

In the Shadow of Papillon

Seven Years of Hell in
Venezuela's Prison System

Frank Kane with
John Tilsley



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



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System

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MAINSTREAM
PUBLISHING

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

To Josie, with all my love

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Drug smuggling is a way of life for some people, but you have to be a certain type of person to get away with it. You have to be without fear and have no conscience. As you read this, there are people all over the world, travelling in planes, trains, cars, boats and many other means of transport, some even crossing frontiers on foot, risking their freedom for that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

I never aspired to be one of those people, and neither did my girlfriend. I was just an ordinary guy whose business had collapsed. Under pressure from impatient creditors, I foolishly allowed myself in desperation to be enticed by old supposed friends into an apparently easy way to make enough money to keep the hounds at bay and have enough money left over to start a new life. Maybe we didn't look the part; maybe it was time for me to follow a karmic pattern of suffering from past lifetimes. 'Sam' wasn't supposed to have been involved; she shouldn't have been with me, but she'd insisted. Maybe we were both overdue a lesson in life. Whatever the reason, things went drastically wrong and we paid the price for our foolishness.

Although parts of my account may seem incredible, unbelievable in some cases, the story you are about to read is without exaggeration. Some names have been changed and others omitted completely for obvious reasons, and to protect the privacy of some individuals I have altered sensitive information. The experience had such an impact on me that I have no difficulty whatsoever in remembering

each vivid detail – every minute of every torturous day has been imprinted in my mind for ever.

For those of you who may be tempted to smuggle drugs, let this story be a warning: it doesn't always go according to plan.

Frank Kane

PROLOGUE

FOUR AND A HALF YEARS IN

In a dangerous mood and very drunk, José, the prison boss, staggered over to where Mancho lay propped on one elbow. He dragged the surprised informer off the bed by his shirt and ordered him to kneel down in front of him. We all sat transfixed and silent, nobody daring to move or utter a sound. José held the muzzle of the .38 automatic close to the man's forehead. Mancho started to sob, then pleaded, 'Please don't kill me!' Those were to be the last words that passed his lips.

'Cocksucking *sapo!* You know what happens to people with long tongues,' replied José coldly. While the gun at his head drew Mancho's attention, Carlo Pino, one of José's lieutenants and a cold-blooded killer of repute, moved in behind the kneeling man and with a practised motion slipped the loop of a home-made garrotte over Mancho's head and pulled it taut around his throat, tightening the wire while at the same time placing his knees between the shoulder blades. It was as though Mancho had accepted the fact he was about to die. Like a lamb to the slaughter, he didn't even put up a struggle. At one point, both men toppled backwards, Mancho landing across Carlo Pino's legs, but Carlo kept his grip tight for almost two minutes during which time Mancho's legs and feet twitched uncontrollably.

With bulging eyes, his sphincter muscle loosened and his bowels emptied, a dark wet patch appearing around his crotch as his bladder discharged. Although I was a couple of yards away from the scene, the smell hit me immediately. I fought to suppress the vomit rising in my throat.

After more than four and a half years in Latino hellholes, I'd almost become immune to the unending cycle of violence and murder. What had happened to me? It didn't seem that long ago I was wining and dining clients in fancy restaurants; now I was witnessing yet another act of cold-blooded murder with little compassion.

José watched Mancho's life force drain from his body with a huge smile, then knelt down, removed a suture kit from his pocket, broke the seal and proceeded to sew up the snitch's mouth. It was an established ritual for that kind of execution.

'He won't be talking to anyone else,' he laughed. His whisky-glazed eyes looked around the room. 'Are you all watching?' he shouted. 'This is what happens to people who talk.'

Still nobody uttered a sound. Eighteen prisoners had been forced to watch the horrific execution and not one dared say a word for fear of a repeat performance.

While all that was going on, another lieutenant, known as Chivo Loco or Crazy Goat, was busy ripping up a sheet he'd snatched from the nearest bed. The owner was another English guy, and he wasn't about to argue. José and Chivo quickly fashioned a makeshift noose and hung Mancho's now lifeless body from one of the concrete window slats. There it would stay until the following morning when it would be discovered that, once more, there was one short at six o'clock headcount. From past experience, I knew every single one of us would pay for that act of retribution.

