends.

The students were pouring out of the boiling classrooms into the stagnant, searing heat, swarming like flies onto the basketball courts and onto the football pitch.

The air was thick with a kind of smog that blotted out the vivid cloudless sky, perhaps a mixture of industrial pollution, and the restless energy of the people in this city, their hopes and dreams, trapped and suspended. Maria and her friends accepted the smog as they accepted the world around them without questioning it too deeply.

\*

The girls had found a spot under a tree on the main lawn in front of the school. Maria, Alicia and three others spread out their lunch and their bags. Alicia sat close to Maria and whispered loudly to her.

‘Maria, did you know Yolanda’s pregnant. Don’t tell anyone,’ she added with a look of delicious conspiracy.

‘Your sister ?’

‘No, Yolanda from school.’

‘But she’s only a year older than us, barely fifteen.’ Maria looked at her in amazement.

‘Who’s her boyfriend, or who did it?’ Maria asked suddenly reddening as she realised how coarse her choice of words was.

‘She say’s she’s not sure.’

‘She’s mad.’

‘She’ll be leaving school this summer.’

‘Who’s going to look after her?

‘She doesn’t know.’

‘That’s probably why she’s not been at school.’ Maria tried to remember the last time she saw her. ‘Are you sure? Who told you?’

‘My mum.’

‘When?’

‘Yolanda’s mum was at our house crying her eyes out at our mum last night. I heard them through the floorboards.

‘Alicia, you’re bad! They both laughed. Then Alicia looked solemn and said,

‘Come on, Maria, you would have done the same, wouldn’t you?

Maria laughed and tried to imagine her mother having that conversation.

‘Maria?’

She looked at Alicia.

‘Are you going to watch the basketball game, tonight?’

‘Oh, I forgot to ask Mum.’

‘Maria, Antonio’s got a chance of getting into the league and maybe even college basketball.’

Maria reddened slightly. Her stomach was engaged in a triple jump and she focused her energy on trying to bring calm to her voice as she said,

‘It’s fantastic for him. Yes, I am going to support him, are you?’

‘Of course.’ Alicia insisted and then she added,

‘Elsa says she is going to ask him out.’

Maria felt a stab of alarm and her eyes gave her away.

‘You like him don’t you Maria?’

‘I don’t know’, she said in a quiet voice.’

‘Do you think she will do it?, she asked Alicia.

‘Elsa is capable of anything.’ Alicia said quietly.

Maria stood up to shake the crumbs from her skirt just as a cherry stone hit her on the forehead. She looked up to find that she was the focus of attention of a group of boys in the year below. They were the school tough gang, troubled, juvenile criminals, all of them with a police record. They were erratic, and unpredictable. Engaging with them in any way usually meant trouble. One of them spoke.

‘Maria, fancy a ride tonight?’

‘Not with you,’ she snapped back.

She knew him too well. He was Elsa’s brother.

The bell rang to signal the end of break. The crowds started to move and Maria felt grateful to be rescued.

Chapter 3

It was the end of the school day. Maria kept her promise and made her way to the English room. As she entered the room, Miss Menguez looked up from her computer and asked her with some urgency in her voice,

‘Maria are you free to help me with the food and drinks for tonight’s basketball game?’

Maria wished that she had remembered about this game and asked her Mum.

‘Yes, I would be happy to. Do you need me now or can I run home to tell my parents?’

‘There won’t be time for you to get home, you can use the phone here and let your parents know you are staying’

‘Ok. Thank you.’

Miss Menguez was concentrating looking at her computer screen as she said,

‘I have noticed that you have become good friends with the captain, Antonio.’

Maria felt herself blush. Miss Menguez glanced up at her.

‘It was not meant to be a criticism. He is a good friend for you, you are well matched in many ways. It is such a shame that his family have experienced so much tragedy during his young life. But he has strong principles. I am sure he will do well in life.’

‘Did you teach his brothers, Miss?’

‘I did. His oldest brother was a wonderful student and died so young. It was tragic.’

‘Of what?’

‘If you believe the gossip, then he was shot by a member of a local gang.’

‘But why?’ Maria knew the rumours but she had always felt uncomfortable about asking about the truth.

‘His father was rumoured to have been dealing with the illegal drug industry and as you know that is a lawless pursuit.’ She sighed.

She carried on,

‘But, I’m not sure I believe the stories.’

Maria said nothing. She looked at Miss Menguez, inviting her to go on.

There was a thoughtful pause before Miss Menguez said,

‘Anyway, the next brother was full of trouble. He wanted revenge. It was very sad to see him taken so young too.’

‘Was he killed too?’

‘Yes. Shot in the street on his way back from school. Cold blooded massacre.’

‘Oh my God.’ Maria whispered to herself. It was true. She closed her eyes and crossed herself.

‘Anyway let us focus on today. Will you come along to the kitchen with me? You can phone your parents on the way, and we’ll make a start on the food. It is an important match and we are expecting more visitors than usual.’

Maria considered the hassle she would get for going to see the game in this way rather than with her friends.

As they walked along the corridor, Miss Menguez explained how another teacher should have been helping her with the food but she had been called home early today.

‘I am very grateful for your help today, thank you Maria.’

They worked as quickly as they could, shifting tables and chairs in to the reception area in front of the sports hall. Tijuana State and City taxes had paid generously for this large, well-equipped sports hall.

