The Fontainebleau

*Where the British love affair with Nerja, Spain began.*

*Based on a true story.*

Paul S Bradley

with Robert H Edwards

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Until the 1970s, Nerja was a tiny, unspoiled Spanish Mediterranean fishing village, where nothing much happened, and tourists were a rare species. In 1972, the Websters, a business-minded family from London arrived in their Rolls Royce and purchased a half-finished hostel, the Fontainebleau. Their concept was to offer British sunseekers a homespun corner in a foreign field, where they could enjoy cottage pie tapas and not have to bother learning the language.

The Fontainebleau is a light-hearted nostalgic return to the beginnings of the British love affair with Spain and the obstacles foreigners faced setting up a business in a nation controlled by a brutal dictator. Today, Nerja is among the top ten quality Spanish resorts.

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This is a fictional account based on a true story. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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Approximate Currency Conversion Rates in 1974

1 US Dollar = 60 pesetas

1 Pound Sterling = 141 pesetas

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Chapter 1 – Hodson’s Choice

Cedric Hodson may have been eight years older than my tender twenty, but he was neither mentor nor boss. We ran a part-time mobile disco on a fifty-fifty basis, but ‘business partner’ was too strong a description for our relationship. We had christened our insignificant disco enterprise Narixa and performed at private parties, weddings, and rugby clubs across West London. We may have gone onto greater things, and my life could well have taken a different course, but shit happens.

Cedric lived in a four-bedroomed pebble-dashed house with three others on a road running parallel to Hounslow High Street in West London, not far from Heathrow Airport. I parked my beloved, but not so new, silver Jaguar 420G behind his BMW in the driveway, clambered out, rang the *Rule Britannia* doorbell, and waited for the usual tardy response.

The dark grey sky threatened an imminent April shower, and the depressing front garden resembled a scrap heap; wrecked bike frames and a rusting Lambretta scooter with smashed chrome wing mirrors squashed a carpet of rotting weeds interwoven with the remnants of a few daffodils.

“Hi Robin,” said Harry opening the squeaking door. Harry was a short ginger-haired man in his mid-twenties. He was dressed in his BEA uniform. All four housemates were pilots working one week off and one week on for the iconic airline. They were never present simultaneously. “Cedric didn’t mention you were coming.”

“He rarely does, we are off to get some new speakers,” I said. “In his room, is he?”

“Er… yes,” said Harry, grinning. “Go on up. He’ll be delighted to see you.”

A trim phone was ringing somewhere and David Bowie’s *Rebel Rebel* was blasting on the stereo record player in the lounge. I trotted up the linoleum-covered stairs, wondering why Harry was being so effusive when, normally, he was as quiet as a church mouse. I paused outside Cedric’s door to admire the Narixa advertising poster of the two of us standing behind the sound system wearing our trademark bright red mock military jackets surrounded by hordes of adoring teenage girls. Iknocked, and, as always, walked straight in.

The untidy room stank of body odour and sex.

Cedric, a tall, well-muscled, mousy-haired man in his mid-twenties was under the bed covers lying back against the headboard. His freckled hairy arm was wrapped around a naked young blond girl, who was snuggling into his manly chest. She glanced up.

“Robin,” she said.

I could have been the cleaner for all the care she showed toward me. She was, after all, Tracy, who until this moment I could have sworn had been my faithful girlfriend for over a year.

“Is this a joke?” I said.

“Ah, er... Robin, sorry, I forgot you were coming,” said Cedric.

“Distracted, were you?” I said, clenching my fists.

“It appears so,” said Cedric, blushing.

“Anything to say, Tracy?” I said stepping closer to the bed and glowering at both.

“You know how I am with uniforms,” said Tracy. “Especially fly boys.”

“Joysticks, Tracy,” I said. “Have always been your priority. Well, Cedric thanks for your loyalty, mate. Shown your true colours at last. Obviously, we can’t continue but now you owe me. Tell you what. Your choice. Narixa or the girl?”

Cedric glared back and forth between the two of us several times. Tracy gazed at Cedric, ignoring me.

“Tell you what, old boy,” said Cedric turning and putting his other arm around Tracy. “I’ll take the girl.”

“Er… fine, I’ll pack the gear and leave, goodbye.”

I walked down the stairs, pulse racing. Harry was standing at the bottom, his astonished expression staring up at me.

“Expecting a punch-up, were you?” I asked.

“I was hoping,” said Harry. “The arrogant arsehole deserves it. Little does Tracy know, but she’s the third in three days.”

“Then they are well suited.”

“What will you do?”

“I gave him a choice, the girl, or the business,” I said.

“And he took the girl?” said Harry.

“Correct.”

“Mad bastard. Listen, Barbados is calling, and I must leave for work, otherwise, I’d give you a hand with the gear. I’ll leave the door on the latch, help yourself.”

“Thanks, I will.”

“Nice to have known you,” said Harry shaking hands.

“Likewise,” I said heading out the door.

Adrenalin surged around my body, causing my hands to shake. Was I angry, disappointed, or hurt? I was certainly confused by this turn of events, even though half of me had been expecting something. My relationship with Tracy had recently cooled. Was it because she and Cedric had been an item for a while? Anyway, although finding them together was a shock, I now had a clean field to decide my future without emotional entanglements.

I opened the vehicle doors and boot and, piece by piece, transferred the valuable equipment from the cupboard under the stairs. The well-practiced routine didn’t take long. I knew exactly where everything went, so it all fitted in and didn’t rattle around under way.

The main console came in a solid wood cabinet with a removable lid comprising two turntables, a pre-amplifier, and a mixing console with a microphone. A separate external amplifier fed two large meter-high speakers. A sound-on-light, a unit that fed off the pre-amp music signals and transferred them to mobile light boxes, which reverberated off the bass, mid-range, and treble frequencies. A few bubble-light machines to reflect mysterious shadow patterns via a projector onto any wall or ceiling, and lamps for special effects.

I was about fourteen when introduced to the emerging concept of a disco. We were heading to southern Spain and paused overnight in Tossa del Mar. A delightful unspoiled village in north-eastern Spain, where an English couple ran a disco in the basement of a hotel on the beach. The dolly bird wait staff had a white line stitched around the bottom edge of their briefest miniskirts, which when highlighted in the dark by the ultraviolet bulbs were mesmerizing to a teenage boy seriously distracted by increasing levels of testosterone.

As soon as I had an opportunity, I formed my own disco, then met Cedric when performing at Harlequins Rugby Club. He played for their third team and expressed an interest in joining me in my venture. In the space of a year Cedric and I had amassed over a thousand singles and dozens of LPs, which we stacked into a custom-made timber cabinet. A removable lid revealed the discs organised in rows and sub divided into different categories for easy selection. It was heavy and needed two persons to lift it but pumped up after the bedroom confrontation, I managed to heave it into the back seat alone.

I returned inside for a final check and heard the two of them at it upstairs. Tracy’s orgasmic shrieks reminded me only two days ago, when it was me pleasuring her. My heart skipped a beat. She’d not been much of a girlfriend, rarely said anything meaningful and I knew she didn’t love me. Notwithstanding, I was fond of her and had grown accustomed to her kooky idiosyncrasies and tolerated her frequent demands for money. I’d given up counting how many hours I’d waited to pay for yet another pair of shoes. I don’t know why I had been so generous with her. Maybe it was because she reminded me of Spain, where we had met. But why had she gone off me? Was I too tall or skinny, did my full beard tickle her neck, or was my long hair too effeminate? Perhaps Cedric had a bigger wallet?

I gave them two fingers, left their front door open, climbed into the Jag, and pondered the future while departing Hounslow forever. Then the heavens opened. I selected a cassette from my collection in the glove compartment and inserted it into the player. I set the volume to max and sang along to, *I can’t stand the rain* by Ann Peebles*,* at the top of my discordant voice. Breakup and bad weather were an appropriate theme for the mood, I thought as I wiped a tear from my eye.

I drove aimlessly in a westward direction. I needed a diversion to rid my mind of its churning confusion. My ego was bruised, and confidence shattered. Sunbury should do it.

The windscreen wipers struggled to cope with the volume of water, and I could only just see where I was going as I turned onto Lower Sunbury Road.

I parked the car outside dad’s old garage, grabbed a telescopic brolly from the door well, and sprinted over the road fumbling with the catch. As the rain thundered on the brolly, I headed onto the footbridge joining the north bank with Sunbury Court Island, one of the few habitable islands on the river Thames. I paused in the middle, leaned on the railing, and gazed at the old wooden boarded family house halfway along the island shoreline. Our beautiful Italian speed boat bought at the Boat Show in London, with the winnings of a 'Yankee' horse race bet my dad had placed was still moored to the jetty, but the once bright red tarpaulin was now a dirty brown.

I lit up a cigarette, and let my mind wander back to when we lived here only two years ago when the chaos prompted by the oil crisis changed our world forever. With petrol now three hundred percent higher, inflation rampant and the UK reeling after three-day weeks, it was hardly surprising the tax-grabbing Labour Government took office in the March elections.

My parents had seen this coming, sold up, and taken a huge gamble with a hare-brained scheme to buy a half-finished hotel in Nerja on the eastern Costa del Sol in Spain. For some completely unfathomable reason, my father preferred the thought of life under a brutal dictator against that of an inept bunch of socialists determined to bankrupt the country.

“At least we’ll be warm when the lights go out,” he said on more than one occasion as a way of justifying it to us.

My two elder sisters, Gloria and Diana, had chosen to remain with their husbands and kids in the UK but the rest of us had elected to go to Spain. My difficult elder brother Mark did not want to go at all, but he deferred to his wife Susan and two children, Sally and Matthew, who couldn’t wait. To me, it sounded like an adventure in paradise. I was as excited as the kids when, a few months later, with everything sold, we jumped into dad’s Rolls Royce and headed for the sun with great expectations.

It was a disaster.

The hotel was nowhere near finished.

The builder’s excuses were generally plausible but always accompanied by yet another invoice for extras we had assumed were included.

While we waited and waited for the next pathetic excuse and drain on our resources, life in our spacious, supposedly temporary apartment became strained, to say the least. However, as the weeks and months ticked by, another problem started to raise its ugly head – money. Spanish bureaucracy banned us from working at anything else other than the hotel and with closed and waiting for Spanish builders, we quickly became strapped for cash. My dad clamped down on the usual free-flowing money supply to which we had become accustomed, so we had to content ourselves with life on the beach without the benefit of sunbeds and sangria. I had to stretch out a single beer for the whole night, but far worse was living in such close quarters with my brother. Inevitably, it brought out the worst in both of us causing screaming matches and the kids running off crying to their bedroom to escape the bad-tempered atmosphere.

Our rented apartment was on the edge of town in La Torna building located on the corner of Calle El Barrio and the early makings of Castilla Perez. There was plenty of room, but a football field wouldn’t have provided enough distance between us to deter our mutual misery. Our life had always been comfortable and under control but now I could see the strain my parents were under as yet another extra had to be paid for. I could only respect their resilience but there was nothing any of us could do to help them and we never mentioned the, shall we pack it in words.

My only light relief from this domestic cauldron was the actress Yootha Joyce. She had an apartment in the same building to escape shooting episodes of the British TV Series, *Man About the House*. She enjoyed a tipple or two of brandy, but was always friendly and usually departed with a slurred pithy remark and half a wave.

Then Tracy arrived.

She was with her parents. I bumped into her in the lobby and our first exchange was almost one of relief someone of the same generation and linguistic persuasion was nearby to relieve the tedium of constant parental supervision. I failed to notice at the time, but her parents must have been pleased she was off their hands. We quickly became an ‘item’ and spent hours walking along the beach, swimming, and the occasional pedalo ride. She tanned quickly and with her long blond hair, shapely curves, and tiny bikini, attracted admiring glances. I felt proud to be her boyfriend even more so when one evening she invited me to her room when her parents were out.

She was willing and enthusiastic. I was in Heaven and soon learned to shin up to her room two floors above using the balcony railings. Thankfully, after a day on the Fundador brandy, Yootha remained unconscious and snored loudly as I scrambled past her open window in my best Edmund Hillary fashion.

Life was infinitely more bearable with Tracy as a distraction from the never-ending hotel-building saga, but I could see my parents’ confidence draining daily. Failure was something they had never experienced and were ill-equipped mentally to deal with experience, but they soldiered on. When Tracy’s parents announced they were driving their American station wagon back to the UK the following week, I saw my chance at escape and asked to go with them.

My parent's attempt to dissuade me was half-hearted. I didn’t mind, I was going anyway. Not just to be with Tracy but to free my parents from fraternal tension and be one less mouth to feed.

The journey back was pleasant enough but being back in the UK was awful but I soon readjusted to the cold and grey in a tiny bedsit in Staines in one of my father’s investment properties. I worked in one of his old betting shops, but I soon had the idea for my discotheque and within a few months was making ends meet. Then I met Cedric and that was nearly a year ago.

A particularly heavy burst of rain shook me back to reality.

This spot on the bridge used to be my therapist, a safe haven well away from Mark’s snide remarks and insults, where I could chew over life’s mysteries. It still was. The muddy water swirling downstream calmed me and when a piece of driftwood floated by, I wondered like me, where it might end up. The treatment was working, my mind ceased its turmoil over Tracy, and clarity returned.

Ducks and swans glided regally among the reeds, the rain not bothering them at all; a water rat scuttled down the bank and disappeared into the greenery. As my short tenure on the island flashed before me – I recalled the exhilaration when returning home from boarding school. Picnics on the lawn, racing up and down the inlet in the boat, and the sadness when returning for another term in that awful place supposed to provide the best education money could buy. Some academic nerdy types thrived there but not me. I was more of a learning-by-doing type student and whoever put the curriculum together had made no allowances for people of my persuasion. I’d left when I was sixteen with a few measly ‘O’ levels. Life would be my university.

