



A true friend helps
beyond the grave

BLOCK 33

THE JAKE HUNT SERIES

JED HART



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Chapter 1

Jake Hunt

‘Llamada de emergencia por la Señora Gabriela.’

The radio call came as I was leaving La Planicie Club. Morning workout finished, showered, changed, driving out the gate. Gabriela had pressed the emergency response button in her car. Again. Goddamn it. San Isidro Base was waiting.

‘Estoy pasando por La Molina...I’m passing through La Molina; I’ll be at Monterrico in ten. Don’t launch the rapid response team yet.’

‘Si señor.’ The voice sounded tired. Like me, he was tired of responding to Gabriela. Black haired, wilful, twenty-eight-year-old Gabriela in her short, tight dresses. She wanted rescue all right, just not the sort we offered. The radio-op gave me Gabriela’s location.

Travelling fast, I barrelled down Avenida Javier Prado. At eight in the morning traffic was still heavy, and I weaved my way through commuters. Left at the Hotel El Dorado, and there, one wheel of her Audi up on the kerb was Gabriela.

She was standing with the driver’s door open, eyes like flame throwers, hair swirling, exquisite face proud and angry as she denounced two cops to a small assembly. They were Guardia Civil, a violent organisation, but these two officers were relaxed, chatting and staring admiringly at the beautiful Gabriela.

No hurry to terminate these proceedings, they were thinking, and I had to agree. A performance by Gabriela was a tour de force not to be missed. The fact that she was cursing the cops for stopping her and alleging everything from kidnap to treason, was received with amusement. She was shapely and fit, but at five feet six in her stiletto heels, she posed no threat to them.

As I got close, I saw there was a third cop, off to one side, closer to Gabriela, a short thickset guy, and he didn’t look so happy.

They'd stopped her, I imagine, simply because she was a woman alone in a car. That wasn't unusual, and Gabriela knew it. Perhaps she'd driven erratically or gone through a light, but that wouldn't have distinguished her from other drivers on the road in Lima. No, they just want twenty bucks so they can go on their way and stop someone else. Business as usual. But now, instead, they have the Gabriela show, and in the absence of a bribe, that's worth the investment of a few minutes.

I pulled in behind the battered Guardia Civil Toyota and joined the three cops, edging past them to stand nearest to Gabriela.

'*Caballeros*,' I greeted them.

Two nodded politely, 'Señor.'

The third grunted, and we all stood listening and watching Gabriela. She saw me, raised her hands palms up, eyebrows raised. You see what I have to deal with? But her tirade continued.

'*Otra cosa...* another thing,' she announced, 'every policeman I ever met was concerned about his manhood. Men join the police force because they are not confident they are real men. They need a gun. They are concerned about the size of their dicks. These three, you can be sure, have very small dicks ...'

An intake of breath from the crowd. Surely this would be too much for the Guardia Civil. But the man in charge thrust his pelvis forward, showing off a modest bulge in his trousers; he shook his head with a big grin. Nothing small going on here. A girl in the crowd shrieked, and the chief nodded his head. This was all the verification he needed.

The spectators loved it, and one of the watching men called 'Bravo!' as if applauding a particularly graceful molinete at the plaza de toros.

That was the sideshow, but I hardly saw it. Instead, I followed the body language of the unhappy cop. This guy was not a team player, his meanness written in the lines of a permanent sneer on a thin-lipped, angry face. He looked solid, barrel-shaped, with arms like thick tree branches. He wore the ragged, empty look that spoke of poverty and bitterness. This guy was a powder keg, and Gabriela's words lit the fuse. His blood rose, suffusing his face an angry red. He took two quick steps towards her, his right arm swinging back as he moved, winding up for a punch that would knock Gabriela flat.

Not going to happen. Instinctively, I read Barrel's face, bunching muscles and the balance of his body; all the necessary precursors to moving

forward to attack. Being closer to Gabriela gave me the advantage, and I stepped in front of her and stood, weight forward, hands at my sides and let the fool run into me, his swinging arm wrapping uselessly around my shoulder like an awkward hug.

He bounced back. I shook my head and said, 'No.'

Barrel was a slow learner and went for the holster at his side.

