

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

### CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't a prison, though some days it felt like one.

It shouldn't have mattered to me, I suppose, what colours the walls were, or that my room wasn't much bigger than my bed, or that the timing of meals, and everything else, was strictly enforced. I spent most of my time living inside my head, thinking of when I was young and strong and alive. I knew that I should've been happy that there was a roof over my head and that I never wondered when or if I would eat. But death stalked the hallways. Some days I felt his breath on the back of my neck, just as I had when I was in the mountains.

I put down the dog-eared copy of *Pedro Páramo* that I had been reading, sliding an old prayer card between the pages to mark my place. I maneuvered around the open door of my single room and rolled myself down the hall with the nicotine yellow walls. Most of the doors I passed had two neatly-

written cards mounted on them, each showing its residents' names. At the top of each card, written in block letters, was the resident's former rank. I glanced in each doorway as I passed until I reached the end of the ward. I wasn't sure what I hoped to see beyond grey faces looking back at me.

It didn't take long for the orderly to see that I was at the doors, even though his attention was on a small television showing a protest that filled the streets somewhere. A young man in scrubs held the door open for me with one hand while giving my wheelchair a helpful push over the lip at the threshold with the other.

"Thank you," I croaked, without looking back. When my voice stuck in my throat, I realized that I had not spoken for several days outside of my thoughts and dreams.

## PHIL HALTON

Though I knew it was grey, the side of the building seemed to shine brightly in the sun. High up were metal letters discretely dripping rust. They read:

### RESIDENCIA DE LOS ANCIANOS HÉROES

And peering down over the letters was a huge bearded face. Or, nothing more than an outline of a face, really, all the details of the man himself missing.

I turned away from the metal artwork and towards the sea, and let the sun warm my bones. I rolled down the concrete pad in front of the building, then stopped at the railing overlooking the malecón. I pulled the oxygen tubes from my nose, rubbing my itchy nostrils with my finger before replacing them again and settling back in my chair. I ignored the oil refinery squatting on the shoreline nearby, and instead looked out to sea. In the distance, just short of the horizon, I could see a collection of fishing boats huddled together, pushed by the waves. The sound of the water rhythmically hitting the stone of the malecón was constant and regular, and because of that, soothing.

“Comandante?”

I turned to look over my shoulder, and there was the orderly again. Standing with him was a young man who I immediately knew to be from the Party. His slacks and open-collared shirt were pressed and clean, and his chunky black glasses would have been fashionable in my youth. His only seeming pretention was a computer tablet that he held in his hands like a prayer book.

“My membership’s paid up,” I said, before turning back to the sea.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Party functionary look at the orderly, who merely shrugged. “Mi Comandante, my name is Rubén Pacheco Losa. It is my absolute pleasure to meet you.”

I merely nodded.

Rubén smiled at the orderly in the way that meant he wasn’t needed anymore, and dragged a battered metal chair across the concrete to sit facing me. He tucked the tablet under his arm so that he could gesture with both hands, then leaned in toward me. “This year’s commemoration of Liberation Day will be the largest since you and the others marched into Managua forty years ago.”

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

His earnestness was exhausting. I could see that he was trying to gauge how much I understood of what was going on around me. I looked much older than my years and had become used to the fact that every young person suspected I was becoming senile. More often than not, I was simply tired of listening to them.

“That is great news,” I said, looking him in the eye so that he could see that I was lucid. “I will enjoy watching it. On television.”

Rubén looked relieved for a moment, if only because he didn’t have to convince a confused old man to do whatever he was here to convince me to do. “On this anniversary,” he said, “all the living veterans of the Revolution will be included in the parade, leading representatives from every branch of the FTEN.”<sup>1</sup>

I tapped the side of my wheelchair with the flat of my hand. “I am past marching in parades.” I fiddled with the oxygen tubes again. They always made my voice sound too nasal to me. Even at my age, I could still be vain.

Before I finished speaking, Rubén pulled the tablet out from under his arm and swiped his finger back and forth on the screen. When he held it up for me, my eyes must have given away that I was surprised.

“This is a photo of you and some others in your jeep during the war.” I gasped at the ghosts in the photo before he swiped the screen, and a new photo appeared. “And this is that original jeep today. The one that led the column as you arrived in Managua. The very same one that you drove during the war. It has been fully restored, everything fixed except the bullet holes. In fact, it’s probably better than new, and the Party would like you to ride in it with some of your comrades.”