My eyes watered as a vision of Alison; my first girlfriend, appeared hovering over the river. She seemed so realistic, I almost reached out to touch her soft blond hair and could sense her inexperienced tender lips on mine. During my middle teens, we’d met on successive annual family Mediterranean cruises and exchanged letters for several years but somehow, we had lost touch. Her memory stirred something within me, a thirst for family and warmer climes.

A sudden gust almost blew me over, exposing me to the tempest. Within seconds I was soaked to the skin, but I was more concerned about my tan-brown leather jacket. In the blink of an eye, it had transformed from a stylish fashion statement into a soggy rag.

“Enough,” I shouted to nobody but the inclemency. “Spain, here I come.”

I shook my head to clear the raindrops streaming down my face, flicked the damp cigarette butt into the water, watched it float away, and headed for my bedsit. On the way I spotted a phone box and pushed inside. I rooted in my pockets for some coins and dialed the number I had long since memorised. There was some noise on the line as the phone connected and then the ringing tone.

“The Fontainebleau,” said the voice.

“Mum?” I said after pressing button A and listening to my piggy bank contents disappear for ever. I picture my mother, standing in the lobby of the hotel, phone pushed up against her ear.

“Robin, how lovely to hear your voice. Where are you?”

“At home. I’m using the payphone dad so generously installed in the hall. It eats up my coins faster than a gecko swallowing a mosquito, so I’ll keep it brief. Have you opened yet?”

“Our first busload of package holidaymakers from Wings Tours arrived yesterday.”

“How is it going?” I asked.

“Hectic, we completely underestimated how many staff we needed. Is there any chance you could come and help?”

“It’s why I’m phoning. I’ve had enough here. Is it all right if I drive down like now?”

“Of course, darling. Is there anything wrong?”

“No, but I’ll explain when I see you. I’ll be there in around forty-eight hours, ok?”

Just as the beeps announced more coins were required, we squeezed in our goodbyes.

Chapter 2 – Farewell Blighty

My father’s investment property was just off Staines High Street. Originally a four-bed Victorian house, it had been converted into thirteen one-bed apartments and studios. The builder, a mate of my dad, supposedly, had skimped on the sound insulation between rooms, which had proved embarrassing when Tracy was feeling amorous. Sadly, I was accustomed to the consequences of my father’s do it on the cheap mentality. He might drive a Rolls Royce but when it came to choosing good builders, he was a walking nightmare.

I stripped the sheets and tidied up the tiny room. There wasn’t much, so it didn’t take long. I walked into Staines town centre, dropped the bedding and dirty clothes into the laundry, and went to Curry’s to purchase a high technology present for my parents. Everyone was raving about them on TV, and it would be a useful tool at the hotel. I carried the large weighty package home and found a place for it in the Jag on the front passenger seat before adjourning to the Beehive. It wasn’t my local pub but the owner of the betting shop, where I worked most mornings, always propped up the bar on his way home and, out of respect, I felt I owed him an explanation for my sudden departure. He was a dapper, short, balding, rotund fellow with a bushy moustache and the name of Reg. By the expression on his face, he was pleased to see me.

“Not your usual establishment,” said Reg. “What can I get you?”

“Thanks, a quick pint of Guinness, I have to collect my laundry before it closes.”

“Going somewhere?” said Reg.

“I’m done with this country,” I said. “I’m off to join my parents.”

“I wondered how long it would take,” said Reg. “You were never cut out for Turf Accounting. Not like your dad and grandfather. Now they were geniuses, both trailblazers in the gambling game. Did you know your grandfather was one of the first to take bets at Kempton Park racetrack?”

“I remember my dad holding me while we watched my grandfather at work. He was a Tic Tac man who wore white gloves and stood in front of his odds blackboard by the ring, where the horses were led round by stable hands so punters could gauge their fitness. I was fascinated when he signed secret codes by hand to officials and other bookies. They taught me some of the signals and sometimes I was held up above the crowd and waved whatever they had told me. I still remember the gesture for Evens – also referred to as straight up, Scotch, levels, you devils, or Major Stevens. I had to extend the forefingers of each hand and then move them up and down in opposite directions. Yet I don’t recall my father having anything to do with betting until I was in my teens, I thought he ran a toy shop.”

“That was just a cover, the real business was done upstairs. Before off-track betting was allowed, bookies disguised their illegal bet-taking behind a kosher activity. Your dad had runners covering every pub, office, and factory in the area. As soon as the law was changed and his license was issued, he junked the toys, stuck up a new sign, and moved downstairs, where the business thrived and expanded to the four shops, I bought from him two years ago.”

“Much to the dismay of the local model train lovers,” I said finishing my beer. “Anyway, thanks for putting up with me.”

“My pleasure but don’t bother coming back. Don’t get me wrong, I like you as a person, you’re reliable and a good laugh but I only employed you out of respect for your father. Now I can get a real pro on board. Let’s shake hands and I wish you luck.”

“Thanks, Reg, and I thought I was doing you a favour. My dad asked me to come and help to make sure you didn’t bugger up his business.”

“Ha, he fooled us both. He was always a devious one.”

“So, I’m learning.”

“What will you do, in the hotel I mean, only you can’t have had much experience.”

“I was an apprentice at the Connaught Hotel in Mayfair, for a year when I was sixteen. Then at seventeen, I ran the restaurant at the Magpie Hotel in Sunbury-on-Thames, which belonged to our next-door neighbour. We had a Turkish chef, who's most popular starter was gambas al pil-pil. I might not be the Galloping Gourmet, but I know how to run a bar.”

“Just as well, you’ll need to sell bucketloads of gin and tonics to make any real money and while I hope the hotel goes well it won’t be easy under a fascist dictatorship.”

“And Dad said it would be a snip after being a bookie. Cheers Reg.”

“Bye, Robin. And Robin?”

“Yes, Reg.”

“At least the weather is nice in Spain. Say hi to your dad and tell him no. When the hotel fails I won’t be interested in selling him back the business.”

It started raining again as I sprinted into the launderette, pondering Reg’s parting words. Was the hotel doomed before it even started? I brushed the negative waves aside. We Websters were made of sterner stuff and never failed at anything, well, except for building things and fraternal relationships.

“I’ve even ironed your smalls,” said the kindly lady behind the counter as she handed over practically every item of clothing I possessed, neatly folded into two plastic bags.

“You needn’t have,” I said.

“My pleasure, darlin’,” she said. “Your girlfriend, or whoever washes them next, will be impressed.”

“No girlfriend now. It will be my Mum.”

“Never mind, dearie, a pretty boy like you, there’ll soon be another one.”

“Not where I’m going.”

“Where’s that?”

“Spain.”

“Oh, you lucky bugger. Here it’s pissing’ down as usual. But surely those Spanish girls are gorgeous? All steamy and passionate. Know what I mean?”

“I agree, they are stunning, especially in those tight curvy dresses but when you can’t speak a word of their lingo, you don’t stand a chance of seeing what’s underneath.”

I left her cackling, ran back to the car, and squeezed the now dripping bags onto the floor in front of the passenger seat. I drove back to the flat, picked up the rest of my stuff, and was off.

I prodded an Otis Reading tape into the player and headed for Portsmouth as the opening refrains of *Dock of the Bay* echoed around the overloaded interior.

I had no idea how much petrol cost in France. Knowing my luck, a lot cheaper but I stopped outside the harbour and filled up the Jag. Ouch, I thought handing over my newly acquired Access Credit Card to the pump attendant and wincing.

As I drove up the ramp onto the ferry, I wasn’t sad to leave the home of my birth. Not one bit.

Chapter 3 – Hola España

After eight hours of choppy seas, the Portsmouth ferry arrived at Le Havre in Northern France. My concerns about sound equipment and officious French customs officers proved unfounded and they waved me through with a disinterested frown. I headed south along Routes National aiming for Paris, Lyon, and Montpelier. At the Spanish border south of Perpignan, there was a massive queue. Several hours later, I apprehensively handed over my documents to an alert official who prowled around the Jag as if he were about to pounce. “Que es?” he said.

“Jaguar,” I said.

He nodded approvingly, returned to his booth stamped my passport with a temporary visa and I was through.

Winding my way down the coastal road toward Barcelona I couldn’t fail to observe the ever-increasing numbers of builders’ cranes and hotels under construction. It was nonstop from San Feliu through our old favourite, Tossa del Mar, Calella de la Costa, and on to Arenys de Mar forming the early makings of the Costa Brava.

The holiday brochures for our hotel in Tossa had never ceased to amuse me. The front cover had been taken from the beach with clean golden sand in the foreground and a sparkling white building nestling against a clear blue sky. However, they cleverly omitted to reveal, or mention, the busy main road and railway line between the beach and the building. We diced with death crossing them every day.

It was noisy, dusty, and extremely busy even at this early time of the season, bikini clad blonde girls were sunbathing and playing volleyball as crowds of Spanish boys ogled their every move. They must be German or Scandinavian here for the Easter break, I presumed. The building work petered out the further south I drove and disappeared completely after I turned inland at Alicante toward Granada.

All those hotel builders can’t be wrong, I thought as Barry White’s deep bass tones thumped around the car. Surely, we must be doing the right thing. The climate in Nerja is even better than the east coast with balmy winters and our beaches are far more intimate and beautiful than these long boring stretches of sand.

I’d been visiting Spain since my early teens. Sometimes we flew but mostly drove down in my dad’s car. The journey was an adventure and the vehicle attracted loads of interest as we drove through populated areas. However, with a high percentage of socialists and communists among Spanish people, some remarks weren’t particularly flattering. Thankfully, we failed to understand most, but fist waving was not a rare occurrence. Perhaps they assumed we were hated landowners or friends of Franco.

We had discovered Nerja quite by accident.

My parents had friends in Gibraltar and before Franco closed the border in 1969, we were visiting them and had taken a day trip to what was then the small town of Marbella. There wasn’t much to see except construction along the beach. Those were the glorious days of Principe Alfonso Hohenlohe, a German-Mexican aristocrat, who had been touring the Mediterranean coast not long after the Second World War seeking opportunities to replenish the dwindling family coffers. Apparently, the cigar lighter in his Rolls Royce was on the blink and he stopped at the only garage to see if it could be repaired. It took longer than anticipated but it gave him time to meet local dignitaries and discuss the possibility of tourist development.

The Golden Mile and Marbella Club were his first investments and through his star-studded contacts, he attracted celebrities such as Stuart Grainger and Deborah Kerr and eventually Sean Connery and somewhere wallowing at the bottom of the pecking order, my dad.

On a later occasion, when I was thirteen, we were chasing hotels down the coast. Every single one we stopped at from Torremolinos to Fuengirola was full, but Marbella Club could accommodate us. Every evening there was a disco and while my parents imbibed at the bar, I wandered off to listen to the DJ in the ball room. He was a young English guy imported for the summer season with long hair, high heels and a shiny silver jacket. I would stand close to his equipment fascinated by how it all worked and while the music played, I asked him a few questions.

“Why do you need two turntables?” I said.

“So, I can start the next disc playing as the previous one fades out. Nothing kills a dance floor quicker than a pause to change the music. Listen I need to go to the men’s room, do you think you could change the disc for me?”

“Sure, why not?”

“These are the discs to play,” he said pointing at a pile of singles next to the deck. Just keep changing them until I return?”

There was no sign of him for twenty minutes and I was worried the pile was nearing the end, but he reappeared just in time.

“Well done,” he said. “Come back tomorrow and you can do it again. It gives me a break from an extremely long night and gives me a chance to chat up some girls.”

So, I did and thus the seeds were sown for my love of music and later my own disco.

It was during this stay my dad purchased a plot of land on the fringes of Marbella intending to build a retirement villa. The price was incredibly inexpensive when compared with our house by the Thames. Several years later, when he was ready to go ahead, the Puerto Banus marina project was in full cry, so finding a construction company interested in giving us an estimate was proving impossible. He approached the developers who sold him the land for help, but their only solution was to offer an exchange for a penthouse in Nerja, where they had recently completed the Parador Hotel.

We had never heard of ‘Nerger’, as we initially pronounced the town, yet after a six-hour drive along a narrow and curvy coastal road it was immediately obvious Nerja was everything we had dreamed of as our ideal Spanish retreat. Quiet, quaint, quirky, and even cheaper. They bought the apartment even though construction had barely commenced. It was the beginning of our family love affair with one of Spain’s most beautiful places.

Not much had visibly changed to the interior landscape of Spain since our first visit. The views to the left and right of the road, while driving through France, had been noticeably different. Lush green fields growing everything from grapes to garlic covered the terrain as far as the horizon. In Spain, there was nothing, just dry scrub, a few random olive trees, and on the fringes of each town and village, scattered allotments.

Other than fuel and potty stops, I hadn’t had a rest since hitting French territory. I was exhausted but stubbornly soldiered on wanting to reach Nerja. Just outside Granada I fell asleep at the wheel but woke in time to swerve back onto my side of the road. Thankfully, nothing was coming but at the next layby, I pulled in and slept for a few hours.

Some thirty hours after leaving Staines, I turned yet another sharp bend on the narrow coastal road near Rio de la Miel and there was Nerja in front of me. I pulled over onto a patch of rough ground and climbed out, my voice husky from hours of singing along to mainly Motown hits. While I puffed away at my umpteenth cigarette of the journey, I drank in the vision of my new abode.

This stretch of coastline was different from almost everywhere on the Costa del Sol. Stark limestone cliffs formed a backdrop to small and intimate coves, where the blue Mediterranean kissed the sandy shore. It was an active fishing region and at night, lines of boats bobbed up and down in a long line parallel with the coast. Their bright lights often being confused with low-lying stars.

Nerja caves had been rediscovered in 1959 by five boys out bat hunting, who fell down a hole and landed on top of a neanderthal skeleton and 45,000-year-old ceramics. It was rapidly becoming one of Spain’s most popular attractions outside of Madrid.