No real surprise, but it annoyed me. Gabriela could be foolish in her choice of words, but she was my friend. Pricks like this, in uniform or not, didn't get to hit her, and pulling a gun was loco.

I punched him in the throat, a quick flick like the tongue of a snake. Out and back. *Thwak*. Then an instant echo, *oof*, a resonant bass accompaniment as the air blasted out of his voice box. That blow was a movement that had taken years to perfect, and it had been finely honed in combat. But the guy wasn't taking notes. He stumbled backwards, knees sagging, making gargling noises, clutching his neck with both hands. That left his face unguarded, so I punched him there, a solid workmanlike blow, the sort I threw by the dozen at gym bags. His nose gave a satisfying crunch and exploded with blood.

'That's for Gabriela,' I said.

Then I hit him in the kidneys. One hard blow with my body weight behind it. That would send him to bed in agony for a day, with a week of pain every time he moved.

'That's from me,' I said. 'Don't hit women.'

I knuckle punched his right arm then—jab, jab, jab—disabling it so that it hung off his shoulder like an empty sleeve. That was just procedure, nothing personal. He'd have to reach across his body with his left hand if he wanted to draw his gun. But he wasn't thinking about that, he was squawking, in pain and sorry for himself, spraying blood like a garden sprinkler. Useless fucker.

The chief and his companion had taken a step back, the subordinate looking to his boss for direction. Barrel had dropped to his knees. I grabbed his collar and propelled him forward so that he sprawled in front of us, bleeding and puking, moving convulsively, desperately trying to escape the pain.

Pointing my finger at the chief, I asked, 'Are you crazy? This woman is married to a senior magistrate. She's protected.'

After the briefest of pauses, Gabriela shouted at them, her educated Spanish giving way to a gutter Limeño snarl, '*Si tontos, mi viejo te va a encerrar.* You idiots, my old man is gonna lock you up.'

Ease up, Gabriela, I wanted to say, though against the odds, it worked. They backed away, but the chief, face confused and flustered, had his gun out now and was waving it about like a loose fire hose. His amusing morning had turned to shit. I stood in front of him and pointed at the gun.

'Who the fuck you going to shoot, genius? Me, the magistrate's bodyguard, or his wife? Either way you're fucked.'

I kept moving forward, until his gun was against my chest. This was me entering the red zone, crossing the line into combat mode. Gambling he didn't have the guts to shoot, that he had the good sense to back down. Someone had to, and it wasn't going to be me.

'Here,' I said, leaning down and heaving his fallen comrade forward so he was dribbling on the chief's shoes. 'Take this fool and discipline him. I'll make enquiries in the morning, and I want to hear he's been punished so I can report that to my boss. Now go.'

I kept crowding into their personal space, making them back up. They dithered.

'Take him,' I shouted, now truly enraged. Head and shoulders above the cops. Not an act anymore, ready to kill them both. It wasn't as if I hadn't done that to more worthy men, and not just once. Or twice.

I lowered my voice so that only the chief could hear. 'Pull that trigger motherfucker and I'll break your neck before I die.'

Then, shouting again, 'Go, fuck off, get out of my sight.' The crowd jeered, and one of the kids threw a rock that bounced off the cop car.

The chief had had enough. With no attempt to save his dignity, he holstered his weapon and packed his team back into the car, the fallen Barrel a moaning pile in the back seat. The chief was screaming like a madman as the car pulled away, weaving, rattling up to road speed and merging with traffic. Their morning had been a disaster, and they would distance themselves from this location before they went on the hunt for another customer.

The crowd roared approval at their retreat. But Gabriela, star of the show, was left with an audience and no villains. She looked pale, shocked perhaps, but if she was, she would never let me know it.

The red mist of rage retreated, and as usual I felt shaky in its wake. My left hand trembled so I put it in my pocket.

‘Hello Gabriela.’

‘Jake,’ she said, her voice high and urgent, ‘*yo no se que...*’

‘English please, Gabriela. Our conversation will be more private that way.’

She looked around at what was left of the crowd. They ranged from well-dressed businessmen, briefcases in hand, to mothers with small children. A kid was selling single cigarettes, the usual racket of buying a packet and selling the individual coffin nails for a fifty percent mark-up. He’d found buyers. For the smokers, it was a pleasant way to spend a few minutes, puffing at un fallo and listening to the colourful language of Gabriela Macdonald. Watching the defeat of the despised Guardia Civil.