I swiped back to look at the old photo of the jeep for a few moments, at the faces I hadn’t seen in decades who stared back at me. I mumbled their names under my breath, and he must have thought that I had said “yes,” and so he began to talk about the arrangements to bring me from the residence in Puerto Sandino to the capital. I looked away from the photograph and into the young face of the man who reminded me, in his earnestness, of other young men I had known. I let out a long sigh, the air whistling

---

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: Fuerzas Terrestres de la Ejército de Nicaragua / Nicaraguan Army Ground Forces

## PHIL HALTON

through my nose a little, and tapped the armrest of my chair with one finger to punctuate my answer. “No,” I said. “I am too tired to lead a parade, even if all I am to do is sit in my seat.”

Rubén took off his glasses for a moment and rubbed his temples with the thumb and fingers of one hand. “Comandante,” he said, “there are not so many excombatientes left from forty years ago. How many will be left at sixty years? It’s important that you be together en masse. One day, it won’t be possible anymore.” He saw that his argument wasn’t moving me. “It is important for the People to see the heroes who gave them their freedom.”

I rolled my wheelchair backwards away from him, not looking as I told him a truth that I knew very well. “The only heroes died during the Revolution. And no one can be given their freedom. That’s not how it works.” I turned the chair as quickly as I could, aiming for the door again and looking through the glass to try to catch the orderly’s eye so that he would open it. Rubén stuck out a foot and jammed the wheel of my chair. Without thinking, I stood and walked for the door. I totter around from time to time, so it was not a miracle, though you would think differently if you saw Rubén’s expression. I kicked the chair so that it rolled into the railing, and the noise jarred him into action. In an instant, he was beside me, his arm supporting mine.

“No one will force you to do anything,” he said. “I know that you are not as strong as you once were, but there is no need to run away.”

I let him help me back into my chair. “Who are you with?” I asked, my voice sharper and more pointed than before. “The FTEN?”

“No,” he smiled, “I am no soldier. I am a Deputy in the FNT for Managua. I work in the department that was run by Jamie Marroquin.”<sup>2</sup>

I ignored the fact that the man he referenced had been dead for a decade because it was then that I understood why he had really come to speak to me.

“I am telling you that no one will force you to be in this parade,” he said, holding his hands up plaintively. “But I am also

---

<sup>2</sup> Translators note: Frente Nacional de los Trabajadores / National Workers Front.

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

telling you: you have to be there. You fought and won the Revolution once, but it needs to be won again every day. The People need to see that their freedom was paid for with flesh and blood. The Revolution must go forward, whatever the personal cost.”

I saw it in his eyes. He was an idealist in the way that only the young and inexperienced can be. I sighed heavily again, looking at this young man who was not much older than I was when the Revolution ended. I reached out and grabbed his arm. Judging by his expression, he was as surprised as I was at my strength.

“I will attend the parade, but on one condition.”

His face was a mask of concern, not knowing what I might demand of him.

“Between now and then, I want you to record my story. All of it, from before the Revolution until victory.”

He smiled again, and I realized that it was a common defence that he used to rebuff people. “I am sure,” he said, “that there are military historians who will do this for you.”

I did not release my grip on his arm, even though my fingers ached at the effort. “I don’t want some officer trained at a military school in Moscow trying to refight old battles with me. I want someone who will just listen.”

“I can ask for a voice recorder to be given to you. My wife will tell you, it will listen more reliably than I can,” he said, laughing a little at his own joke.

“I’m too old to sit and talk to a machine all day,” I said. “You can record it electronically if you like, but I need a person, flesh and blood as you said, to talk to.”

Rubén began to push me towards the entrance of the residence, hoping to end the discussion. “Comandante, it would be an honour to listen to your memories, but I am very busy on various committees, and it is far for me to come here to Puerto Sandino . . .” His voice trailed off. “I am sure that there is someone else who can be detailed by the Party for this important task.”

He brought me to my room, glancing at the photos on my dresser, of me standing with men he knew primarily from history books. I seized my chance. “During the Revolution, we worked seven days a week, and only because we couldn’t work eight. Don’t tell me that you’re too busy.”