What appealed to me more than anything was the stunning landscape. Only several kilometres inland, the Sierras Tejeda and Almijara mountains, over two thousand meters above sea level, defined a sense of horizon protecting the town against imaginary invading hordes from the north. Somehow, I felt safer here than I had ever done in the densely populated city of my birth where the most prominent landmarks were church steeples and stinking gasworks. During the Nineteenth Century, there was a thriving sugar industry, in and around Nerja, with several mills and tall chimneys to process the cane. Their ruins still dotted the fringes of the town. Most of the plantations had disappeared but remnants existed, one of which was growing right up to the edge of Burriana beach where Ayo, a flamboyant local character had recently opened the first merendero - beach restaurant. A water-skiing school operated there in the warmer months run by some of the earlier English residents, Ken Taylor, and his son Chris.

The centre of Nerja was dominated by a promontory, The Balcón, as the locals had christened it, earned its name thanks to a visit by King Alfonso XII. In 1884, after a massive earthquake, he’d stood among the ruins and issued a decree that this central area of the town was to be rebuilt and referred to as El Balcón de Europa. The broad promenade is lined with palm trees and projects out over the Mediterranean providing stunning vistas of the Sierras and blue Mediterranean. On a clear day, the Rif mountains in Morocco were visible.

Every evening families strolled back and forth arm in arm nodding and smiling politely at each other and often stopping for a chat. This centuries-old tradition was how boys and girls had met each other under the watchful eye of their loved ones. This courting system was completely different from what I was accustomed to as I would eventually experience for myself.

Next to the Balcon stood El Salvador, the imposing Seventeenth Century Baroque-Mudejar church and bell tower. Some fifteen meters in front of the massive timber church doors and by the adjacent courthouse, a giant Norfolk Pine tree roughly half the steeple's height provided shade to churchgoers. Opposite the courthouse stood the town cinema with cars parked in front. At the far end, opposite the church doors where the town hall used to be back in the fifties, was a picturesque open-sided building decorated with geranium pots. Arches on three sides provided spectacular views over Playa Calahonda, one of Spain’s prettiest beaches, where the fishing boats parked up on the sand during the day. Various buildings housed fishing nets, fuel, and spare parts for the boat engines.

The beautiful actress Raquel Welch starred in *Fathom*, a spy film made in Nerja during the mid-sixties, with Anthony Franciosa and Richard Briers. There’s a seductive scene of her slinking down the steps to Calahonda in the briefest of bikinis surrounded by hunky half-naked men.

I stubbed out the cigarette and resumed the final few kilometres of my long journey. I wound slowly through the tiny hamlet of Maro and approached the outskirts of what was to be my new home.

There were a few signs of expansion on the eastern edge of town. A new school and a development known as Pueblo Andaluz were well under way. The Parador was visible from the main road and a few large villas lined Calle Rodriguez Acosta the road leading down to it. One of the villas was reputed to be owned by one of Franco’s ministers. The Guardia Civil presence was certainly more evident whenever he was down from Madrid.

The west side of town ended at Calle Castilla Perez, the north at Calle San Miguel and Plaza Ermita where a few residential properties surrounded the municipal market and Ermita de Nuestra Señora de las Angustias. The population stood at around ten thousand of which about a hundred were foreigners.

At Plaza Cantarero, I headed down Avenida Generalissimo Franco which everyone still referred to by its original name, Calle Pintada, and turned left into Calle Alejandro Bueno. I parked up behind my Dad’s Rolls Royce in the cul de sac to the side of the hotel.

Finally, I thought, standing in the middle of the street, and appraising the façade. Three floors rendered with white adobe, surrounding an open atrium with twenty-eight bedrooms and en suite bathrooms accessed by galleried landings. Each window was secured with ornate black wrought iron bars and garlanded with colourful window boxes. The solid timber front door had a glazing panel to the side. A large vertical sign in black and yellow certainly caught the eye. The Fontainebleau had turned out far more visually appealing than I had envisaged.

Despite my exhaustion, my heart soared.

Coming here had been the right decision. We just had to make it work.

Chapter 4 – Welcome to The Fontainebleau

I peered into the lobby through the glazing panel and spotted my mother as elegant as ever, standing behind the desk tapping on a calculator. My grandfather’s picture hung on the wall behind her. It was askew, a classic sign it had been mounted by my dad.

I entered and she looked up.

Her loving smile lit up my world.

Doreen Webster, or Donna as my mother preferred, was an attractive, deeply tanned woman in her late fifties sporting massive sunglasses dressed exquisitely in a sleeveless black dress with perfectly lacquered dark hair cut to curl under her chin.

Tracy was instantly forgotten.

I was home.

Donna burst into tears.

I rushed around the desk and hugged her. She shuddered and regained control.

“Pleased to see me?” I said concerned I might be the cause of the problem.

“Oh, Robin, thank God you’re here,” whispered Donna into his ear as a man came in from the patio and stood in front of the desk glaring at her. “I desperately need your help with this pest.”

Donna smoothed the front of her dress, took a deep breath and smiled. “Mr. Hancock, how may I help you?”

Amazed by her rapid transition, I moved alongside her and smiled at the diminutive, skinny man in his early fifties frowning at mother through squinty grey eyes. He was wearing a white short-sleeved shirt, with a row of cheap biros clipped neatly in his breast pocket. Khaki shorts covered his knees while long white socks disappeared up under the shorts. Plastic sandals and a white floppy hat completed the quintessential outfit of a certain breed of English gentlemen on holiday in warm places.

“Any news?” he said in a squeaky-clipped voice.

“None, I’m afraid,” said Donna.

“What sort of hotel is this?” said Hancock. “I’ve never been treated so badly in my life. Now, when am I going to get my suitcase?”

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“Who is this?” said Hancock.

“My son, Robin,” said Donna. “Robin, this is Mr. Sydney Hancock, an honoured guest staying for a week with his wife, Gladys.”

“Perhaps he could help discover where my luggage is. Nobody else has, only I’m running out of clothes.”

“First trip abroad, is it?” I ask.

“Yes, but what has that to do with my suitcase? When we go to Southend, British Rail never loses a thing.”

“Can’t beat the Brits, eh? Do you have travel insurance?”

“I do, but I fail to see how insurance will help locate my suitcase, young man.”

“Maybe not, but at least you could buy whatever you needed and claim it back.”

“I want my specific case. It belonged to my grandfather, and the clothes to my father. We’re talking irreplaceable family heirlooms here.”

“The Wings representative is doing her best, Mr. Hancock,” said Donna biting her lip. “They promised to ring me as soon as they’ve found it but rely on information provided by the airport and airline. It’s in their hands, I’m afraid and there is absolutely nothing I can do about it except wait for a call. Please try and relax and enjoy yourself. You are on holiday, after all.”

“But I can’t wear these again. They stink?”

“Have you anything you can wear?” I ask.

“The suit I travelled in.”

“May I suggest you wear it this evening, and we’ll run your er… beach outfit through our laundry.”

“Good idea, son,” said my father squeezing into the lobby next to me and then punching me lightly on the arm with one hand while holding the other close to his chest covered by a large bandage. Jack Webster was a tall, elegantly dressed man in his late fifties with greying dark hair and black-framed glasses. “Glad you’re here, every room is full, and as you can see, I’m hors de combat so we could do with the extra hands.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“Spot of picture hanging,” said Dad regarding his father.

“I accept there isn’t much you can do,” said Mr. Hancock irritated by the brief lack of attention. “We will take you up on your laundry offer. My wife will deliver it later but don’t stop calling Wings. I want my suitcase and I insist we keep the pressure on them, otherwise, I’ll be suing everyone, including this hotel.”

We waited until Hancock was out of earshot before having a three-way hug.

“Are they all like him?” I ask.

“Thankfully not,” said Jack. “But some of their stupid questions stretch my patience beyond belief. I'll scream if asked again for directions to the Balcon de Europa. Are you here to stay, son, or passing through? Did you bring Gold-digger with you or…?”

“Yes, I’m here to stay,” I said. “No, Tracy is no longer on the scene, and I’ve brought all my DJ gear, the latest discs, and bubble lamps. I thought installing them in the bar should attract the locals to keep us busy in low season.”

“Great idea,” said Donna. “It’s a bit flat on atmosphere, and your dad and Mark aren’t exactly mister sparkling barman of the year, plus their Sangria tastes like old socks.”

“Talking about me again,” said Mark standing at the bar door. He was a slender man of twenty-six with longish dark hair and the Webster brown eyes.

“Oh,” he added as us three separated, revealing me. “Check what the cat dragged in.”

“Nice to see you, bro,” I said with as little enthusiasm as I could muster.

“To see you, nice,” echoed Donna and Jack, laughing.

“Mum, Dad, please; no more Bruce Forsyth,” said Mark, scowling. “The one thing I do like about living in Spain is the absence of *give us a twirl* on Saturday evenings. Anyway, where’s it going to sleep? We don’t have any spare rooms.”

“We do,” said Donna. “Room three is being used as a storeroom for the drinks.”

“Do me jush fine,” I said mock swaying.

“All you are good for,” said Mark. “Women and booze.”

“You’re a married man and father now,” I said. “You need to forget about the freedom us bachelors enjoy and get on with your paternal responsibilities with at least some pretext of enjoying it.”

“As usual, no respect for your elders,” said Mark with fists clenched.

“Three seconds and they’re at it again,” said Donna, laughing. “Robin, you’ll have to make room in the kitchen storeroom and move the drinks in there, but it can wait until tomorrow. Mark, fetch Susan and the kids, and let’s have a quick glass of champagne to celebrate Robin’s arrival before the punters arrive back from the beach. Where did you park your car?”

“I didn’t want to leave it too far away from the hotel, so squeezed in behind the Rolls. It’s jammed full of my expensive gear and a rather special surprise.”

“Something along the jewellery line?” said Donna. “Or even better, tea bags?”

“Or Marmite?” yelled the kids as they rushed in and jumped into my arms. Sally was five years old with shoulder-length dark hair, twinkling brown eyes, and a smile to melt most hearts. Matthew was six, slightly taller than his sister but with similar hair and eyes. His two front teeth were missing, and he spoke with a lisp. I hugged and kissed them both. They smelled of coconut sun lotion.

“You pour the drinks, Mark,” I said lowering Matthew and Sally. “I’ll go fetch.”

Mark stomped off to open the champagne. Two minutes later, I returned carrying the large, heavy box from the front seat. I plonked it on the bar, ripped off the sealing tape, and heaved out a white machine with a window in the front door. Everyone gathered around, straining to see what it was.

“Duh, English TV doesn’t work here,” said Mark popping the cork and spilling half the champagne over the bar.

“It’s a microwave oven,” I said.

“We have an oven,” said Mark.

“It’s the latest technology,” I said. “It can defrost a frozen cottage pie in three minutes.”

“Amazing,” said Susan, Mark’s wife joining us. Thankfully, Mark had married this lovely lady in her mid-twenties with long blond hair and hazel eyes. She tolerated my brother’s mood swings, was organized and practical. “Now the chef can batch-make everything in advance and pull out a frozen one when needed. It’s a game-changer and the first I’ve seen in Nerja.”

“Then let’s drink to the microwave,” said Jack. “Was it expensive?”

“Don’t worry, dad,” I said. “It’s my treat.”

“Must be money in this DJ lark,” said Mark.

“Can’t complain,” I said.

“Then why give it up?” said Mark. “There’s nothing to do here where you can earn good money. It’s like slave labour.”

“Now Mark,” said Jack. “That’s not the way to think. We are investing our time and money into building our own business which, when we sell it in ten years or so, will give us a substantial capital gain.”

“I doubt we will see any of it,” said Mark. “Meanwhile, we are just cheap workers.”

“Nonsense,” said Jack. “Of course, you will share in the profits plus you have a wonderful life here, a free roof over your head, a full stomach, and no commuting or stress. Your kids and wife love it to bits.”

“Harumph,” said Mark scowling. “He’s just another mouth to feed.”

“On the contrary, my sound system will attract customers,” I said. “Rather than go elsewhere they will stay in the hotel bar and spend their holiday funds with us.”

“And most of them will stay up drinking all night,” said Jack rubbing his fingers.

“You catch on quick, dad,” I said.

“What’s the secret to this DJ lark?” said Donna.

“Chirpy banter and powerful speakers,” I said.

“Not too loud,” said Donna. “Otherwise, Mr. Hancock will be complaining.”

“Bloody cavalry arrives in the nick of time,” mumbled Mark.

“What, Mark?” said Donna.

“Champagne is ready,” said Mark passing the overfilled flutes around, the excess dripping onto the floor.

“Then welcome home, son,” said Jack raising his glass.

They chinked and sipped.

“I don’t want to leave my gear in the car overnight,” I said, savouring the Spanish Champagne's crispy tang.

“Better safe than sorry,” said Donna. “If you rearrange the drinks cases, there’s enough space in your room for tonight. Mark will help you bring it in.”

“Mark will not,” said Mark. “I have enough to do behind the bar and serving dinner. I can’t do both.”

“We can’t tolerate such attitudes,” said Jack. “We all pull together here. Robin has worked in a hotel and is far more personal with the customers than you or I will ever be, so he can take over the bar. You concentrate on porter duties, room service, taking dinner orders, and waiting tables. We will all help Robin unpack his gear, when we've finished these drinks. He can set it up tomorrow and work on an entertainment program.”

“Is Mickey Jingles here?” I ask.

“He went back to England yesterday,” said Jack. “But will be back next week. Did you think he could play guitar?”

“He’s certainly good enough,” said Mark. “And a bloody sight more enjoyable than Bruce Forsyth.”

“Shame, we could have had a Flamenco evening,” I said.

“Discuss it with the chef,” said Donna. “He’s bound to know someone.”

“The chef?” I said.

“El Rubio,” said Donna. “He is er...”

“Like you boarding-school boys,” said Mark glaring at me. “You know, queer. A poof, bent as a nine-bob note. You’ll need to watch your backside.”

