

Chapter 1

*“My cup is filled with oblivion and illusion,
and in it I want to drown my despair.”*

from the tango, “Leave Me Alone, I Don’t Want To”

Friday, July 6, 1973: Jesse Gonzales slouched deeper into his seat aboard the Bolivariano Express and stared out the window. Instead of enjoying the rolling mists and lush vegetation of the rain forest, he ruminated his wife’s parting words.

“Remember, Jesse, there is no bad from which good does not come.”

He grunted. Colombian Proverb bullshit. Just another way for the rich to convince the poor that suffering was noble, got them to heaven quicker. Still, maybe Isabel was right. Maybe it was time for his luck to turn around.

On one of the many hairpin turns ribboning up the mountain, his bus fidgeted, broke rank and lurched past a slow moving cattle truck.

Jesse grabbed the back of the driver's seat and stared through the wide, dirty windshield at a large, black automobile bearing down on them. He braced for the collision.

Horns blaring, without a moment to spare, the gaily painted bus squeezed back into the struggling, single file procession. The Mercedes sped by.

The men on the bus cheered. The passenger to his right crossed herself and Jesse hollered, "*Idiota*," shifting his muscular frame back onto the cushion. He pulled a flask from inside his leather jacket and took a chug before turning to the elderly, countrified woman at his side. "You'd think all the crosses and shrines along this highway would remind them, but, oh no—a quick sign of the cross pays the God insurance and those idiot drivers go on playing their *macho* games with our lives. This Colombian *fatalismo* may be quaint for the tourist books, but I'm a man in charge of my own destiny."

"*Sí*," the woman agreed, nodding her head. "*Tiene razón*."

"You bet I'm right."

He emptied his flask and refocused on the purpose of this trip—a partnership offer from a long time friend. Be just his luck to get killed before he even got to Bogotá.

It was late afternoon by the time the driver threaded his clumsy vehicle through the congested city traffic. Swarms of people pressed and jostled for a piece of the narrow pavement while automobile horns shrilled as drivers bullied their way through it all.

Outside the terminal, Jesse worked his way over to a pay phone, fished some coins out of his jeans pocket and dialed the six digit number he had just memorized.

"Can you see the Cafe Buenos Aires from where you are?" his friend, Harry, asked him.

"See it and hear it."

"Good. It'll take me about twenty minutes to get there."

Glad to get away from the crowds and the smell of diesel fuel, he ordered a beer, put money into the juke box and slipped into the despair of the lyrics. *Yira Yira*, was an old tango about the hard times and social injustices in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century, when European immigrants were displacing the migrant workers from the rural areas of Argentina.

When luck, fickle as a woman, has left you cold.

The words knew him well. But he was here to start a new chapter not relive the old ones. The moment he hit the street, Jesse was assailed by lottery vendors, old hags selling cigarettes and young urchins peddling chiclets and chocolate bars. Sensing potential thieves close at hand, he clutched his gym bag even tighter. Not a stranger to seedy *barrios*, nor adverse to a good fight now and then, he still felt nervous and wished Harry would get there soon. He rubbed the thin white line along the left side of his nose, a souvenir for making a pass at some drunk's girlfriend back in San Pedro many years ago. Jesse smiled. The scar was nothing compared to the beating he gave the guy. A short dark Mexican like him had to be tough living in a white Los Angeles middle-class neighborhood back in the sixties.

A waft of sweet, spicy cooking close by reminded him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. As he was about to buy himself a piece of the tasty sausages, an old white pickup pulled over and the bearded driver motioned him to get in.

"You look nervous out there, pal. How the hell are you?" Harry leaned over and gave Jesse a hug before maneuvering the truck back into traffic.

Jesse tried to stay calm as Harry went through yet another red light. He ran his fingers through his curly black hair, untangling the ends. He rubbed his chin, massaging the cleft in the dark stubble. Finally, he spoke up. "I know driving here has hit a new low when even *you* don't stop for the traffic signals anymore."