FIRST ENCOUNTER

I remember the voices in my head as clearly as if it were yesterday. 'Don't do it, Frank,' one said. No, it'll be OK, the other silently replied. I was in two minds. Should we leave it behind on the coach? What if it all goes tits up? Stop worrying, it'll be fine. Dump it, Frank. It's not much money to lose. Just get on with the job. It's a risk you don't have to take. It'll be OK. Stay cool.

The coach eased out from the plush Flamingo Beach Hotel for the 30-minute ride to the international airport near Porlamar. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, 10 December 1996. As we swung through the *barrios* of Pampatar, a town on La Isla de Margarita, a small island in the south Caribbean, kids were playing and families going about their everyday business on street corners and dusty slopes. Old rusting American automobiles dotted the kerbsides and landscape. Most had wings, doors or bonnets missing. Here it didn't seem to matter. They were drivable whatever the condition. Huge parts of the island's population live in poverty and squalor, while others are wealthy and live in luxury. A perfect breeding ground for crime and corruption, and only four hours by ferry from its mother country Venezuela.



The voices came again as I watched people and colour all around me. We weren't tourists any more. On a normal holiday, we would be taking in what we were leaving behind, but not today. Our conversation was strained, it was too late now for any more deliberation. The coach turned a corner and the airport loomed up ahead. There was no turning back; we had to go through with it.

As the coach pulled up across from the entrance, 'Sam' and I turned and looked at each other. I smiled reassuringly. She smiled back, but in that instant I noticed something was different about her. I could see the hint of doubt in her eyes, the usual sparkle had gone. We'd been together for 18 months and I thought I knew her inside out; I'd never seen that look before. Had she been thinking the same thoughts as me? It didn't inspire me with much confidence.

Waiting for the cases to be offloaded from the luggage compartments, I hailed a porter. He was one of a huge crowd always available for the '*gringo* flights', as I later learned they were called. The going rate for tourists was 1,000 bolivares. Small wonder the guy's smile reached from ear to ear as he shuffled over, pushing his two-wheeled trolley. A meagre amount for a tourist on holiday but quite a princely sum for him, especially when the average salary for anyone lucky enough to have a job was around 30,000 bolivares a month: roughly £40 sterling.

We walked across the concrete area towards the one and only airport building, which was shimmering in the blistering heat. The sun beat down on our heads; it was a far cry from the coolness of the air-conditioned coach. My head began to throb and I started to sweat profusely, small rivulets running from my hairline, drenching my shirt collar. The heat didn't seem to trouble Sam. She could lie in the sun all day, every day, which she'd proven over our two-week stay. The heat didn't seem to faze our grinning porter either, who stuck to us like a faithful dog. An emaciated character, he was no

more than five feet tall, black as coal and dressed in poor-quality shirt and pants, which stopped a good four inches above his ankle line. There were no socks to protect his feet against the tattered Nike trainers he wore.

We entered the airport building and felt the air conditioning's instant chill. Ten yards ahead was the first obstacle to cross. Several stern-looking soldiers of odd shapes and sizes manned passport control. These were men of the Guardia Nacional, each one dressed in ill-fitting US Army-pattern fatigues, red berets and black boots. All sported the mandatory machine gun. There wasn't a smile on any of their faces.

Two lines of tourists moved forwards slowly as every face was examined and matched against the passport handed to them. After what felt like hours but in fact was only a minute or two, it was our turn. I handed over our passports to a particularly ugly brute whose jacket appeared to be several sizes too small. The nametag over his left breast pocket read 'Guirez'. The procedure seemed to take for ever, repeatedly checking the photos and scrutinising our faces. Finally he paused, leafed through the pages one more time and focused on Sam, his glinting eyes lingering longer than I cared - he was blatantly undressing her in his mind. It wasn't surprising really because she was a real stunner. Twenty-one years old, long blonde hair, bleached almost white by two weeks of Caribbean sun, her almond-shaped, piercing green eyes, and slim and suntanned figure: who could blame him?

She returned his shameless stare with a smile. The guy was mesmerised. Eventually, he handed our passports back to me. He didn't give me another glance, he was still staring at Sam. He waved us through and our porter met us, smiling and visibly eager to claim his reward. So far, so good, I thought, walking towards the ticket counter.

'That monster really fancied the arse off you, Sam,' I said.

She pulled a face, as if she'd eaten something past its sell-by date. 'Yuk,' she replied.