“Stop your bigoted crap, Mark,” said Susan. “The word is gay. He has more charm in his little finger than you will ever have, and his cottage pie is amazing.”

“After three days of practice, I should hope so,” said Jack. “Had to throw the first four batches out. While you’re with him install the microwave and teach him how it works.”

“I’ll watch too,” said Susan. “Then I can speed up the kids’ meals and keep me out from under his feet. He’s a bit temperamental when I invade his territory. Who knows, such hi-technology might improve my culinary delights.”

“Miracles can happen,” said Mark laughing.

Susan scowled.

“Where is er, El Rubio?” I ask.

“He starts at six for the evening meals,” said Jack. “He is also an adept handyman and with this building, we can’t function without him. The electrics are dodgy, the plumbing is capricious, and cracks appear at will and that was only after a week of occupancy. Susan and your mum see to the rooms but on changeover days we all muck in with the bed linen, etc.”

“I see there’s a dartboard,” I said. “Have you thought of arranging a match with a local bar?”

“Great idea, son,” said Jack. “As entertainment is your thing, arrange it when you want; but don’t clash with the street market on Tuesdays or changeovers on Fridays.”

“Next week is Easter,” said Donna. “We shouldn’t have any raucous evenings while the processions are on.”

“And Robin you should be warned,” said Mark with a snide grin. “A Spanish bar opposite called Bar Bilbainos opened three weeks ago, some of their drunks stagger in here and cause havoc. Thankfully, they are neither aggressive nor pukers, but if your music encourages guests to stay up late, they won’t be able to resist the temptation. You’ll need to learn how to eject them as diplomatically as possible; otherwise, they’ll end up dancing Flamenco on the tables.”

“One more thing,” said Donna. “We had no idea how many English-speaking residents were in Nerja and the surrounding area. They seem to be adopting us as their place of solace in this sunny corner of a foreign field.”

“Which means?” I ask.

“The bar is full at midday and every evening from about seven,” said Mark, smirking.

“Then we should finish these and unload Robin’s car,” said Jack draining his glass and putting it by the sink. “There’s work to be done.”

With the sound gear stacked in my bedroom, I went behind the bar to familiarize myself with my new workplace. I hadn’t realized the room was so small. On the plans it had appeared much larger but in reality, it was about sixty square meters. I approved of the floral sofas with glass coffee tables by the window at the front of the building. They were typical of my mother’s interior design preferences but there were only half a dozen dining tables of four around the edge. If the hotel was full and everyone came down to breakfast at the same time, there wasn’t enough space to seat them all. We’ll have to add more tables to the patio. Then what do we do when it rains? Somebody hasn’t thought this through I concluded.

The freshly varnished bar counter sat on top of a brick and ceramic tiled support. Shelves lined the wall behind, glasses hung from racks above. The San Miguel beer taps were in place and had been connected to the kegs underneath. However, the taps took up more room than planned and the small domestic filter coffee machine had a capacity of eight cups. “Totally out of touch with the needs of forty thirsty clients,” I tutted. “Let’s hope they all drink tea, at least we have enough pots.”

To the right of the bar was an open passageway leading to the kitchen, toilets, and storeroom, which could also be accessed by a rear door in the cul de sac to the side of the building. The dartboard with blackboard side panels was mounted on the outer toilet wall but where would players stand to throw? Through the double doors leading to the open-topped atrium were comfy chairs and bushy ferns in giant terracotta pots. Several patrons were relaxing and enjoying the ubiquitous sunshine and the main feature of the hotel, a large blue ceramic fountain. The water gurgled gently.

“Robin?” said a soft male voice.

I looked up from trying to work out the mechanics of the beer chiller to see a short, slender man in his mid-twenties with swept-back fair hair and blue eyes wearing chef’s clothing appraising me a tad too closely.

I nodded.

“Hola, hi am El Rubio, cocinero. Nice meet you,” he said in extremely camp, broken English holding out his hand delicately. I was in two minds to shake or kiss it.

“Unusual name,” I said.

“El Rubio is namenick for persons with fair hair. My real name is Dario, but nobody call me that. You is serious. What think you?”

“We really haven’t thought this through,” I said indicating the bar. “It isn’t big enough to lay out the breakfast buffet. The coffee machine is pathetic and if all the guests come down for breakfast at the same time there aren’t enough tables.”

“I say same ting your father,” said El Rubio. “But he tell me make do with what we have.”

“Sounds like what he usually said when more money was required. What is on the menu?”

“Breakfast continental, peoples help themselves, we heat croissants and top up coffee,” said El Rubio. “On lunch and dinner menu is all English muck. The beef stew excellent but hi not know how peoples eat cottage pie or fish and chips. Why they no want paella?”

“Plenty of Spanish food in the bars and on the beach,” I said. “I can only assume, my parents wanted to provide something familiar in the hotel to make the guests feel at home.”

“Then why they come Spain?”

“You ever been to England?”

“Si,” said El Rubio.

“You like rain?”

“Crikey, no and it ice-cold.”

“That’s why the English come here for holiday, not for the food. Where were you?”

“Hi were in London working in Spanish restaurant. It where hi learn English.”

“You went to classes?”

“No, hi ‘ave English friend. ‘e taught me pillow talk. Perhaps you also teach me?” said El Rubio gazing at me.

“We can learn while we work together,” I said. “Meanwhile, I will need a Spanish girl to help me with more detailed vocabulary.”

“Not so easy,” said El Rubio. “Spanish girls difficult.”

“Why?”

“They need chaperones, us boys not.”

“Chaperones?”

“Si. You not allowed to take out girls on own, always someone like parent or friends obligated to escort.”

“Really? But this is 1974, surely those days are long gone.”

“Crikey, not in Spain,” El Rubio moved close to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and whispered into my ear. “It fascist dictatorship. Any persons say bad things against state, Franco, or break our traditional code of conduct usually disappear. I could be taken concentration camp just for saying you.”

“You serious or just scaremongering to get in my pants?”

“Crikey Robin,” said El Rubio, deeply offended. “I warn you this as friend. If you want Spanish girls, you must be carefuls. They not easy like English and obey parents all time. What bad for you is they keep knickers locked firmly for honour of family.”

“It can’t be as bad as all that.”

“You will see,” said El Rubio.

“Thanks for the warning. Now come into the kitchen, I need to show you a new machine I brought from England.”

“Hi like machines,” said El Rubio as we entered.

“Dad said you were a good handyman,” I said as I tried to plug in the microwave and hunted around for an adaptor.

“Just as well with you Websters, you not think about plug when you buy this?”

“I forgot.”

“I have adaptor here,” said El Rubio extracting one from a drawer.

“Most practical.”

“Hi learn from my father. We live in old house. Always something breaking. We ‘ave no money so I fix.”

“This is a microwave oven,” I said plugging it in and switching it on. “It cooks incredibly fast. A frozen cottage pie should be ready in three minutes.”

“Crikey is quick. It means I don’t have to guess how many we sell each day. Just take out from freezer when need.”

“Exactly.”

“Crikey.”

Chapter 5 - The English Revolution

“Has Dad approved of your new décor theme?” I said entering the hotel bar to discover Mark standing on a rickety wooden stepladder in the middle of the bar floor holding a plastic bucket and paint brush. He was splattering what appeared to be thin globules of wallpaper paste everywhere except where it was intended, on the ceiling.

“I’m bored to tears with bare walls and am jazzing the bar up a bit. Dad said it was fine to stick my favourite racing car posters on the ceiling and mount some pics on the wall. Can you give me a hand?”

“Only if you help me install the sound equipment, after.”

“Fair enough, pass me, Brands Hatch?”

I passed up the picture of the Brazilian Formula One driver, Emmerson Fittipaldi screeching around Druids Bend in a Lotus.

“Don’t take this wrong,” I said. “But if this is to impress our guests surely the theme should be flamenco artists, bullfighting posters, or Spanish cityscapes, not something they can see any day back home.”

“I don’t give a fuck what our guests make of them. These are for my enjoyment to help me cope with working in this dump. I thought you were a fan of Formula One?”

“I love it,” I said choking back a giggle as the Brands Hatch poster peeled ever so slowly off the ceiling and wrapped itself around Mark’s head. “And have no objections to your posters, but may I respectfully suggest they would adhere more effectively if the paste was a tad thicker.”

“It’s fine,” Mark snapped, untangling the poster, and reapplying it to the ceiling. This time he held up the paper until it stuck then brushed out a few of the air bubbles. “Next.”

Eventually, the ceiling was half-covered with an overlapping collage of Silverstone, Thruxton, Cadwell Park, Mallory Park, Snetterton, and others. The floor and bar stools though were covered with wallpaper paste. Happily, the haphazard poster arrangement met Mark’s approval. He returned the ladder to the storeroom and staggered back with an electric drill, and several framed photos, mainly of him racing Mini Cooper S cars around Silverstone, which he’d started when he was seventeen. He’d shown some talent.

The pebble dash walls were rock hard and proved a serious challenge to Mark’s slapdash hole boring dexterity. Four drill bits broke and the electric motor smelled burned out by the time the pictures were hung almost straight.

“I see you’ve inherited Dad’s skills around the house,” I said mopping paste off the floor, while Mark stood in the middle of the bar and admired his handiwork.

“They are up, aren’t they?” said Mark.

“Almost,” I said. “Except for those peeling away at the corners.”

Mark peered up. He saw nothing of the sort.

“Bastard.”

“Didn’t he do well?” I said, laughing. “Now, where can we mount the speakers and park the deck?”

Surprisingly, we had a good laugh while transporting the gear from my room and discussing where everything should go. Within half an hour *The Yellow Brick Road* album by Elton John was blasting forth.

My mum stuck her head through the lobby door and joined us having a dance for a minute or two. We took turns to twirl her around. My dad joined us, and it was just like old times back in our riverside home.

But then dad checked his watch, went over to turn down the music, and said, “It’s almost time to open for the evening.”

The mood swung back to tense as my parents exchanged worried glances.

Mark stomped off to shower.

While I surveyed my brother's inept attempt at arts and crafts, Mark returned in his black trousers and hotel polo shirt, just in time to make the final tweaks to the tables for the evening session. The chef had prepped the food and I had filled the ice buckets. At precisely seven p.m., the first guests of the evening came through the bar door rubbing their hands, eager for their first drink. They were a well-dressed couple, he, tall in his forties, she a little shorter, elegant, slightly younger.

“A new face,” he said, holding out his hand and gripping Robin’s. “Charles Bishton, my wife Jean. Let me guess; you must be Robin, right?”

“Are you hotel guests?” I asked.

“Good lord, no,” said Jean. “We’re your first regular locals. We run an estate agency called INFO on Calle Granada. We pop in every evening on our way home and often at lunchtime, so you’ll see a fair bit of us.”

“Can you mix cocktails?” said Charles as they slid onto bar stools.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m a professionally trained bar person, fresh from London’s Connaught Hotel. What would you care for?”

“Two dirty Martinis please,” said Jean. “It’s been a heavy day.”

It took a while to track down a cocktail shaker and olives, but eventually, I found them. I then made a complete fool of myself with a pathetic attempt to add drama to the occasion. I threw the gin bottle into the air, the idea being to catch it and then dispense a large measure of spirit into the shaker with flair and style. I dropped the bottle. But kicked it back up before it smashed to pieces on the terracotta tiles, caught it, and poured as originally intended. Mark watched my every move, and I could sense his glee as the bottle hurtled to the floor. When my lucky footwork rescued the situation, he scowled, stomped off into the kitchen, and could be heard yelling at the chef. I continued mixing the cocktail, poured the drinks, added an olive on a stick to each, and passed them over.

The Bishtons took a sip and nodded their appreciation. They chatted for a while about the real estate business in Nerja, and Jean excused herself. She attempted to climb off the stool, but it was firmly stuck to her skirt.

“Is this your new system to keep clients drinking?” said Charles.

“I am so sorry,” I said, stifling a laugh. “We were decorating the ceiling earlier. Regretfully, my brother was a tad over-generous with the wallpaper paste. I thought I’d cleaned it all but must have missed her stool.”

“Pass me a cloth and some hot water,” said Charles. He dabbed his wife’s backside with the damp cloth and gently peeled off the material inch by inch.

“Charles, darling,” said Jean after several minutes of squirming with discomfort. “Could you speed it up a bit? Only I need to…”

“Hold on, dear. Nearly there,” said Charles. However, the skirt refused to be separated from its newfound friend as Jean wriggled furiously.

“Wait,” shouted Jean. She turned back, grabbed the remaining material stuck to the stool, and yanked it hard.

The skirt remained glued to the stool, but such was her strength; it ripped below her petite derriere, and she was able to grab her bag and sprint to the ladies, her damp pink underwear exposed for all to see. When she’d disappeared, the two men howled with laughter. She returned, suitably relieved, and bashfully twirled to reveal a safety pin had provided an acceptable level of decorum.

Charles, meanwhile, had separated the rest of her skirt from the stool and presented it to her with much aplomb.

She gracefully accepted and stuffed it in her handbag after a little curtsey.

“How gracious,” said another new voice as a man of medium build and height joined them. He was in his fifties and speaking with a northern English accent. “I have no objections to unusual fashion statements, but may I inquire why half your skirt is missing, or is that the latest style?”

I stood waiting eyebrows raised.

“Robin, this is David Rowcroft,” said Charles.

They shook hands then I put on another album. The Carpenters singles.

“Along with astute fashion critiques, David is also known as Mr Ten Percent,” said Jean humming along to, *It’s only just begun*. “He is a capable Spanish speaker and is keen to introduce English-speaking newcomers needing help with anything to his pool of friendly and capable Spaniards. Surprisingly, they are efficient and reasonably priced, so we use them regularly. His wife, Kay teaches English to young Spanish children.”

“She’ll be along shortly,” said David.