Harry just laughed then turned left from Fifteenth Avenue. "Here we are—Camino El Lago—the most architecturally pretentious street in this whole north area," he said. "Talk about sparkling new prosperity. As you can see, things have changed considerably since you were here."

Harry turned right at the second corner and pulled into the driveway of an old, but elegant, three-storied building standing proud and aloof from its flamboyant neighbors. The heavy wrought iron doors to the garage slid open and the truck eased forward into the parking space marked *Apartamento 101*.

"Well?" Harry's voice echoed in the empty space. "What do you think?"

"Looks more run down than I expected." Jesse chilled. Despite its attractive facade of red burnished bricks, mullioned windows, brass fittings and climbing ivy, he sensed a powerful brooding and restlessness about the place.

“Been empty six months,” Harry answered.

When they walked into the first floor apartment, Jesse clucked in disgust at the plaster chunks scattered on the gray granite floor of the atrium. “Looks like somebody used these walls for target practice.” He frowned, rubbing his fingers gently over the scarred surfaces. “Ssh,” he ordered, pressing his ear to the wall. “Do you hear music?”

Harry cocked his head and listened. “No. What kind?”

“Tangos. Wild tango music.”

“Derelict ghosts,” Harry offered, laughing. “Some pretty strange people lived here, surely one of them liked tangos.”

Ghosts were not good news to Jesse. As a young boy, he'd accompanied his grandmother many times when she was hired to evict unfriendly spirits from houses or barns. Goose bumps rose over his arms and torso. “I still hear music,” he said, rubbing his hands vigorously until the *piel de gallina* subsided. He picked up a fragment of painted porcelain from the floor and turned it between his thumb and forefinger, examining the design. “Must be a radio playing next door,” he said, abruptly, and pocketed the shard.

Walking down from the third floor, Harry went on about the renovation. “With your expertise, this place will be like new and you’ll be back on your—”

“I need to get out of here, Harry.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Can’t explain. There's something here gives me the creeps.”

Harry locked up, muttering about Jesse's crazy superstitions.

Less nervous outside the building, Jesse said he needed a hot shower and a strong drink to shake his chills.

“You sure you want to spend the evening drinking?” Harry asked as he pulled into his own garage.

“Just a couple to warm up.” Miffed at his friend's sarcasm, Jesse walked to the corner store and bought a bottle of rum. After supper, he sank into Harry’s worn leather recliner and looked at his friend. “You look healthy, lost weight, gained some color.”

Harry laughed, his widely set, clear blue eyes squinting in the process. His full, ruddy cheeks rising up to meet their sparkle.

Jesse looked over and laughed back. He had always envied Harry's straight-forward good looks, square, clearly defined face, strong jaw line under the beard, straight nose, broad forehead. "What's your secret?" he queried.

"Had to change my way of living. For starters, haven't had a drink since Janet took the boys and left."

"Not even a beer?" Jesse got up and walked over to the fireplace. "I was looking forward to a few nights out. You know, like the good old days." He picked up one of the many photographs lining the mantle and smiled, recalling happier times when the two families celebrated special occasions together. "What do you hear from Janet?" he asked, trying to hide his disappointment that his friend wasn't drinking anymore. "Still living in Miami?"

"Yeah, still there." Harry disappeared behind his newspaper.

Uncomfortable, Jesse continued to drink, going on about how bad things were for him lately and how his luck had sunk to an all time low. "I've been wondering what ever possessed us to come to Colombia? To get married, have a bunch of kids and be poor? Look at you—all alone."

Quick to respond, Harry peered from behind the pages of *El Tiempo*. "What the hell has gotten into you, man? Have you forgotten that coming here was *your* idea? 'Let's join this Peace Corps thing of President Kennedy's,' you said. 'So we won't have to go to Vietnam.' That's exactly how you put it back in sixty-one."

Shaking his head, Harry added, "Well, here it is twelve years later, pal, and guess what the big news was a few months ago? 'U.S. pulls out of Nam.' A good reason to have come and an even better reason to have stayed. Stop complaining. What would you do back there, anyway? You wouldn't even have Isabel's parents to support you."