The mood lightened and we laughed. They hadn't even searched our suitcases and travel bag. I looked at the porter - he was still beaming, and little wonder. For pushing our cases no more than 50 yards, he was about to earn the equivalent of a day's pay. Those thoughts briefly distracted my attention from the job at hand and as a result, I failed to stop at the next obstacle, a booth set in the wall where airport tax had to be paid before passengers could leave the country. I'd never come across airport taxes before. I remembered being told about them and had made a mental note. I even had the correct amount - 26,000 bolivares - folded in my rear pocket. There was no excuse, I had made a serious error, and it wasn't until we'd reached the queue of holidaymakers waiting to collect their boarding passes that I realised what I'd done. The booth was no more than 20 yards back; I had to think quickly. Would it look more suspicious if I left Sam in the queue with the cases and paid the taxes myself? Or should we walk back together? I looked around, the porter had disappeared in search of fresh custom. I decided on the first option and went back on my own. There was nobody waiting at the booth and it wouldn't take too long.

I was only gone a couple of minutes, but it was long enough for that little voice in my head to reappear and tell me, 'You shouldn't have done it, Frank.' Walking back towards Sam, I could see a worried frown on her face; it dawned on me that even though we'd been separated for only a minute or two our collective strength, the link that held us close, had somehow been broken. My immediate thoughts centred on how I appeared myself. Did I too look guilty? Sliding by her side, I soon realised what was troubling her.

'There's a little guy over there who's been watching me,' she whispered, pointing with her eyes. 'He had his eye on

you, too, as you walked back.'

'Don't worry about it,' I said. 'He probably fancies you, the same as the guy who checked our passports.'

'No, seriously, he's still there . . . Shit, now there's two of them.'

I couldn't stop myself. I turned to look and, sure enough, she was right. There were two men dressed exactly the same, wearing black pants, sky-blue shirts and shiny black shoes. Each holstered a side arm and was so similar in looks they could have passed as twins. They had short, black, curly hair, dark skin, moustaches and thin weasel faces. For a moment, I thought I was seeing double but was soon proven wrong when one of them raised his arm and pointed directly at me. There was no doubt about it. They were on to us.

Fuck!!

It's difficult to explain exactly how I felt at that moment. The background noise of the busy airport concourse narrowed into a deep hum. My mind raced, yet everything around me seemed to slow right down like the frames of a flickering film, my vision changing from peripheral to tunnel and edged in foginess.

The same weasel-faced character raised his right hand and pointed at me again. My heart began to race. We went through the whole routine: I pointed to myself with the best innocent face I could muster under the circumstances; he nodded solemnly and beckoned me with his crooked index finger; I pointed to myself again, and lowered my eyebrows in a quizzical frown. I tried to swallow, but the finger kept beckoning. With hunched shoulders, I showed the palms of my hands in the classic gesture, 'Who me?'

At that point, barring a miracle, I realised we were in deep shit. On the outside, everything was still in slow motion, while inside my head the best that little voice could come up with was, 'I told you so, Frankie. You've fucked up big-time.' My stomach turned. Sweat began to saturate my

clothing. I knew my face looked as guilty as hell. My heart literally bounced out of my chest and everything went hazy. As I walked towards them, my feet became leaden, as if anchored to the floor by heavy weights. In my mind's eye, I could see my sluggish movements from outside of my body, an experience I will never forget.

Looking back, I knew it was my good spirit leaving me behind. 'I told you so,' it was saying. 'You should have listened.' I had a gut-wrenching feeling that this was the beginning of a terrible nightmare.

After what appeared to be an eternity, I made my way over to the two officials, who turned out to be airport police. Each took one of my arms and very gently guided me to a door to one side of the airport tax booth. Once through the door, things started to get a little rougher: a gun was swiftly slipped from its holster and placed firmly against my cheekbone. The man holding the gun pushed me roughly against the wall and held me forcefully with his free hand. His breath reeked of garlic. His hold tightened, though I couldn't understand the need, the gun alone being enough to frighten the life out of me.

The other one started to pat me down. This happened in the corridor, a few strides inside the door we had come through. It smelled strongly of cigar smoke on entering. The walls were painted a dull brown and yellow. When the police officer reached the small of my back and touched gold, his face lit up with a huge grin. His twin beamed too. They made gestures for me to unbutton the baggy denim shirt I'd purchased especially for the job. I did so very slowly but couldn't drag it out longer than the six buttons. The shirt opened and they started to jabber in quick-fire Spanish. At that time, my knowledge of the Spanish language was limited to *por favor*, *gracias* and a few odd words. Now, as they saw taped across my stomach the waistcoat I'd made in the hotel room several days earlier, they became more excitable.