“Don’t let the grey complexion, extended belly, and mild perspiration concern you,” said Charles. “Like us, he’s an alcoholic but until around the fifth drink continues to spout more or less intelligible sense.”

“Now you’ve mentioned the elephant in the room,” said David chuckling, “I’m not here to discuss my shortcomings, admire the grotty new Formula One ceiling paper, or astound you with my repertoire of terrible jokes. As Charles so eloquently put it, I am here to drink. Vodka and Orange is my poison, all day, and all night. This is the only time I’ll mention it. In future Robin, whenever you see me just pour but keep the ice to a minimum. It plays hell with my liver. Ah, there you are darling. Robin, this is my wife, Kay. Robin is fresh off the boat and is the latest member of the esteemed Webster clan to join us here in our little patch of paradise. I’m hoping his youth and seventies sound system will brighten our otherwise tedious life in the sun.”

Robin shook hands with the slender well-spoken lady with an elfin face. She was smartly dressed in an elegant royal blue sleeveless dress, short blond hair, and sunglasses.

“We are simple clients,” said David. “We both drink the same except Kay prefers lots of ice. Her liver is more robust than mine.”

“I look forward to chatting later,” I said as the next customer pressed me for service.

The bar filled. Mark circulated menus and took food orders. I was serving three customers at once with pints of San Miguel, when Mr. Hancock barged his way to the front of the throng. “I still don’t have my case. Any news?”

“As you can see, Mr. Hancock,” I shouted as beer froth spilled over the rim of a glass into the drip tray. “We’re a tad busy. Anyway, the offices at the airport are closed so we won’t be able to call them until the morning. Did you give your laundry to my Mum?”

“Yes, but I still don’t have my suitcase. This is most unsatisfactory,” continued Hancock at full volume, not appreciating the last track on the Elton John album had finished and the whole bar had fallen silent.

Deadly silent.

I served pints to another guest, noted his room number, and turned back to a snorting Hancock.

To my horror, two tall burly uniformed officers from the Guardia Civil were standing directly behind Hancock, towering over him, and glaring at me, ungainly tricorn hats tilted slightly forward casting a sinister shadow over the top half of their faces. To their left was a mean-faced man in his mid-fifties with a scarred lip. A faded brown leather patch covered his left eye. He was dressed in blue jeans and a black leather jacket with a prominent bulge under his left arm. All three were intimidating, exactly as Franco intended. Every customer watched them warily, you could hear a pin drop.

“As I was saying, I don’t have my suitcase,” shouted Hancock failing to notice I had turned white and was looking over his shoulder. “Mr. Webster, I’m not accustomed to being ignored.”

I stared at Hancock and indicated with head and eye movements he should turn around. “Is there something wrong with your eyes?” said Hancock. I repeated my eye movements, more exaggerated this time. Finally, something twigged. Hancock shook his head, turned, and glared at the officers. “At last,” he said without batting an eyelid. “Someone in authority. Have you brought my suitcase?”

The officers were astonished.

The man with the eyepatch shoved his colleagues aside and stood glowering at Hancock as if he was a piece of something he had trodden in. Spittle dripped down his chin. He lowered his forehead until it was almost touching Hancock’s. Hancock appeared unfazed by the invasion of his personal space or the man’s foul breath and flying saliva.

Mark bulldozed his way through the crowd and stood by the officers. “C… c… can I help you?” he said in English. He appeared terrified.

An exchange of rapid Spanish ensued between the officers. Eyepatch handed over a piece of paper to me. I glanced at it and couldn’t understand a word.

Wondering why nobody had collected the plated meals for service, El Rubio joined us, grabbed the paper from me, and scanned it.

“What do they want?” I asked.

“The hotel, she must close immediately,” said El Rubio. “You ‘ave no hopening license. All guests pack cases, leave now.”

“Is this a joke?” I asked. “And what’s an opening license?”

El Rubio consulted with the officers. With each second, he grew more nervous.

The elder of the two officers talked to the man with the eye patch, who nodded, said nothing, took out a notebook from his jacket, and opened it while glaring at Robin. “Nombre, name?” he said, removing a pencil from behind his ear and licking the point.

“Por que, why?” I said digging deep into the shallows of my vocabulary.

El Rubio regarded me as if I was stark, raging bonkers, nodding furiously. The man with the eyepatch glared at me with an expression of pure contempt, then opened his jacket to reveal a pistol in a holster under his arm.

“Robin Webster,” I blurted out.

“Que?” said the man.

“Robin,” I paused, waiting for the man to write it down, but he did nothing but stand and stare at me, pen poised.

“Webster,” I said. “Rob…in, Web...ster.”

The man in the suit made to write it down but seemed to have no idea how to spell the foreign name. He scribbled something, turned back to the elder officer, and nodded. The officer faced me and barked out his instructions.

“What do they want me to do?” I said.

“You m… m… make announcement,” said El Rubio his knees shaking. “P… p… people must go now. If not, they go prison, you too.”

I looked pleadingly at my elder brother.

Mark shrugged and turned away.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” I said. “These officers have ordered us to close the premises immediately. All hotel guests should pack their cases and leave, all bar customers should depart now. Sorry, but I have no idea why this has happened or how to prevent this.”

“But I do,” said Hancock hopping on tiptoe and shouting at his countrymen through the gap between the officers’ shoulders. “Ladies and Gentlemen, my suitcase has still not arrived. It is an extremely precious possession, and I refuse to go anywhere until the Spanish authorities responsible for its loss deliver it here. There is no way a tiny town like Nerger has enough cells to accommodate all of us, so I suggest we sit down and don’t budge until these gentlemen rescind their orders.”

There was a general murmuring.

“We’re with Hancock,” said a gruff well-spoken Londoner, who, along with his family, sat down on the floor and folded their arms.

One by one, every person except the staff followed suit, sitting with folded arms, and glaring relentlessly at the officers standing in their midst.

The furious younger officer drew his pistol and pointed it at Hancock, who remained completely unfazed by the possibility of instant death. He was British and refused to entertain the idea a foreign police officer would dare shoot him.

For several minutes nobody moved.

The Brits continued to glare at the officers.

A classic stand-off.

The police seemed perplexed when nobody dropped their gaze. Under such intense scrutiny from such an obdurate crowd, they shuffled their feet and, for the first time, began to appear unsure of themselves.

Hancock scrambled to his feet and slowly but confidently approached the younger officer. When near enough he lifted his hand and with a pointed index finger pushed the gun aside, staring directly into the officer’s face.

I was terrified, aware of their formidable reputation, but as I peered around surreptitiously, my fellow countrymen continued their protest confidently.

Ignorance must be bliss, I thought.

“Can someone point out as delicately as possible to our dear friends,” said Hancock now peering up the nose of the younger officer. He spoke loudly and clearly as if he was addressing a council meeting. “There are over four hundred thousand British tourists currently in Spain, with a further three million to follow throughout the summer season. If they insist on us leaving now, this story will be published in every newspaper worldwide and broadcast on every TV station. It will cause an international incident. Nobody will visit Spain for decades and the income of every hotel and tax revenue will plummet. How do they think Generalissimo Franco will react? Do they think he will sit by and ignore their stupidity? No, I think it is more than likely they will lose their jobs, pensions, and may even face imprisonment. Do they want to be held personally responsible for this, or would they kindly reconsider their orders and let the lawyers sort the paperwork out in the morning?”

“Did you understand, El Rubio?” I asked. El Rubio nodded. “Translate every word and don’t hold back.”

El Rubio stepped nervously toward the officers and blurted out the translation. For a moment, there was no reaction.

The one with the eyepatch exploded in a fit of rage and extracted his pistol from his holster. “How dare they speak to us like this?” he shouted spittle flying everywhere.

The elder officer placed his hand over the pistol. “There might be a mistake here,” he said. “I suggest we allow our superiors to sort this out tomorrow.”

The elder officer and the man with the eyepatch had a heated, whispered discussion. The name Franco was heard often. Gradually, eyepatch calmed down and nodded in reluctant agreement.

“*Mañana*,” said eyepatch.

“*Mañana*?” said the younger holstering his weapon.

“*Mañana*,” said the elder and led the way out.

Eyepatch put away his pistol, followed them, paused at the exit, and glared at everyone.

His exaggerated sneer of contempt at the seated assembly left everyone in no doubt this was not over.

“*Bastardos Ingleses*,” he shouted and tried to spit on the floor, but due to his constant dribble, he lacked enough saliva to form a meaningful amount of ammunition. What little spittle he did manage to collect dripped down his jacket and dribbled to a stop on his blue jeans. “Harrumph,” he grunted, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and span round to head out. He shook his head as if he appeared to be dizzy, stumbled against the lobby wall, and out into the street.

Glances of relief were exchanged among the seated gathering. They waited until spit-face had disappeared and scrambled to their feet.

“Three cheers for Hancock,” said someone.

After the applause faded, I turned to El Rubio. “What happens now?”

“This nightmare. You disobey biggest shits in Franco regime. When people disappear, them three involved.”

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Elder, Guardia Filipe Álvarez, other, younger brother, Javier. Everyone call him ‘El Cuchillo.’ knife. He scalp victims before burying alive. Man with eyepatch is Diego Cienfuegos, jefe secret police. A dangerous hombre. Notebook full of names of people he no like. When they disposed, he cross them out.”

“And now my name is in his book,” I said, pouring a large whiskey and gulping it down.

“Yes,” said El Rubio. “You need watch out.”

Chapter 6 – A question of legality

The Hancocks were first to appear for breakfast, bang on the opening time of nine o’clock.

“Laundry ok?” I said seeing him wearing the same fashionable 1920s outfit as yesterday but beautifully ironed. The pens in the breast pocket were as usual perfectly aligned. Mrs. Hancock wore an almost see-through wrap over her tiny red bikini. Her skinny legs and arms were bright pink.

“Fine thanks,” said Mrs. Hancock. “We’re going to wander around the market today and maybe buy a few clothing items for my husband. What kind of stalls do they have?”

“The market covers four of the surrounding streets,” I said. “Last time I went, about half sold fruits, vegetables, and dried fruits. The others are spread over ironmongers, flowers, plants, pictures and frames, local crafts and handmade jewellery, kitchen equipment, cleaning fluids, furniture and drapery, and masses of clothing stalls selling everything from shoes to ladies’ underwear and everything amazingly cheap.”

“I don’t want any Chinese rubbish,” said Mr. Hancock. “Where is it all made?”

“Everything is made in Spain,” I said. “Even the typical tourist trinkets such as huge donkeys, sombreros, or intricate metalwork from Toledo including enormous swords, although you may have a problem getting one on the plane going home. They also have the finest leather goods in Europe. I bought a beautiful leather jacket for a fraction of what I paid on Carnaby Street.”

“Will the stallholders give us receipts?” said Mr. Hancock.

“Probably not,” I said. “They don’t have tills. Best to buy a receipt book from the stationers around the corner and have them fill it out for you.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Hancock, crestfallen. “We don’t speak enough Spanish.”

“Say *Recibo por favor*, then give them the paper and pen.”

“We’ll give it a try,” she said.

“If they won’t, then bring the receipt book here and I’ll write out whatever you need.”

“Fraud,” said Mr. Hancock. “We couldn’t possibly…”

“When will you learn to shut up?” said Mrs. Hancock, elbowing him in the ribs. “Now pour us two coffees, we’ll sit by the window.”

“Harrumph,” said Hancock shuffling off toward the coffee machine, where he could be heard mumbling. “Everyone seems to break the law with impunity in this damn country. Plus, you can’t get a decent cup of tea anywhere and the long-life milk muck. Ugh.”

The other guests drifted in during the next couple of hours, initially jaded from the previous night’s post-revolutionary celebrations but soon perked up after coffee and the prospect of a street market right outside the hotel. Nobody mentioned the previous evening’s run-in with the law, but it wasn’t long before English humour prevailed.

“I’ll tell you what’s good for bartering behind bars,” said one man regarding me. “Take plenty of cigarettes.”

“And don’t bend over in the showers,” said another.

I grimaced but was far more worried about what El Cuchillo might do to me remembering the gory scalping in Soldier Blue. An epic film from 1970, inspired by events of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in the Colorado Territory. The soundtrack by Buffet Saint Marie was particularly haunting.

After the breakfast things had been cleared away, I joined El Rubio in the storeroom, where we spent the rest of the morning mounting shelves onto walls and assembling rows of free-standing grey metal ceiling-high racks. We transferred drinks from my room to the storeroom and at last, I could unpack my suitcase and take a shower. Dressed in hotel polo shirt and black trousers, I joined Mark and my parents in the lobby. They stopped talking as I entered but I was so distracted by the events of the previous evening I failed to notice the tension between them.

“Ah, Robin,” said Jack. “Mark has been telling us the worrying events with the police.”

“Have you spoken with the lawyer about my work permit and the opening license?” I asked. “Only my name is in the scary secret policeman’s dreaded book, and I don’t want to be arrested for failing to comply with their order.”

“He wasn’t in when I called,” said Jack. “I’ve left an urgent message with his secretary.”

“Fine, but do we have an opening license?”

“We must have,” said Jack. “The lawyer promised to take care of the paperwork and I signed a bunch of documents at the notary last week.”

“More worrying,” said Donna. “One of the guests called Wings to complain we are operating illegally. Wings is sending their area manager tonight, at eight, to discuss the complaint. If we can’t show him an opening licence, he will demand we relocate all guests to a legal hotel at our expense, then seek recompense for damaging their reputation and strike us out of their catalogue.”

“We’ll be ruined,” said Jack.

“And probably deported,” said Mark disguising a smirk.

“I don’t know who complained,” I said. “They seemed happy last night.”

“Then why are the bar takings so poor?” said Jack.

“I gave them drinks on the house, to thank them for their support without which I would now be locked up and this hotel no longer exist.”

“Why did you give away so much of our hard-earned cash, son? We’re a business, not a charity.”

