

CHAPTER 1

The keys felt good in his hand - solid and cool against the flesh of his sweating cupped palm. They were like freshly minted silver coins, winking at him in the Spanish sunlight. The keys to a new life! He felt a surge of excited anticipation.

“Tom! What are you dithering about? Have you worked out which one’s the door key?”

Linda was staring at the damp patch on Tom’s back. It had the outline – roughly speaking – of the Iberian peninsula. She’d become very familiar with maps of Spain on the long drive south from the ferry at Santander. What on earth was he doing? She was dying for the loo. The loo, and a nice cup of tea. But there would be no tea inside this empty Spanish villa. They had no tea bags, no mugs, no spoons and no kettle. Not until the removal lorry came.

Tom probed the keyhole with the snout of a large lever lock key and applied a sideways pressure. The key turned with a satisfying, solid click that spoke of quality. High spec, just like everything else he remembered about this villa. He pushed the door open and stood aside. This was a special moment, wasn’t it? A moment to be marked with

some ceremony: the entry to their new house. He made an ostentatious sweep with his arm.

“In you come, Princess!”

Linda lifted her eyes to the heavens to convey that the Princess was in no mood for flippancies. He was grinning at her though, oblivious. Her irritation softened a little. He looked so happy!

She hauled her suitcase over the threshold. The damned thing was like a coffin. She trundled it along the hallway, its little wheels bumping across the tiled floor in a way that renewed her irritation. Behind her, she heard Tom closing the door and catching up with his own suitcase. Bump-bump-bump...

The artery of the hallway brought them straight to the villa's empty heart: a big white-walled space that was for now devoid of any furnishing or decoration. It felt to her like a dance floor before the dancing had begun – or, perhaps, after it was over.

Tom strode straight across the room, hardly seeing it, drawn like a moth to the brightness spilling through the glass patio doors. He gazed out across his new domain.

On the other side of the glass was a broad terrace of terracotta tiles bounded by a low white wall. Where there was a gap, unseen steps led down to a lawn of lush coarse-

bladed grass, and a rectangular swimming pool beyond. *His* swimming pool! He noted with a feeling of satisfaction that his instructions had been followed: although it was only the first day of April, it was already filled with water. Its surface moved gently in the slight breeze, and little sparks ignited where ripples caught the sun. On the far side of the pool the garden sloped down to a line of tall, dignified palms. *His* palms, all of them! Between their slender trunks he could just see the top of the white boundary wall, and the red-tiled roof of a neighbouring house. Then at last came the shimmering Mediterranean Sea, mirroring the deep blue of the sky and leading the eye out into infinity. Were those two white sails out there, right on the edge of sight? He felt as if he himself had somehow grown larger, as he took in this scene. It seemed in some way to pull him towards it and make him a part of what he saw. He drew in a deep breath, expanding his lungs, and felt a smile spreading across his features. A smile that was for himself, and for this brave new world he was a part of. He turned to share it with Linda. Where was she?

He heard the sound of a toilet flush being pulled fruitlessly twice, and then a faint cascade of water.

She returned to the living room looking at her watch as if it had been caught out in some misdemeanour.

“She’s coming at twelve?” she said.

Tom nodded, his smile wavering, his balloon of joy deflating a little.

“That gives us half an hour to...” she went on, and then stopped. Tom had turned back towards the patio doors.

One of these myriad small keys in his hand must open those doors, he thought, examining them.

“Shall we sit on the terrace – on the little wall?” he said over his shoulder.

She felt a little mean, but someone had to be practical.

“Half an hour to check round for problems, is what I was about to say.”

Tom turned reluctantly to face the room, the magic still strong behind him, calling for him to come back to it.

“What sort of problems?” he said uneasily.

“Things wrong with the villa. That flush handle didn’t work brilliantly. There might be other issues. It’ll be much easier to see things before the furniture arrives.”

He felt a little... what? Insulted? It was as if one of the houses he’d built himself was being criticized. Already this house – *Elysium* – felt like an extension of his own being; something to be defended.

“But we made an inspection visit already. I had a thorough look then. Everything was kosher. Wouldn’t have bought it otherwise.”

“Things can change. There might have been an earthquake. They get earthquakes in Spain. Or a lightning strike.”

“We’ve got a guarantee. Two months.”

“There might be things we’d miss though, even in that time.”

She scanned the room suspiciously, alerted by that flush handle. Tom shrugged, and returned to his bunch of keys and the patio doors.

Linda watched him fiddling with the keys for a moment, and then fished in her handbag for her little notebook and a pen. Let him wallow in his entry into paradise for now, she thought. For herself, tired after the long journey and all the prior stress of packing up in London, she felt nothing emotionally at this moment of arrival. Nothing at all. But she could at least do something useful. Tom had spent his working life building houses, but he wouldn’t spot the little details here that she might notice. He’d always been the man for the bigger picture, and left the detailed interior finishing of his projects to others. By the time a house was at that final stage, he was already preoccupied with the

foundations of the next one, and buying the land for the one after that. When she'd noted down the missing knob on the walk-in closet, the cupboard door that looked slightly warped in the second bedroom, and a cracked tile in one of the en suite bathrooms, she returned to the living room. Through the opened patio doors she could see Tom's square, solid shape sitting on the low wall of the terrace, apparently staring vacantly into space.

She felt a motherly impulse, and couldn't suppress it.

"Have you got sun cream on?" she called, but he just raised a hand in a vaguely dismissive gesture. She resisted the temptation to search for the sun cream in her suitcase. Let him learn these things for himself. After all, today was April Fools' Day. She'd once got sunburnt herself here on the Costa del Sol in April, not believing it possible; a long time ago when she was young and foolish.

The doorbell rang, its shrill summons resonating through the empty villa and startling her. She went along the hallway, and found the button to open the outer gate. Behind her, she heard Tom entering the house through the patio doors.

She opened the door to a handsome woman who immediately made her feel dowdy in her crumpled travelling clothes. She wore a smart dark brown business

suit softened by a chiffon scarf at her neck. She had lustrous shoulder-length black hair, stylishly cut, and an olive-skinned face just a shade nearer to angular than oval. Her mascara, eyeshadow and lipstick were impeccable. Linda estimated that she was about ten years younger than herself, perhaps just tiptoeing into her forties. A good-looking woman. Spanish, of course.

“Hello,” the woman said. “Mrs Rook?”

Linda made an inarticulate noise, caught between simply saying *yes* and the kind of explanation that would be required to clarify that she was, in an informal way, Mrs Rook, but not by name. The pleasant smile on the woman’s face flickered a little.

“I’m Linda, Linda Raleigh,” Linda managed to get out as Tom arrived at her side.

“And I’m Tom Rook,” he said, and the woman’s smile grew confident again.

“Pleased to meet you Señor Rook! I’m Andrea González.”

“*Andrea!* How nice to meet you face to face after all our e-mails and phone calls!”

“Yes, I’m sorry I was on holiday when you make your inspection visit here.”

“Well, come on in.”

Linda stepped aside, feeling a little superfluous. She could always tell when Tom found another woman attractive. There was an extra pinch of seasoning in his voice, and an invisible stair rod slid up his back and made him taller.

Andrea gave her another smile as she passed.

“And so nice to meet you too, Mrs Reilly.”

Raleigh, Linda mentally corrected her as she smiled back. She got *Reilly* so often that she always let it pass.

Tom ushered Andrea along the hallway like a sheepdog with two tails. Her shiny high-heeled shoes went clickety-clack on the tiles. Linda shuffled along in their wake in her comfy moccasins. Tom’s voice boomed ahead of her.

“We’re so pleased to be here at last, Andrea! Everything looks lovely!”

They all entered the empty living room, where they came to a halt and formed an awkward triangle, as if they’d arrived at the wrong destination.

“I’m sorry we can’t offer you anything,” Linda put in.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m just come to make sure that you got all the keys from my assistant, and that all things are okay for you. I came more early and turned on the hot water.”

“Thank you,” Tom said, with a broad smile.

Fawning, Linda thought.

Andrea glanced around the empty room. She was like a bright, inquisitive bird, Linda felt, with sleek dark plumage. A blackbird. She had perfect lacquered nails and no wedding ring.

“When will your furniture arrive?” she said, looking at them both.

“Should be here in three or four hours,” Tom replied. “I spoke to the driver on my mobile.”

“Excellent. Are you going to have some lunch at the clubhouse? They cook some very nice salads.”

“We might do that, mightn’t we Linda? I could murder a burger.”

“Yes, good idea.”

Andrea fished in her handbag. A fake Gucci bag, Linda thought. She brought out a little card.

“I nearly forget... I bring this for you. It gives a 10% discount at the clubhouse. You only must fill in your address in the Valle.”

Tom took the card.

“Thank you, that’s great Andrea!”

They stood for a moment longer, all smiling uncertainly at each other, and then the doorbell went again. Andrea looked relieved.

“Oh, that will be Pepe. I see him in a garden along the road, and I say to him that he should come along and introduce himself.”

“Pepe?” Tom said.

“You remember – you ask in one e-mail if I can find you a gardener? Pepe is the best gardener in the *Valle*, and he only charge exactly the same as the others.”

“I’ll go,” Linda said, moving towards the hallway. She buzzed open the outer gate, and then opened the door to a handsome man in his forties. His eyes were brown and frank, and his smile revealed perfectly even white teeth. That smile and those eyes immediately erased the self-dowdification that Andrea’s presence had provoked in her, and made her feel womanly again. He removed a spotless beige baseball cap to reveal curly dark hair just tentatively venturing into grey above the ears.

“*Buenos dias,*” Linda greeted him, “*Pase usted, por favor.*”

The man’s eyes widened a little, and his smile became a grin. He nodded – almost a little bow - as if acknowledging her effort.

“*Gracias,*” he replied, and came in. Closing the door and following him along the hall, Linda allowed herself a little smirk at this modest success in Spanish.

Tom had remained in the living room with Andrea.

“Does he talk any English?” he asked her quietly, leaning slightly towards her ear. Some perfume clung faintly to the air around her and tickled his interest.

“Yes, much better than me.”

Pepe came forward into the room, smiling. He acknowledged Andrea with a friendly glance, and then wiped his hand on his trousers, examined it critically, and extended it towards Tom.

“Forgive me, my hand is slightly sullied by my horticultural labours. I’m Pepe. Delighted to meet you Mr Rook.”

“Oh. Delighted to meet you, too.”

“I hope your journey was felicitous?”

Linda registered Tom’s blank look and took the answer upon herself.

“Yes, completely felicitous thank you.”

Tom looked at her enquiringly.

“What? Was it?”

Andrea smiled helpfully.

“So, Pepe will come this Friday to start, Señor Rook?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’d be great. Thank you Andrea. And, please – call me Tom.”

Andrea smiled and nodded. Linda grimaced inwardly. Pepe shuffled his feet and cleared his throat.

“I must depart immediately, I fear, as I am labouring in a proximate garden. I will be here at eight thirty on Friday morning on the dot, and we can orchestrate my activities at that time.”

Tom stared at him, grappling with *proximate* and *orchestrate*.

“I must go too,” Andrea added. “If there’s anything more I can help you, just call me at the office.”

“Thank you,” Tom said. “Thank you both!”

Linda and Tom saw them to the door, and shared an amused look when it closed.

“Seemed very nice and friendly,” Tom remarked.

“Yes, they did,” Linda replied.

“That gardener’s swallowed the dictionary hasn’t he though? What’s fallacitous? Nothing to do with... what do you call it? Fellatio?”

Linda batted his arm.

“*Felicitous*. Happy, enjoyable, fortunate.”

“That right? That’s going to be us then, in Valle de Pinos, eh? Felicitous!”

They meandered back to the empty sitting room.

“Smart young woman, that,” Tom said.

“She’s at least forty.”

“Well, that’s young isn’t it?”

“Younger than us,” Linda agreed.

“Not so much younger than *you*. Snatched you out of the cradle!”

“I bet we’re the youngest residents around here,” Linda replied.

“What, forty-nine and fifty-nine? What makes you think that?”

“Oh, come on! We talked about it when we came here on the inspection, how all the people we saw were leathery and wrinkly, like turtles. I suppose living in the sun makes you go a bit like that.”

Tom shrugged.

“Like fruit that’s fallen off the tree and got all dried up,” Linda said, pursuing her line of thought.

“If you fall off the tree, aren’t you dead?” Tom suggested. “Like the poor old bugger who had this place built for himself, old Mr Calder.”

Linda set off again with her notebook. Tom returned to the terrace wall. The sun felt good on his face. Let him turn turtle; it was a price worth paying.

He closed his eyes.

Birdsong, and... yes... just the faintest murmur of the sea in the distance. A soothing murmur, like a mother to a baby. He fell to thinking about Mr Calder. He'd not met him, but today he was moving into Mr Calder's dream home, the home he'd had built and designed especially for his retirement; him and his wife. He was in his late sixties apparently. Then, before he could come and enjoy it, he went and had a heart attack and died. Tom felt a kind of affection for Mr Calder, as well as pity. When he and Linda had come out to the Costa del Sol in search of a place, Mr Calder's widow had just put this on the market, and as soon as Tom saw it he felt it fitted him like a glove. Linda said a house couldn't fit you like a glove, and it was a mixed meta-something, but it felt like the right expression to him.

He felt quite certain that he would have liked Mr Calder, if he'd ever met him.

There was a sudden small sound very close at hand that startled Tom in his self-imposed darkness. The ghost of Mr Calder, come back to claim his house! He opened his eyes wide in panic. The sound was repeated, and he glimpsed a sandy brown lizard, no longer than his thumb, disappearing around a corner of the wall, with a scuttering dash of its little feet.

It made you think, didn't it, a scare like that! He didn't *believe* in ghosts, but even so, just for an instant there, he'd felt the heebie-jeebies. He thought he'd go back into the house.

Standing in the living room, he turned his thoughts to practical matters. He considered the wall opposite the terrace doors. A pity he didn't have a measuring tape to hand...

"What are you staring at that wall for?" Linda said, re-entering the room from the hallway.

"I was thinking the piano would go brilliant there!"

Linda shook her head. She mustn't let this idea sprout.

"The spare room, like we said before. I'll still be able to hear it everywhere."

"Yeah. It'll be lovely, eh? Romantic music floating through the house!"

"I've told you already, you can't just sit down and start playing Chopin. You'll have to play scales, arpeggios..."

"What?"

"Arpeggios – it's like exercises, to train your fingers. I spent half my childhood doing them."

"And now you didn't even want to have a piano here! Well, don't you worry, I'll put in the hard work. My Mum

used to play the piano lovely! I've always wanted to play like her."

"*Roll out the Barrel?*"

"What's wrong with *Roll out the Barrel?* Don't be a snob. It's a rousing tune, that is!"

"I thought you were setting your sights a little higher."

"'Course I am: Chopin; Beethoven; Liberace... You'll see. I've just been too busy. But I've always wanted to learn - you know - classical music and all that."

Linda took a step forward and put her arms around his stocky torso. He was suddenly so endearing; so full of enthusiasm.

"Mr Culture!" she said softly.

Tom laughed, and returned her hug.

"Mr Culture and don't forget Mr Golf!" he said.

Linda gave him another squeeze and stepped back.

"Oh yes, and when will you start *that?*"

"Well, when we're settled in a bit. Maybe next week. You have to have one or two lessons I think to get started, but how hard can it be? Ball doesn't move, does it! Must be like kicking a football off the penalty spot. I had an eye for a ball when I was a lad."

"Wasn't all you had an eye for, by reports."

Tom winked.

"Well, *you* didn't turn up until a bit late in the day, did you!"

He ran his eye across her, and felt a sudden impulse. This place had taken twenty years off him already.