'*Dólares,*' one of them whispered at me, looking shiftily around.

At the bottom of the corridor to the right, maybe 15 yards away, I saw through the open door of an office a white-shirted man sitting behind a desk littered with files. He busied away on an old-fashioned typewriter, apparently oblivious to what was going on. He had probably witnessed the procedure many times.

'*Dólares,*' he said again.

The puzzled look on my face lit a bulb in his head because he spoke slowly, with extenuated gestures and hand movements. '*Si me das muchas dólares y es suficiente, puedes irse como nada paso.*'

Was he asking me for dollars? I was struggling to fully understand what had been said, but his body language told the story. I couldn't believe what was happening. If I were to give him a sufficient amount of dollars, I would walk out of there as if nothing had happened? I had no dollars on me at all. I had a few pounds in my jeans back pocket, so reached back slowly, very much aware of the pistol now being waved in my face. I came out with a bundle of £20 notes, somewhere between four hundred and five hundred quid.

'No dollars,' I said shakily. 'Pounds sterling - English.'

'*No! Dólares!*'

I tried to make them understand using the same manner of gestures they had that the English pound was worth much more than the dollar. It was all to no avail, the black-market currency in Venezuela was the good old American dollar, and those guys knew no better. Only people 'in the know' would appreciate the value of the pound, which was very unfortunate for me because they weren't having any of it. I may as well have waved a fistful of coloured paper at them. I put the money back in my pocket, and I could tell by the look on their faces that they were angry with me. Their patience was up and the gun holstered. They grabbed my

arms and roughly manhandled me down the corridor towards the open doorway.

At first, it was a bit of a struggle for them because I wasn't too sure I wanted to go. But my six-foot-one-inch, fourteen-stone frame put up only token resistance. They were only small men but quite insistent. I knew after a few shuffled steps it would be pointless to fight it.

At the bottom of the corridor, we entered the room with the open door. The man behind the desk got up immediately and walked to another doorway to my right into a much larger room, in which I could see several Guardia Nacional soldiers milling around. A few seconds later, an officer with an array of coloured ribbons on his chest came into the office. He looked me up and down with a sour expression and stopped short to take in the waistcoat. His left hand moved down, unclipped his holster and pulled out a nasty-looking pistol.

'Sit!' he shouted, pointing somewhere behind me with the gun.

I looked around for a chair and saw there was one against the wall. In that instant, I actually thought about making a dash through the open doorway. But what would I do about Sam? Crazy idea. I couldn't leave her. Where would I go to anyway? I would have the corridor to negotiate, giving *Señor* Ribbons or one of the policemen plenty of time to put a bullet or two in my back. No, I had to sit down and think clearly. This guy could know the value of my currency, and this mess could still be sorted out.

As I sat, I noticed the colourful chest had the nametag 'Sanchez' stitched upon it. He turned and spoke sharply to the two airport policemen, and it was clear to see who was the boss.

'*Y la mujer?*' he asked.

I understood that to mean 'and the woman', and that meant Sam.

'Si, señor,' replied the two airport officers in unison and without further instruction took off in search of Sam, who no doubt was in a panic over the length of my disappearance. I somehow hoped she'd been quick-witted enough to go to the toilets and dump the waistcoat she was wearing. I snapped out of my thoughts and wondered if 'Sanchez' was 'in the know'. I would try him out.

'Pounds sterling?' I said to him hopefully.

Nothing. No reply.

Sanchez pushed a pile of folders to the centre of the table, perched himself on the corner and swung his leg back and forth. He looked at me coldly. I saw no compassion in him, but I thought I'd try him one more time.

'Pounds sterling,' I said again.

'Silencio!' he barked.

My heart pounded once again, temples throbbing in time with my quickening pulse. My mind raced. I'd lost the numbness of before: I was back in the real world and realised beyond any doubt we were up to our necks in deep, deep shit.

Sanchez was a short, barrel-chested guy, broad shouldered and impeccably dressed in what I took to be a high-ranking officer's uniform. He wore black leather shoes as opposed to the boots I'd seen soldiers wearing. His red beret was cocked on the side of his head but perfectly arranged. Placing the pistol in its holster, he lit a cigarette. His eyes never left me for a second. His left hand came to rest on his thigh closest to the holstered gun, his right lifted the cigarette to his mouth. He took long, deep drags, then exhaled a cloud of smoke upwards into the air. His hair was cut very short, which accentuated his well-fed face. Thick bushy eyebrows topped his dark, swarthy skin and bulbous nose. His eyes were black and malevolent, the mouth under a well-trimmed moustache was cupid-shaped yet mean, with the corners turned down. A couple of chins finished the look.