## PHIL HALTON

Rubén hesitated, but when he glanced up at the thin glass case on my wall that held the original pennant that had been reproduced for his restored jeep, I knew that I had him. “You can come on Sundays,” I said. “Just for the afternoon.”

He reached out to shake my hand, and I gripped his as firmly as I could. The veins stood out against the back of my gnarled hand, making his hand look impossibly smooth and soft as I squeezed it. “OK,” he said, finally.

“And this is between you and me,” I said. “Not Party business.”

He shrugged, I’m sure because he didn’t see what difference that made.

“And you have to bring me a cigar. The rough kind that campesinos smoke, nothing fancy.”

Rubén pointed at the oxygen tank strapped to the back of my wheelchair. “I doubt that is a good idea, Comandante.”

“Not for me,” I said, “for you. You’re going to smoke it, and I’m going to enjoy the smell.”

His face set in an expression of submission. “Alright,” he said. “Next Sunday, Comandante.”

“And you have to call me what everyone called me then. Paco.”

“Of course, Coman . . . Paco.”

Rubén left before I could make any further demands of him, and although I knew that he didn’t want to spend his Sunday afternoons with me, I also knew that he would be true to his word. I rolled myself back down the hall and out through the lobby to look out at the sea again. The smell of salt in the air seemed stronger now, and I could see that the wind was whipping up waves in the distance where the fishing boats had been clustered. With white caps and darkening clouds at their backs, they were scurrying back to shore, the storm growing behind them.

**LA CIUDAD**

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

### CHAPTER TWO

**T**he first few months of 1978 were the hottest I can remember.

That may seem like trivia now, but I think that it actually shaped history. The nights were so hot no one could sleep. The streets were full of people at all hours, just walking, or sitting at outdoor bars and cafés hoping for a breeze. Many old neighbourhoods were still just piles of rubble from the earthquake in '72, and if they couldn't afford to pay for drinks, people would just sit on the heaps of brick and stone. No one slept well that summer, except maybe the rich. It was as if there was twice as much time in a day. We talked more, laughed more, danced more, and in the end, that is what caused history to take the path it did.

Along with some of the boys I grew up with in my barrio, I worked as a musician. I wasn't the best guitar player, and there were lots of better singers than me out there, but I could always get a crowd to start dancing. Some people liked American music, even "disco," whatever that was, but we played local music, son nica, or sometimes cumbia. Sometimes we got paid to play in bars, but we mostly played for tips, around restaurant tables in the plaza or at parties. With the unreliable electricity in the city, the only music you could count on was live. It was at one of these parties that I met Ramón.

The parties we played at weren't in the richest houses, but they were still a world away from the barrio of my youth, or the rooming house where I lived. University professors, journalists, or sometimes even artists after they had made a big sale, were our best clients. The number of guests often outstripped the size of their houses, and so parties spilled out into the garden or street. I guess you'd say we were part of the leftist intellectual scene, but I didn't

## PHIL HALTON

think of things that way back then. I knew them as the people who gave us a little extra on top of our tips and gave us bottles of beer so we could cool off as we played through the night. They were simply good people, who didn't see me as an uneducated youth living just a hair's breadth above the gutter.

It took more than an hour of walking to get to this particular party on the other side of Managua. Our band was Esteban, Miguel, Luis, Antonio, and me, and we all carried our own instruments. My guitar was easy enough to bring, and I had a piece of rope that I had made into a sling so it hung over one shoulder. Miguel played guitar as well, and with the lightest loads, the two of us were always hurrying the others along as they lagged behind. Esteban's small marimba fit in his lap, and he had nailed leather straps to the underside, so he carried it like a backpack. Luis carried the wooden box that he used for percussion in both hands and a few rattles and claves. Antonio's accordion had straps on it already, but he was always stopping to change how he carried it, and so, was perpetually bringing up the rear.

The streets were crowded at all times of day, and we walked single file between the traffic and the market stalls that filled up many sidewalks. We walked straight through the Plaza de la República, with the ruins of the old cathedral looming over one edge. The streets leading from the plaza were surrounded by crumbling colonial buildings that leaned inwards as if taking great interest in the happenings beneath them. We weaved around a loose group of protesters in the centre of the square. They were listening to a man standing on a box and shouting about freedom. This demonstration meant little to those of us who had to hustle for money if we wanted to eat. Sometimes we made up songs as we walked, picking up snatches of conversations or the shouts of vendors. I don't remember all the words anymore, but Esteban made up a whole song about two chicken vendors who shouted out prices to attract customers from where they stood across the street from each other. There was an energy to the streets that we fed off of as we walked to our gigs. In crossing the city, we saw how every neighbourhood lived, rich and poor. I learned more from playing music in all parts of the city than I ever did during my few years of school.