"What about a quick one, before the furniture men come?"

Linda took half a step back in mock alarm.

"What? Listen to you!"

"On the floor - or up against the wall..."

He made a move towards her. She turned and ran with a squeal through the terrace doors and down the steps onto the grass. Behind her she heard Tom in pursuit, and then a cry of pain. She stopped and looked back. He was at the top of the steps, bent almost double and clutching one leg.

"What's happened?"

"Slipped on the tiles. Banged my bloody knee on the wall."

"Shall I come and rub it?"

"No... no... I'm still coming to get you!"

He started down the steps, limping a little. She stood her ground for a moment.

"Tom - be sensible. What if our new neighbours..."

"No-one can see into our garden..."

She turned tail again and fled down beyond the pool. Sex out of doors was a predilection of hers, as Tom knew very well. What he didn't know – although perhaps he guessed – was that it was because she loved the sense of transgression, and always imagined concealed observers. After a little dodging about she let Tom catch her up and wrestle her to the ground. A short-lived resistance expired amongst the coarse prickling grass and the ants. Labouring on his knees (one quite painful), Tom felt the rightness of this moment. From the point of view of romance, and especially comfort, fucking on a Spanish lawn was not something he thought he could ever recommend. On the other hand, it was the perfect way to mark their arrival in paradise. Like Adam and Eve, they were naked – or at least dishevelled – in the Garden of Eden, and there was no way he was opening the gates to any serpents.

Pepe, up a ladder some fifty metres away in the neighbouring garden cutting dead fronds from a palm, observed the thrusting white buttocks of his new employer with surprise. He finished his work quickly and descended. It would not be a good start to his future relations with these English people if they caught him looking. The English, he had gathered from his extensive reading of their classic literature, were constrained and secretive about sex.

However, collecting the brown rattling palm fans on the ground and putting them in his wheelbarrow, he thought that there was something he liked, something charming, about their untidy passion. The man was planting a seed, symbolically, in his new garden. Of course the woman was too old to prove fertile ground, but still... their act had a sort of rightness about it.

Later, over his solitary re-heated stew of chorizo, chicken and beans in his empty house, he wondered if he could make a poem out of what he had seen. He had imposed upon himself the task of writing a poem – in English – at least once a week. It was a form of self-discipline. In his present wobbly situation in life it was important to have some sustaining structures in place. He mopped up the last drops of his stew with a piece of stale bread, pushed aside the empty plate and fetched his poetry notebook and a pen. He wanted something pithy... something... he drained the last dry mouthful of his cheap Rioja, and tapped his pen for a while on the table, as if that might stimulate it. After a few false starts and crossings out he came up with:

*Satyr and nymph,
Cavorting on grass,
Are wholly absorbed*

In their own holy mass.

He felt half-satisfied. Was that a poem? It was very short, admittedly, but at least it rhymed. It also contained a pun – *wholly* and *holy* - and had a vague suggestion of blasphemy, which tickled his mild resentment of all those pompous priests who had bored him every Sunday throughout his childhood.

Well, it might not be *Paradise Lost*, but it would do. He turned to the page at the back of his poetry notebook where he'd marked out a grid with dates, and with a modest sense of achievement he put a tick in the box allocated to the present week.

He felt a little drowsy, and couldn't be bothered turning on the television. He slumped onto the sofa and mulled over his poem again. *In their own holy mass... holy mass... bread and wine... like his supper... flesh and blood of Christ ... flesh... the flesh of that woman in the garden... her legs spread wide... the flesh of his wife, two hundred kilometres away in Seville... and Andrea, in her smart skirt and high-heeled shoes... shoes that took wing and flew up into the sky like...*

He was falling asleep.

He stretched and yawned, and stood up to turn on the television news. There was some more coverage of that dispute along the coast over Gibraltar. Spanish police boats were testing the waters, as they did from time to time. It bored him, and he turned it off and decided he would make one of his infrequent visits to *El Gordito* for a nightcap. At least he would have a little company there.

CHAPTER 2

Andrea left the office at *Valle de Pinos* at eight o'clock in the evening as usual. The sun was low in the sky, and the smoked glass door caught its red glow, conjuring up the glass of red wine that she felt she would need when she got home. The last hour had been unusually hectic, after the departure of her so-called assistant Nieves at seven. Generally, the absence of Nieves enabled Andrea to abandon her display of brisk efficiency, take off her shoes, and get on the telephone to a friend or read a magazine. It was the only time of the day when she was completely alone; a time to breathe. But today she had been cheated of her hour's peace. The phone had rung repeatedly and a swarm of problems and questions had come buzzing at her ear like bees. She couldn't put it onto answerphone in case

her irritating boss, Señor Fuentes, called. He did this at least twice a week, usually at about ten to eight. Checking up on her. Once in a while he'd come to the office in person, and she'd have to scramble her feet into her shoes and look busy. He was an aggravation, but susceptible to a little eyelash fluttering and banter. She observed the pupils of his rheumy eyes dilating as he perched familiarly on the edge of her desk, and forgot to enquire after her work activities. Andrea knew all about body language. During her uncompleted year as a Psychology student at the University of Málaga she had been much impressed by a book called *Body Language and How to Speak It*, and ever since then she had applied its lessons to her social interactions.

If Señor Fuentes ever seemed to be taking this flirting too seriously, she brought his formidable wife into the conversation. Also he was nearly seventy and asthmatic. She could overpower him if it ever came to that, which it wouldn't.

She heard the phone start to ring again faintly inside as she stood at the door, turning the key and thinking about red wine. Well, that was one buzzing bee that was too late for the pollen.

There was no peace at home in *Los Pedregales* either, but instead there was an unexpected delight. A towering crimson-robed figure filled the windowless sitting room at the centre of the little house. Her mother Carmen and her grandmother Iñes were squeezed into the surrounding space, clucking admiringly. A tall conical hood that touched the ceiling obscured the figure's face. Outside in the back yard, Pizarro and Cortés, the darlings of her mother Carmen, had got wind of something unusual, and were indulging in a frenzy of excited yapping.

Andrea felt a sudden lightness. All the burdens of the day seemed to slip from her shoulders.

“Paco!” she exclaimed. The tall figure bowed its head, its hands removed the hood, and there he was, grinning at her. She rushed forward and put her arms around him. He returned her embrace, and leaned down to kiss both her cheeks. She stretched up on her toes, marvelling, as she often did, that she had produced this giant from her own interior.

“Hello Mama! How are you?”

“I'm fine, I'm fine! What a surprise!” She felt a little breathless. “You said you were coming *tomorrow!*”

“They agreed an extra day off at the last minute. A good thing too - when I went down to the church, most of the Brotherhood’s best hoods had already gone.”

“Well, you look splendid!”

She turned to her mother.

“Did you get more beans and *salchichas* for the stew tonight, Mama?”

“Of course Andrea. Now we’ve got this horse to feed for four days!”

Iñes piped up from her wheelchair.

“Tomorrow I’ll make my *gazpacho*, if someone will get the ingredients. Carmen didn’t have enough money today, with the extra beans and *salchichas*.”

Andrea nodded to her mother. “I can spare a little more, Mama.”

“That would help. Still a week until this month’s pension.”

Carmen always numbered off the days to pension day. Then, after a heady period of little treats, the long count down to the next one would begin. She turned to Paco, shaking her head with a look of sadness and a sort of half-smile. Andrea knew what was coming next.

“Your grandfather would have been proud to see you,” she said, as she did every Easter week. “He always looked magnificent in his robes, like you.”

Paco nodded, and exchanged a quick glance of amusement with Andrea. Then he began to divest himself of the robes, getting into something of a tangle and emerging pink-faced.

“Phew! These things are hot!”

Andrea thought of her father, standing in the same erect posture as Paco had been just now, holding his hood hemmed with gold thread in his elegant, agile hands. That was in the bigger house of course, where she had grown up. In those days her grandmother Iñes lived alone in this rabbit hutch - plenty big enough for a widow, but not for three women and two dogs.

On Easter Sunday, Paco, like his father before him, would march to the solemn drumbeat with the statue of the Virgin as she made her journey to meet the statue of Jesus in the *plaza*. It was his third year in the Brotherhood. From time to time one of the older women of the town would wail at the procession in an ecstasy of religious fervour. She cried silently herself, every year, but not for the death of Christ. She didn't really know why. Perhaps they were tears shed for all the years that had slipped

through her fingers, while those immutable statues swayed through the narrow streets between the white-walled houses.

Iñes too was reminiscing.

“It was at the Easter procession that I first really noticed your grandfather, Paco.”

“*Great-grandfather!*” Carmen corrected her.

Paco nodded, catching Andrea’s eye again as he folded up the robes. This story, like Carmen’s memory of her husband in his finery, came trotting out of its stable and whisked its tail every Easter.

“It was a hot Easter – sweltering – and the men carrying the Virgin were allowed exceptionally to leave off their robes. It was... what’s the word? Controversial. It never happened again. But the doctor... it was doctor... what was his name? Doctor Barrero?”

“It doesn’t matter, Mama!” Carmen put in impatiently.

“Doctor Barrero. Or perhaps... perhaps it was Bareda...”

“The doctor...” Andrea prompted.

“Yes, the doctor said that he wouldn’t be responsible if those men collapsed in the heat in their robes under the weight of the statue and were crushed and their families had to live on charity for the rest of their days.”

“So they carried the Virgin naked?” Paco suggested mischievously.

Iñes cackled and leaned forward in her wheelchair to bat his leg.

“Don’t be sacrilegious! No, but they were bare-chested, and your grandfather...”

“*Great-grandfather!*” Carmen muttered.

“He was in the front rank of the bearers. He was only a little older than you... what are you now Paco?”

“Twenty one.”

“Maybe he was twenty three. Or twenty two. Or...”

“So what happened, Mama?” Carmen put in. She wondered if she had heard this story more or less than a hundred times – and it wasn’t even a story really. It had no beginning, middle or end.

“Oh, nothing happened. Just I remember I took a fancy to him then, seeing him all bare-chested. He had lovely strong arms, and he was glistening with sweat. The heat was a furnace. And as they passed by he caught my eye and smiled at me. It was before we were walking out. I was only seventeen.”

“Mama, you’re a disgrace,” Carmen put in disapprovingly.

“Stuff and nonsense!” Iñes retorted. “We didn’t get to see half-naked men in those days. Now they’re everywhere.”

“What do you mean, everywhere?” Paco said, grinning.

“They’re on the television.”

“What programme’s that, Grandmama?”

“It’s not a programme. It’s an advert that keeps coming on. For deodorant.”

“You shouldn’t be noticing such things at your age,” Carmen said, wrinkling her nose.

“Rubbish,” was all that her mother said. Then she set her wheelchair in motion. Her body was weak, but her arms had become quite muscular.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” she announced.

“Do you want a push, Grandmama?” Paco suggested.

“No. I never get a push from anyone else around here, so I don’t want to get used to it.”

Carmen and Andrea shared a look as the irritating squeak of the wheelchair marked the progress of their progenitor along the hallway towards the ground floor bathroom.

“Do you mind if I put the robes and hood in your room, Mama? I’ve dumped my other things in there for now.”

“Of course, of course,” Andrea said. He moved off. He’d have to sleep in the living room on a sofa, naturally,

but there would be complaints if he kept his stuff there. She wondered if his bag of clothes would slide under her bed. What else was already under there? Too much, no doubt.

“Do you think he’s going to help...” Carmen hissed at Andrea as soon as he was out of earshot. Or perhaps just before he was out of earshot.

Andrea shrugged, unsure.

“Well, the train from Madrid will have cost something,” she pointed out. “I don’t know how much that was. I’ll talk to him. But anyway, don’t worry, my salary should be in my bank account by tomorrow, and I can cover him.”

“He eats like some sort of bear. He was only in the house five minutes before his head was in the fridge.”

“Don’t worry. Are we all right for tonight’s meal?”

“Yes, but now Mama has got this *gazpacho* in her head.”

“That’s all right, that’s just tomatoes and onions and peppers.”

“Have you seen the price of peppers?”

“There’s no meat. It’ll be fine. And it’ll keep her happy most of the day.”

“And me occupied most of the day. *Carmencita* have you seen the sharp knife? *Carmencita*, would you just go out and get me some more olive oil?”

Andrea gave the corners of her mouth a comical downwards turn. Carmen glared, and then laughed.

A cry reached them from behind the bathroom door.

“*Carmencita!* There’s no toilet paper in here!”

Later, while Carmen and Iñes fussed and got in each other’s way in the cramped kitchen, Paco suggested to his mother that they stroll to the *Tres Marias* to take a coffee. It was a slight extravagance, but Andrea understood that he wanted some time alone with her. So they walked down to the café, which as usual was brimming with bustle and the din of clattering dishes and glasses; the qualities that made it a favourite location for the most private conversations of the town’s inhabitants.

The air inside had a warm toasty aroma.

“Ah... whenever I smell freshly baked bread I think of the Tres Marias!” Paco remarked as they found a table.

When their drinks came, Paco poured the contents of his sachet of sugar into his *café cortado*. Andrea watched him tearing the sachet into tiny strips, and sipped her own coffee.

“Grandmama and Great-Grandmama seem well,” he said.

She nodded, waiting patiently. She knew her own son. He had something important on his mind, but he couldn't find his words yet.

He gathered the tiny strips of paper and twisted them together to make a little figure. Two arms, two legs, something like a head. He tried to make it stand up, but it kept lying down. Andrea watched him do this three times, and then her patience finally took to its heels.

“Well?” she said, more abruptly than she had intended.

He jerked slightly in his chair, as if an ignition switch had been turned on. He glanced at her, and then his eyes flickered back to the table top. His mouth was a solemn line.

“Something's happened with Natalia and me.”

She waited for a moment, but the engine had stalled. She conjured up an image of Natalia, who she had only seen in pictures and on video calls. A pretty girl with large eyes that seemed permanently astonished at something.

“Have you broken up?” she suggested gently after a suitable allowance of time had been given.

He looked startled again.

“No, no. It's not a bad thing like that. It's just a... well, a difficulty.”

She nodded. He took a deep breath.

“She’s pregnant.”

She hadn’t foreseen this, and sudden emotion welling up in her chest found its watery way straight to her eyes. She scrabbled in her handbag for a handkerchief. For a few moments she was bobbing like a raft on pure foaming rapids of joy. But hardly had that sentiment had its head, hardly had she sniffed and blown her nose, when a murky spate of worry succeeded it. What would they do for money? Natalia came from a family of modest means, like their own. And she was only nineteen.

Paco downed his coffee in a gulp. He looked confused, uncertain of why she was crying. She made an effort to look more composed, and reached for his arm and gave it a squeeze. He looked at her gratefully.

“When is it... how long?” she said.

“She’s three months now. It was New Year’s Eve, I’m sure... we were drunk, that’s the trouble... we’d been with a crowd at the Puerta del Sol...”

“*Hijo!* I don’t need all the details! So... it’s coming around... what, in September?”

Paco nodded.

She considered the variety of reefs and shoals that lay ahead. There would be no plain sailing.

“So... her job. What will she be able to arrange?”

Paco drew his shoulders up around his ears and dropped them back down; an enormous shrug such as a bear might make on waking with a sore head.

“There’s no guarantee she’d get her job back at Doctor Buñuel’s after a baby. She doesn’t get the hours she wants already – there are four of them sharing...”

He looked at her again, his eyes big with emotion. It reminded her of the time his favourite teddy had fallen under a car’s wheels. “Mama... she talks of getting rid of it. An abortion.”

The word made her go cold all over, and she seemed to hear a clattering of icy metal implements in a hospital room. She glanced around, to steady herself. Just knives and spoons on crockery. Taking a deep restoring breath, she looked at him again.