Jesse defended, "I didn't say I wanted to go back to the States. I just—"

Harry folded his newspaper and set it down. "When are you going to stop thinking it's always better somewhere else? Do you know the political corruption going on back home? Agnew booted out. Nixon in that Watergate scandal—"

"But, my life is out of control and I feel like I'm going down with it."

"I promise you things will get better after you do this renovation. All those architectural drafting and engineering classes you took will pay off, not to mention your experience with building materials."

“I don’t know. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this kind of work. Maybe I won’t be able to handle it. You know, the technical stuff.”

Harry raised his voice. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. What you’re really saying is you like your life the way it is and don’t want to change.”

“That’s ridiculous. Of course I want this chance to get back on my feet.”

This conversation was not going well. He didn’t want to discuss the matter further or admit his indecision was based on fear. Something was going on inside that building and he was afraid of it. He said goodnight and took his rum into the bedroom where Harry’s two sons used to sleep.

Lying on his back, he reminisced. A couple of years ago he had owned a hardware store two blocks from here and lived happily with Isabel and the kids in the large house at the rear of the property. Then the bad times crossed his mind, the bankruptcy four years ago, and being forced to sell the business. After that, losing his part time job as a salesman and having to sell their car in order to buy food. Then, the final blow, letting go of their home and renting a cheap apartment. When that money ran out, they packed up and moved in with Isabel’s parents until her old man gave them an apartment of their own.

He closed his eyes and felt the room spin.

He saw Harry’s two boys boarding an airplane with their mother. Directly behind, Isabel was pushing him up the boarding stairs and into the row behind them. She padlocked the seat belt, dropped the key into her purse and kissed him good-bye.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed next morning, he knocked the empty bottle over. His head pounded and he swore at himself for having that last drink. He pulled his clothes on, then willed himself to walk steadily into the kitchen.

Harry was frying sausages and eggs. “Hungry?” he asked.

Jesse’s stomach soured at the mention of food. “Just coffee, thanks.” Then, he added, “Think I’ll head on home this morning.”

“What do you mean, man, you just got here.”

“I know. It’s something I can’t explain.” He picked up his bag and headed out to the truck to drink his coffee far away from the greasy smell.

Harry climbed into the truck and, in silence, they headed south, leaving the quaint old town of Usaquén, which was in the path of, but not yet part of, the new city suburbia. Jesse drank in the sights, remembering how wonderful it had been to live here.

Trees and flowers glistened with beads of moisture from the night's rainfall. Wisps of drowsy smoke rose from chimneys. The smell of burning hardwood from brick ovens and open braziers along the roadside mingled with the sweet aromas of baking breads and sizzling meats. Animals grazed by the highway on which rural commuters, from their brand new town homes in the country, sped along in shiny little *Renaults* to their jobs in the bustling city. He wished he had brought his camera, the one Isabel gave him for his thirty-fourth birthday last month.

He turned to Harry and said, "I am hungry after all. Maybe I should eat something."

Harry pulled alongside an outdoor cook-stand where plastic sheeting, stretched over roughly hewn tree poles, provided shade or shelter as the weather dictated and kept the well packed earth floor dry. They sat down at a lopsided table covered with red gingham oilcloth and, while Harry drank more coffee, Jesse breakfasted on eggs, steak and bread.

By the time they reached the depot, Harry had not convinced him to stay.

"Think about it, man. If you don't take this job, I've got to find someone else. Don't be such a superstitious fool. This could be your last chance to make something of yourself. If not for that, then for Isabel and the kids. Quit drinking so damn much and get on with it."

Irritable and anxious to get Harry off his back, Jesse promised, "I will, I will. I'll call you in a couple of days."

He waited for Harry's truck to be out of sight before heading into the Buenos Aires Cafe. Sipping his beer, he suddenly remembered his promise to the children and ran outside to buy a few toys from a passing vendor. By the time he took a seat on the three o'clock bus, he couldn't wait to get some sleep.