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

That evening, Miguel took a few wrong turns while leading the way. He admitted that he was following a young woman selling tostones from a huge basket, and wasn't paying attention. It was one of those hot, hot nights when women sweat through their dresses so that they cling to them in a way that was flattering and not at the same time. We were playing in the garden of an old colonial house that had seen better times. It was a professor of medical science who lived there, with his wife and three young girls, and every time I looked up from where we were playing, I could see all three children peering down from a window on the upper story. The garden was lush and unkempt, like a jungle, full of students and professors and neighbours.

We had been playing for nearly two hours when I looked around at the other players and using nothing more than glances, we agreed to take a break. We brought the song we were playing, a raucous version of *Besada por el mar*, to a big ending. All the dancers stopped and clapped, we took a quick bow, and leaving my guitar leaning against a fruit tree, I walked straight over to a tub of ice to find a beer. The tub looked mostly empty, but I fished around the bottom until I pulled out a bottle of Victoria. I passed the first one back to my friends, and then another, and so on, until at last, I could keep one for myself. I held the crisp bottle against my forehead to cool off while I looked around for the bottle opener.

Hearing a commotion, I looked across the garden towards the house. The crowd parted to make way for a line of young women, all balancing trays of beer on their heads, led by a young man. He looked to be a little older than me and was dressed in the open-necked shirt and pleated slacks that were practically a uniform for students at the university, though his clothes were far more rumpled than was fashionable. His thick, dark hair was piled in waves atop his head, making him look a little younger than he probably was. He had his arm around a young woman in a polka dot dress as he sashayed towards the tub, eventually stopping to direct the giggling line of women to put the beer into the ice. Although his expression was generally playful, he had a piercing gaze that swept across the room like a searchlight, catching me in its glare for an uncomfortable moment. He extended his hand towards me, like a waiter offering to open the bottle.

## PHIL HALTON

He took the bottle from my hand rather than wait for me to pass it to him, and, while still grinning at me, put it in his mouth and pried the cap off with his teeth. He wiped the mouth of the bottle on the sleeve of his shirt and handed it back to me. The girl on his arm gave him an exasperated look and went off to talk to another group of students. He watched her go with a laugh and stuck his hand out for me to shake.

“Ramón Espinoza de la Fuente,” he said.

“Paco,” I replied. Even then, I didn’t put much stock in my lineage. The other guys in the band had found the opener without me and had dispersed into the crowd to chat up the university girls.

“Where did you learn to play?” he asked.

The first answer that leapt to mind was that I had no idea. Before the earthquake, my earliest memories were of music in my house, my mother and father and uncles and everyone else playing and singing. That was all gone now. I shrugged. “Around, I guess.”

He nodded, and we stood there for a moment in silence, both sipping our beer. I was going to say something else when I noticed that suddenly the party had become much quieter, even accounting for the lack of music. Everyone had turned to face a new arrival in the garden. He was past middle age, and though still tall and thick across the shoulders, he was preceded by a huge belly against which his shirt buttons strained. Even in the heat of that summer night, he wore a suit and tie. I recognized him from the newspapers, as I’m sure everyone did. A leader in the UDEL, Jaime Marroquín had been a professor at the university and was often in the news for his newspaper editorials.<sup>3</sup> He stood at the edge of the garden, a diminutive woman clinging to his arm, waiting. A young man, with broad shoulders and a boxer’s nose, stood just behind him, watching the crowd. The host shook his hand effusively and kissed the woman on both cheeks before offering them both a drink from the bar. I saw that Ramón was watching him. I was surprised when Marroquín walked up to us directly.

His voice was higher and a bit breathier than it seemed when I had heard him on the radio giving speeches. He looked back and forth between me and the stack of instruments on the other side of

---

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s Note – The UDEL was a moderate opposition group, the Unión Democrática de Liberación / Democratic Union of Liberation.

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

the garden. “It’s time for you to play again, boy. We want to dance.” He patted the woman’s arm, entwined with his.