“And what do *you* want?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“I want her to keep it.”

“Are you both in love, Paco? A child needs that.”

He smiled broadly, the serious lines on his forehead and at the sides of his mouth banished for a moment.

“Of course! We’re very much in love.”

She nodded, satisfied, and moved onto the next rocky point.

“Do her parents know about this?”

“Not yet. And if she goes ahead... with what she’s thinking... they’ll never know.”

“But her mother... surely...”

“Natalia wants to keep it from her mother, if that’s what happens. It won’t be easy.”

“And Natalia knows you want her to have the baby?”

“I think so.”

“What have you said?”

“It’s difficult. I’ve said that we could find a way. But I don’t really know what that could be. And it’s her body; her life.”

“Would you want to marry, if she was going to have the child?”

Paco smiled.

“Yes, I’d like to marry her.”

“Have you proposed to her?”

“No. Not formally.”

Andrea nodded, unsurprised. She couldn’t imagine Paco doing anything formally. He was a shaggy-haired, amiable bumbling sort of creature, not ready yet at twenty-one to enter the fully adult world. Had she brought him up too protectively? Unmanned him with her devoted affection? Well, he’d landed in the fully adult world now all right,

with a bump: a bump that would soon show on his girlfriend's profile.

“Do you think it's time now to do that?” she suggested gently.

“Mama – I've thought of it... but... do you think it might look as if... well, as if I'm doing it because I have to. And because I want to put pressure on her... you know... to keep the baby.”

She looked at him, a little surprised by his reasoning ... impressed, in fact. He *was* growing up after all! She leaned across the table and gave his arm another squeeze.

“Well, you must find a way, Paco. A way to make her see that it's possible. At least you've got your job at the *Prado*.”

“I have. But the wages...” He gave his mouth a comical downward turn. “And – Mama - it's no job for an intelligent person: standing all day watching people get too close to the paintings and telling them not to.”

He shrugged, picked up the little paper man and let him drop to the table again, a helpless victim.

“Perhaps you can find something better. Talk to your Uncle Salvador. You say he knows people. He found you your job at the gallery.”

“He does know people. But you can’t imagine what it’s like in Madrid. A job vacancy is like a bone thrown on the ground – there’s a pack of dogs fighting for it as soon as it lands.”

“It’s the same here in Andalucía, Paco. It’s the same everywhere in Spain I suppose.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, surrounded by chatter and noise.

“So...” Paco said, “I’ll propose to Natalia when I go back, and if she says ‘yes’ then... well, we can start to make a plan. The first thing will be somewhere to live – we couldn’t manage in my single room even without a baby, and her parents haven’t got any space.”

“Talk to Uncle Salvador again. You know... well, you know he probably feels guilty about your father being so useless.”

“I don’t like playing on that.”

“Of course not. But you have to use any lever that comes to hand, Paco. The world is a hard place.”

Paco nodded, and then his face brightened again.

“I think Natalia will want to have the baby, if I can say the right things. I hope so!”

“So do I, Paco. So do I.”

CHAPTER 3

From the comfort of his padded reclining chair on the terrace, Tom watched his potential son-in-law's progress up and down the pool with a critical eye. Richard was a splasher. Tom himself had been dragooned into swimming lessons at an early age by his mother, who fell into a river when she was small, and had never forgotten it. She was determined that her own children would remain afloat, should they find themselves in similar circumstances. Consequently Tom was a competent swimmer. He took a sip of his gin and tonic, feeling pleasantly superior.

It was good to have his daughter and her boyfriend here. He and Linda had only been in Spain a fortnight, finding their feet, and now that their first visitors had come, Elysium felt suddenly more homely.

"Hi Dad!"

Julia appeared at his side, bearing a small pile of books, which she deposited on the low glass-topped table in front of him.

"Hello my darling. Have you had a little siesta?"

"Yes, nearly an hour! I feel so relaxed here!"

"That's good. Do you want a gin and tonic? I've brought everything out – these cans are slimline. I don't think the ice has melted yet."

Julia picked up the little ice bucket and shook it. It rattled. Good. She set about making herself a gin and tonic. Tom watched her contentedly. The low evening sun gave her pale winter skin a golden hue.

"What are the books?" he enquired, poking tentatively at the pyramid, straightening it up.

She wagged a finger in mock disapproval.

"They're not just *books*. They're *literature*. That's what you asked for, isn't it?"

"That's right, I did, didn't I!"

"Some of them are Mum's books that she passed on to me. You won't mind, will you, if you find some of Mum's funny little remarks pencilled into the margins? From when she did her Open University courses."

"Not as long as they're not about me."

Julia snorted.

"She's not as hostile as you always make out. She says nice things about you, occasionally."

Tom made a face and settled some of the books in his lap to examine.

"*Great Expectations* - that was one I was supposed to read at school. But the film come on the telly, you know, just at the right time for me. Good film, from what I remember. Black and white, of course."

"So is the book."

"Very funny... *The Magus* - what's that all about then?"

"It's a bit strange. It all happens on a Greek island, or Italian, I can't remember. It's a while since I read that one."

"*Cold Comfort Farm*..."

"That's very entertaining, that one. Quite an easy read."

"*The Cherry Orchard*..."

He thumbed through a few pages of *The Cherry Orchard*.

"This is a funny looking one. It's got all the names of the people down the side of the page. Weird names, too."

"It's a stage play. Chekhov. It's brilliant."

"Is it? Brilliant? I've never read a play. Only been to the theatre once or twice. Linda took me to something last year, and I fell asleep. *Waiting for...* someone or other."

"*Waiting for Godot*"?

"That was it. And when I woke up, he still hadn't come."

"Why don't you try *The Cherry Orchard* then."

"I will. I'll start with that one, when I've got a moment."

Julia was amused.

"When you've got a moment! Are you *very* busy, then?"

"Course I am. All this place to get sorted. Piano lessons – Linda’s teaching me that. Golf lessons. Hardly have a moment to think. But thanks for these books, darling. Books are on my 'to do' list now."

He took a gulp of his gin and tonic.

"You know what... I go into this big bookshop in London a few months ago, and I think to myself: there's all these millions of words that people have written, and I haven't read any of them. Seems a shame, all that effort and I just ignore it. Like if I built a house and nobody ever lived in it."

"Had you gone in to buy a book?"

"Well, no, not really. I just went in to have a look, out of curiosity, you know? Spur of the moment. Like visiting an art gallery... or going into an old historical church."

"When did you last do either of those?"

"Dunno. Years ago I suppose. Here - have some crisps."

Julia picked out one small one. She always had a guilty feeling around crisps.

Tom nodded towards the pool and lowered his voice, although with all the splashing noise it was hardly necessary.

"And what about Richard? How's everything there?"

"Fine, he's fine. Busy - he's still trying to...do you remember what I mentioned? He's still wanting to set up his own business, with Matt and Jamie."

"Who's Matt and Jamie again?"

"His two big friends from college... old friends. I've told you about them before."

"I haven't got no memory for names. Well that's good - setting up your own business. That's the way to make the real money. What sort of business, exactly?"

"It'll be a graphic design agency. They're thinking of calling it *Design Doctors*."

"Design Doctors? That's good, that. That's a clever name, that is. *Design Doctors*. Got a ring to it."

"Or they might use their surnames, like a firm of lawyers or accountants. They think that would look very professional, very upmarket."

"Naa... I like *Design Doctors*. Mind you, it's not my world, graphic design. Never knew there was such a thing 'till you started pointing it out to me. Cereal packets, beer cans, logos. Can't seem to get away from it, once you know it's there."

There was a sudden increase in the volume of splashing from the pool. Julia followed her father's eyes.

"He's doing the butterfly," she suggested.

"More like the butterfly's doing him," Tom replied. "Christ, I'm going to have to refill the pool when he's finished!"

She laughed.

He smiled at her out of his gin and tonic glow of well-being.

"You happy, darling?" he said.

His eyes went to the pool and back, signalling his meaning. She took a sip of her drink.

"Yes, we're fine."

Tom glanced at her again, put on the alert by the slightest of hesitations in her reply. He knew her so well that he could sense undercurrents below the surface of her words. Not a skill he'd ever picked up with Linda – or his ex-wife either. Must be a genetic thing: father and child. He smiled, not showing that she had given anything away.

"Good. That's good, because you've got to take stock now and again. At certain times in your life, you know? Take stock. See where it's all heading. See if you like the look of the road ahead. Take me. I took stock a couple of years ago, when I was fifty-seven, and now everything's different. The business is sold. The proceeds are invested. Now I can start the kind of life I only dreamed about. A lot of people, they don't take stock. They just keep going..."

like they're in a ditch, going along. Or a ... what do you call it? A furrow. They don't look up over the sides, see?"

Julia looked at him over the rim of her glass, her eyebrows raised. Ever since they'd arrived yesterday she'd had the impression that he'd had some homily bottled up ready for when they were alone. Now, with Linda inside preparing the supper and Richard in the pool, he'd found his moment. She was amused by his transparency. She'd find out what was on his mind soon enough.

"Are you building up to giving me one of your life lessons?" she said.

Tom shifted slightly in his chair, caught out. He wondered if she thought she knew him as well as he thought he knew her.

"No, no darling," he protested. "You've got your head screwed on. But take this Mr Calder geezer, who built this place."

"What, Valle de Pinos?"

"No, no. Just this house. Elysium."

"What about him? Didn't you say he died?"

"Yes, poor old sod. Not that he was all that old. Sixty-eight or something. Well, anyway... the thing is... he designed everything here – well, not designed, but told the architect - and the garden people too I suppose - he told

them how he wanted it all. And it all fits *me* like a glove, you know? It's just like what I would have asked for, if I'd had Mr Calder's imagination."

"*You* built plenty of nice houses."

"Yeah, but nothing like this. They was mostly boxes, really. We had to squeeze them into small plots usually. Good quality boxes, but nothing like this. Anyway, so I sometimes have this funny feeling that I'm living *his* dream life. Mr Calder's."

He paused, and swirled his slice of lemon and bit of melting ice around in the bottom of his glass. What was his point? He hadn't meant to start talking about Mr Calder. Julia was looking expectantly at him. He saw the corners of her mouth start to lift, ever so slightly, which meant *silly old bugger's lost his thread*. He pulled his thoughts together. Gin was good to have, but it didn't help your concentration.

"Anyway... yes... taking stock. Well, I kind of feel that this Mr Calder geezer must have taken stock of his life, and decided *this* was what he wanted. But his timing was bad. You've got to take stock at the right times, and you know what? He left it too late. On the other hand, you see, I think *I* done it in good time."

Julia waited. She could have supplied his next words herself, but she waited for them patiently. They arrived after her father had drained the dregs of his gin and tonic.

"You're nearly thirty now, my darling."

"Don't remind me!" she said.

This conversation had been coming for a year or two now. Like a slow train on the approach, it had announced itself with one or two distant toots. Stray remarks and hints. Now it was finally pulling into the station. She didn't mind, though.

"Later this year, you're thirty. So - you're at a moment to take stock. A bit like when you finished art college and decided what to do next. It took you a year or two..."

"Or three or four!"

"But now look at you! A *lecturer*! That's a good job, that is."

"You're in a serious mood, Dad."

"Not really. It's just - well, I've got time to think, now I'm here. Time to think what it was all about. What it *is* all about."

He paused, and let the thought play out.

"What it's *going* to be all about."

"What?"

"Well, *life*, of course! It's like I was down on the ground all that time, like I say, in my little furrow. And now I'm up on a hilltop."

He put his glass down and gestured towards the view, expansively.

"I can look around and *see*. You know, when I took a walk on the beach the other day, there was nobody else down there. Almost nobody. And I just looked at the beach stretching both ways to the... to the..."

"Horizon?"

"...the horizon, and the sea, and the sky all blue above it. I could actually see the – you know - the curve of the earth, when I turned my head along the horizon. I could actually *see* that we were living on this huge ball of water in space. Imagine – I'd never noticed that before, in fifty nine years."

Julia nodded.

"I've seen that looking out of an aeroplane window..."

Tom nodded back.

"Well, there you are. You've got your head screwed on, like I say. Me, I didn't fly much – we didn't in those days - but when I did, I used to do work, look at house plans, catch up on paperwork. I never looked out of the window, hardly. Didn't want to waste time, you see. But really, that's exactly what I was doing. I *was* wasting time, 'cause

I was still in my little furrow on the ground, even when I was up in the sky."

They both reflected on this for a few moments.

"How do you *not* waste time?" Julia said.

Tom tapped his glass with his fingernails, making a little rhythm.

"Well.... you've got to do what you want with it. You've got to stop and work out what you want, then *use* the time to do it. Otherwise, the time's using you. Using you up."

He felt pleased with himself. That was quite a clever thing he'd just thought up there, about using time and time using you. It was amazing how ideas that you didn't know you had just kind of popped up when you were talking.

"I've got to earn a living," Julia pointed out.

"I know. I had to do that as well."

"Is that wasting time?"

"Course not, no. But it's a matter of what it's *for*. Put it like this: what do you want most in the world?"

Julia didn't even have to think.

"A family."

Tom nodded. He was happy with the answer. He liked to think he'd have been happy with other answers too. The interesting thing though was how quickly it had come.

“There we are! That’s exactly what I mean about taking stock. You’ve done it already. You’re such a clever girl! You know what you want. Now you’ve got to go about making it happen.”

Julia downed the rest of her drink.

"It's not so simple."

"Because?"

She nodded her head towards the pool.

Tom looked down there. Anyone who hadn't seen Richard swim before would have thought he was drowning.

“What about Richard?” he said.

“It takes two.”

“There’s a problem?”

Julia glanced towards the pool again.

“Not a problem. Not exactly a problem, anyway. But I don’t know if he wants to have a family yet.”

“Well, tackle him about it.”

“It’s not so easy.”

“Surely you can have a conversation?”

“I’ve tried. He sort of skates around it. Makes positive noises and then changes the subject. And he always brings up that he’s only twenty seven.”

“Do you want *me* to ask him?”

Julia looked alarmed.

“For God’s sake, Dad!”

Tom sat back, taken down a peg. But after a moment, he ventured a further mild suggestion.

“Well, perhaps you need to do something about it.”

“I have,” Julia replied, slightly exasperated.

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

“Come on, Julia. You can’t say that and then shut up.”

“I didn’t mean to say anything. Don’t hound me.”

“All right. Sorry. Sorry. Back in the kennel.”

Julia was silent for a minute or so. Tom thought the conversation was over. She seemed cross. But then she surprised him.

“All right, I’ll tell you. But for God’s sake don’t let this out, even to Linda. I’ve stopped taking the pill.”

Tom contemplated his fingernails, just a little bit embarrassed. But he felt pleased that she’d taken him into her confidence.

“That’s good then. That’s a positive step. Shows commitment, doesn’t it?”

“But Richard doesn’t know.”

“What?”

“I only stopped a month ago.”

“But...”

“I know it’s not ideal. But...”

Tom struggled mentally with the implications.

“But... well, if...” he said.

Julia looked at him with something like defiance.

“If I get pregnant? Yes?”

“If you... if you do... then, you’re assuming...”

She nodded, definitely defiant now. She wasn’t seeking any permissions, from him or anyone else.

“I’m assuming. Yes, I’m assuming.”

Tom wondered if she was assuming what he was assuming. This was getting too complicated for him.

Julia leaned back in her chair with a long sigh, letting go of the defiance and the tension.

“It’s all about priorities, isn’t it?” she said. “Maybe it was simpler in your day.”

“Oh, nothing was simple with your mother...”

“What I mean is, at my age, well... for me, first choice is to have a family.”

“By which...”