A few hours later, Jesse awoke, and wondered why the bus was parked on the wrong side of the highway in front of a roadside shrine. He watched the driver light a candle and place it on the crowded ledge beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary. After making the sign of the cross, the young man took his place behind the wheel again.

“Thanks be to God,” Jesse praised, leaning across the aisle. “Now, we’re safe.” He drank from his flask and uttered curses at the grinding and shuddering of gears as they got moving again. “If it’s not a lunatic driver, the bus is falling apart.” He dozed off until they pulled into the Ibagué station on Twentieth Street and First Avenue at nine that evening.

Jesse strolled leisurely across the park, then up Third Avenue toward his father-in-law’s apartment building.

The soft music of romantic boleros drifted through open windows and blended with the tropical breezes, beckoning to him, causing his melancholic nature to surface. But as much as he loved this musical town, his wife’s family never let him forget he would always be an outsider, a *forastero*. Worse yet, a *gringo*. He wondered if he would ever belong anywhere.

The idea of going home worried him. How would he explain to his wife he wasn’t taking the job; that his intuition had warned him of powerful energy lurking within the walls of that old building and he didn’t want any part of it. Isabel was going to be furious.

The sweet sound of laughter filtered into his anxiety and he was drawn to the gaiety. “What the hell, a couple of drinks and a dance or two,” he promised himself. He turned right on Sixteenth.

The Palmira was one of the joints he and Harry used to frequent back in sixty-two, while they were stationed with the Peace Corps in the nearby town of Líbano. After working on construction all week with the local residents, they would come into Ibagué on Friday nights and party hard until Sunday evening. One of the girls from his past still worked out of there and sat down beside him at the bar.

It was dawn before Jesse rattled the chains on the courtyard gate. At the main door he struggled with the padlocks before stumbling his way up the four flights of imported Italian marble stairs to where Isabel stood, arms crossed, blocking the doorway.

“Quiet,” she hissed, grabbing his gym bag and pulling him over the threshold. “Have you no shame?” She kicked the door shut with her heel and, without stopping for breath, went on. “What are you doing home? You weren’t supposed to come back until Tuesday or Wednesday. When do you start?” She pushed him up the stairs, onto

the bed, and threw a blanket over him. She crawled back into her own side, mumbling about his drunkenness and womanizing. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

Unable to defend himself, Jesse fell quickly into the arms of Morpheus and was snoring loudly when his grandmother appeared in a dream.

“Are you willing to go the limit, mijo?” she asked. “To take the challenge you are being offered and straighten out your life?”

“What limit, abuelita? What do you mean, challenge?”

“A few things I didn’t have a chance to teach you. I promise that if you can survive the unpleasant experiences that await you within those walls, your rewards will be many. Be cautious and remember well the things you learned with me. Above all, don’t be afraid, mijo, not all ghosts are bad.” With that, she turned and faded.

Jesse sat bolt upright. His heart pounded. Perspiration beaded on his brow and upper lip.

“My God, what was all that hollering about? Look, your hand is bleeding.”

Isabel unfurled his fist and removed the porcelain shard before applying ointment and a bandage retrieved from a nearby drawer.

“I can’t take that job, Isabel. My Grandmother came to warn me.”

“What do you mean?” Isabel listened to the details of the dream. “Of course you’ll take it. You *have to*, if you love your family as much as you say. Can we get some sleep now?” Isabel plopped her head onto the pillow, then sat up again. “What did she mean by ‘limits,’ and ‘not all ghosts are bad?’ Silly old woman.” She put her head down and yanked the covers up.

Disappointed, but too tired to argue, he rolled over and went back to sleep. Isabel never seemed interested in his concerns anymore.

He awoke late, glad to be alone. After shedding his dirty clothes and locking the door to keep the kids out, he opened the window and glanced over at the yellow house to his right. Inside, beyond the flower pots, he could see his mother-in-law’s gleaming wood floors, polished antique furniture and treasured ornaments. It was garish looking stuff he couldn’t stand even if it was expensive. And he knew, that later in the day, her lacy

curtains would flutter in the light afternoon breeze. His eyes snuck up to the roof. There she was, the Pereira's pretty young maid, right on time for her Sunday shower.