I still had almost half my beer left. I looked around quickly, but I couldn’t see all of the other players. As I hesitated, a look of irritation flashed across Marroquín’s face. “You are with the band? You’re not some other kind of help?” The host called out to him from the bar, holding up two drinks. Marroquín led his date away from us, and I had still not spoken.

Ramón spat on the ground. “They say that you can’t trust a skinny cook or a fat union leader.”

“What was that?” asked the boxer, who was still nearby.

“Poor hearing must be a prerequisite to work for that ass,” said Ramón.

The boxer took a half step forward, and without really thinking, I grabbed Ramón by the arm and pulled him away, and as I did, I began to sing. “El pueblo unido” wasn’t the most popular song anymore, but most people still knew it, and when we played it, we did it with a cumbia rhythm that people could dance to. I could see that Marroquín recognized it and approved. No wonder, as it had begun as a protest song for striking workers. I sang the first verse a cappella, drawing it out a little and focusing on the suffering it described so that the other band members had time to join me. I handed Ramón two claves, and he played along, although his sense of rhythm wasn’t terrific.

The other players joined in as they reached their instruments, and so, the song began to build. In no time, people were singing and dancing along, including Marroquín and his date. When we brought the song to a crashing finish, I didn’t pause to catch my breath or do anything that might have let the crowd out of the palm of my hand. I started straight into another leftist anthem, “El trabajador poderoso,” also in the cumbia style, and people just kept dancing. Ramón kept banging away with his wooden blocks, more or less in time with the rest of us. Throughout both songs, he ignored the crowd and kept looking at me with an inscrutable expression.

After that, we just kept playing, sweating in the heat until our shirts were soaked. Eventually, Marroquín got tired of dancing and left with his date, though the bodyguard gave Ramón one last hard look before he followed them out. Finally, we finished our set and

## PHIL HALTON

took a bow, anxious to cool off and have another drink. Ramón clapped me on the shoulder and laughed at what had just happened, and despite myself, I laughed too.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. “I know another party where there are more girls.”

The party here was still going strong, and I knew that they would want music for a few more hours. “I can’t,” I said. “I won’t be paid until the end of the night.” Ramón looked a little surprised, then walked over to the tub of beer, pulled one out by the neck, and gave me a little salute with the bottle. “Next time, maybe,” and with that, he was gone.

I saw him again a few weeks later at another party, also at the house of a university professor. This time they had cleared out the largest of the rooms in the house as a dance floor and had flung open the windows to let air circulate. Still, the room was hot and got more so as it filled with dancers. We played with the windows to our back, and the cool breeze helped, but it still felt like it would be a long night.

I watched the crowd as we played, as I always did, trying to gauge what song would keep them on their feet. We found the rhythm of the party, and soon the room was so packed with dancers they could hardly move, slowly shuffling in a large circuit. Sitting in a windowsill off to my left was Ramón.

He had a short bottle of rum dangling in one hand, and he looked more dishevelled than usual. Other students passing him on the dance floor leaned in to speak to him, and more than one girl seemed to invite him to dance, but he waved them away with one hand, not bothering to look anyone in the eye. He looked like a sailor, shipwrecked on a tiny island.

We brought a popular dance number to an end, holding the last note and laying on the vibrato long enough for everyone to understand that we were done playing for the moment. There was no way we could move until the crowd thinned out, and so we shared a joke and eyed the girls in the crowd while we waited.

Esteban, who I had grown up with, and who played a small marimba, lit a cigarette and used it to point to Ramón. “See that guy sitting there?” he said. “I heard the craziest story about him earlier.”

## EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED

I took the cigarette from him, as I had none, and took a drag before passing it to one of the others.

“He’s a medical student,” said Esteban. “Or he was one. He got thrown out of the university for this prank he pulled.”

Ramón caught my eye, and perhaps he could tell we were talking about him. He took another pull from his bottle and slunk off through the crowd. “They have a professor of anatomy,” Esteban continued, “a Doctor Velásquez, who has been there for decades. Supposedly he looks in worse shape than even the cadavers. His lectures are as dry as a nun’s panties, they say, and it’s also the toughest class. And so, he came into the anatomical theatre this morning and started droning on about whatever it was, and then he went over to the dissection table to remove the sheet from the cadaver. When he got close, the cadaver sat up and grabbed his arm. Apparently, Doctor Velásquez passed right out and split his head open on the side of the table. And it was that guy who was under the sheet.”