“By which, I mean, yes – a mother, a father, and children. But if that doesn’t work out, there’s two other choices.”

Tom felt lost again. Were there?

“Which are what?” he said slowly.

“To have children or not to have children.”

“But you just said... a family...”

“A family is just one way of having children. First choice, if you like.”

“So...”

“So...” she said, leading him gently towards grasping her point, “second choice? The next best choice? The thing that’s better than *not* having children is...?”

“Single parent,” Tom concluded.

“Exactly.”

Tom gave a low whistle between his teeth.

“That’s a tough one.”

They sat in silence again. The sun was almost gone now, delicately suffusing some wisps of high cloud above the sea with an orange glow. Tom felt the first hint of coldness in the air. Inside the house, Linda put on some music in the kitchen. *The Gypsy Kings*.

“I’m not sure I should have mentioned this,” Julia said.

“Oh, come on darling! I’m your father!”

“I haven’t told anyone else. I haven’t told Mum. It was all my own secret until now.”

“Well, it’s still a secret. You don’t think I’ll tell anyone do you?”

“But what do you think of me? Do you think I’m deceitful? Cunning?”

Tom turned the word over. Cunning? It wasn't the right one for Julia.

"No, but maybe you're a bit of a gambler," he said.

"A gambler? How?"

"Well – you don't know what Richard would... how he'd react."

"That's true."

She looked worried, Tom thought. He reached across the little table between them, with its scattering of empty glasses and crisps and *literature*, and gave her arm a squeeze.

"But you've taken control, darling, that's the important thing. I don't know what I think about being a single parent, but you've taken charge of the situation. That's impressive. I'm proud of you."

Julia's eyes met his, and she smiled at him. It was a grateful smile, he thought.

"Thanks, Dad. It's such a relief to tell you. I didn't think I'd ever tell anyone else. Certainly not Richard."

"No, you're right there. He doesn't need to know anything."

Until it's too late he thought to himself.

Down at the pool, Richard suddenly shot out of the water like one of those performing orcas at Sea World and hauled

himself awkwardly onto the pool surrounds, where he commenced to hobble backwards and forwards as if harpooned.

“What’s the matter?” Julia called to him.

“Bloody cramp!” came the anguished reply.

Tom snorted, and then caught Julia’s eye and forced his features into a look of deep compassion. Then she snorted too, and they grinned at each other.

CHAPTER 4

Tom lay in bed within the cosy glow of the bedside lamp. Linda was still downstairs fiddling about before coming up. He was listening to the subtle sounds of the Spanish night. They were still fresh and pleasurable to him. In the garden, crickets – two crickets? - were holding a high-pitched conversation. It wasn’t exactly a hiss, that noise they made, and he had a vague idea that they produced it in some strange way with their legs or something. Hard to believe. Anyway, it was something between a crackle and a hiss. Then there was a barking dog far, far away. *Woof...woofwoof*. Pause. *Woof...woofwoof*. Very faintly too, he fancied he could hear the deep breathing in and out of the sea as it rolled up against the beach in its dark, heavy

sleep. All of it was restful – even the barking dog, at such a distance, was restful. In London, there were always car alarms, ambulance sirens, aeroplanes passing overhead, and sometimes - especially on weekend nights - drunken shouting on the street outside, even on their tree-lined comfortable street in upmarket Kew.

He was relaxed, but he wasn't quite ready to sleep yet. He picked up his copy of *The Cherry Orchard* from the bedside table and read a couple more pages. Then he put it down, realizing that he was just running his eye over the words, while thinking of something else entirely. He was going over his conversation with Julia earlier in the day, worrying, as he always did a little bit, about whether or not she was happy. It was a pity that happiness wasn't catching, like a cold. He felt he had enough happiness right now to give some of it away. But you couldn't do that. Well... at least she wasn't positively *unhappy*.

Linda came up the stairs and meandered into the en-suite bathroom, humming a Gypsy Kings tune, which died on her lips as she confronted herself in the mirror. The lighting – there was something about the lighting around that mirror that added a kind of textured overlay to your face. She popped out her contact lenses and her reflection looked better. Smoother... youthful, almost. She turned

her face sideways, jutting out her chin, and ran a finger along her neck just below her jaw. Things were getting just a little baggy under there. She reached for the firming lotion and smoothed some into her upper neck. She didn't believe in it, but she tried to.

Tom, unaware of dissatisfaction in the bathroom, was just thinking how Linda was brighter this evening than she had been of late. After the initial bustle of settling into Elysium was over, and before the arrival of Julia and Richard, she'd seemed to go into a bit of a lull, which had surprised him. She was such a live wire when they were in London, always off doing something. Perhaps she was just pausing to draw breath before launching into Spanish life properly. But now they'd had a nice sociable evening, with a couple of bottles of wine. He couldn't remember what they'd all talked about, but there'd been a flow of easy chatter. As Linda slid into the bed beside him, he remembered one thing. He was still feeling chatty and sociable himself.

“Funny thing that, about Richard and Spain, eh?”

“What's that?”

“You know – half Spanish, but he's never been here before. What is he, twenty seven?”

“Well, if his father hated Franco's Spain so much that he left for England...”

“But Franco died before Richard was born, didn’t he, if I understood right?”

“Of course. But the way Richard was brought up – you wouldn’t expect him to want to visit Spain in particular. Not a word of Spanish spoken in the house. No sense of his... what’s the word... heritage.”

“Well. You’d have thought he’d be curious, wouldn’t you?”

“I think he *is*, now that he’s come here. We should get off the estate while he’s here. Take him to real Spain.”

“Real Spain?”

“Yes – that place that starts at the gates of Valle de Pinos. You saw it when we arrived.”

“Very funny.”

“Well, it’s true, we’ve hardly left the *urbanización*, except to go to the *supermercado*.”

“Are you going to end up speaking Spanish all the time?”

“You understood me, didn’t you?”

“More or less. Anyway, we’ll get to know Spain. Give it time. We’ve only been here a fortnight. Got to get settled in.”

Linda made a kind of grunt, which could have been agreement or disagreement, and reached for her book on

the bedside table. Tom picked up *The Cherry Orchard* again.

Along the landing, at the other end of the house, Julia was listening to Richard brushing his teeth. The performance always ended with a gargling and a spitting that she didn't quite like, somehow. It was as if he were trying to dislodge a layer of sawdust from the back of his throat. She hummed a little phrase from a Gypsy Kings song, to cover that.

There was nothing not to like about the Richard that emerged from the bathroom and headed towards the bed however, and she watched his approach with approval. His body was muscular and athletic, and his dark Mediterranean features were strong and regular. He gave her a little grin as he climbed under the duvet beside her. She folded herself under his arm and lay with her head on his chest. She felt him smooth her hair down, caressingly.

“Well, did you see what I mean about Linda?” she said.

“What?”

“At dinner. You had plenty of examples to observe.”

“What about Linda? She seemed quite lively and cheerful.”

“She's so bloody opinionated, she drives me mad!”

Richard considered this. She had said nothing that offended him, so he put the case for the defence.

“She’s got a right to opinions.”

“Not opinions about art, she hasn’t. She doesn’t know anything about art.”

“What did she say?”

“Didn’t you hear?”

“Must have missed it. Did we talk about art?”

“Not for long, because I changed the subject. She said *I just can’t see the point of abstract paintings*. And she knows perfectly well that my work is non-representational. I can’t see why she wants to dig at me.”

“Well, you’re her rival,” Richard suggested. The idea had popped out without forethought, but he was pleased with it.

Julia reared up her head and gave Richard an incredulous look at close range. She was too close for his eyes to focus, but he knew the look anyway.

“How?” she said.

“Oh, come on! Your Dad dotes on you.”

“But I’m his *daughter*! She’s his... partner.”

“Makes no difference.”

“*Rival?*”

“Sort of. I mean – well, he’s never married her. She might feel... I don’t know... some insecurities?”

Julia felt him shrug. She gave some thought to his proposition. There had always been an undercurrent of tension in her relations with Linda, but she’d never thought of it as a rivalry. Weren’t rivals competing for the same thing? She wanted her father’s love and approval. Presumably Linda wanted those things too, although a different kind of love, obviously. Surely her father had enough of both kinds of love to spare? One didn’t eat into the other, did it? It wasn’t like a physical substance, that could get used up. Like money, for instance. Money... yes, she supposed that was something they could be rivals over. What was Dad going to do with his money? He’d always wanted her to make her own way in the world, and she’d wanted that too. She wasn’t dependent on him in any way. But – what if a child *did* come along? What if she couldn’t work? What if Richard...

Richard ran his fingers through her hair again gently, and she came back into the present moment.

“How long have they been together?” he said.

“Ten years.”

“Ten years together – and now she’s left her whole world behind to come here with him.”

“Yes. Did you notice how often she mentioned London? You’d think she might be more focused on what’s going on here.”

She followed her train of thought for a little longer. She put a hand on Richard’s midriff, let it rest there a moment, then moved it slightly lower to the waistband of his briefs.

“Do you think they’re going to get married?” she murmured.

Richard felt awkward.

“It’s not very relevant nowadays,” he suggested.

“What, being married?”

Now her hand was stroking gently. A finger slipped below the waistband of his briefs, as if accidentally.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Lots of our friends are married,” Julia commented.

“Religion. Convention. They do it to make their parents happy, or because they want a big party. It doesn’t change their lives in any way.”

He felt it was time to lead the conversation back to its starting point.

“So, do *you* think they’re going to get married? Your Dad and Linda?”

Julia’s hand slid unequivocally down into his briefs.

“Bugger Linda!” she murmured.

Back along the landing in the other bedroom, this was on no-one's agenda. Linda and Tom were propped up on plump pillows with a comfortable gap between them. Linda was reading Gerald Brenan's *The Face of Spain*, part of her conscientious effort to accommodate herself to her new setting. It was about the Spain of 1949, but amidst its fascinating particularities it also offered up general observations that she was as yet in no position to test. Was it true, for example, that *the whole of Spanish life, one may say, is organised in a sort of clan system. Within the clan – which consists of relatives, friends, political allies and so forth – all is warmth and friendliness: outside it all is distrust and suspicion?* Were outsiders such as Tom and herself objects of distrust and suspicion, or did the observation only apply to Spaniards' own countrymen?

She became aware of sighs of exasperation beside her. Tom was reading *The Cherry Orchard*, and she foresaw that she would be drawn into his struggle. She tried to concentrate on Gerald Brenan, but now Tom was waving his book in the air beside her, flagging her down.

“Did you say you'd read this?”

“No. But I've seen it at the theatre.”

“It’s so confusing. There’s so many characters, and they all have about six Russian names. You never know who’s talking.”

“Don’t read it then.”

“But I want to.”

“Why?”

“You know why!”

“Well, you can be cultured and well-read without *The Cherry Orchard*. It’s allowed to stop reading a book if you’re not enjoying it. You’re not going to sit an exam.”

“But this is the first proper book I’ve read in years. It’s too pathetic to give up so easily!”

“Maybe you need to read it more than once to get it. It looks quite short.”

Tom turned this revelatory idea onto its back like a curious dead beetle and considered it. It was amazing what he didn’t know about.

“Read it more than once?” he said.

“Yes.”

“I’d never thought of that. Do people do that? Read stuff more than once?”

“I’ve read some of my favourites lots of times. *Emma*, or *Pride and Prejudice*. I must have read them half a dozen times each, easily.”

Tom was adapting to this strange idea. Maybe he would get the hang of the names on a second reading.

“Is there going to be a murder?” he asked. “I mean – should I be looking out for the murderer?”

Linda shook her head.

“I’m pretty sure there’s no murder.”

Tom nodded.

“Okay. That’s one thing I don’t have to worry about then.”

After a few minutes Linda observed him quietly putting *The Cherry Orchard* down, and picking up the *Golf Monthly* magazine he’d self-consciously bought at the airport on their way out. She put down her own book and picked up the letter from her mother that she’d skim-read that morning. In this age of internet communication and cheap air travel, her mother still clung to the idea that southern Spain was teetering on the edge of the known world, and that letters would take weeks or even months to arrive. E-mail was out of the question, since she had once read that computers emitted toxic rays, and wouldn’t have one in the house. It was the ringleader of a group of devilish and incomprehensible appliances that had started with microwave ovens and now encompassed mobile phones, tablets, and God-knew what-all else. So she

conducted her life exactly as she had in the nineteen-eighties, when she was the same age as Linda was now.

Neville and Adrian came for tea on Sunday, and we had a good old chat about their careers.

Linda's sons Neville and Adrian both lived in London and had been charged with keeping an eye on their grandmother now that she wasn't there herself. Since they both worked in IT, she found it hard to imagine what her mother had gleaned about their careers. They might as well have been necromancers.

Adrian said he was seeing a young lady from his work. I think he said she was involved in maintaining the network or something. I made a joke about fishing nets, which I think tickled his funny bone. Anyway, she sounds very nice. I do hope the boys will settle down soon. I read somewhere recently that being near computers all the time affects male fertility. I didn't mention it though, as I suppose they have to do it for their work. I thought perhaps there might be some kind of shield or special trousers they could wear, like a cricketer's box, so I'll keep an eye out in the papers in case I see anything advertised. It could make a good Christmas or birthday present.

For God's sake!

What about you Linda? Are you happy out there? I know it's early days, but you did say you were worried that you'd miss your part-time work at the literary agency. I expect they'll be missing you there, a clever girl like you.

Girl! Was she never going to be a grown woman, to her mother? But then, were Neville and Adrian ever going to stop being *boys* to her?

She put the letter down. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Tom was making some peculiar twisting movement with his wrists out in the air in front of him. She glanced at the page of his golfing magazine open on his lap, and saw photographs of hands in different positions. You could be a lot older than Neville and Adrian and still be just a boy.

She let her thoughts drift, and pictured Francesca and Sophie in the office at the agency, and someone – probably some young woman with a First from Oxford or Cambridge – getting to grips with their complex and sometimes impenetrable agendas. She was aware of a faint sense of indignation. Some Young Pretender was usurping her role as factotum to her employers, while the Old Pretender, her mother, was usurping her role as friend and confidante to her sons.

She closed her eyes and rested her head regally on the plump pillow, controlling her breathing, calming herself, a dignified Queen in Exile.

CHAPTER 5

Iñes watched Carmen's retreating back as she left the sitting room. She heard her mutter something to herself in the little tiled entrance hall, and finally the door clicked closed behind her. She had the house completely to herself now, which hadn't happened for over a week, what with Paco's visit and the Easter celebrations and one thing and another.

Not entirely to herself: Carmen's closing of the front door had set off a salvo of anxious yapping from Pizarro and Cortés. Carmen had loved stories of exploration and conquest in history at school, and the fact that her dogs were in fact bitches had not stopped her from bestowing these illustrious names upon them. Anyway, just now Pizarro and Cortés were not actually in the house; they were in the yard at the back. Carmen would have had them indoors permanently, but so far Iñes had prevailed. Usually Carmen carried them upstairs to her room for an hour or so in the afternoon to share her siesta. Even up there, they

were annoying. Iñes could hear their scampering little feet through the ceiling, and the excitement of their change of scene always occasioned a lengthy outbreak of barking, accompanied by soothing and affectionate cooing sounds from Carmen, as if a gigantic deranged pigeon had got into the house.