Tiring of that, he dropped his gaze to the parking lot behind the thick, stucco wall facing him. Dust plumed behind a bright red car headed for one of the stalls between the flimsy poles holding up a corrugated metal roof. Jesse watched his father-in-law step out, put a white handkerchief up to his nose and walk toward the exit. And, as he did every Sunday morning, Mr. Pereira stopped to give a little something to each of the three small children who were chasing around the dusty yard with a mongrel dog and a ball.

While hens scurried, a singular cock proffered up his third and last morning crow from the roof of a shed. Lazy smoke rose from the crumbling chimney of the derelict shack where the aging caretaker lived with his tired wife and ever increasing family.

There was a perverted comfort in the weekly repetition of this scene. Jesse pitied one man and hated the other.

Avoiding the red bricks of the Pentecostal Church, behind the parking lot, and a little further, the Shrine of Christ atop its mound, he looked to the brightly tiled roofs creeping up the velvety green crumples of the mountains. A little house over there was what he longed for. Finally, his wanderings came to rest on lofty peaks where cotton-candy clouds dangled from a sky of primary blue.

The nostalgic tango, *Caminito*, tugged at his heart strings.

*Little road covered with thistle,
the hand of time erased your tracks.
I would like to fall beside you
and let time kill us both.*

His throat constricted and he choked back that yearning he knew so well but could never quite put into words.

"Time to get up," yelled Isabel from downstairs.

He spun around. Three gulps from a bottle hidden in the closet, and the dizziness subsided. He put on his bathrobe and headed downstairs.

"Not feeling well?" Isabel chided from the kitchen off the glassed-in patio.

Jesse grabbed the cup of coffee she held out. "No, but it'll pass." He walked on through the living room to the balcony, high above the busy street.

“It would be so easy just to jump,” he mumbled.

“What did you say?” Isabel snuggled up to him from behind.

“Nothing. Just thinking out loud. Where are the kids?”

“I sent them to Mother’s.” Isabel grinned, and slid her hands into the deep pockets of his robe, ‘looking for loose change,’ as she called it.

At precisely one-thirty, Jesse sat down to the most dreaded part of his Sunday ritual—lunch at the Pereira’s. After a few drinks, his father-in-law repeated the same story he told every Sunday; how he and his wife had come to Colombia as children in nineteen-thirty when so many Europeans were leaving their homelands for the illusion of a better life in South America. The dreams of both their families had come true. Hard work over the years earned them great wealth and the high esteem of the townspeople. “We even sent Isabel to university in Texas,” Mr. Pereira added.

Jesse listened. Yeah, to look for a rich husband, an American, just in case politics in Colombia didn’t work out. She didn’t do what you told her though. She wanted me.

“And look at her now,” Mr. Pereira continued, “Ten years married and nothing to show for it but a bunch of kids.”

“How many times do I have to hear this?” Jesse yelled inside his head.

“Isabel says you finally have a job.”

Jesse responded, “And just what do you mean by, *finally*?”

Voices raised and became insults. The women left the table, the children escaped to the courtyard and Jesse stomped out. Mr. Pereira remained at his table and the meal sat, untouched, in the serving dishes. Mrs. Pereira rested on a chair in the kitchen and looked at her daughter. “It might be better if you went home, my dear,” she said. “Leave your father to me.”

Meanwhile, Jesse marched up the main street to the Plaza de Bolivar only to find all the benches occupied with Sunday afternoon strollers and sitters. An outsider again.

Disgusted there was no place for him to sit, he trudged back down Third Avenue and swaggered into the Cafe Florida. He sat alone, enjoying a large platter of empanadas, drinking beer mixed with fruity Colombian soda, and listening to old tango songs from the juke box.

Born was I for pain, I drank away my years.