“Then why did you commence trading without an opening license?” I asked.

“What’s done is done,” said Donna. “What’s important is to find out where the license is so we can show it to the Guardia, Wings, and the disgruntled guest.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “Hancock?”

Donna nodded.

The phone rang. Donna picked it up. “The Fontainebleau,” she said into the mouthpiece. She listened for a second, grimaced, and passed the phone to Jack. “It’s tosspot.”

Jack took the phone.

“You promised to take care of the paperwork,” he yelled, then listened to the reply.

“What’s missing, you ask,” said Jack, calming down. “You’re the lawyer; you should know what’s missing. All I can tell you is the police tried to close my hotel last night because we don’t have an opening license. Furthermore, our guests deliberately disobeyed an order from the Guardia Civil and could all be arrested. Thanks to your incompetence, we are likely to be bankrupt, out of business, and, what’s worse, my son could be sent to jail.”

He held the phone away from his ear as the lawyer shouted back. “Wait,” said Jack. “You say we have a license, then where the feck is it?” Jack listened before responding. “We need it by this evening. The area manager for the tour operator is due here at eight p.m. If we cannot prove our legality to him, we will be struck off their list of hotels and have to recompense them and our guests. If, as you say, the mayor signed the license last week, then it should be a simple enough task for you to get in your car, pick it up, and deliver it here by eight. Then go to the Guardia and explain why we didn’t have a copy in our possession. If all works, we may survive, and your account may be settled. If not, the police will be after you for failing to fulfil your duties as our legal representative.”

Jack listened, his fingers drumming on the desk.

“No,” said Jack after a few minutes. “It cannot wait until tomorrow. I don’t care who you have an appointment with, this is resolved today, or we will see what the English media have to say about you and the risks of British tourists being thrown out of Spanish hotels because of a piece of bloody paper. Do you understand?” Jack listened. “Do it,” he screamed, slammed the phone down, glared at everyone, then smiled.

“Has he agreed?” I asked.

“He assures me there is no problem with the license,” said Jack. “It was signed by the mayor last week, but our dear, wonderful, efficient lawyer was too busy to collect it or inform the Guardia. The license is with the mayor’s secretary, and the lawyer will pick it up in about two hours, take it to the Guardia, and then bring it here long before the Wings guy arrives. We should be ok.”

“Assuming you can trust the tosspot,” said Donna.

“What else do you suggest?” said Jack.

“Why don’t I pick it up from the mayor?” I asked.

“If the lawyer hasn’t arrived by lunchtime, Mark can go,” said Jack.

“Why is it always me,” said Mark.

“As yet, Robin isn’t an official employee of the hotel company,” said Jack. “It has to be you.”

Mark seemed as if he was about to explode, barged past me, and stormed out of the hotel.

“Why is he so angry about collecting a piece of paper?” I asked.

Jack appeared embarrassed.

“It’s not only the license,” said Donna. “While your unannounced arrival is a blessing and solves our lack of resources, it means we have three rooms full of family instead of paying guests. We’ve told Mark they have to move into an apartment. He thought it unfair they had to move, not you.”

“Good idea and probably the right thing,” I said.

“Why?” said Donna.

“Some of the excessive bar bill last night was down to Mark. From his constant tirade of snide comments, he resents my arrival and was drowning his sorrows in whisky. Living offsite will keep him away from the bottle and me. It should help us all.”

Jack and Donna exchanged glances. Jack checked his watch.

“Eleven a.m.,” he said. “Time for the bar to open.”

“Yes, Dad,” I said, standing. I opened the door from the lobby, adjusted the wonky dartboard, and stood behind the bar. I hadn’t even wiped a drip tray before the first customer said in a broad Scottish accent. “I’ll have a pint, and a wee chaser.”

“Certainly, sir,” I said pouring the beer and handing it over to the ginger-haired, overweight, short man with a full beard who was sweating profusely. I was surprised to see he was wearing a kilt, sporran, long thick socks, brown brogues, and a lace-fronted white shirt.

“I’m Robin. What brings you here?” I said.

“I’m Ken. I’ve lived here for a few months and love walking around the market. I heard about you from Charles and Jean. I bought my apartment through them. Thought I’d give you a try. Is the infamous Cottage Pie available this early?”

“Cottage Pie, Ken is available 24/7. Shall I order you one?”

“Aye, with a bowl of chips and a gallon of ketchup.”

“Certainly,” I said filling out a food order slip, taking it over to the kitchen hatch, ringing the bell, and leaving it on the shelf for El Rubio to process before returning behind the bar.

“Aren’t you a tad warm in your national costume?” I asked.

“After decades of freezing ma nuts off in Perth, being warm is the main reason I’m here,” said Ken tossing back the whiskey shot in one gulp. “A spot of sweat helps build up a wee thirst and I love a good drink.”

“Do you wear it all the time?”

“In bed, nay.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Market days and fiestas. It adds a spot of colour and is usually a conversation starter.”

“I can imagine. You’re not married then?”

“I was but she didna want to come oot here. ‘Too hot,’ she said.”

“Here’s your pie,” I said as El Rubio brought it over and placed it on the bar.

“Wow,” said Ken. “Super speedy.”

“We ‘ave microwave,” said El Rubio. “It fantastico. Hi like your skirt. Pretty pattern.”

“This,” said Ken hoisting up his kilt to reveal a fat hairy thigh. “Is nay a skirt and the pattern is a Drummond tartan. Have you never seen a Scottish kilt before?”

“Scottish no, but señoras wear them in Galicia, and play *gaitas*.”

“*Gaitas*?” said Ken.

“I tink you say *Bolsapipas*,” said El Rubio playing an air bag pipe.

“Bagpipes,” said Ken moving to a table and tucking his kilt underneath his backside in a well-practiced movement as he sat down. “I’d assumed they were an exclusively Gallic instrument.”

“Where you tink origin of Gallic?” said El Rubio.

“What?” said Ken.

“Galicia, Gallic,” said El Rubio.

“I swore it evolved from Gaul, you know France, but perhaps that also originated from Galicia so you could have something there,” said Ken taking a seat at a table his expression dismissing El Rubio’s historical snippet as nonsense. “I’ll eat here if I may and bring me another chaser.”

By the time Mark had transferred Ken’s lunch and drinks to his table, the bar was more than half full. Mark rushed around taking orders, I was hectic pouring drinks and El Rubio was at full tilt with the microwave bell from the kitchen pinging every few minutes as more cottage pies were ready for delivery. I chuckled at El Rubio every time he placed another piping hot cottage pie on the shelf for Mark to serve. His expression conveyed his disgust at such awful British stodge.

Just as well he didn’t attend my boarding school, I thought. The spotted dick covered by lumpy custard would have him heaving into the trash.

Two of the clients were a couple in their mid-thirties. Both had pink faces and legs, they seemed uncomfortable, unhappy, and wanted to talk to me.

“Can I help you?” I said pouring more pints wondering if every market day was going to be so hectic.

“I do hope so. Er… we’re in Room 206,” said the man scratching his peeling forearm. “Mister and missus Bailey from Ilford, Essex. We’d like a Babycham, a pint of lager, and a spot of lunch. And I wondered if you could help us, please?”

“Here’s the menu,” I said passing one over. “What’s the problem?”

“Stop scratching, Cecil,” said the wife tugging her short sleeves further down her pink arm. “We decided to give the beach a rest today, so wandered around the market. I bought some sandals and a...”

“Tell him, dear.”

“Anyway, we were stuck in the middle of a crowd of people. They were gathered around a bar stool watching a man with three cups,” said the wife. “You had to guess which one the ball was under.”

“It seemed so easy,” said Cecil. “One man was right every time and won a thousand pesetas. So, I had a go.”

“It was a hundred pesetas a guess,” said Mrs. “You had to pay in advance.”

“I had twenty goes and didn’t win a sausage,” said Cecil.

“I told him enough,” said Mrs.

“So, I stopped and bugger me.”

“Language, Cecil.”

“The next bloke won first go,” said Cecil.

“So, what’s your problem?” I said serving two beers to the next customers.

“Did we lose because we’re foreigners or were we unlucky?”

I found it difficult to keep a straight face. “The only winners are the stooges in the crowd. It’s one of the oldest scams around the Mediterranean, especially in the markets. Sorry sir, but it has nothing to do with you being foreign.”

“Oh,” said Mrs.

“Bugger me,” said Cecil. His wife stared at him. He buried himself in the menu. “Fish and chips for me please,” he said.

“Make it two,” said Mrs.

“Take a seat, and my brother will bring it over,” I said noting everything on their tab.

The lunchtime trade remained hectic, with full tables until the market closed at two. The kids and Susan arrived back from school as the last client had finished his umpteenth chaser. It was Ken. For the amount of alcohol he consumed, normal folks would have been crawling out on their hands and knees, but somehow Ken stood with dignity and headed for the bar more or less in a straight line.

“I’ll take ma bill just now,” said Ken.

His rather loud Scottish accent attracted the children's attention. They turned and inspected him with fascinated faces. They approached Ken, who peered at them struggling to focus.

“Why are you wearing a thkirt?” said Matthew.

“It’s nay a skirt, laddie,” said Ken smiling down at the boy. “It’s a kilt, we wear them in Scotland.”

“But we’re in Spain,” said Sally.

“Indeed, we are,” said Ken. “But it doesna mean I stop being Scottish.”

“What’s that?” said Sally pointing at Ken’s crotch.

Ken looked down with a puzzled expression. “Och,” he said somewhat relieved. “It’s a sporran.”

“Ith all furry,” said Matthew.

“Aye, it’s rabbit fur.”

“What’s it for?” said Sally.

“The kilt does nae have pockets,” said Ken opening the sporran and taking out his wallet. “I keep ma money and keys in it.”

The kids watched, fascinated, as Ken settled his bill and had several goes at reloading the wallet back into his sporran before leaving, slowly and almost steadily leaving the bar unusually silent. I put on the latest album by Simon and Garfunkel and was humming along to *Sound of Silence* when Susan came out of the kitchen and announced.

“Lunch is served, everyone.”

Mark pulled a few tables together. The family and El Rubio gathered around and tucked into a cold chicken salad.

“Has the opening licence arrived yet?” I asked. “Only, it’s nearly two thirty.”

“No,” said Jack. “I called the lawyer. Nobody replied.”

“Tosspot,” spat Donna. “Completely useless.”

“Shouldn’t we press the button on plan B?” I asked.

Jack chewed on his salad and nodded. After he’d swallowed his mouthful, he said. “Ok, Mark, as soon as you’ve finished your lunch, head down to the mayor’s office.”

“They close at three,” said Donna.

Mark scowled but nodded.

Chapter 7 – Licence problems

Calle Alejandro Bueno is an unassuming street about ninety meters long, linking Calle Cristo to Plaza Cantarero—a delightful orange tree-lined square with a fountain and pergola covered by dense bougainvillea. It was a beautiful place to sit and enjoy a coffee while people watching and from where views of the mountains were spectacular. The nearest peak, Pico del Cielo, at 1508 meters above sea level, looms over the town some six kilometres from the coast. It provides a protective barrier against cool north winds in winter and searing inland summer heat.

Like most of central Nerja, Calle Alejandro Bueno was transitioning from single-floor buildings to apartment blocks, townhouses, and retail premises. The few remaining single-floor buildings had been built during the nineteenth century. Most of these had white-painted facades, a timber door in the centre, and a wrought iron-barred window on each side. The windows were shaded with faded green roller blinds and garlanded by colourful pots of geraniums jammed between the bars and blind. There was no guttering, but waterspouts varying from half-broken plastic tubes to ugly ceramic gargoyles, projected over the street to drain rainwater off the flat roofs, often showering unsuspecting passers-by. Despite the amazing vistas, most terraces were used for drying laundry and store collections of human jetsam such as beach gear, rusting bikes, broken suitcases, out of favour toys, and the requisite TV antenna.

The apartment blocks, although new, stuck to a similar architectural formula. It was the only construction style builders were familiar with, mainly because it was the cheapest and used the only materials available locally. Halfway along on the northern side of the street was Calle Guatemala, a cul de sac providing access to the Fontainebleau rear entrance and more housing. It’s where my dad and I parked our cars.

The recently opened Bar Bilbainos, a typical Spanish bar opposite the hotel, was always busy from morning until night.

“Do they play darts?” I said nodding in that direction.

“I doubt,” said El Rubio. “Yours first dartboard in Nerja far as I knowses.”

“Do you think they might like to learn?” I said thinking about my entertainment program.

“Crikey. No harms asking.”

“Do you know them?”

“Of course, it small town, everybody knowses each bodies.”

“The guy in black with beret and crutches, what’s that all about?”

“He Miguel,” said El Rubio. “Him sixty-two. Left leg missing below knee from Civil War. He use crutch to remind nationalists of their war crimes. He wear old black army beret, with five-star red-cross badge to provoke Guardia Civil. Nerja used have many men similars but most dead now. My father and him good amigos, they fight against Franco together. If you want, I can ask him about darts, but you must teach them how play first.”

“Then do it but not Tuesdays or Fridays.”

“Ok, I go tonight. Tell me Robin, I need understand. I likes workings with you but why your father buy this hotel? He have plenty money and fancy car, he no need do nothing. Everybody think he crazy.”

“Have you heard of Harold Wilson?”

“No.”

“He is the current Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. His Labour Party has increased currency restrictions and taxes on the wealthy to nearly ninety-five percent. We came to Spain to escape those taxes and build a new life for all the family with the hotel as our main source of income. But the hotel is also a sensible long-term investment. Thanks to your beautiful climate, low-cost hotels, and flights it is now cheaper for British people to come to Spain for their annual holiday than stay at home. Over the next ten years, the annual number of visitors from Britain will increase by millions. Eventually, the value of the hotel will increase substantially. We are among the first businesspeople, but more will follow especially after Franco dies and is hopefully replaced by someone more internationally acceptable.”