We all laughed and agreed that Velásquez should be able to take a joke and that expelling Ramón was a travesty, though none of us had ever even seen the inside of a university. After a while, I left the others to go find Ramón. There were tight knots of people, deep in conversation, jammed into every possible space, and the noise filled the house until the walls felt like they were buzzing. Standing halfway up a staircase, in an intense dialogue, I found Ramón.

I had seen the man he was talking with at other parties. He was dressed in the same shirt and pleated slacks as the students, but he was older than them and very clean cut. His greying hair was buzzed short, and he had thick glasses that made his eyes look larger than they were.

“I think that if you apologize and give it a little time, they will take you back,” said the man in heavily accented Spanish. Ramón was not really looking at him but was nodding. I stood nearby, waiting for an opportunity to interrupt. When Ramón saw me, he smiled and pulled me by the hand up the stairs. “This is my friend,” he said, an arm around my shoulders. “Paco.”

The older man shook my hand with a firm grasp. “Alan Green,” he said, with a strong American accent. “The Economics Department.”

## PHIL HALTON

“Professor Green was just giving me some academic advice,” said Ramón.

“I heard that you might need some,” I replied.

Ramón’s body stiffened, and he looked at me curiously. “News travels fast.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Green said suddenly. “It’s hotter than hell in here, and I’m still getting used to it. I think that I’ll be calling it a night.”

“Thank you, professor,” said Ramón.

“Let me know if I can be of help,” he said as he left.

Ramón offered me his bottle of rum, and I took a quick pull from it. “You’ll get back into school, I’m sure.”

Ramón winced, still embarrassed that I knew of his problem. “That’s the least of my worries,” he said. “Being kicked out of medical school in my last year is one thing. But I’ve also been kicked out of residence, and I haven’t told my parents yet.”

“Can you kill two birds with one stone and stay with them?” I asked.

Ramón shook his head. “They’re in León, not here.” He hesitated for a moment before sharing with me. “I think I’d rather die than tell them in person.”

“Friends?” I said tentatively.

“I couldn’t ask them. They’re all at the university. Anyone who sneaks me in risks getting expelled themselves.” He drank the rest of the bottle, setting it down on the stair between his feet. “So, in summary, I’m fucked,” he said.

I’m not entirely sure why I wanted to help him, though I can see now that he inspired the same kind of feelings in almost everyone. “Well, there’s an open bed in the house where I stay, and I’m sure that the landlady would rent it to you.”

Ramón brightened up a little. “Where is it?”

“Barrio San Pablo,” I said.

“Perfect,” he said, though I suspected that he didn’t really know where that was at all. “Let’s find something more to drink.” And like that, he was back to being the same person I had seen at the other party. He chided and cajoled people, made jokes and laughed with them, and in no time had a bottle of beer in one hand and a cigarette in another, surrounded by pretty girls and jealous boys.

## **EVERY ARM OUTSTRETCHED**

I went back to work, but he danced until the party finally finished, and then grabbing one more beer for the walk, fell in behind the band clutching a battered suitcase that contained all his worldly possessions.

Thanks for reading this sample!

To keep reading *Every Arm Outstretched*, you can purchase it as a paperback or e-book [here](#).

OTHER WORKS BY PHIL HALTON:

## THIS SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PEACE

**After the collapse of Afghanistan's Soviet-backed government, a *mullah* finds himself doing anything to protect his students.**

Chaos reigns in the wake of the collapse of Afghanistan's Soviet-backed government. In the rural, warlord-ruled south, a student is badly beaten at a checkpoint run by bandits. His teacher, who leads a madrassa for orphans left behind by Afghanistan's civil war, leads his students back to the checkpoint and forces the bandits out. His actions set in motion a chain of events that will change the balance of power in his country and send shock waves through history.

Amid villagers seeking protection and warlords seeking power, the Mullah's influence grows. Against the backdrop of anarchy dominated by armed factions, he devotes himself to building a house of peace with his students — or, as they are called in Pashto, *taliban*. Part intrigue, part war narrative, and part historical drama, *This Shall Be a House of Peace* charts their breathtaking ambition, transformation, and rise to power.