Act one was complete, and this was the intermission. They looked at me and tried to guess my role. Big guy a year or two older than Gabriela, a blonde man, tanned and in good shape. A fighter not scared of the Guardia Civil. Was I a Gringo? The husband, the brother, the lover? Limeños love drama. They were hoping for another instalment of colourful abuse directed, this time, at me, but they had no such luck. Gabriela put the back of one hand against her forehead and rolled her eyes at the sky, then she fixed her gaze on me.

‘Jake,’ she said, ‘I am so glad you came. I’m having a terrible day. Sit with me in the back of my car so we can talk.’

She looked at the crowd and smiled graciously, inclining her head. For a moment I thought she was going to bow, but instead she stood by the car door looking at me expectantly.

Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly.

Gabriela was married to Global Petroleum’s Finance Manager Philip Macdonald, a quiet, effective Scot, a colleague of mine rather than a friend. Not a magistrate, not even Peruvian. He wasn’t my boss but was certainly a rung higher on the ladder than me.

Aviation and Security were my departments, but as a department head in a small management team I knew Gabriela well. Better than well, in fact. We attended the same cocktail parties and receptions, and sure, we flirted, but life would be terribly dull without that. A good rule in affairs of the heart, I always thought, was not to cuckold your friends and workmates,

and I stuck to that rule. Without fail. Almost. If Gabriela had more than a chat in mind, she was out of luck. This time.

Dream on, she wants to talk.

I opened the door for her, smiling at these thoughts, and walked around to the kerb side and got in. Some wonder why the male red back spider willingly mates with the female of the species, only to be killed and eaten. If you're a man you know the answer, and the compulsion doesn't come from the brain. I closed the door of the Audi and contemplated the gorgeous Gabriela at close range.

'Jake, it is no good. I'm so bored. I'm so unhappy. I need a man. I need love.'

Everything was high drama with Gabriela, and this statement was made as if the end of the world was imminent. Her eyes were dark pools, fixed on me in supplication. You are the answer to my prayers, help me. Her perfume was as sensual as her lips, and she drew a deep breath, so her breasts stood to attention. An invitation? Perhaps. I shifted uncomfortably, erectile tissue answers to no man. The back of the car seemed very hot.

'It is fortunate you have Philip,' I suggested.

'*Pah,*' she said. 'What use is he? He makes love like an Englishman.'

'He is an Englishman,' I said. In fact, he was Scottish, but to Gabriela, all Brits were Englishmen. There was little doubt in my mind she had married Philip Macdonald for a British Passport.

She ignored me. 'He's as white as a boiled egg,' she said, 'and fat with spaghetti noodles coming out for arms and legs, all limp and colourless. No muscles, no tan, no energy, no passion. It's like making love to a bath sponge.' She put her hand on my arm and felt my bicep. 'I want an Australian. I had one when we were in Sydney, and he was very nice. Why are Australians so fit and energetic?'

The Australian Gabriela had in Sydney was me. An indiscretion on a trip that should have been strictly business. That had been three weeks ago, and a single hour with Gabriela had been so spectacular that I couldn't honestly regret it. You don't regret a beautiful sunrise or a waterfall or winning the lottery. Making love to Gabriela was like all those things rolled into one. Only better.

'Steak, sunshine and salt air, that's why we're fit and healthy,' I said. 'My mother thought it had something to do with vegetables as well, but I'm

not sure about that. Gabriela, this Australian isn't available. I have a fiancé in London.'

That was a stretch since at present my relationship was one big question mark. Nicole and I had fought before I left for Perú, and she told me we should both see other people. That wasn't going to happen in my case. I was going to sort things out with Nicole. Somehow. What I wasn't going to do was play with Gabriela in the meantime. That was for sure. Wasn't it?

'London is on the other side of the world,' Gabriela pointed out.

'Give Philip a chance. He's a very bright man.'

'I don't need a bright man.'

What does that say about me?

'You've been fighting in the streets,' Gabriela went on, 'hitting policemen, crowding up against a man with a loaded gun to your chest. What would Nicole think?'

