

## CHAPTER 1

### The Killing

I could see him in the twilight, swaying and staggering, as he walked drunkenly towards the house. I was ready to do it but quivering at the thought. I used all my strength to ease the granite paving stone up, on to the window sill, above the door. I steadied it with my hand and it balanced there. I could hear his uneven footsteps as he approached. I was determined if fearful: I dared not fail. While he inserted the key, I gave the stone a gentle push. It dropped straight on to him, smashing into his head with a muffled, deadly crunch. Silence.

I ran down the stairs and opened the door, fearful of what I would see. The hideous sight shocked me. His crumpled body lay there on the road. His mouth trickled blood and his broken skull gaped wide open. His eyes looked calmly ahead, as if nothing had happened. I half expected a flicker, a blink, but saw only a fixed stare. I could smell the ale and brandy on his breath and urine on his clothes. I placed my hand on his chest but could feel nothing but stillness. He was unseeing, motionless and dead. Whether or not I had meant to do it, I'd killed him. I tried hard to move him by pulling at his arms. He wouldn't budge. So I grabbed his feet and pulled with all the strength I could muster. He slid into the hall on his own blood and piddle. I sighed with relief and shut the door behind me, leaving the smashed paving slab and the trail of his redness outside.

As I washed his blood off my hands, my mind raced with the finality of what I had done. My heart beat faster and thumped in my chest. I did not panic because I knew what I had to do. I had to go and soon, if I was not to be charged with murder. I grabbed a large sackcloth bag and rushed around the house to pack my few possessions. Just two dresses, a petticoat and a pair of sandals. I took the remains of a loaf of bread, some slices of ham and a kitchen knife. I put on my coat and, with the bag over my arm, left the house, not five minutes after I had killed him.

I could not go without telling my friend Lucía what I'd done and why I was leaving our town. The door of the house where she lived, with the other orphans and stray children, was never locked so I opened it and walked in. A single candle, in its holder on the wall, flickered in the draft from the open door. I felt my way into Lucía's room, made my fumbling way to her bed and shook her.

'Who the hell is that?'

'It's me. María. Come with me. I've something to tell you,' I whispered, so as not to disturb the others.

'Can't it wait 'til the morning? I'm tired,' she yawned.

'No. It's urgent... and serious. Get out and come with me.'

Lucía, wearing her nightdress, followed me back into the hall and outside into the road. We could see each other clearly in the light of the full moon.

'What is it then? You're shaking.'

'I've killed the *hidalgo*, and I'm leaving town.'

'What? You've killed him? Never! Injured him, maybe. But from what he's done to...,' she said, shocked but attempting justification.

'Yes, he's dead.' I explained to her what I'd done and how. She already knew about what I had had to tolerate from that ogre.

'Where are you going?'

'To Madrid. I'll get a ride on a cart.'

'If you go, I go!'

'No. You can't. We'd both be in trouble.'

'Now I am in trouble. You've told me what you did and they are sure to ask me.'

'Please, Lucía, stay here. You'd be better off.'

'No. I'll pack my things now and come with you. Wait here.'

Lucía hurried back into the house. She had surprised me with the strength of her wish to come with me. I took great comfort in knowing that she was prepared – if not that well – to give up her life here and join me in a new beginning. She had always been my best friend, ever since we had escaped from the orphanage, some five years before, with my twin brother Pedro and Simón, our legless comrade. She showed her greatest value as my friend at the time of my beloved brother's disappearance. I was heartbroken and she gave me the strength to survive without him. We then shared our grief when Simón was run over, not six months later. Within a few moments, Lucía re-emerged from the house, fully dressed and wearing a short, thick jacket. She carried a small sack, full of her belongings, slung over her shoulder.

'Let's go,' I said. 'We'll find somewhere to rest by the side of the Madrid road and wait to ask someone to take us.'

We walked quickly away from her hostel, up the hill and along the north bank of the river towards the cathedral.

'Why not stay in there for the night?' I said.

'In the cathedral? We can't sleep in there, among all those tombs. Someone will see us.'

'I don't agree. Let's go in.'

My mother was a nun at this cathedral. I was named after its saint but not by my mother, whom Pedro and I never knowingly met. No one knew exactly when, but the day we were born, sometime around the year of Our Lord 1585, the nuns took us both to the convent orphanage where we lived until the day we escaped. Our father, so they said, was a priest. We could see the towering

cathedral clearly by the light of the moon. We entered through the door to the north which squeaked loudly as we pushed it open.

'Someone will hear us,' whispered Lucía.

'Don't worry,' I said as we crept in.

Oil lamps, placed high on the stone columns, bathed the floor in a gentle, fragile glow. 'Let's see if there's anyone here,' I said quietly. We tiptoed carefully down the aisle, across the nave at the altar end and down the opposite aisle of this huge, echoing building.

'There's no one here,' said Lucía. 'We can sleep wherever we like.'

'Yes, but we must get up early in the morning and onto the Calle de Madrid.'

We settled down on a threadbare carpet in the Capella de la Condestable, using some pew cushions for cover and pillows.

'I still can't believe you killed him,' said Lucía. 'I wouldn't have had the courage.'

'Maybe not, Lucía. But I just could not stand to be treated that way anymore. Last night I woke up with a fright. I heard my bedroom door opening. I could see him standing there, looking at me and holding a lamp. He stood there for two threatening moments. Then he bent over. I could smell the drink on his breath. I felt his hand slide down inside the bed. I could see he was half naked and ready to do me. So I punched him in the stomach and dashed out of the room into the kitchen and grabbed a knife. He followed me shouting that he would get me.'

'You didn't try to kill him then?'

'No. When he saw the knife he held up his hands in shame and started to cry. Said it was the drink that had driven him to it. With his head down, he crept back into his room and shut the door. I swear that, if it hadn't been for the knife I held out towards him, he would have done me. That was the last straw. So I spent the day planning what to do. And I thought of that paving slab lying in the yard, round the back...'

I started to sob, more in search of sympathy than in sorrow. I could not regret what I had done.

'Now, now, don't cry, María. We'll soon be out of here and leave all this behind us.'

I didn't sleep much and neither did Lucía. My head was still spinning. If I was caught, I could be hung for this or burned at the stake. But I harboured no regrets. It was a case of me or the *hidalgo*. I could not submit to more abuse or even rape by that wretch of a man. I was certain that if he did succeed in raping me, he would kill me, and then drop me in the river. Lucía was restless, too. She fully realised that I had committed a grave act and what the consequences could be. But this wonderful friend still wanted to be with me. She supported me and gave me solace.

We heard the church bells chime out five o'clock in the morning and decided to go. First, we tucked into some of the bread and ham which I had taken from the *hidalgo's* house and a hard-boiled egg each that Lucía had brought with her. We cupped our hands and drank our fill of cold, holy water from the enormous stone font. Then we left the way we'd come in. Within a few minutes and in the dark of the vanished moon, we were on the uncertain road to Madrid.