Carmen had always been besotted with animals. It had started with that lizard, resident in their wall at Ronda, where Carmen was born. She was about two and a half when she adopted that lizard. She knew exactly which stone it lived behind, and would wait patiently for long periods in expectation of an appearance. Soon she had wanted a rabbit. She, Iñes, had encouraged this folly, and look where it had ended: Pizarro and Cortés! *Que desastre!*

Her own parents had had a more robust attitude to animals. Her father worked at the bullring in Ronda. One of his jobs was the supervision of the mules that dragged the bloody carcass out of the arena to the skinning room, where the butchers waited. He'd brought her in to watch that, one time, the butchering of the bull. Why? To toughen her up? Well, she supposed it had worked. They had in the house a succession of large black dogs, all named *Toro*, which her father beat with a stick whenever they annoyed him. Usually they annoyed him when he'd

been drinking. As for her mother, she would go out of her way to kick a stray cat. And she would never forget, when she was about five, watching the slaughter of a pig in the dust, heat, flies and stink of her uncle's farm.

She had hated all that cruelty, but, on the other hand, it had immunized her against this soppy humanization of animals that was everywhere nowadays. Perhaps Disney was to blame, with his Bambis and his Dumbos. Certainly Carmen seemed to commune with Pizarro and Cortés as if they were capable of understanding human speech. She'd thought that Carmen only went as far as baby talk, but had been shocked one afternoon a year or so ago to overhear her explaining to them that she was going to be away for a couple of days, and that Andrea would be in charge of their food. She had seemed to lay great stress on this. She heard her say *You're only to eat what Andrea gives you*. It set her wondering. It seemed to imply that Carmen suspected her of wishing to poison her little darlings. She would never do a thing like that – that would be worse than her father with his stick. On the other hand, if Pizarro and Cortés were to contract some fatal disease, then that wouldn't be a matter for much regret.

At last the yapping died down, and she could think again. She'd been waiting for the house to be empty in order to do

a little subtle reorganization of things in the kitchen and the living room. Ever since she'd been stuck in this wheelchair Carmen had been encroaching on what had hitherto been her own undisputed province: the ground floor of the house. She'd replaced her herb and spice corner with a microwave oven. She'd banished her old cushions with the bullfighting scenes – threadbare, admittedly, but still a family heirloom – to Iñes's cupboard, and bought new, garish orange cushions made from some horrible synthetic material that crackled with static when you rubbed against them. She'd received one or two nasty shocks when touching her wheelchair afterwards, but Carmen just laughed. Once, she could swear she'd seen a spark.

In fact, when she'd recently given it all careful thought, Carmen had introduced a legion of little changes that she'd never have got away with in the past, when Iñes was more vigorous and more mobile. She seemed to have forgotten that her sphere of influence, established by custom and practice over more than a decade of shared accommodation, ended at the foot of the stairs. She could do what she liked upstairs, where she and Andrea had a bedroom each. Iñes hadn't set foot up there for years. Even before her subsidence into the wheelchair, she'd had no reason to ascend the awkward tiled and twisting stair. It

was true that there was a small pleasant balcony up there, opening off the end of the upstairs corridor. She used to enjoy sitting there in the old days, before the view of the mountains had been obscured by the back of the new *Mercadona* supermarket. It was still the only usable outdoor space that the house possessed, since Pizarro and Cortés had turned the tiny back yard into a toilet, where a compact garden could have been created. Mind you, Iñes had to admit that the garden project had never quite taken off, even before Carmen, her dogs, and finally Andrea moved here. She wasn't the gardening type. But at least there had been a few pots of geraniums and an old plastic chair to sit in occasionally.

She turned her thoughts back to the task in hand. Where should she start? The microwave was too settled to move. She'd have trouble lifting it, and then there would be nowhere to put it. Carmen would notice immediately on her return. No - more modest adjustments were needed. Things that Carmen might not observe for a while, but which, when discovered, would convey clearly the message that Iñes still determined the shape of things on this floor of the house.

Manoeuvring her wheelchair into the cramped hall, she pulled open the bottom drawer of the dark, too-big chest of

drawers there, a monstrosity bequeathed to her by her grandmother. As she had observed from her last inspection, her own collection of fine lace antimacassars and doilies had been compressed into half the space that they previously occupied, and the rest of the drawer was full of Carmen's gloves and headscarves and a beret. A beret! Why couldn't these items be kept with the rest of Carmen's clothes, in her wardrobe upstairs? Why did the decision to wear a beret, for example, have to be made here in the hall, just prior to exiting the house?

She scooped up the offending items, put them temporarily on the top of the chest of drawers – only just within her reach - and re-established her lace items in their proper quarters. She shoved the drawer shut – it always stuck a little, that drawer – and contemplated what to do with the gloves and headscarves and beret. Now that the weather was warming up, there was little likelihood of Carmen seeking out these objects until winter came in again. Ideally she would have transported them upstairs and stuffed them at the back of Carmen's wardrobe, behind something. But the stairs were a step too far – several steps - so she decided to put them in a plastic bag and take them out to the tiny laundry room that opened off the kitchen. There was a miscellany of plastic bags there, with all sorts

of unknown contents. The new bag would blend in unobtrusively.

Now – what about those horrible orange cushions?

Meanwhile, the owner of these movables was ambling gradually towards the supermarket. It was only a block away, but her circuitous route took her along the pleasant Calle Santa Clara with its neatly clipped orange trees, and through the sociable *Plaza de Merced*, where chatty encounters with other mature ladies of Los Pedregales could prolong her outing for an hour or more. She inhaled the fresh citrus-scented Spring air, warm but not overpowering. It was good to be out of that cramped house. On the other hand, she had a suspicion that her mother was up to something in there, and had half a mind to turn back and catch her red-handed. She had a sly look on her face when she said goodbye. Oh, well... such things were inevitable. Three generations of women in that one small house – it put a strain on them all. At least they owned it, so there was no rent to worry about. Or, more precisely, her mother owned it, which gave her a whiff of moral leverage never put into words but always implied. At the age of sixty, it wasn't what Carmen had expected – to be living with her mother. But then, had her mother

expected to have her daughter and granddaughter cluttering up her house at the age of eighty? It was all the fault of these unreliable men. Drinking himself to death, in the case of her father. Catching a vicious flu virus and converting it into pneumonia, in the case of her Pablo. And packing his bags and going off with another woman, in the case of Andrea's Domingo. Leaving a house full of women to battle onwards on their own.

She sighed. Oh well, here came Miranda Delgado towards her, her face breaking into a rueful smile of recognition, like a wrinkled potato skin. Now she would get the latest instalment of the soap opera of Miranda's combative marriage. It was good to be reminded that there were always people worse off than oneself!

"Hello Carmen! *Ay de mi!* What a life!"

"Hello Miranda, how are you?"

"Well, as if I didn't have enough with one dumb animal in the house, now he wants a dog!"

Miranda regarded her piteously, a potato pushed beyond its limits. Carmen ticked her off.

"Dogs can be very nice company, Miranda. They're more reliable than men. Always affectionate."

"Ay! Of course I was forgetting about your two. Well, at least he doesn't want two."

“They’re company for each other,” Carmen said, feeling obscurely criticized.

“I’m fighting off one, don’t talk to me about two!”

“Well, what sort of dog does he want?”

“That’s another thing. He doesn’t want just an ordinary dog, like your ones. He wants a show dog.”

Carmen felt her eyes narrow a little.

“Pizarro and Cortés are pure bred dachshunds – *perros tejoneros*. They could be show dogs, if I chose.”

Miranda put up a hand, palm outwards.

“I’m sure, I’m sure, Carmen. Whatever you say. But he’s got some friend in that fly-hole of a bar that he goes to, and this friend has an Alsatian bitch that’s had a litter. So this friend has fed him nonsense about dog shows and what a wonderful hobby and big prize money until his fool head is turned. You’d think he’d stumbled on a gold mine. I can’t think how I’m going to keep the house safe from an Alsatian puppy. It’ll piss all over the furniture, I’m certain.”

“You can train them, Miranda. And I keep Pizarro and Cortés in the yard at the back most of the time. You know what my mother’s like.”

“How is Iñes? I haven’t been to mass for months. I never see her.”

“She’s herself. General Franco in a wheelchair.”

“You should get out of the house more, Carmen, get yourself a hobby like this useless husband of mine is talking about. Why don’t you take Piss-aro and Cock-head to dog shows? Maybe you could go together, you and my Diego. Have an affair if you like, I won’t mind.”

There was a streak of mischief in Miranda that made her come up with offensive nonsense from time to time. It was a mild form of Tourette’s, Carmen thought. One shouldn’t feel offended, but one did.

“It’s all right Miranda, your husband is safe from my attentions,” she said.

“He’s safe from mine too!” Miranda cackled. Then her potato face resumed its wrinkled look of self-pity. “*Ay de mi!*”

CHAPTER 6

Tom had finished his golf lesson and the pro had left him to hit the rest of his basket of balls on the driving range. He was making contact with the ball every time, which indicated progress. However, his shots were not like the demonstration shots that the pro had shown him - the ball soaring into the blue sky and hovering there for an age like

a bird of prey before finally plummeting to earth. His own shots sent the ball scuttling along the ground like panicked rabbits looking for cover.

He was aware of a growing pain in his shoulder. It was the shoulder that had put a stop to his amateur boxing when he was a young man. He knew he shouldn't provoke it, and he fished the last ball out of his basket with a sense of relief.

In the next bay to his, a very old man with a straggling, sparse white beard, a humped back, and a distinct palsied tremor appeared to be hitting shots in the same easy manner as the pro, although not quite as far. He had just finished his basket of balls and was gathering his clubs together to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the man pause to watch him hit his last shot. It put him right off, and he barely nicked the top of it. It dribbled about twenty feet and then came to a halt, wobbling insolently.

“Just taken up golf?” the old man remarked.

“How could you tell?” Tom replied.

The old man chuckled indulgently.

“Don't get disheartened. It takes a while.”

“How long have you played?”

“Sixty six years.”

Tom raised his eyebrows and made an inarticulate noise indicative of awe and appreciation.

“Yes, and I’ve only one regret,” the old boy said, and waited.

“What’s that?” Tom supplied.

“I didn’t practice my short game enough.”

“Ah – you mean that chipping and putting stuff and so on?”

“Exactly – the scoring zone. Do you live here in the Valle? Or are you a swallow?”

“I live here – now. I just arrived recently.”

“Retired young, or still working?”

“Retired.”

“I’ve been here ten years now. It’s not a bad place.”

“Ah...”

“Although they let the grass grow a bit too long on the greens. I keep mentioning it.”

“Oh.”

Since the man showed no sign of moving on, Tom offered his hand.

“Tom. Tom Rook.”

“Pleased to meet you. Harry Jones. I’m going to have a beer on the terrace at the club. Come and join me if you want.”

Harry Jones, over the course of a couple of beers, reminded Tom of a man he'd once got chatting to on a railway station platform. That man had a notebook, and his world consisted of timetables and trains. He spoke with passion about things whose existence Tom had barely registered before. He'd felt that he was being gradually sucked into one of those black holes that were supposed to exist in outer space, and that only the arrival of his own train could rescue him from a terrible fate.

In retirement, Harry Jones's world had contracted to eighteen strips of turf, each with a small black hole of its own at the far end. He knew this world with the intimacy of a lover: its voluptuous and inviting hollows; its swelling green bosomy hummocks; its fringes of shining foliage; its watery and malodorous ravines. The correct tactics for playing the first hole alone occupied about half an hour of Harry's advice, and left Tom dazed and confused about the respective merits of hitting a draw or a fade from the tee, either of which would entail getting the ball airborne, which at present was beyond his powers anyway. How did you play the first hole if you couldn't get the ball to fly over the small ornamental pond in front of the tee? He supposed he would have to putt around it on the cart path.

But oddly enough, Harry Jones was not boring him in the way that the railway man had done. Although he ceased to pay close attention to what he was saying – and contributions from himself were not required – he was spellbound by the man’s enthusiasm. His old eyes shone as he spoke, and his hands moved in eloquent, though shaky, gestures. He was in the grip of a passion, and, as far as Tom could make out, completely and utterly happy. At one point he expressed some regret at not being able to hit the ball as far as when he was a younger man, and some dissatisfaction with the fact that he couldn’t always see where it had gone, but these were mere quibbles. When he was on that golf course, he was in paradise, and as long as God gave him legs that could move, he’d be out there every day. And once the legs packed in, he’d ride around in a buggy. At the end of the second beer, when Tom began gathering his own legs beneath him ready to go, Harry Jones delivered his summing-up.

“All I can say is that golf has been my life, and when the time does come for me to drive out of bounds into the great unknown, I hope I do it when I’ve just made a par.”

While Tom was at the golf course, Linda was sitting on her own in the drawing room, which Tom referred to as the

sitting room or even, when he forgot, the lounge. When challenged, he pointed out that more lounging than drawing was done in the room. Privately, she had to concede that 'drawing room' wasn't quite right for a Spanish villa, but she stuck with it as a matter of principle. She'd engaged in some fairly radical rebellions against middle-class conventions over the years, but seemingly random fragments of her mother's principles had been too firmly bolted onto her to be dislodged now.

She had listened online to the *Today* programme on BBC Radio Four, which, finishing at nine in the UK, took her through nicely to ten in the morning. Then she'd made a cup of coffee. Now she'd drunk that, and she was looking through the glass patio doors and trying to decide whether to sit on the terrace or to stay inside. Of such decisions were her hours made up. It was deeply unsatisfactory. She looked, unenlightened, at the sunshine outside. She listened, unsoothed, to the silence, broken only by some birds piping in the garden. A little goldfinch fluttered onto the bars that protected all the ground floor windows. It was probably looking for insects on the glass, or perhaps it was puzzled by its own reflection, but it seemed to scrutinize her, like one of those curious philanthropists who visited the old bedlams to peer at the inmates.

She looked at her watch. Only nine thirty in Kew. However, she couldn't resist any longer. Rooting out her mobile phone from its lair in the depths of her handbag, she woke it up and scrolled down her contacts list to Carol. It was only the second time she'd rung Carol from Spain. For years they'd spoken almost every day on the phone, and met up at least three or four times a week to do something or other. But the first time she'd rung Carol from Elysium, it had left her feeling depressed. She'd been overcome by an overwhelming sense of life flowing on in its accustomed way, while she was left stranded on a mud bank, like a maladroit fish. All the usual things were going on – the coffee mornings; the drinks on Friday evenings; the trips to the theatre; the birthdays and suppers and visits to this fashion show or that art gallery. It sounded as if Carol and the others didn't miss her at all – although of course Carol said that they did. But her absence had apparently made no difference – indeed, why should it have done? She thought back to others who had come and gone from their circle over the years. There was Lizzie, for example, who'd been one of the ringleaders. Then she and her husband went off to Australia – oh, ages ago. What had become of Lizzie? After a few weeks, they'd all forgotten she existed. Now

had she herself already followed in Lizzie's footsteps?
Gone walkabout, never to be thought of again?

After a couple of rings, Carol picked up the phone.

"Hello Carol! Linda here!"

"Linda! Well, hello stranger! Are you in town?"

"No, I'm calling from Spain."

"That's a pity. We're meeting at *Lucio's* in an hour for coffee."

"Who is?"

"Oh, the usual suspects. I'll give them your news."

I have no news, Linda thought to herself.

"Oh – I wish I could just hop on a bus and join you all!" she said, attempting a bright tone. "Have one of their chocolate brownies for me!"

"Well, if that's a strict order, I will. I'm supposed to be on a diet, but I'll do it for you. So – listen, I haven't got long, so tell me all. Have you still got Julia and Richard there?"

"No, they've gone now. Just me and Tom here. Well, just me in fact at the moment. He's off learning golf."

"I *told* you not to let him start that silly business. You'll be a golf widow before you know it."

"He wants *me* to start."

“Even worse! You’ll end up as one of those stout women that wear diamond patterned jumpers and bark at each other over great distances.”

“*Stout!* How dare you!”

Carol laughed, that warm but slightly mocking laugh that Linda knew so well.