I knew the answer to that, and unfortunately, so did Gabriela. Nicole would be yelling down the phone and I'd be even further in the bad books.

'There's no reason for Nicole to know about it. We can keep that AND the fact you were taunting the Guardia Civil to ourselves.'

She ignored my counterthreat.

'I met Nicole when she was here in Perú, I like her,' said Gabriela. 'It's not right that she doesn't know how you conduct yourself. But at least she has you. I, on the other hand, have only the limp noodle. It isn't fair.'

Gabriela wanted entertainment, and apparently, I'd been nominated to provide it.

Then I had a brainstorm, not one that Philip would appreciate, and not one I particularly liked, but my relationship with Nicole took precedence over Philip Macdonald's sensibilities. Gabriela was going to play, whatever I did.

'Look Gabriela. I'll introduce you to my friend Marco. You'll like him.'

Gabriela's lower lip jutted out and she said, 'You think I am a commodity to be traded? Or do you plan to give me to your friend as a gift?'

'Neither. Marco is sad and lonely, and I think you could help him. He's also handsome, rich and extremely energetic.'

That got Gabriela's attention. 'How rich?'

'Very.'

'Why is he sad and lonely?'

Truth was that Marco had never been sad a day in his life and was never short of companionship whether family, friends or a succession of beautiful women. But it would have been tactless to name him as the serial philanderer he was.

‘You’ll have to ask him,’ I said. ‘An affair of the heart gone wrong, perhaps? But he is very discrete; he would never tell me about such a thing.’ That, at least, was true.

Gabriela thought for a moment, considering the deal. A blind date with possibilities in exchange for an unwilling recruit.

‘All right, but you must kiss me before I forgive you. Then you can introduce me to Marco.’

She leaned over and offered a silken cheek.

As I approached the target she turned and kissed me on the mouth. Not a peck, a full-on passionate Gabriela kiss. My instinct was not to pull away. Why give offense? So, I kissed Gabriela back. Hard. She put a hand to the side of my face and gave a small sigh. We disengaged slowly, and I took a deep breath and let it out.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked sweetly, her head tilted to one side.

‘I’m sure,’ I said, ignoring that other voice that said, *no, no, you’re not sure*. Sometimes it isn’t easy being a man.

Reluctantly, I got back to business.

‘Gabriela, why did you press the emergency response button? Surely not because of the police. They just wanted a few dollars to go away and you know that very well.’

‘Why should I give them the satisfaction?’ she demanded. ‘I was just driving with Tyler, minding my own business.’

Tyler was Philip’s sixteen-year-old son by his first marriage. Great kid, here in Perú on holiday with his father.

‘Where’s Tyler?’

‘He walked,’ said Gabriela. ‘I think he had some weed on him, so he didn’t want to hang around when los picoletos stopped us.’

‘What makes you think he had weed?’

‘I gave it to him.’

‘Nice parenting.’

‘What would you know about it?’

‘Precious little,’ I agreed, thinking about Tyler, walking. Not a good idea in this neighbourhood. ‘We are friends, anyway. Not mother and son.’

He is Philip's boy.' 'He's a good kid. Are you going home now?' The Macdonald's bungalow was on La Conquista, ten minutes' walk away.

'No. Would you see that Ty gets home safely and off to school?'

Why wasn't I in London making things right with Nicole, instead of babysitting Gabriela and Tyler Macdonald?

'Sure,' I said, and took that as my cue to get out of the car. I leaned in before closing the door. 'I have to go to Camisea tomorrow. I'll set something up with Marco before I go.'

'Saturday lunch,' she pronounced. 'We'll go to Ancon, it's quieter.' She looked at me. 'We should go as two couples. That way I have female company if I don't like Marco. What about Abigail Fernandez?'

'Who?'

'At the cocktail party last night, the earth scientist. Big boobs. Hanging off your arm. Wanted to take you home.'

'No one tried to take me home,' I said, but Gabriela's mention of boobs reminded me of the bright, bubbly woman who seemed to enjoy rubbing my side with her generous breasts in the press of the cocktail party. She'd put a hand on my arm occasionally as we talked. I didn't mind. She was clearly a tactile person.