His stare was hate-filled. I stared back for a few moments, until his eyes veered to the doorway and the corridor beyond. It was obvious Sam was going through the same pat-down as me. It hadn't taken them very long because just then she walked through the door, her head lowered, a bewildered expression on her face as she turned and looked down at me. It was a stupid thing to say, but I started to ask if she was all right. Sanchez cut me short.

'Silencio!' he yelled. 'No talk! OK.'

The airport police were right behind her, carrying our luggage: two cases and a holdall. With all those extra people and baggage, the already small office was suddenly overcrowded. One policeman said something rapidly to Sanchez, who looked at me and said in broken English, 'Open case.' Mine was a grey Samsonite with a combination lock; Sam's a black, canvas suitcase zipped all the way around. The holdall was our hand luggage, containing the usual holiday paraphernalia.

I inserted the right code and opened the catch, whereupon Sanchez drew his pistol. Using the barrel as a pointer, he said, 'Dis way,' and waved us into the next room. Once through the doorway, we were ushered to the right and brought to a halt in front of a large desk. Sat there was none other than 'Guirez', the passport official. He motioned with his hand for us to remove whatever we had under our clothes, his greedy eyes taking in Sam's breasts when she lifted her flowery top in order to remove her waistcoat. His breathing became somewhat laboured and it looked as if his ill-fitting uniform was about to burst at the seams.

I felt a stab of anger and wanted to hit him, but it would have been madness; there were at least a dozen soldiers of the Guardia Nacional around us, two of them pointing machine guns at me. I wondered if this was some horrific dream I was having and any moment I would wake up in the hotel room.

An exchange of words took place between Guirez and the two soldiers, who left the room briefly and returned with our luggage, dumping it on the floor behind and to the side of us. They opened the suitcases and started to take everything out, item by item. Clothing was shaken and everything meticulously checked. We'd taken off our waistcoats by this time and placed them on the table in front of Guirez. Again using gestures, he told us to empty our pockets. We were wearing baggy, lightweight jeans and had used our pockets for all sorts. Out came a set of keys from one of Sam's pockets - the key ring had a photo of me inside it. Then a wallet-type purse, where she kept her little treasures: photos of her family, little notes from me, and other personal things. I could tell she was reluctant to put them down.

Then along came Sanchez. He spoke a little English, albeit badly with an American twang. Walking across the room, he said, 'Trafficking cocaine is very bad offence.' He came so close I had to look down on him as he spoke. 'You go to jail for very long time,' he added coldly.

Stunned by his words, I felt numb. Sam and I looked at each other for a second, the seriousness of the situation beginning to sink in. I emptied my pockets - out came my money, keys, two passports and other papers.

Guirez examined the four packs he'd taken from the waistcoat pockets, cut into one with a knife, wet his finger and stuck it in the package, ready to test it with his tongue. As our passports landed on the desk, he stopped what he was doing and swooped on them; it was the second time that day he'd had our passports in his grubby little hands. He didn't bother looking at them this time. Opening a drawer on the right-hand side of his desk, he dropped them inside, closed it and looked up with a satisfied smile.

After recovering a little from the shock of what Sanchez had said, I became more aware of things happening around us: conversations in the background, the clack-clack of an

old-fashioned typewriter, a telephone ringing, even the sound of a plane taxiing on the runway. I looked at my watch. We should have been on that plane. Shit, I thought to myself, we've been caught. Look for an opportunity to get out of this mess!

'*Por allí!*' said Guirez, pointing over toward the wall on our right. The wall had a clear space about six feet wide and was painted off-white. When we turned, he said loudly, '*No, no, no, así!*' He picked up one of the waistcoats - each had two kilos of cocaine placed on the top - and struck a pose, holding the garment at arm's length. He passed the waistcoat to me, picked up the other and gave it to Sam.

We turned and moved over to the wall. As we did so, the person who'd earlier been sitting behind the desk in the first office walked over with a camera, an old-fashioned contraption with a flash-bulb attachment. He appeared to be a civilian worker: short-sleeved white shirt, black pants and shoes. He wasn't dark-skinned as such, rather he had a jaundiced face with slicked-back dark hair - a nondescript character really. He obviously seconded as photographer and took up his position.