“Anyway, listen...” Carol went on, “You’ll never believe this – Sandra is going to be a Grandma!”

“Sandra? But she’s only – what – forty?”

“That’s right. Forty exactly.”

“God! Am I going to be the only one who isn’t a Granny? They’re all breeding like rabbits except my two.”

“I’m sure your boys will find a nice girl soon. Or two nice girls, I suppose would be better. You shouldn’t share some things.”

“Hmmp! There’s no sign of *any* nice girls. None that they’ve told me about anyway. Although Mum said something in a letter about Adrian and a girl at work.”

“Well, they’re still young aren’t they? Mid twenties.”

“Not even mid. Well, I suppose Adrian *is* twenty four. Not on the shelf yet, I suppose. Mind you, they both work in IT.”

“They’re *all* like monks in IT. I remember what they were all like at *Mason, Kempzell and Holwill* when I used

to work. I think there's some kind of radiation that comes off the screens."

"You should talk to my mother, that's what she thinks."

"Is your mother okay?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I do worry that I won't be able to keep an eye on her so easily."

"I expect she'll phone you if there's a problem. Anyway, what's the weather like there? It's lovely here – a real early Spring day. The daffodils are everywhere."

"Oh, it's nice here too. Clear sky. Warm. There's a lovely jacaranda tree in the garden that's coming out in blue blossoms. When are you going to come?"

"That's so nice of you! Let's sort it out by e-mail. It can't be the next couple of months though. I've so much on. Do you think I should come on my own, or bring David?"

"Oh, come on your own the first time. David and Tom aren't particularly on a wavelength, are they? I mean, if you come on your own we can have some good old chats and do a bit of exploring without worrying about keeping them entertained. Tom can do his own thing. He's got a list of new interests."

"Speaking of new interests, here's another bit of news for you, by the way. Barbara's got a new bloke!"

“She hasn’t? I thought she was hoping to get back together...”

“All over. He’s got someone else now. She saw them in a restaurant in Wimbledon, canoodling over their soup.”

“How revolting! Mind you, I don’t know what she saw in him anyway. He’s like a bullfrog!”

“So is the new one!” Carol said.

They both fell into a small fit of laughing.

“Barbara must think there are princes underneath!” Carol gasped.

“Carol, you’re a cruel woman,” Linda said in a tone of mock sternness. Then they were off again, laughing.

It was all over too soon. After ten minutes of inconsequential and hilarious gossip, Carol had to be off to catch her bus to Lucio’s Coffee House. When she’d put the phone down, Linda stood for a moment in the empty living room feeling as if she’d been swept up in a wonderful little tornado full of colourful characters, and that now it had dropped her back to the ground again. Not in Kansas, but in Valle de Pinos. She thought perhaps she’d have another cup of coffee, but the prospect of drinking it on her own, instead of in the stimulating buzz of Lucio’s with her friends, was enough to poison the chalice. She decided just to go out onto the terrace and read. She’d got the *Complete*

Jane Austen on her kindle. If she couldn't be in London she could at least lose herself in the environs of Northanger Abbey or Mansfield Park.

After about an hour a metallic clanking noise in the house broke into her absorption. She went to the terrace doors to look in, and heard Tom's voice calling from the hall.

"I'm back. It's not a burglar!"

He appeared at the archway that led from the hall into the sitting room. He had two bags of golf clubs on his shoulders, and a foolish naughty-boy smirk on his lips. He looked like a rosy-faced pack-horse with panniers.

"For goodness' sake, Tom! Have you got even more golf sticks?"

Tom nodded.

"The pro said he thought I should have a full set. I've kept the half set as well in case you take it up."

"Honestly! I bet this *pro* drives an expensive car, does he?"

Tom shed his loads and straightened his back. It was a slight disadvantage of golf, all this ironmongery. On the other hand, he'd quite enjoyed acquiring it. It made him feel as if he was taking definite firm strides along the road to becoming a *golfer*.

“I trust his advice,” he said defensively.

“Well, I expect you’ve made *his* day for him anyway.”

“What have you been doing? Reading?”

“Yes. And I had a chat with Carol.”

“Ah - the Queen of Kew! How’s she?”

“Very well. It was nice catching up with her. I was wondering if you fancied a walk along the beach before lunch?”

Tom nodded.

“Why not?”

“In fact, I thought we might have lunch at one of those little places that we haven’t tried yet, along the front there.”

“Good idea. We could have a *paella*.”

He was rather pleased that he knew this word, and was pretty sure he’d pronounced it right as well. But the lines around Linda’s mouth told him that there was something wrong with his suggestion.

“Well, I was also thinking about later on...” she said.

“Later on?” Tom interrupted. “Well, I think after a walk and a *paella*, and a glass or two of *vino*...”

“You’re going to sleep all afternoon, aren’t you!”

“Sleep knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,” Tom replied smugly.

“What?” Linda said.

“Learned that at school. I’m not a complete beginner at this culture lark you know. Shakespeare says sleep’s good for you.”

“He didn’t mean sleeping off a boozy lunch.”

“How do you know?”

Linda felt a nameless frustration aggravating her. She wanted to go somewhere, do something. A lunch along the beach wasn’t enough.

“All right, listen...” she said, “let’s have a *light* lunch, and then, this evening, let’s go out of the Valle and go into town.”

“What, Los Pedri-whatsit?”

Tom pictured what he’d seen of the local town in daylight hours, going to and from the supermarket. He found it hard to imagine it in darkness. It felt a little threatening, somehow.

“Bit of a dust heap...” he went on, off-puttingly.

“But we’d at least see some people who aren’t at death’s door, unlike around here!” Linda said stoutly.

“What would we do there? Go to a bar?”

“No – we’ll find a restaurant. It’s a Wednesday. We won’t need a booking.”

“Is your Spanish up to this?”

“I can read a menu. We’ll mingle with the locals.”

Linda felt her spirits lifting. She entertained vague images of a lively room filled with Spanish chatter. Perhaps a guitarist.

“Like sore thumbs,” Tom suggested.

Linda gave him a look.

“Don’t be so negative. Who wanted to come to Spain?”

“All right, all right. Let’s go for it.”

“You’ll put on long trousers,” Linda stipulated, glancing at the boy-scout shorts he was currently wearing.

“All right, as long as you don’t wear your *Kiss me Quick* hat.”

“*De acuerdo, señor.*”

“You what?”

“It’s a deal.”

Tom felt relieved. Linda appeared to be happy with the prospect of her night out in Spanish Spain. He turned around and swept up the golf clubs to stow them away in the garage, and felt a sharp twinge in his shoulder.

“Ow!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Just picked up these clubs awkwardly, I think. It’s nothing.”

He put the clubs down again. He’d take one bag at a time.

“I need to get fitter,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Fitter. I’m out of shape. I was even thinking... you know, with that long beach there... I was wondering about going jogging. Along the beach, you know. Maybe first thing in the mornings, while it’s nice and cool.”

From absolutely nowhere, an overwhelming red rage erupted in Linda.

“Good idea!” she said in a voice loaded with sarcasm. “*Excellent* idea! Yet another activity that excludes me!”

Tom stared at her, horror-struck. It was true, he had pictured himself jogging along the sand by himself, barefoot, the sea washing up around his footprints. But nevertheless... he wasn’t deliberately trying to exclude her.

“You think I’m *deliberately* choosing to do things without you?” he said, all offended innocence.

“Perhaps not deliberately,” she conceded, the volcanic rage already subsiding. She felt taken aback. It was as if there was a lava lake inside her that she’d been unaware of.

Tom abandoned the stowing of the golf clubs. He moved towards her, and put out a clumsy arm to rest on her shoulder. It was as if he were conferring some award or something. He wished she’d move in closer and let him turn his awkward gesture into a hug. But she stayed where

she was, a little distant. He could see that she had surprised herself. He spoke soothingly.

“I *want* you to take up golf with me. And I want you to help me with my piano playing – you *have* been helping me with my piano playing. And books – *The Cherry Orchard* and all that... we can talk about books together, now I’m starting to read a bit. And if you want to come jogging on the beach with me, I’d love that, Linda. That would be great!”

At last she folded into his side.

“I know, I know...” she said in a low voice, conciliatory.

“Come on darling, let’s cheer up! We’ll go out for a nice bit of grub tonight. And we’ve got our nice evenings in. We’ve got the British telly.”

“I know,” Linda said. She was fighting down a wave of self-pity. It wasn’t Tom’s fault, the way she felt.

He thought a little. What had she said she had been doing this morning? She’d been on the phone to London.

“You’re missing your friends, aren’t you?” he said.

She nodded.

“I wouldn’t miss them so much if we made more friends here,” she said. But we’re in our own little castle, behind our big walls.”

“You have to have security. There’s been robberies. Everyone says you have to be careful here.”

He was struck with a thought – one he’d had before and kept under wraps - but this seemed a good moment to try it out.

“You know what, Linda...”

“What?”

He took the plunge.

“A dog is really good company – and good for security too. Do you think we should think about a dog?”

She detached herself from the hug. What was missing from her life was not to be supplied by a hairy quadruped demanding to be fed, walked and cleaned up after on a daily basis. She shook her head. She didn’t need to say anything – Tom knew her views on having a dog already.

“Not a good idea, then?” he said.

She shook her head again.

Well, it had been worth a try, he thought. He pictured Winston, his parents’ Bulldog; a friendly presence throughout his childhood – a lot more friendly than his older brother anyway.

“You know yesterday morning, when you were practicing your scales on the piano?” she said.

“Yes.”

“I went out for a walk, remember?”

“Yes.”

“I walked down to the *Palmas* area of the Valle.”

“Where?”

“Down nearer to the sea. Where it’s all small apartments, all close together.”

“Oh yes, I know where you mean.”

“Well, it was all geriatrics down there of course. But they were all leaning over their balconies or standing on corners and chatting away to each other. It was all Brits. Anyway... what struck me was it was more like a community down there. They all knew each other.”

“You want to move into one of those poky little apartments down there?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just... well, we depend on each other for company here in a way that we never have before. Not in London... or anywhere.”

She wasn’t far off tears now. Tom felt, not for the first time in his life, as if he’d been going around with his head in a sack. He remembered that time, a few years ago now, when Linda had had that funny turn. She’d done all kinds of peculiar things – gone mad, in a quiet way. He’d never seen that coming. She said there was some little voice in her head that kept provoking her. She broke things

deliberately and then went out to get new ones. Sometimes he suspected she'd stolen them. Silly things like teapots. She'd acquired a dozen or more teapots. He was pretty sure she hadn't paid for them all. How did you shoplift a teapot? Then he'd got home from work one day and found her wandering around the garden naked. Not the back garden, which would have been bad enough. The front garden. Who knew who'd seen her there? She'd gone to therapy sessions after that. Got over it. Perhaps she'd been prescribed something, he couldn't remember now.

God forbid she was going to go off the rails like that again. He must tread carefully.

"I've been selfish," he said, "not thinking enough about you."

"You're not selfish. I didn't mean it about the jogging. Of course you should go jogging – and golfing. It's me, not you. It's me who hasn't got the inner resources to make a life without lots of friends. I'm a very sociable creature. It was so obvious, but it's taken these first few weeks here to bring it home."

Some heavy, oppressive feeling was gathering in Tom's stomach.

"So you don't think you can be happy here?"

“No, that’s too much to say. It’s just that I haven’t started to adjust yet. Maybe I didn’t give it enough thought beforehand. I mean, this was *your* dream life. You’ve been looking forward to it, but it’s different for me. I need to find my own dream here too. Maybe I just need to change.”

Tom nodded.

“We can all change, my love. Look at me – from workaholic property developer to... well, to whatever I am now.”

What *was* he now? No word had come to mind. But surely he was on his way to being *something*: a cultured book-reading, piano playing, golfing man of leisure, living in the sunshine. There was no single word for that, except it wasn’t the Thomas Rook of his previous adult life.

“Change for the better, eh? In my case?” he said, prompting.

“Of course, Tom,” Linda said. She knew that was what he needed to hear. But he’d always seemed happy to her in the past, bustling out of the house at seven in the morning and coming back at night tired out but often with some tale of success to relate. He didn’t moan about the frustrations of his work. He revelled in obstacles overcome, or difficult deals finally concluded to his advantage.

Tom had an idea.

“I know we’ve not been here long, but maybe you need to have your first trip back soon? Plan a trip – a few trips - back to London, to see your friends, and your boys. Have something to look forward to!”

Linda snuffled a little, pulling herself together. This was all so pathetic of her, a little bossy voice inside her admonished. They’d been here less than a month! But she *did* want to go back.

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” she agreed.

“Come on then, let’s go for that walk shall we? And some prawns or something, and a nice glass of wine, eh?”

“Yes. Prawns always cheer me up.”

CHAPTER 7

Andrea slowed down the car. It *was* Pepe walking along the road ahead of her, towards Los Pedregales. Why was he doing that? She wound down the window as she pulled alongside.

“Pepe? Where’s your car?”

“It’s in the garage. Annual check.”

“Why didn’t you ask me if you could have a lift home? Get in.”

She pushed the door open, and he climbed in. He was slightly sweaty from his day's work, but another musky smell predominated. He still used *Lynx Africa*.

"How has your day been?" she asked after a few moments.

"Normal. I got a scare though at *Casa de la Torre*."

"The one on Avenida Jack Nicklaus, or the one on Avenida Severiano Ballesteros, next to *Elysium*?"

He snorted with amusement. "Next to *Elysium*. You could draw a map of the Valle from memory!"

"So could you. What happened?"

"There's a big dog now, a guard dog. A huge Alsatian. They hadn't told me."

"God! It wasn't on the loose was it?"

"No. But as soon as I went in the gate it came charging towards me until its chain stopped it. I thought I was going to be torn to pieces!"

"How awful!"

"And then it barked every time I made a noise in the garden. You can't do gardening without making any noise at all. A click of the secateurs would set it off."

"Señor Rook next door will enjoy that!"

"I wouldn't want to live next door to that monster."

“Señor Gomez is probably the kind of man who needs a vicious dog. I expect he’s got enemies.”

“Yes, I imagine he has.”

“Do you ever see him?”

“No, only the first time I went. Do you?”

“No, I’ve never seen him. His lawyer did everything when he bought the house.”

“His henchman or whatever he is gives me my money. Big bald guy.”

“Does *he* ever talk to you?”

“No. Just grunts sometimes. He’s like a hippo.”

“Who else is in there?”

“I’ve seen women, once or twice. By the pool, or up at the terrace. Different ones. Glamorous. Usually there’s no-one around when I do the garden. Except this big dog now, damn him!”

“Dogs can be a pain,” Andrea agreed.

They drove on in silence for the next kilometre or so. A slightly edgy silence, Andrea felt, not like the companionable, easy silences they had once shared. That was always a good sign, she thought, that you could feel comfortable being silent with a person. She vaguely remembered there was something about silences in *Body Language and How to Speak It*. She might look it up.

They reached the untidy fringes of Los Pedregales, a zone of warehouses, empty building plots and small car dealerships. Soon this short, rare interlude together would have passed, and Andrea felt a sudden sharp anxiety to make more of it.

“How are your children?” she said, the first thing that came into her head.

Pepe sighed.

“I don’t see much of them. They’re fine.”

“Do they stay in Seville outside university term times as well?”

“Yes, their whole lives are there now.”

“Does... Felipa go to see them a lot?”

She pictured Pepe’s wife as she had last seen her a few weeks ago, walking along the street. A smallish, vigorous woman with quick, bird-like movements.

“Felipa has moved there – she went about a month ago. Her mother’s getting old. She prefers it, already. She’d like me to go too.”