'I don't remember the boobs. But now you mention earth sciences I recall Abigail.'

'Bring her along,' ordered Gabriela. 'That will be fun, and she likes you.'

Then she looked into the centre console of the car, leaned forward and retrieved an envelope.

'This is for you,' she said, holding it out.

I don't normally get my post via Gabriela.

'Unusual. Where does it come from?'

'Some kid on the street gave it to me outside my house and said it was for you. That's why I pressed that silly button. He said it was..., ' she paused, searching for the correct English, then gave up, '*vida o muerte*.' 'Life or death,' I translated, and watched as she gracefully got out of the back seat and slipped behind the wheel.

'Nice seeing you Jake cariño. Saturday, don't forget.'

'I'll try to set something up, but you'll need to be flexible.'

'Of course. I'm very flexible, but you already know that.'

She gave me a naughty smile, and I closed the door. With a howl of tyres, she raced off, forcing the traffic to give way. As I walked away, I thought about Gabriela's flexibility.

Then I thought about Nicole. I really needed to get things on an even keel with her, and I had to get back to the UK. I'd been on assignment in Perú for months and I felt as bottled up and overheated as a pressure cooker. Sooner or later, something would give. Again. I was celibate before I hit puberty, that was enough.

Dammit, Ty. I was fixating on my love life, and I'd forgotten the kid. A schoolboy fresh from England stood out on Lima's streets like a parson at a prize fight. I'd briefed him on the risk, but what did he really know? Kidnappers cruised the streets in neighbourhoods like this, looking for kids in expensive jeans and sneakers. A well-drilled team could snatch a youngster in ten seconds and be off in the traffic and gone. They'd sell their victim to the guys who acted as jailers, who would in turn sell him on to the negotiators, who would extort money from the parents. It was the worst sort of production line, one that traumatised kids and treated them like cattle in a saleyard. About thirty kidnaps hit the press each month, but that was the tip of the iceberg. Most kidnaps were resolved, and reporters never heard about them. Much better to negotiate and pay, then beef up security and procedures after the lost child came home. If they came home.

The strip shops and cafes were humming, but I couldn't see Tyler; I went into the side streets, running now, determined to find the kid. This was my worst nightmare. I liked Ty, and I knew he looked up to me. Some role model I'd be if I let him get abducted because I was too busy making out with his stepmother.

Ten minutes later, panting from sprinting, I identified myself on the intercom at the Macdonald's gate so their dogs could be chained.

A maid let me into the house, and there was Ty, bag in hand, ready to join his driver Ulysses in the Land Cruiser that would take him to school. He smiled, not a worry in the world, happy as a colt at dawn, no thought of danger or dark deeds. My heart slowed from its hammering pace. Everything was okay and the guardian angel that protected the innocent had won. Somewhere else in the city, kids were being snatched, but they weren't under my protection, and they weren't Ty.

We talked for a few minutes, but the kid had to go. Before he left, I said, 'Stay off the streets if you can, Ty, it's not safe. You know that. If you must

be out, try to do it in company, and no matter if you are with someone or alone, be alert. Have a plan for where you're going if you have someone after you.'

'I know. You already told me that.'

'You remember Gerard Asquith?'

'Sure, he and I played tennis last time I was here. His dad works for LOSCO.'

'Right,' I said. LOSCO was the other major foreign petroleum company working in Perú. 'He was kidnapped three weeks ago, Ty. Released after his parents paid a ransom. The kidnappers had him for fifteen days.'

'Wow,' said Ty, his eyes big. 'Where is he now? Maybe I could go see him.'

'He's in hospital in Houston, sick and traumatised,' I said. 'He's started therapy sessions. Stay off the streets Ty. Do it for your dad. It would kill him if you were kidnapped.'

That was the edited version because I didn't want to scare Ty so much that he would never come back to Perú. Gerard Asquith had fallen into the hands of the Guzman crime family. Antonio Guzman, scion of the family, ran the kidnap business, and he liked to take a personal interest in the more lucrative abductions. Though I wished I hadn't, I had heard the recording Guzman junior sent to Gerard Asquith's mother.

"Tell your mother what you see, and what I've told you," Antonio Guzman had said. There was the sound of an adolescent crying, then the thump of heavy blows and high-pitched screams.