“Crikey, most my family and friends no understand this. We have no idea what happen in Málaga let alone Britain. We only have state TV news which is controlled by Franco. Nobody believes what they say so we only watch football. Rest is mierda.”

“Believe me tourism is the future of Spain. It’s already happening on the Costa Brava and in Marbella. It’s only a question of time before it spreads here and there are more like us.”

“Hopefully, they not make same mistakes you. Your builder, Emilio, he so bad no Spaniard buy from him. This hotel take so long build, we thinking the Gaudi Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona be finished first and why your parents live in middle countryside? What wrong with living in hotel or in apartment nearby so easy walk work. They drivings three times a day.”

“It’s complicated but you’re right, we assumed appointing a lawyer, buying property, and setting up a business would be similar to how it was back home. Now we know better, but how could we have avoided these mistakes?”

“Talk with local people.”

“We didn’t know anyone we trusted and had appointed an English-speaking lawyer to represent us.”

“He from Málaga and know nothing about Nerja builders or bureaucracy. It recipe for disaster. Always use local lawyer and speak with Town Hall first, they know who good and bad and where ok to build.”

“Too late now. Anyway, my parents did buy an apartment in town, but the builder went bankrupt, and it’s still not finished. For their retirement they wanted a quiet place in the countryside. When hotel is successful, they will back out and leave the running of the business to me and Mark.”

“I understand but is fallacy countryside is quiet. With dogs, cement mixers, tractors, and mopeds, it loud like town.”

“Cement mixers in the countryside?”

“We like to build. Whole of Spain is building site. We fed up living in old stone houses full of damp, no electric, water, or plumbing. Familias buy cement mixer before washing machine. Here Mark, no look happy.”

“How did it go with the opening licence?” I asked.

“It didn’t,” said Mark. “Only our lawyer can collect it.”

“Wasn’t he supposed to pick it up before three?”

“He may well have done, but they wouldn’t confirm if he had or not,” said Mark. “Shit, I hate this useless country.”

“Are you sure they understood your Spanish?”

“Of course they did, you cheeky bugger,” said Mark. “And listen, if you carry on digging at me, one of us will have to get out of here.”

“If we don’t get an opening licence by eight, there won’t be a here to get out of,” I said. “The way I feel at the moment, if there was anyone to kill to ensure we get our licence I would do it.”

“Oh dear, how sad, never mind,” said Mark, gloating.

“Some of us like it here. With no hotel, my future is shot,” I said heading to the lobby. “I’ll call Dad at the villa and let him know. He needs to locate the lawyer quickly.”

“You can’t,” said Mark following him.

“Why not?” I said stopping dead at the lobby door. “Why have I never seen that before?”

“Dad locks the phone when he and Mum are out,” said Mark. “We can receive calls but not make them.”

“What if there is a fire?”

“No point in calling them. The nearest fire station is thirty clicks away in Vélez-Málaga. By the time they attend, we’d have burned down.”

“Typical, so, I suppose dad expects us to extinguish it ourselves.”

“Correct.”

“So, we’ll have no license to show the Wings area manager or the Guardia,” I said.

“Then you can anticipate your imminent arrest,” said Mark.

I glared at him hard. The phone rang. I picked it up.

“The Fontainebleau,” I said.

“This is Rupert Caterham, area manager for Wings. I regret to say that thanks to a French air traffic control strike my plane was cancelled, so I won’t arrive until tomorrow. I’ll let you know when. Have you got your license?”

“It’s been signed,” I said. “We’ll show you when you arrive.”

“Good, then everything should be in order,” said Rupert. “See you tomorrow.”

I replaced the handset and grinned at Mark.

“What?” said Mark scowling.

“The Wings guy’s flight was cancelled,” I said. “We’re reprieved for twenty-four hours.”

Mark stomped into the kitchen.

Chapter 8 – Never argue with a JCB

I was drying glasses and humming along to *Hey Girl* from the Temptations Masterpiece album when the first customers of the evening arrived at the bar. I turned down the volume and smiled at the rough diamond standing at the bar with his pretty blond wife.

“Ted Bartlett,” said the well-built dark-haired man in his late thirties wearing white trousers, a green and white shirt, and two fingers missing from his left hand. “This is my wife, Joyce. We’d like to kick off the evening with a bottle of your best champagne. Afterward, who cares?”

They burst into infectious laughter at their joke.

Joyce was a brassy blond with a curvaceous figure wearing a red dress and covered in gold jewellery. They were both well-tanned.

“Let me guess,” I said popping the cork. “East London.”

“Correct,” said Ted. “But that’s all you need to know. We often holiday in Nerja and when here, we forget everything from back home. I hope you’re well stocked. We’ve been coming several times a year for a while now and have been on the lookout for an English-speaking establishment with good company, fine grub, quality booze, and great sounds. If we have a good time tonight, you’ll likely be seeing us often, know what I mean?”

“We’ll try our best, I’m Robin Webster, and this is our family business.”

“Excellent,” said Ted. “We like family businesses. They try harder, know what I mean?”

“Do you have a property here?” I asked.

“No,” said Ted. “We always stay in the same rental in Nueva Nerja. It’s far enough away to be quiet but near enough to stagger home.”

“Sorry, but I couldn’t help overhearing,” said Charles Bishton leaning on the bar next to Ted. “You should seriously consider buying a property; prices are incredibly cheap now. What with rampant inflation and soaring oil prices, they can only increase in value, especially if you’re a cash buyer.”

Ted turned to appraise the intruder. His expression was hard and mean.

“Estate Agent?” he said.

“Absolutely,” said Charles extracting a card and proffering it to Ted. “Charles Bishton. My wife, Jean, she’ll be along in a minute. We run INFO on Calle Granada. If we can help you in any way, please call.”

“How long have you worked here Charles?” said Ted.

“Five years this May,” said Charles. “Why?”

Ted nodded. “And how many properties have you sold since?”“Oh, er… good question,” Charles said, counting on his fingers and muttering names. “I would say around thirty.”

“Thirty,” said Ted as I watched on, unsure which way this was heading.

“Maybe thirty-five,” said Charles.

“All at five percent commission?” said Ted.

“For used properties, yes,” said Charles his face tightening. For new, up to twenty.”

“Twenty, wow. Then…,” said Ted as Jean arrived and clasped her husband’s arm.

“What?” said Charles as Ted reached for the champagne bottle sitting in its cooler on the bar. He pulled it out of the ice.

“Robin, two more flutes, please,” said Ted.

Charles's face was puzzled as he watched Ted. He shrugged at his wife.

Ted poured two glasses of sparkling wine, emptying the bottle. He picked up the two fizzing flutes and placed them on the bar in front of the Bishton’s. “Congratulations,” said Ted with a huge grin. “Let us celebrate your success. Hearing about the disaster the Edward’s family had to endure, selling those properties must have been a bloody nightmare. Now let’s leave Robin to his work and move to the sofas by the window. I want to hear all about what it’s like to live and set up a successful business here.”

“Splendid,” said Charles, relieved. “Come along, dear.”

“Bring more champagne please Robin,” said Ted loudly.

I delivered another bottle of champagne and turned up the music. They took a sip and clinked glasses.

By the third bottle, they were in full party mood. Ted and Jean started dancing.

The rest of the bar joined them.

At two a.m. in the morning, Charles staggered up to the bar.

“I’d like to pay the bill for all of ush, please,” he slurred.

“Already paid by Ted,” I said.

“Oh,” said Charles. “How generous; then I’ll fetch the car and take them home.”

“Er…, Charles, should I order a taxi?” I asked. “Or would you prefer I give you all a lift home?”

“No, no, I’ll be jack in a biffy,” said Charles staggering back to the sofa where the others were emptying their glasses. “Wait for me in the schobby, and I’ll pick you up lortly.”

While Charles tottered outside, the others collected their belongings and stood giggling by the front door. Ten minutes later, Charles returned with blood dripping down his left cheek.

“Darling, what happened?” shrieked Jean leaping toward him tissue in hand as Charles stood in the lobby swaying.

“Crit of a bash,” he mumbled.

“Where?” said Ted knocking on the lobby door to attract my attention.

“Jush round corner,” said Charles.

“What’s up,” I said bursting through the door having heard the commotion.

“Crit of a bash,” said Charles waving his arm, indicating they should follow. Charles shoved the exit door and nearly fell into the street.

Ted watched, concerned.

“We’ll skip the lift,” said Ted as he and Joyce headed toward Plaza Cantarero. “See you next time.”

“Thish way,” said Charles swaying back and forth.

We followed him concerned as he bounced off various walls. In Calle Cristo, vehicles were parked on the left-hand side. Some fifty meters down Charles stopped in the middle of the road and indicated his car, a Citroen GS parked in front of them with the engine ticking over.

“Oh my God,” shrieked Jean. “How?”

Charles swayed and pointed to a huge JCB parked a few meters up the street. The arm movement was too much, and he fell over. Jean rushed to him, but he was fine. She heaved him up where he stood swaying and pointing at his car. The entire left-hand side was missing. It had been peeled off like a sardine can lid. I peered up the hill and spotted the missing metalwork perfectly aligned vertically on the tarmac alongside a huge JCB. There was an empty parking space several vehicles up, which was where Charles must have parked. He’d seriously misjudged his speed and steering as he headed around the block to reach The Fontainebleau.

I climbed into the Citroen, reversed it back into its original slot, and turned off the engine. Jean and I picked up the damaged side and arranged it gingerly to cover the gaping hole. It rocked alarmingly but stayed put.

“Come back to the bar,” I said. “I’ll order a taxi to take you home.”

“Thanks, Robin,” said Jean giving him a peck on the cheek. “Come on dear.”

“Jush minute,” said Charles staggering back up the street and opening the passenger door. “Need something.” He leaned in, pulled the keys out of the ignition, shoved himself out, heaved himself up by the roof, and closed the passenger door, waving the keys aloft.

“Why the keys?” I said shaking my head.

“Sho noone will shteal it,” said Charles locking the passenger door. He proceeded around the car locking everything. He tried the locks in the doors of the damaged side but couldn’t get the key in either hole. Eventually, he gave up and waved his arm in frustration.

“Fush it,” he said and staggered after Robin and Jean.

After the taxi had left with the Bishtons, I finished up in the bar. When the breakfast items were all in place, I took a final inspection, nodded with satisfaction, and went to bed.

But sleep didn’t come.

My mind was too busy exploring the possibilities of tomorrow. Would we still have a hotel or not?

Chapter 9 – Hancock’s half hour

I had now absorbed that running a family hotel wasn’t just about friendly service and clean rooms, it mostly concerned efficient logistics and reliable suppliers. Toilet rolls, for example. Although they are an inexpensive readily available commodity, running out of stock can easily happen with dire consequences. Whereas if all the whiskey had been drunk there was always an alternative. It was my mother’s responsibility to monitor the stock levels of everything except the bar, which fell to me. She left her list on the lobby desk before heading home each evening and I phoned them through to our regular suppliers the next morning as soon as the phone was unlocked. Without this daily task, our hotel would soon grind to a halt. So, there I was as usual, sitting at the reception desk in the lobby filling out paperwork for the orders when the phone rang.

“Fontainebleau,” I said.

“Robin?” said a female voice.

“Yes.”

“This is Sharon from the Wings office in Málaga airport. We have located Mr. Hancock’s suitcase, it’s at our office. Regrettably, because it is old, it hasn’t withstood the ravages of baggage handlers, the lock broke and everything fell out. We’ve packaged everything up as best we can but had a problem with a crumpled cardboard box. It was unusable so we wrapped the contents in elastic bands and stuffed them in a shopping bag. I hope we didn’t damage anything.”

“Anything delicate in the crumpled box?”

“Er..., a bit embarrassing really.”

“Go on.”

“Don’t get me wrong because I’m no expert,” said Sharon trying to stifle a giggle. “But to me, they resemble sex toys.”

I howled. Sharon joined me.

“Is it,” said Sharon trying to talk but forced to stop for another bout of giggling. “Is it, er… is it worth sending er... the case over to you, or shall we keep it for him to collect on his way home tomorrow?”

“Good question,” I said, a plan taking shape in my mind. “Give me your number. I’ll have a word with him and call you back.”

Sharon dictated the number, and I scribbled it down on the notepad as Donna and Jack arrived.

“Thanks, Sharon,” I said. “Oh, one more thing, when does Rupert’s plane arrive?”

“We suspect this afternoon but haven’t been informed of anything definite. These strikes in France are causing havoc with our timetable.”

“Really? That is good news. Thanks. Bye.”

“Who was on the phone?” said Jack barging in the front door with a big scowl. Donna followed. Jack unlocked the phone as if he were giving away his life savings to a taxman.

“Wings,” I said. “They have chummy’s suitcase. The other good news is the area manager won’t be arriving until this evening at the earliest. The question is, do we have the case delivered here, or shall we leave it at the airport to be collected on his way home tomorrow?”

“Not sure,” said Jack. “What do you think?”

“I think we have an opportunity to win back Hancock’s approval,” I said. “He might even withdraw his complaint.”

“Go on,” said Donna.

“Why don’t I offer to take them to the airport in the Rolls, and then on to lunch at the historic Café Central? Rupert would have seen the opening licence by the time we are back here and hopefully approved our continuation in the Wings catalogue. We can show it to Hancock and offer him a free week here at the end of the season as a gesture of goodwill, confirm we have no hard feelings about his complaint, and are grateful for his role in keeping the police at bay?”

“Not comfortable with the free week,” said Jack. “And for the way he keeps upsetting your mother, I’d rather string him up from the nearest lamppost. But in principle, you’re right, son. Good idea. Have they gone out yet?”

“No, they’ve just finished breakfast.”

“Then knock on their door and extend the invitation,” said Jack handing over the car keys. “And put a suit on, so people will think you are their chauffeur.”