Poof! For a few seconds I couldn't see a thing. My sight returned just in time to see he'd changed the bulb and was ready to blind us again. Poof! This happened four times in all. When it was over, we were told to return the waistcoats. It took a minute for the bright spots dancing in front of my eyes to disappear. As my sight returned, I saw the two soldiers with machine guns were still pointing their weapons at us. They were young men, 19 or 20 at the most, though I could tell by the look in their eyes they wouldn't give us any sympathy if we tried anything. They'd shoot us for sure.

Events began to speed up. Transport had been arranged. We were handcuffed together and faced towards the way we'd entered. I turned and looked back at our belongings still lying on the table, nothing signed for and no receipts of any kind; however, that was the least of our worries. The

cuff was so tight it bit into my skin. Sam was a bit luckier, as her wrists were so slim that even on the last notch the cuff wouldn't close tight.

Four soldiers jostled us unceremoniously through the door and down the corridor. The two in front held our clothes with a tight grip, while the other two young machine-gunners stayed behind, prodding us with the barrels from time to time. I prayed the safety catches were on. We passed the door through which the police had brought us and down to the bottom end of the corridor where, just around the corner, a doorway led outside. There sat an old, American army jeep-type vehicle with the back door open.

We were pushed inside, the door slammed shut and locked. It stank of urine. The heat was so intense it stuck to our skin. The vehicle had been converted for this particular kind of service, the tiny windows made up of a tight diamond-shaped mesh. Rusting metal seats ran either side with the spare wheel in the middle of the floor. The interior was absolutely filthy. Before too long, I was mopping the sweat with the tail of my shirt. Outside, there was enough room for two soldiers to sit one either side. One more soldier stood on the back step, holding on to a bar that ran from floor to roof. I could see them through the grille in the door.

The journey wasn't long, maybe ten minutes or so, but it was so bumpy it felt like the driver was purposely aiming at every pothole he could find. I didn't have a clue where we were heading and, to be honest, I wasn't in the mood for sightseeing. Now we were alone, Sam and I began to make conversation. It wasn't easy, the words forming lumps in my throat. Sam sat with a stunned expression on her face, her eyes wide open.

'Oh God, love, I'm so sorry,' I said to her.

'It's all right, it's not your fault,' she said. It was as if she knew a huge cloud of guilt had enveloped me.

I tried to sound convincing. 'Maybe we can get out of this somehow. I've heard that you can buy yourself out of

situations like this. Don't give up just yet.'

'I won't,' she replied. 'Maybe someone here will help us, eh?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, maybe,' I said, praying inwardly.

THE INTERROGATORS

The jeep bumped and bounced through narrow streets, then turned a sharp right that almost threw us from our seats. The soldiers at the rear laughed amongst each other loudly, probably amused at our discomfort. The vehicle stopped abruptly, causing me to crush Sam into the bulkhead momentarily.

‘These fuckers are really having a ball with us, aren’t they?’ I said angrily.

‘Calm down, Frank, you’ve got to keep your head,’ she replied.

She was right, of course. I was getting angry, mad at myself for doing something so stupid in the first place, despite all the warnings in my head.

What Sam had said made sense: I needed to keep my head. I’d once learned a saying used by friends in martial arts circles - if you allow your opponent to get you angry, then he has already won. This would be the time to put those wise words into practice.

We’d stopped short of a large set of metal gates, a shaded sentry box stood against the wire fence, manned by three soldiers of the Guardia Nacional. One got to his feet lazily and ambled over to the jeep’s passenger window. A few words were hastily exchanged and he walked away

clutching a piece of paper that he waved at the other two soldiers, motioning them to open the gates.

Sam joined me to look out of the window, and as the jeep lurched off we banged our heads together. We rubbed the pain with our free hands. Under normal circumstances, we would have laughed it off, but the mood was darkening by degrees. The driver sped through the gates and swept the jeep in a wide arc, jammed on his brakes, backed up a dozen yards or so and jerked to a halt. The two soldiers in front jumped out and made their way to the rear; the door to our sweatbox was unlocked and snatched open. Bright sunlight flooded in, while one of the soldiers motioned us out. They were more relaxed with their machine guns now, probably safe in the knowledge we posed no threat in the heavily manned Guardia Comando post.