The team filed into the hall for warm-up, ten minutes before the audience was due. Maria watched as Antonio led his team out and shadowed the coach. He noticed Maria watching and ran over to her.

‘Hey Maria, what are you doing here, are you staying to watch?’ He couldn’t hide his enthusiasm.

‘Yes, I’m helping with the refreshments.’

‘Cool!, So you’ll stay and watch?’

He put his arm around her and squeezed her. She giggled and playfully pushed him away.

‘Gonzales, get over here Captain!’ the coach shouted in a tone of mock rebuke.

Antonio turned to run back on court but said to Maria as he went. ‘Can you save a seat for my Mum?’

‘Sure, I will,’ said Maria.

Within a few minutes of her conversation with Antonio, Maria was swamped with visitors. The away team filed onto court and the atmosphere became charged and noisy. Eventually the crowd thinned as people found their seats. Maria went to find Miss Menguez.

‘Do you need me for anything?’

‘No. Thank you, Maria. You are welcome to find a seat and enjoy the game. Come and find me at half time, that would be great’

‘OK. Thank you.’

Maria entered the hall and looked around for two empty seats. She found them behind the team bench. These were prime seats, she asked a member of the team if she could sit there and he said of course, they were saved for her. She made herself comfortable and looked around nervously for Antonio’s mum. She had only met her once. Would she recognize her now? She wasn’t sure. She was surprised at how important this little quiet lady had suddenly become to her. A man tapped her on her shoulder. She swung around.

‘Can I sit there, it’s nearly time?’ He asked her.

‘I’m sorry but this seat is saved.’ She answered.

He grumbled and walked off. Then a neighbour in the same row also tried his luck.

‘I got a friend who needs that seat.’

‘I’m so sorry, Sir, but I need to save it’.

As the whistle blew for the start of play, the man next to her started to reprimand her. She could tell by his expression what he was trying to say but she could not hear his words above the noise of the crowd roaring it’s support for the teams. Maria watched the doors. They were shut now. She couldn’t imagine how Antonio’s mum might get access now. And it was still harder to imagine how, she might be able to attract her attention even if she did get in. Maria felt uncomfortable, the man who had wanted to sit next to her was standing behind her somewhere and she felt his glare boring into the back of her head. She tried to put these thoughts out of her mind and watch the game. It was a county final and she knew that Antonio’s team were desperate to win. They talked of nothing else in class. Tickets had sold out very quickly. It would never have occurred to her to pay to watch the match.

Goal after goal, scored for the home team. The atmosphere became charged. The visiting team played hard and scored plenty of match fouls. Maria watched Antonio, animated in his favourite game. He looked completely fired up as he ran about the court. At least twice she saw him tackled but the referee did not call a foul. Antonio did not loose his cool. Several times he had contact with the ball but was out of shot. The home coach shouted commands from the sidelines and his team followed his commands navigating their way artfully around the court. Antonio loved this sport, it was written on his face. Maria had often seen him playing in the street where he lived, a basketball hoop attached to their apartment wall.

As the half time whistle sounded Maria ran through the crowd heading into the reception area to find Miss Menguez.

Together they sold drinks, *churros* and ice creams. The players came out and joined the crowd. Fists of cash were waved in front of her face, orders shouted from all sides. She tried to catch a glimpse of Antonio, but ,she was surrounded by a wall of faces.

Suddenly, a hot hand pressed on her shoulder. Antonio had found her. He squeezed her arm. She jumped, laughing as she saw him.

‘Hi Maria, we’re gonna win!’

‘You’re doing great.’ She looked up at the clock. ‘What happened to your Mum?

‘I dunno, maybe she got busy with my brother.’ He shrugged dismissively and turned to go.

The second half of the match was just as fast-paced and furious as the first half. Maria did not like the attention drawn to her by the empty seat beside her. She really wanted Antonio’s mother to walk through the doors and find her, but it was clear that she was not coming. She hoped that someone else would ask to sit beside her and she would gladly have given the seat to anyone who asked but no-one did.

As the whistle blew for the end of the match, Maria felt relieved. She stood up and slipped out of the hall before the crowds. Antonio’s team had won. She looked around for Miss Menguez but the reception hall had been cleared. She had obviously packed up and gone home. Maria felt badly because she had not offered to help clear away during the second half. She had been so intent on finding Antonio’s mother that that she had not thought to offer. At any moment the doors would burst open and the sports hall would tip out into this room so she found her bag and left the building.

Outside the sky was a beautiful shade of blue, not quite light and not quite dark. There were a few stars visible and the moon was a lovely feminine crescent lying on her back as though waiting for her lover. Maria walked home taking in the smells of the city at night time; the Jacaranda and Jasmine trees, with their faintly rancid smell of over-blown foliage, and the inevitable smell of warm garbage. The subway rumbled underfoot, blowing gusts of rank heat out of the vents in the road. Her walk was almost twenty minutes at this time of day when the heavy daytime traffic had left the streets. She wandered home, enjoying the space for her thoughts that she never had at home. She thought about her day and about Miss Menguez and Antonio. By the time she reached the apartment, it was dark and she felt a sense of disappointment as she opened her front door. The house was quiet for a change, except for the tinny sound of the ageing TV.

Maria sat for a while and chatted with her Mother. Her father snored heavily as he lay on the sofa with his feet hanging over the edge. Eventually she made her way quietly to the tiny bedroom she shared with her younger sister whose sleeping face was angelic in the moonlight. Maria fell immediately into a sound dreamless sleep.