He paused a moment, surprised by a thought. Had Felipa actually *said* she’d like him to go too? He’d assumed she would, but had she put it into words?

A pang of regret caught Andrea by surprise. Even though she and Pepe hardly spoke nowadays, she liked him being

around, in the Valle, and Los Pedregales. She didn't want him to go to Seville, where she'd never see him again. That was a foolish sentiment.

“How do you feel about that?” she said, keeping her tone light.

Pepe shrugged.

“I'm going next weekend, to visit. But she's at her mother's. We wouldn't be able to afford our own place in Seville. Beatrice and Francisco are at the house too.”

“So – you might join them all?”

Pepe stared ahead for a few moments, seeing imaginary crowds; traffic; bustle. *Mucho ajetreo*.

“I don't think so, no.”

So – he was staying in Los Pedregales. *Alone*. Andrea dropped him off at the corner of his street with a ridiculous lightness of heart.

Back in his empty house, Pepe took a shower as usual and then sat on his little terrace with a beer. The small garden in front of him – really just a courtyard with a modest square of grass – still contained a swing, a relic of the old days. It made him feel a little melancholy, that swing, although when he'd suggested taking it down, Felipa had talked about grandchildren using it one day.

Since she'd gone to stay in Seville, leaving only a token quantity of clothing and possessions behind her, he'd begun to feel that these putative grandchildren might never find their way to Los Pedregales. He stared at the swing for a little while, and then fetched his poetry notebook and pen from the drawer in the living room. He hadn't written his poem for this week yet.

*The rusting swing,
That creaks with no child when the wind blows
Is like the echo of the past
In my hollow house.*

That wasn't too bad. 'Hollow house' was good, surely? He thought of the children's voices echoing in the tiled hallway, when they returned from whatever after-school activity Felipa had encouraged them into. He remembered how he'd made a point of speaking in English to Francisco and Beatrice every Sunday. That had of course fallen by the wayside once they'd gone to Seville to university. He didn't manage to speak to them every Sunday at all now, in any language. He tried to think of another verse, that would capture some of all this, but nothing came, so he gave up, ticked off the box for the week on the back pages,

and shut the notebook. His thoughts turned to the prosaic. What was he going to eat tonight? He sighed. He was going to have to go out to the supermarket.

After parking her car in her usual spot beside a little square of grass and trees, Andrea felt she needed to be alone with her thoughts for a few minutes before re-entering the claustrophobic little world of the house, so she walked across the grass and sat on a bench. Fifty metres away, an overweight woman in lycra was pedalling hard on some stationary bicycle thing that had been installed recently, along with other devices to encourage older citizens to exercise. A kind of geriatric playground. The woman was putting in a lot of effort but going nowhere. Wasn't her own life a bit like that?

She closed her eyes, and permitted herself to think of the past. Pepe's voice, and that scent of *Africa* had brought it all rushing into her head again. It was five years now since they had their affair. Two years after her husband had gone off. Paco was sixteen then, still at school, and Pepe was his English teacher. That was how they'd first met – at a parents' evening. Only a month or two later, Pepe had become a gardener. Perhaps their affair was somehow a

part of that transition for him – breaking away from the life he'd led for years.

It had lasted seven and a half weeks. It had seemed – it still seemed in her memory – a much longer time. Passion had swept away all her good sense, lifted her on a high tide of emotion and then left her stranded on a sandbank of disappointment. In the end, Pepe couldn't bear the risk of breaking with his wife and the danger of a possible separation from his children. It was his children that he was most in love with. He was terrified that Felipa would eventually discover what was going on, and so he baled out, a dutiful husband and devoted father who had tasted something more passionate and exciting but was frightened of the potential consequences.

But she clung to the belief that he had been in love with her. She hated the thought that it had been no more than a fling for him. No, he was not the kind of man who would act lightly or selfishly on such a matter.

Now they never alluded to that time, but it was always in her mind when they had their brief chance encounters around the Valle, or in one of the aisles of the supermarket in Los Pedregales. His behaviour on these occasions accorded perfectly with a diagram of concentric circles from *Body Language and How to Speak It*: he stayed at the

outer edge of the circle reserved for interaction with slight acquaintances. This overly cautious degree of reserve was enough to tell her that the past affair was in his thoughts too.

It was the only ‘affair’ she’d ever had. Her sporadic and disappointing experiences of internet dating over the last few years had introduced her to a number of men who seemed to think that an existing wife or partner could be conveniently left out of the equation in the interests of a hedonistic liaison. She’d become expert in ferreting out the clues to the existence of these unmentioned shadowy females. So no ‘affairs’ had ensued. The genuinely unattached men she had met had failed to live up to expectations in a seemingly infinite variety of other ways. There had been just one who had got her as far as his bedroom on a couple of occasions, but that ultimately proved to be a false dawn as well. For the last year or so she’d given up the quest entirely.

But Pepe..., even after the mellowing passage of time and in spite of the mundane and low-key way in which they now interacted... even still he occupied a place in her heart. Now his children were grown up and had gone to Seville. And his wife – Felipa – she had gone too. Flown off like

the bright, busy little bird that she was. How did Pepe feel now, about his marriage?

A rustling in the tree above her brought her out of her reverie. Two pigeons, fighting over something. She stood up and smoothed down her skirt. Time to face her world again.

Back at the house, she found her mother with Pizarro on her lap. She was brushing her coat, and fondly fondling her long ears.

Andrea sniffed the air.

“What’s that flowery smell?”

“I bought a rose-water spray. To make Pizarro and Cortés a little more fragrant.”

Andrea had nothing to say to this.

“Where’s Grandmama?”

“She’s in her room. She had bad news today. Your great-uncle Antunes in Granada has died.”

“Oh dear. Well, what was he? Ninety two?”

“Ninety three. He had a good run.”

“I haven’t seen him since my wedding.”

“No, he wasn’t close to Mama. But apparently he’s left her something.”

“What? How do you know that already?”

“The person from the nursing home spoke to me before I fetched Mama. She was explaining that the nursing home was owed money – that it would have to come out of the estate.”

“That’s very tactful – to tell someone of their relative’s death and then present the bill!”

“Well, it’s a business. There’ll be something left over, she said. Not a lot, but something. Lawyers will sort it out.”

“And is Grandmama very upset?”

“She cried a little. Told me one or two stories about her and Antunes growing up. He was a nasty little boy, by the sound of him.”

“*Dios mio!* Can’t we forgive the dead?”

“That’s what I said, Andrea. Then Mama said he took after their father, and that was hard to forgive.”

“Well... if he left her a bequest, *she* must have meant something to him.”

Carmen shrugged, and put Pizarro on the ground.

“Cortés! Come to Mummy!” she called.

A small yapping brown bullet shot out of the kitchen, where no doubt it had been investigating for crumbs.

“There’s my darling!” Carmen simpered, scooping Cortés up into her lap. “Let’s give your coat a nice brush.”

“Mama – why are you brushing their coats? I’ve never seen you do that. And whose hairbrush are you using?”

“Don’t worry, Andrea, it’s not yours. I called in at the pet shop and bought one for them. I can’t think why I haven’t done it before.”

Andrea caught a new look on her mother’s face. Was it a look of suppressed excitement?

“Mama – what are you up to?”

“Nothing. It’s normal, isn’t it, to want your dogs to look their best?”

Andrea gave up.

“I’m going to go and have a word with Grandmama about her brother Antunes. She must be upset.”

“She’ll be more upset if the nursing home gobbles up all her bequest!”

But Andrea didn’t get as far as her grandmother’s door. Her phone rang. She looked at the screen. Paco. She walked out of the house as she answered it, ignoring a reproachful glance from her mother, who enjoyed hearing even one side of a conversation. She walked a little way along the too narrow pavement outside. But not as far as Señor and Señora Solar’s house, which, with its open windows and door, was a listening post.

“Hello Paco.”

“Mama! We’re engaged! And Natalia is definitely going to have the baby!”

Andrea felt as if she had been lifted slightly above the street’s surface.

“That’s wonderful! Both things... both are wonderful! Where did you propose? Tell me about it!”

“At the *Retiro*, by the boating lake. I got on my knees and everything. I bought a cheap ring – I told her I’ll get a better one of course, when we’ve got money. She was so surprised – but she said *yes* straight away.”

“I’m so happy, Paco. That’s... oh, you’ve caught me by surprise...!” She felt a little breathless now, but her feet were back on the pavement.

“Yes. I’m so happy too. Of course, it brings some difficulties.”

“Tell me.”

“Well... I don’t see how we can set up a home. She can’t come to live in my little rented room. Even half my own things have to be shoved under the bed. And of course Natalia’s parents have no space for us.”

“Have you talked with Uncle Salvador?”

“Yes.”

“What did he have to say?”

“He wasn’t very pleased with me. He said, in fact... well, we had a bit of an argument.”

“Oh no...”

“Mama, he said I was a young fool!”

She bridled a little on his behalf.

“That’s not very nice! Very harsh.”

“But marrying the girl you love, starting a family... what’s foolish about that? They’re not foolish things.”

“He might think that they are when you have no money at all, and no place to live.”

“That’s why Uncle Salvador was annoyed, I think. I was going to ask him for help, but I never got the chance.”

“What sort of help?”

“I thought he might help us with rent for somewhere we could live. Just a very cheap place. But before I got to that he’d said something like *don’t come running to me for help*, and I’d said I wasn’t going to come running to him for help, and so then, of course, I couldn’t ask him.”

“He’s cranky. He’s been kind to you. He helped you find work when you went to Madrid, but he’s cranky. Like your father. It’s a thing in their family.”

“Do you think...”

Andrea read the thought before it was said.

“You can try, and good luck to you. It was only because of the law that I ever got anything out of your father when you were still at school. I had to threaten him with lawyers.”

“Maybe the thought of a grandchild...”

“It’s very touching that you think your father has human feelings. It shows you have an optimistic nature, Paco.”

“I don’t think I have his correct phone number. Last time I tried to call him the number wasn’t available.”

“Well *I* don’t have it, Paco. I haven’t spoken to him for years.”

There was a pause. Paco cleared his throat.

“There’s another thing, Mama...”

“What?”

She took a deep breath.

“The *Prado* – they say they won’t need me after the summer. They say they’re closing some galleries for restoration work and they’ve got too many staff.”

Andrea let out the breath from her lungs.

“So, in August, you and Natalia will have a baby, no jobs and nowhere to live?” she summed up.

She imagined his face. He would have that hangdog expression that he had when she caught him out in some misdemeanour as a child.

“That’s possible, Mama.”

“You’ll have to start looking for a new job. Surely Uncle Salvador will help you find something else? Talk to him again. Be humble.”

“I don’t know... he seemed very disappointed in me. He said the time to raise a family was when you were financially secure.”

“He’s right, but it’s crying after spilt milk.”

“He didn’t say it, but I could tell he was thinking that a... a termination... would be the sensible thing.”

“And your Uncle Salvador nearly trained for a priest! Well, you and Natalia have taken your decision about that, haven’t you?”

“Of course.”

“So...”

“Mama – I was wondering if there might be some sort of work down there – in the Valle perhaps?”

“Nothing. When there’s even a rumour of work available the phone doesn’t stop. We advertised for a new security man last year and the next morning there was a queue – more than forty men - to pick up application forms. I had to print off extras.”

“Okay. But you could look out for something couldn’t you? Maybe things that aren’t advertised?”

“You couldn’t wait to get away from Los Pedregales a couple of years ago.”

“Well, things have changed. No-one can find any work in Madrid. People are going to London, Dublin, Berlin...”

“Anyway, any job that came up in the Valle wouldn’t pay enough for you to rent a place to live. I can’t afford to rent my own place myself. Not unless I left Mama and Grandmama to starve.”

“I know. But I just wondered, Mama, if... as a temporary thing... you know, to get us past the first difficulty...”

“Paco. You’re not even thinking about...”

Her heart was fluttering. To have her son back in Los Pedregales! And a little grandchild! But the practical drawbacks were overwhelming.

“It’s not a definite request, Mama! It’s just a thought. If we have nowhere to go in Madrid.”

“We only have three bedrooms. Mine, Mother’s and Grandmama’s.”

“It’s only a thought I wanted to put in your mind, Mama. It would be something to know. As a last resort. What do you think?”

“I can’t make any promises like that. You know it’s not even my house.”

“I know, but...”

“Let’s not talk about that just now. I need more time to think. But you can’t live on the street, Paco. It will never come to that.”

CHAPTER 8

There was a cork noticeboard on the wall next to the door of *The Cavern*, the little general store down at what Linda characterized as the *lively* part of the Valle. The goods in there were overpriced, and the lady who presided was a blustering - verging on belligerent - person from Liverpool called Audrey, much given to long chats with her favourite customers while Linda waited to pay for her nice freshly baked bread. The bread, delivered from elsewhere presumably, and the pleasant fifteen minute stroll in each direction were the only reasons that Linda sometimes took her custom there.

She always glanced at the noticeboard on her way out, and amongst the scraps of paper offering cheap hairdressing and bewailing feline vanishings she spotted a new announcement. *Ladies! Get in shape! Zumba class starts 4pm on April 28th at La Palmera. Ten euros per session, no need to book. Tracy.*

The 28th of April was tomorrow.

She mulled it over as she walked slowly up the gradual incline towards Elysium. It was a social opportunity – that was its main appeal. A chance to rub shoulders (and drip sweat) with other ladies of the Valle. Perhaps the starting point for a new life of coffee mornings and sociable chit-chat while Tom was out golfing, or filling the house with the horrible noise of his ham-fisted scales and arpeggios.

On the other hand, she would have preferred the coffee and chit-chat without the zumba.

“Well, have a go love!” Tom encouraged her when she reported her discovery to him.

“I’ll go for a jog on the beach when you go to that,” he went on, after a glance down towards his belly. “We can get fit simultaneous. Compare notes. Maybe we can have a losing weight competition?”

“I’m not telling you my weight.”

“Why not? You’re not fat.”

“Some things are private.”

Tom winked.

“You know all *my* dimensions.”

“Very amusing.”

The next afternoon, Linda made her way in the car with a mixture of optimism and trepidation down to the seafront

café *La Palmera*. She feared a clique of slender lycra-clad younger women such as from time to time had ambushed her as she hurried past some gym in London. On the other hand, younger women were in short supply in the Valle, so she knew her fear was irrational. She wasn't entirely happy with her outfit though. Lycra was absent from her wardrobe, so she wore a cotton t-shirt – dark blue, so the sweat wouldn't show too much – and white shorts. She didn't possess trainers, so she wore what she thought of as her 'comfortable' shoes. After all, zumba was a kind of dancing, from what she'd gathered, not a game of tennis. Well, if she stuck out like a sore thumb that was just too bad.

At first *La Palmera* seemed closed. The main door was locked, and peering in through the dirty windows she could see no sign of movement inside. She checked her watch. Four in the afternoon, as specified. She walked around to the back, where there was another door with bins jostling around it like a crowd demanding ingress. She nudged through these obstacles, nose wrinkled against rotting food smells and flies, and tried the door. Locked.

She heard a car pulling up, and made her way back to the front door. A woman of about forty in a grey tracksuit was just levering herself out of the driver's door. She had

greasy dark hair and both in shape and greyness bore more than a passing resemblance to a baby elephant. She caught sight of Linda and gave a little wave of acknowledgement.

“Sorry I’m late,” she called out. “The twins both filled their nappies just as I was leaving, and my Jason just won’t deal with that. I say it’s part of being a dad, but he just refuses. It’s funny how they always do things at the same time, my twins. Perhaps they’re psychic, if that’s the word I mean.”

The accent was Midlands, perhaps Birmingham. And maybe the woman was younger than forty, but having twins had aged her.