As we emerged, I could see some ten yards in front double doors fitted with opaque glass and painted bright blue. One of the doors swung open and a soldier stepped out, holding the door with one hand and beckoning with the other. Neither of us needed a degree to know where we had to go, but before we had the chance to step forward the five soldier escorts began to manhandle us.

There were a few seconds of scorching heat from the early afternoon sun as we made our way over to the waiting soldier, but once inside the door, the chill of air conditioning hit me like an icy blast. In the large office, three men stood to one side of a table that held an archaic computer and printer. Other desks were scattered around, littered with papers, ashtrays and files. One held a bank of telephones. On the far wall, two glass-panelled doors led into other rooms. The men, smartly dressed in khaki suits, shirts and ties, carried side arms. They were huddled together discussing our fate, from time to time glancing in our direction.

The soldier who had led us in stood with his back to the door, a machine gun strapped over his shoulder in the ready

position, forefinger resting on the trigger guard, his face deadpan. It didn't look as if we were going anywhere for a while.

It was some minutes before one of the trio broke away and made his way over. He looked down at our handcuffs. 'Don't worry, we'll soon have them off,' he said in excellent English. Again, there was that strong American twang. '*Busca la llave!*' he barked at the soldier guarding the door.

'*Si, señor,*' replied the soldier. He opened the door and smartly took his leave. The man who gave the orders had no markings on his uniform except for a row of coloured ribbon. He was almost as tall as I was, around my age too, early 40s. His hair was very thin, almost balding, and he was pale-skinned. His thick, grey eyebrows overshadowed dark, piercing eyes and his beaked nose hooked over thin, cruel lips. After he'd spoken, he smiled. It sent a shiver down my spine. He was playing the good guy, but my instincts told me he wasn't to be trusted. I had no money to bargain with, it had been left at the airport - not that five hundred quid would possibly have bought those men anyway.

The soldier returned with the key to our handcuffs and passed them to our interrogator, then repositioned himself by the door as before.

'Good,' said the English-speaking officer, taking off our handcuffs. When he saw the mark around my wrist, he tutted and slowly shook his head. 'They get a little excited,' he smiled. Who was he kidding? This guy had evil written all over him.

The remaining two officers split as if on cue. One placed two wooden chairs in front and to the side of the computer table. The other sat down and prepared himself at the keyboard.

'Sit down, both of you,' the English speaker ordered.

As we sat, I had the feeling it was going to be a long day. I wasn't about to tell them anything about my connections back in England or on the island; it was more than my life

was worth. Sam didn't know anything anyway, so it would be down to me. We gave our full names, addresses in England, ages, dates of birth and parents' names, and were asked for our identity numbers, which threw us completely. We didn't have identity cards or numbers.

'Passport number then,' said the officer.

'Can't remember,' I replied.

'Me neither,' said Sam.

'What? You can't remember?' he said incredulously.

In Venezuela, it seemed everyone possessed an identity card and number.

'No *cédula*? What kind of country do you come from?'

'A free one,' I replied, almost too quickly. I'd reacted with a smart-arsed reply and as soon as it left my lips I realised I couldn't take it back. It was too late now anyway; I noticed something in his eyes had changed in that instant. He recovered quickly; the thin, watery smile never wavered.

'Now,' he said firmly, 'where did you buy the drugs?'

'Off a guy on the beach,' I replied, and again it was almost too quickly. It was the first thing that popped into my head. For some unfathomable reason, I hadn't reckoned on this part.

'No, no, no, you know that's not the truth. Where did you buy the drugs?'

'I told you, I bought them off a guy on the beach!'

'Are you asking me to believe you bought four kilos of cocaine from a man you met on the beach?' he said, looking across at Sam, as if for encouragement.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know anything,' she said flatly.

She was telling the truth. Sam had stayed in the hotel complex for the whole two weeks of our holiday and had never been present during the transactions. I knew the 'man on the beach' story was a bit feeble, but I needed time to think of something to make it ring true.

The officer turned in his chair. 'Go and sit outside for a while, I want to talk to you separately,' he said to Sam. After instruction, the soldier guarding the door took Sam outside. He never came back, so I assumed he'd been told to watch over her.

The officer slipped his smile and set his face. 'OK, let's not fool around any more. Who did you buy the drugs from?'