"Tell her, you little gringo shit, I don't have time for your crying. Man up, it's only your fucking ear. You've got two of them."

Then Gerard's terrified voice. "Mum please, do what they've asked. Pay the money. He's got a knife and he says he's going to cut my ear off and send it to you. He says you're taking too long to pay. Mum please."

More of the kid screaming, with laughter in the background, then Guzman's voice. "You'll get the ear in a day or two. The kid looks lopsided, so I'll take the other ear tomorrow." Silence for a moment, then the voice changed, became charged with urgency, and anger. "Pay me. Give me my fucking money." Screaming now. "Pay me, you cunt. Day after tomorrow it will be his nose, then his dick and balls, then I fucking kill him and deliver his body in pieces. Pay me."

Ty had been thinking about what I'd said. That he should stay safe for his dad's peace of mind.

'Yeah,' he said, and for the first time I think he really thought about it. 'Don't worry. I'll keep off the streets, and I'll keep a look out and plan, just like you told me. The kids at school think it's cool; I told them about you. You wouldn't run, I bet.'

I put Antonio Guzman from my mind. Smiling, I said, 'Depends on the odds, sometimes running is the smart option.'

'Have you ever done it? Run?'

'Sure Ty,' I said. 'Stay safe.'

Ulysses eased the Land Cruiser out into the street, and I turned back to the house. Thinking about my answer to Ty, I realised that I couldn't identify a single instance of running from danger. More fool me.

It was a company house, and before leaving, I figured I'd check the security cameras, locks and alarms, then read Gabriela's note. First stop was the internal safe room, the lockup within the house where the Macdonald's would retreat if there was a home invasion. It was designed to give them fifteen minutes safety while the Global rapid response team mobilised. Once my guys were on site, they'd clear the house in five minutes and any junkie or criminal fool enough to still be there would be taken off site in a body bag.

I was still checking locks and hinges when I heard Gabriela return to the house and loudly send the maid to the shops. She arrived at the door of the bedroom in a rush, cheeks red, a little breathless.

'You're still here,' she said.

'As you see.' Alone in a bedroom with Gabriela. Again. My pulse hammered. She stood squarely in the doorway.

'I've got you trapped.'

'I'm fairly sure I could get past you.'

Gabriela slowly unfastened her blouse, unhooked her bra and let them both drop. 'Do you want to?' Her hand went to the belt at her waist.

I'm a man with principles and good intentions, but I'm not a saint.

'Let me help you with that.'

On the way out, I stood in the garden, and pulled out Gabriela's letter. The envelope was addressed by hand in printed capitals 'SEÑOR HUNT, GLOBAL.' I pulled out a single piece of paper, and it said: **GLOBAL IS NOT WELCOME IN CAMISEA. LEAVE NOW. THERE WILL BE NO SECOND WARNING.**

Below that, in the same hand, were the words, **¡VIVA LA GUERRA POPULAR!; ¡GUERRA POPULAR HASTA EL COMUNISMO!**

'Long live the People's War; People's War until Communism,' I said under my breath.

This was the slogan of Sendero Luminoso. The Shining Path. They were the main terrorist group in the country, killing officials and blowing up infrastructure in pursuit of their cause. Global Petroleum fell into a group they hated above many others. We were foreigners who didn't belong in their homeland, usurping the riches of the country and people. So went their argument. But I knew Global wouldn't be leaving the Camisea area. It was prospective country, and our geologists were confident of success in finding oil and gas.

But Camisea was also cocaine and terrorist territory. The rainforest there is old and magnificent, its ecosystems nurturing life for millennia, and Sendero and its revolution are recent arrivals like the narcotics business. The Ucayali and other rivers that run through the region form the upper headwaters of the Amazon; there are occasional airstrips and no roads. For those who want somewhere off the beaten track to produce cocaine, foment revolution or forge an unholy alliance between these activities, Camisea is a perfect place.

There was a sick feeling in my gut, like I'd been punched with each word in the note. Sendero was an uneasy mix of patriots and criminals, but they were all fanatics, and many were homicidal maniacs. Now we were squarely on their radar, and life was about to get complicated.

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