“I’m Linda,” Linda said, advancing with a smile. She wondered about offering a handshake, but the new arrival didn’t look like she expected one. She locked her car door and plodded towards La Palmera’s entrance, carrying a ghetto blaster and studying her key ring as she went.

“I’m Tracy,” she said without noticing Linda’s hesitant approach. She located the key she needed and unlocked the door. “I hope Manuel’s pushed the chairs and tables back like I asked him. Bloody useless these Spanish. *Mañana bananas* me and Jason call ’em. Have you seen anyone else yet?”

“No...”

But another car was just pulling up. With a sinking feeling, Linda observed Audrey from The Cavern at the wheel. She quashed an impulse to turn tail and run, and followed Tracy into the gloomy interior of the café. Chairs and tables were pushed to the walls, leaving a clear floor area in front of the bar.

“He opens again at five thirty,” Tracy said. “We’re supposed to push the tables back for him.”

She plonked the ghetto blaster on the bar and uncoiled a snakelike cable

“Now, where does he hide his bloody sockets?”

Audrey came through the entrance door. Linda smiled at her as best she could, but found that she had somehow become invisible.

“All right, Trace?”

“Yeah, all right Aud?”

“Yeah. This all there is?”

Audrey glanced in Linda’s direction. Linda smiled again, her last attempt.

Tracy emerged from her plugging-in operation behind the bar.

“Yeah. This is Leslie.”

“Linda,” Linda corrected. “I’ve been in your shop.”

Audrey nodded, but made no comment. However, she vouchsafed a thin-lipped grimace that at least reassured Linda that she had become visible.

“I think Angie’s coming,” Tracy said. “She said she was, last night. Mind you, she was pissed as usual.”

“She wants to get that under control,” Audrey remarked. “Me and Tony always have a night off every week.”

“Christ! I’m lucky if me and Jason do it once a week!”

Audrey emitted a low gravelly cackle.

“I’m not talking about that, Trace. I’m talking about drinking. You’ve got to give it a rest every now and again. Once a week, we do that. We drink shandies. Mondays, usually.”

Tracy pressed a button on the ghetto blaster, and the room was filled with a repellent noise that Linda immediately identified as rap music. She’d been forcibly acquainted with it some years ago by her younger son Neville when he’d bought his first car and took her for a drive. The car was in essence a high output sound system housed in a rusty four-wheeled wreck. She didn’t want to rain on his parade, so she politely put up with it. She’d subsequently noticed the growing presence of rap on television and in public places. Like the more recent fashion for young men to grow beards, it was regrettable

but would eventually pass. She was, she knew very well, helplessly replicating her mother's abhorrence of her own purple Mohican haircut and love of the Sex Pistols back in the day.

Tracy was nodding her head appreciatively to the beat. She turned up the volume a little.

"It's ten euros Leslie," she said.

Linda fished the ten euro note out of her pocket. Not only was she to be tortured, but she was paying for it. Audrey made no sign of paying, and Tracy didn't ask her. Perhaps some *quid pro quo* was in operation.

A weak, piping noise came from the door. A frail looking old woman was peering in.

"What?" Tracy shouted over the music.

"The zumbo class? Is this the zumbo class?" could be faintly heard, in what Linda identified as relatively refined tones. Thank goodness, a member of her own social class! She blushed inwardly at her snobbery. But, well...

"Yes. Come on in. Ten euros please," Tracy bellowed.

The woman hobbled in. She smiled nervously at everyone. She had curly grey hair, spectacles, and wore a print dress and a cardigan. She obviously hadn't shared Linda's fears about not fitting in. She was dressed as somebody's grandmother, and that was that. She fumbled

in a handbag and put a ten euro note into Tracy's outstretched palm.

"I haven't done any *zumbo* before," she said apologetically. "But I used to do a lot of ballroom dancing. Of course I'm a little rusty."

"No sweat," Tracy replied, tucking the note with Linda's under the ghetto blaster. "Right, let's get started. Everyone in line in front of me."

Audrey, Linda, and the newcomer formed a line.

"I'm Margaret," the old lady said to Linda.

"I'm Linda," she replied with a smile.

"Are you new to this as well?" Margaret said.

"Yes."

"Right, listen up everybody!" Tracy trumpeted. Her accent seemed to have moved suddenly westwards, completely overflying Dudley, Wales and the Atlantic Ocean. "We're gonna do some funky moves, some body-rolls, yo gonna twerk yo butts off - you betta believe it! Okay, get down and get with it – you do what I do, sisters!"

She fiddled with the ghetto blaster and a new, even more hideous noise came out of it. She turned the volume up to eleven. A disembodied voice gabbled at them.

May I have your attention please?

I'm not afraid (I'm not afraid)
To make some money (to make some money)
Everybody (everybody)
Come shake your bum (come shake your bum)
We'll walk on the beach together, through the storm
Cold or warm.

Linda was puzzled by the lyrics, but even more puzzled by Tracy's initial movements. A kind of jelly-like wobbling of all the interior contents of the grey tracksuit was accompanied by arm movements suggestive of battling a persistent wasp or mosquito intent on landing on her nose. Just as Linda thought she was getting the hang of that, Tracy turned her back on them and began a series of low squats, the first of which was accompanied by a very audible fart.

“Whoops, sorry!”

Audrey squealed with laughter.

“You minger!”

Next was a series of corkscrew movements, like an elephant attempting to climb a tree with scant success. As Linda laboured conscientiously to emulate her mentor, she was aware on her left of Audrey starting to pant alarmingly, as if about to have a seizure, while on her right Margaret

was now standing stock still, like a stunned witness to a road crash.

Luckily the first song was a short one. Once the singer had enjoined them to “*All just fuck off now!*” Tracy pressed a button on the player and announced a short break. Sweat was trickling down her brow and a damp patch was forming on her ample frontage.

“Jesus, Trace!” Audrey announced, walking over to a chair, scraping it out across the tiled floor and collapsing onto it.

“It’s all right. We’ll do a slow one next. Everyone else all right?”

She looked enquiringly at Linda and Margaret.

“That’s zumbo, is it?” Margaret said.

“Yes. *Zumba.*”

“Can you do it to other kinds of music?”

Tracy looked defensive.

“It’s up to the teacher to choose the music.”

“Of course, of course,” Margaret said meekly. “I just wondered.”

“I mean, you can’t do it to Mozart, you know.”

“No, of course. I wasn’t thinking of Mozart.”

“How’s the music for you, Leslie?” Tracy said. Her eyes were narrowed a little – an elephant that suspects lions in the long grass.

“Fine, fine,” Linda lied. Only fifty minutes of zumba hell remained in her life, so she might as well take the line of least resistance.

The session resumed. Margaret did a little shimmying on the spot, and made an excuse to leave twenty minutes before the end, claiming a need for a cup of tea. Linda returned her little smile of complicit sympathy as she decamped. Audrey sat out some of the time, and once went out with an explanatory wave of her cigarette packet. Linda laboured on, concentrating on the thought that she would never have to do this again, and that no-one who knew her would ever see this. She was, at least, getting some sort of exercise. Tracy slowed up considerably after the first few songs, and by the end of the session she and Linda were doing little more than wobbling on the spot.

As she left the scene of her torture, something on the floor caught Linda’s eye. It fluttered in the draught of air as she opened the door. A banknote. She stooped to pick it up. Ten euros. She glanced behind her. Tracy and Audrey were deep in some raucous conversation, their backs turned to her. Was this ten euro note one of the two that Tracy

had been paid for the class? How had it escaped to the door, in that case? Or was it a note that had been lying unnoticed in the bar since before the class? She felt a wicked little impulse, irresistible. A distant cousin of the wicked impulses that had governed her youthful behaviour. Closing her hand tightly around the note, making it her own, she slipped away. Now her experience had at least had the merit of being free.

After Linda had left for her zumba, it took Tom a long time to work up to his jog on the beach. For inspiration he re-read the article he'd found online about how Duane Jacobs of Mountain Creek, Kentucky, aged sixty five, had turned himself from a housebound fat slob into a muscle-packed machine that could run up a hill as fast as a horse. There were *before* photos of Duane Jacobs sitting like a giant toad on his couch, and *after* photos of Duane Jacobs posing like Charles Atlas atop some mountain peak with his shirt off, pectorals rippling under a sheen of sweat following his horse-like ascent. He'd found it encouraging when he'd read it before. This time he couldn't help noticing a certain fuzziness around the pectorals that might suggest digital retouching. It was Julia who had told him

about that – you couldn't trust a photograph any more, apparently.

He made himself a coffee, putting it off for a bit. Jogging on the beach was one of those scenarios that look attractive from a distance, he thought: a lean silhouette powering along the sand against the silvery backdrop of the sea, with *Chariots of Fire* on the soundtrack. But as he contemplated the imminent activity in close-up, he could imagine clearly the red, puffy face streaked with sweat, and hear the gasping protests of his outraged lungs.

However, his belly had ambushed him the night before from the bathroom mirror, coming at him from an unexpected angle, and something had to be done. It was hanging over the waistband of his pyjama trousers, like a little fat man leaning over a wall with a cigarette looking for a conversation. He sipped his coffee now and rolled a sausage of this superfluous flesh between thumb and finger. It wasn't going to go away of its own accord. This belly didn't fit with his idea of the new Thomas Rook. It was a stubborn hanger-on from the old days; the days of boozy lunches with clients and business partners, of eating out in the best new restaurants, and never walking further than the corner shop to get chocolate croissants and the *Express* on a Sunday morning. He'd had a month now in his new life,

but the belly had come along for the ride, and had no plans to leave. The golf wasn't giving him much exercise yet, since he hadn't progressed well enough on the practice range, in the pro's opinion, to make it worthwhile setting foot on the course itself, with all its problematical trees, lakes, sand pits and other hazards. Nor had he been swimming much as yet. The pool was unheated, and an experimental dip had ended prematurely with painful throbbing cold in the extremities. Funny how Richard had coped with it – that weird way of swimming he had must have kept him warm.

But the belly definitely had to go. Perhaps jogging might become pleasurable, once he got used to it?

It was only when Linda's return was imminent that he nervously emerged from his front gate in shorts, sleeveless athletics vest and trainers, all brand new. He cast an eye along the road, with its lines of stubby young palms marching off into the distance like friendly dwarfs with feathery caps. There were no dog walkers or cars. Good. He felt as if he'd like this jogging to be a private sort of affair, at least until he'd got into the way of it. He'd gathered that stretching was a good idea before running, so, with another furtive glance up and down the road, he made an attempt to touch his toes. He nearly overbalanced. He'd

got just below his knees anyway. That was a start. Well, he might as well get going, gently did it at first. He launched into a kind of trotting walk that he could accelerate into a jog if he spotted anyone watching him. He wished he felt less self-conscious.

The road had a helpful gradient, winding down gently to sea level in big looping curves past houses as palatial as Elysium. He ran his builder's eye over what could be seen of them. It was a distraction from the discomfort of his progress.

Most were in the traditional Spanish style, with white walls, roofs of red pantiles, and shuttered windows behind ornate black metal bars; security masquerading as decoration. It was odd, he thought, how many of them had their shutters closed. In fact, it was puzzling how few people were about generally. Sometimes the Valle had the air of a ghost town.

Other houses were pugnaciously modern: long horizontal slabs of whitewashed or coloured concrete with south-facing terraces, and oddly angled corners, like higgledy-piggledy piles of books. These relied on more modern methods of self-defence than the shutters and iron bars of the Spanish styled houses. Signs on their gates warned of CCTV cameras and something called *vigilancia*.

Sometimes there was a silhouette image of a man with a rifle. It was impossible to determine whether or not the modern houses were occupied. The glass of their windows was tinted, or reflecting, giving the houses themselves the air of silent observers, hiding their eyes behind sunglasses.

When he reached the beach – so far, so good - there was hardly anyone about. A fisherman stood with his hands in his baggy jacket pockets, his two rods fixed in the sand and the lines stretching out beyond where the waves were breaking. It didn't look a promising spot to Tom, but he knew nothing of fishing, and the man looked Spanish - grizzled and stoical - so he probably knew what he was doing. In the far distance was a single dot that could have been either a man or a woman, and near to it another even smaller dot darting about that was certainly a dog.

That was the whole population of the beach at this late afternoon hour. Tom chose the opposite direction to the dog-walker, and gingerly increased the pace of the walk-trot he had employed so far into something that more fitted his idea of jogging.

The sand was resistant, but he found that nearer to the water line it was firmer, because a little wet, and easier to jog on. He laboured manfully for a while, getting up a kind of rhythm, and glanced at his watch. Jesus! It was only

nine minutes since he'd set out from the house, and he'd thought of half an hour as a gentle start for his first outing. Could he keep this up for half an hour?

After what felt like an eternity of affliction, he had left behind all traces of civilization. There was a cluster of buildings on the horizon, but just here the beach was backed only by sand-dunes bristling with untidy spiny grass, their long scruffy crests surging out from the land as if to meet the waves. Lumbering along in this great empty space, on the dividing line between land and sea, Tom felt as if his whole being had contracted into a painful knot of sensations. Seagulls seemed to shriek right inside his ear, and the waves pounded in slow counterpoint to the rapid thumping of his heart. He kept glancing at his watch imploringly until at last he'd been going for a quarter of an hour, and could turn around. He felt as if he were labouring in hell. Sweat ran into his eyes, and the sand and sea in front of him blurred into a dazzling smudge. Pain was coming in waves too now, pains in his knee, his hips, and now his chest. Well, if this was what it took to get fit, he was man enough for it! Thomas Rook was made of stern stuff! He stumbled slightly as he slewed around to make his return journey, scorned the whingeing demands

from his lungs to stop for a moment to get his breath, and pounded on.

Back at Elysium, Linda pulled off her damp zumba outfit and showered. She felt less exhausted than she had anticipated – perhaps she wasn't *too* unfit - but she was badly disappointed in the social outcome. Margaret had seemed nice, but had vanished before she had a chance to get to know her. As for Tracy and Audrey... well, there would be no cappuccinos with them in this life or the next.

Drying her hair, she wondered how Tom was getting on. Evidently he was still out on his run, so she thought she would wander down towards the beach to give him a little moral support. She expected she would see him before she reached the beach, on his way back. He'd have plenty of time to shower and cool down while she walked back, and then they could have a sundowner together.

However, she reached the beach without seeing any sign of Tom. This surprised her. How far had he gone? The beach was almost deserted. She scanned her eyes in both directions, looking for a distant bobbing shape. Could he have gone so fast and so far as to be out of sight? Turning to her right at random, she strolled along unhurriedly,

glancing behind her occasionally in case he reappeared the other way.

At first she thought it was a bit of driftwood, and then an abandoned heap of clothes. Then she saw flesh – an arm, and a hand. She went cold all over with an awful premonition. It was Tom, and he was dead! She rushed forward. It *was* Tom!

“Tom, Tom! Oh Christ! What’s happened?”

She knelt beside his prostrate form. He was on his side. Thank God, he stirred slightly at her voice! She leaned over him and put her ear to his chest. He was breathing. His eyes opened, and his unfocused gaze wandered off into the sky. There were flecks of saliva at the corners of his mouth. He mumbled something.

“Tom... Tom! I can’t hear you!”

His eyes found her face, but he still didn’t seem to focus.

“It’s Linda, Tom! Linda...”

He made another inarticulate sound, and twitched a little to one side, as if in an attempt to rise.

“Just stay still. Rest there, Tom. I’m going to get help.”

She fumbled for her mobile phone. She’d nearly left it at the house, and then thought... what had she thought? Anyway, she had Spanish emergency numbers stored in it. She called the number for medical emergencies, and thank

goodness, got someone who spoke good English. An ambulance would be on its way.