'I told you already—' Smack! The flat of a hand struck the right side of my face. It came unexpectedly from behind me, knocking my head sideways. My face smarted. Turning, I saw a fist coming towards me. My reactions were a bit slow and he caught me a glancing blow on the cheekbone.

'*No, no, no. Asi, no,*' said Mr Nice Guy to the man who'd hit me.

'Sorry about that,' he said to me. 'He sometimes loses his temper. I've told him, I said to him, "Pedro, one day you're really gonna hurt someone." That's what I said to him.'

I wasn't impressed; nevertheless, they had my full attention.

'Just tell the truth and everything will go painlessly,' the officer said in a fatherly manner.

'Look! I've told you already—'

'OK, so what did he look like, this guy on the beach?'

'He was Venezuelan and he spoke very good English. A Negro type.'

'And what was his name, this *negro*?'

I ransacked my mind for a suitable Spanish name. 'Miguel,' I told him after a few seconds.

'I think you're making all this up,' said my interrogator.

'No, I'm not, I'm—' Smack! Again, another good crack to the side of the head, this time from the interrogator himself.

Leaning forward, and inches from my face, he screamed, '*Tell me the truth!*'

'I'm telling the truth, I met the guy on the hotel beach one day and got to know him. He seemed OK, so—'

Everything went dark as a black plastic bag was placed over my head. The stench of something repulsive filled my nostrils. I tried to breathe, but the fumes burned my nose. I felt a sharp pain around my throat. I couldn't breathe, my head was swimming. I tried desperately to unhook the hands behind my head holding the plastic bag tight around my neck. The fumes inside the bag took all the oxygen. I felt myself going, then I blacked out.

When I came round, I was still in the office, everything dancing and swirling about dizzily through the blur of my watery eyes. I gasped for air, coughing and wheezing. As my head began to clear, I heard the tail end of a conversation going on behind me. The only words that rang any bells were '*no*' and '*cónsulado*'. I turned around slowly, just in time to see a door slam. The door was set in the opposite wall, and I wondered if maybe it was their chief's office. I never did find out, though I wasn't mistreated for the rest of the time I spent with those three gentlemen.

I gave the English speaker my story, which I made up and embellished along the way. While doing so, he translated it to the man at the keyboard. All the time, I glared at the third man, who'd perched himself on the table edge. He looked back at me with just the faint glimmer of a smile in his eyes. When everything was typed out and printed, the computer man placed the pages on the desktop and passed me a pen to sign them.

'You've got to be kidding,' I said in response after trying to read and understand what I was supposed to have said. 'I don't understand a word of this. It could say anything!'

He smiled and said, 'You have to sign it, my friend, because the process does not start until you sign the statement. If you don't sign, you will be here for ever.'

After some thought, I still refused. Better to be sure and wait until I was certain that what was written on the statement was what I'd actually said. I had no idea how I

would go about this, but I was sure something or someone would turn up.

They had finished with me now and seemed unaffected by my refusal to sign. 'OK,' said the interrogator, 'we'll talk to your woman now. Maybe *she'll* be more helpful.'

His intonation made me see red. I snapped at him with new-found bravado. 'Don't you hurt that girl, she doesn't know anything - don't even fucking touch her!'

'And who is it that's going to stop me, *gringo!*' He spat the last word at me. Gringo echoed in my head. For some reason, the way he delivered it made my skin crawl.

My tormentor walked briskly to the door. 'Come with me,' he said sharply. He opened the door wide and shouted an order to the soldier across the courtyard guarding Sam. Through the opened doorway, I could see her sitting on a concrete bench. She got to her feet and walked towards us, the soldier following closely. Making eye contact as we passed each other, I had a chance to say to her quietly, 'Don't sign any papers, OK?' She knew me well enough to know my expression was serious.

Once outside, the heat pounded at me like a hammer. My head throbbed, my cheek ached but most of all I dared not think what was happening to Sam. The day was unfolding to be a page in my life I would remember for ever. The soldier made a point of prodding me with the barrel of his gun and pointed to the concrete seats 20 yards away on the other side of the courtyard. I made my way over unsteadily, taking deep breaths as I went, the smell of ammonia still hanging in my nostrils.

There was no shade where I sat. I looked at my watch: it was four o'clock. The soldier placed himself ten feet away in the shade of a large tree. Looking at me unblinking, he ejected the magazine from his machine gun, glanced down briefly to check the round count, and snapped it back. He looked at me again. He was only a kid. An evil smirk crossed his boyish face; he had made his point, he was macho. I