“Ok,” I said heading off to my room. “Will you finish off the breakfasts and run the lunchtime bar? Only it’s Mark and Susan’s day off.”

“Fine, go,” said Donna.

I headed off but remembered the reason why Rupert was coming. I popped his head around the lobby entrance. “Do we know for sure when the opening licence is arriving?”

My dad stared at me long and hard. “The opening licence is not your problem, don’t worry about it.”

“Dad, it is my problem as much as yours. If we don’t have a hotel, my future in Spain is buggered. You at least have a villa and capital. I have nothing and need this job. So, make sure you get the damn licence in time for Rupert, ok?”

I ran upstairs and knocked on Hancock’s door. Mrs. Hancock opened it wearing a skimpy unflattering bikini. On seeing Robin, she stuck out her left hip and provocatively fiddled with the bottom strap of the bikini.

“Any news?” she said fluttering her eyelashes.

“Er..., yes,” I said squirming with embarrassment. I couldn’t shake the vison of the two of them naked on the bed debating furiously which toy they should try next.

“Well, what is it?” said Mr. Hancock joining her at the door in a new pair of baggy shorts.

“W... Wings have recovered your suitcase,” I stuttered.

“About time,” said Mr. Hancock shoving his wife behind him.

“They regret the lock broke, and everything fell out.”

“Incompetent idiots,” said Mr. Hancock breathing deeply.

Mrs. Hancock continued to flirt from behind her husband.

“However, they refolded your things tidily and have strapped it shut.”

“Did they repack all our stuff?” said Mrs. Hancock.

I looked down at the floor praying for a *Beam me up Scottie* moment.

“Almost everything but er... there was a problem with a cardboard box,” I said chewing my cheek. “It broke. I’m sorry but all your um...”

“Harrumph,” said Mr. Hancock. “Are they intact?”

“The Wings staff were puzzled about what the items were,” I said. “And hope they have done the right thing.”

“What, exactly?” said Mr. Hancock on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“They wrapped them together with elastic bands and placed them into a transparent carrier bag. Unfortunately, they er... wouldn’t fit in the case, you’ll have to carry them as hand luggage. Alternatively, you might like to consider their offer.”

“Offer?” said Mr. Hancock having turned a deep shade of red.

“Even though they beefed up your case as best they could, they suggest it is unlikely to survive the journey back to the UK in one piece and advise you accept their gift of a replacement. You can choose a bigger one so er... it all fits, but you can decide when you inspect the old one.”

“Is there something wrong with your cheek?” said Mr. Hancock.

“A mouth ulcer,” I said.

Mr. Hancock glared at me, his expression jammed with suspicion.

“The thing is,” I said. “Would you care to collect the case today or wait until you depart tomorrow?”

“We’d like to collect the case today,” said Mr. Hancock. “Then we can at least have some use of our er clothing on the final day. Do you know how we can get to the airport and back?”

“Actually,” I said. “I am happy to drive you and invite you to lunch in a historic restaurant in Málaga centre.”

“About time you showed us some gratitude,” he said glancing at his wife and smiling for the second time during his visit.

She nodded.

“Fancy restaurant is it?” she said.

“No, but people do dress nicely,” I said.

“Then shall we say downstairs in half an hour?” said Hancock.

“The car is in the alleyway,” I said. “I’ll wait for you there.”

Hancock nodded and closed the door.

I went to my room, changed into a grey suit with flared trousers, and ran a brush over my shoes and called the daily orders through. I rang Sharon and confirmed our arrival at the Wings office before lunch.

“Good thinking, son,” said Donna as I made the call. “Fingers crossed tosspot turns up with the licence he promised yesterday.”

“Have you spoken with him?” I asked.

“Not me, but Dad rang and spoke to his secretary after your little outburst. Her English isn’t so good, but we think she said he picked up the licence and will deliver it today around lunchtime. How long will the Hancocks be?”

“Half hour.”

“*Hancock’s Half Hour*,” she giggled. “Only to be expected?”

I regarded her as if she were from outer space and headed out to the car. I was grovelling around in the Rolls glove compartment for a map of Málaga when someone coughed and tapped me on the shoulder. I backed out of the car to find the Hancocks irritated. He was in his only suit, she in a tight red sleeveless dress and sombrero.

“You told us you’d be waiting outside with the car,” said Mr. Hancock.

I took a deep breath. “The Rolls-Royce is the finest car in the world, Mr. Hancock.”

“We are going in this?” said Mrs. Hancock.

“Indeed, Mrs. Hancock.”

“You are sure?” said Mrs. Hancock. “There was no need to go to all this trouble hiring a posh car. A Seat five hundred would have been fine.”

“This is my father’s car,” I said. “We drove it down from England. It has UK plates.”

“I did wonder,” said Mrs. Hancock. “He told me it didn’t seem Spanish.”

“But it’s right-hand drive,” said Mr. Hancock. “Is it safe to drive in Spain?”

“If we managed to bring it all this way without incident,” I said. “I expect we can safely negotiate our way to Málaga and back. Now, do you want to fetch your suitcase, or stay here?”

“There’s no need to be bolshy,” said Mr. Hancock. “Gladys and I are only concerned for our wellbeing. Shall we get in the back?”

“Of course,” I said opening the door and offering my hand to Mrs. Hancock. I guided her in and left Mr. Hancock to his own devices.

He climbed in the front.

I gritted my teeth, shut the door, and started the engine. It purred as I reversed out of the cul de sac and set off.

As I drove, Mr. Hancock nodded like a donkey, while he caressed the burr walnut facia as tenderly as he would a lover’s cheek.

“Always wanted to ride in one of these,” he said admiring the fine grey leather interior. “I can see why rich people buy them now. You’re higher up than other cars and can look down at the plebs as you glide along. Gladys, you alright in the back there?”

“Yes, dear. There are picnic tables, an ice cooler, and an electric screen divider I can put up should I want privacy.”

“Is this a normal model?” said Mr. Hancock.

“Hardly,” I said. “It’s a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud II, two-tone grey model with a long base chassis.”

“Did you hear, dear?” said Mr. Hancock. “This car is like the Queen’s.”

“It’s certainly extremely comfortable,” said Mrs. Hancock. “Although it throws me about a bit when we go around corners. I hope it doesn’t make me car sick.”

“Need a bag?” said Mr. Hancock.

“Yes, but I’ll cope if he drives slowly,” said Mrs. Hancock. “I hope.”

“Try and refrain from waving,” said Mr. Hancock. “We don’t want to mislead anyone.”

Gladys giggled, put the armrest down, and settled into her corner, making mini practice waves and horsey grins.

I headed along the coast road at a funereal pace; petrified Mrs. Hancock might have a problem holding on to her breakfast. I checked the mirror every few seconds, poised to stop if necessary. My father would be furious if she made a mess on the fine leather.

And, I’d have to mop it up.

Chapter 10 – What a gay day

I arrived back from Málaga around five with the Hancock’s, luggage collected and upholstery intact. After two glasses of wine with lunch, they had both snored all the way back to Nerja. We joined my parents in the lobby. Mr. Hancock was hanging on to his old, damaged suitcase as if it was his favourite teddy bear, but more surprisingly, he was nodding and smiling at everyone. Mrs. Hancock showed my mum the brand-new hard-shell plastic case from Wings covered with their logo before they went up to their room.

“All, good?” said Jack after they had gone.

“Perfect,” I said. “Like kids with favourite toys.”

“Finally, they can have a play,” said Donna smirking. “What er... colour were they?”

“I didn’t go into the Wings office, I had to stay by the car. By the time they returned with their array of cases, the er... pleasure accessories had been recycled or bunged into an airport bin.”

“How was lunch?”

“Not too expensive, Dad. Mr. Hancock loved the clams?”

“What a relief. I’d best get back to the bar,” said Jack, leaving them.

“With the uncertainty of when you were coming back and this wretched Wings man coming, we decided not to close for the afternoon,” said Donna sitting behind the desk. “I’m exhausted plus we received complaints at lunchtime about the cottage pies. Some were cold in the middle, others, the mash was too soggy.”

“I’ll have a word with the chef,” I said as a handsome man in his early thirties with swept-back dark hair entered dressed in an expensive blue suit with flared trousers and wide lapels. He had ice-blue eyes. “It’s probably the microwave settings. Good afternoon, can I help you?”

“Good afternoon, my name is Caterham,” he said in a deep posh voice. “Rupert Caterham, area manager of Wings Tours. I’ve come to see Jack Webster.”

“He’s serving behind the bar,” I said. “I’ll take you through?”

“Dad,” I said, pausing in front of the bar. “This is Rupert Caterham from Wings.”

“Oh,” said Jack coming around and shaking hands. “Welcome, we weren’t expecting you until later.”

“Dashed frogs on strike again,” said Rupert. “Anyway, I’m here now and need to see your opening licence.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Jack. “But it hasn’t arrived yet. Our lawyer is on his way and will deliver it this evening.”

“Most inconvenient,” said Rupert. “On the phone, your son said it was ready.”

“I had it all arranged for yesterday, but when we heard you weren’t due until this evening, I put it off. Our lawyer had another urgent appointment.”

“Can’t we ask your lawyer to bring it now?” said Rupert. “Only I have other appointments in Marbella.”

“Regretfully, he’s based in Málaga, so no, but he is due here imminently,” said Jack.

“Why Málaga?”

“There are no English-speaking lawyers in Nerja.”

“Most unlikely,” said Rupert.

“Believe me, if you could find me one, I’d fire the Málaga guy immediately. He’s unreliable, to say the least.”

“Hence the tardy opening licence?”

“Indeed,” said Jack. “Listen, while we wait for the lawyer, why don’t you take a seat, have a drink, and order any food you fancy on the house? Our chef, El Rubio, will take personal care of you.”

“I don’t have much choice,” said Rupert. “But six p.m. is my absolute deadline if I’m to make my appointment. If the license isn’t here by then, your hotel as a Wings-approved place of accommodation is history.”

“I understand,” said Jack. “But I’m positive the lawyer will be here shortly. Please take a seat.”

Rupert sat by the window but when El Rubio approached and handed him the menu, a magical transformation happened before our very eyes. I peeked at my dad, and he grimaced.

El Rubio was blushing and seemed besotted by Rupert.

And Rupert appeared equally so.

They sat down close together, and El Rubio explained the Fontainebleau culinary delights. Rupert hung on his every word. El Rubio popped in and out, fussing over Rupert, who seemed to be relaxing a bit after two glasses of dry fino and a plate of El Rubio’s finest microwaved beef casserole and al dente julienne of vegetables.

As six o’clock approached, there was no sign of the lawyer.

I slipped out to Donna.

“What are we going to do? Still no lawyer.”

“Rupert is English,” said Donna. “He won’t speak any Spanish or have a clue what an opening licence resembles. We could show him a copy of our contract with the builder. It has a notary stamp and appears official. He won’t know the difference.”

“Do we have it here?”

“In the filing cabinet.”

“Ok Mum, prepare it. I’ll bring him out.”

I rejoined my dad in the bar to outline our deception only to discover El Rubio deep in conversation with Rupert. By the expressions on both their faces, they seemed to have discovered mutual interests and were talking animatedly. El Rubio glanced up and came over.

“Rupert has accepted my invitation to show him around Nerja,” he said. “I’ll try and keep him as busy as possible.”

“But what about the kitchen?” said Jack.

“Close,” said El Rubio. “If you value hotel contract with Wings, keeping Rupert happy more important than profit on few pies, and Jack, believe mees, I make hims extremely happy.”

“Really. How?”

El Rubio regarded us knowingly and smiled.

“Oh, I see,” said Jack. “He bats with your team, then off you go and keep him busy for at least two hours, the certificate should be here by then.”

“He lovely man, I might not bring him backs ever but when I do, then we talks about increase in wages.”

“Harrumph,” said Jack blood pressure boiling. “Just don’t bring him back too early. We resumed serving a waiting line of customers. When we checked again, El Rubio and Rupert had disappeared.

At seven p.m. there was no sign of the lawyer.

“No news is good news,” said Donna coming to tell us the obvious.

“Yes, but I hate this waiting,” said Jack. “It’s like sitting under the Sword of Damocles, waiting for imminent execution. Fucking lawyer, why can’t people do as they promised.”

“Relax, Jack, or you’ll need another indigestion tablet.”

“If we don’t get this licence soon, I’ll need the whole bottle. Rupert and El Rubio are taking their time.”

“That could work quite well in the opening licence saga,” I said.

“How?” said Jack.

“His office may not approve of gallivanting with suppliers,” I said.

“Mmm…,” said Jack as Mr. Hancock entered the bar.

“I’m glad I’ve caught most of you together,” said Mr. Hancock. “I just wanted to apologize for my unspeakable behaviour earlier in the week. I realize now it was no fault of yours my case went missing but in the absence of anyone from Wings, you were the only route to finding a solution.”

The bar door opened.

El Rubio and Rupert came through the front door together, relaxed and happy.

“This is Rupert from Wings,” said Donna. “Meet Mr. Hancock.”

“You’re from Wings,” said Hancock turning to Rupert and advancing so close he invaded his personal space. “The name is Hancock and I demand to amend my complaint.”

“Mr. Hancock?” said Rupert stepping back, trying not to scowl at Hancock’s garlic breath.

“Correct,” said Mr. Hancock. “I confess when I lodged my complaint; I blamed the hotel for my lost luggage. Now I understand it was not their fault. It was the Wings' contracted baggage handlers. They sent it to Gibraltar by mistake. My complaint should be about your company, not this hotel. Despite my constant moaning, I have to congratulate the hotel staff who have been most cordial and helpful in solving your problem. Naturally, I will be seeking recompense for my additional purchases and laundry costs.”

“Are you no longer concerned about the hotel’s legality?” said Rupert.

“Yes, but Robin explained in Spain everything works differently from elsewhere,” said Hancock. “I’m no longer worried about it, and neither should you.”

“I’m not,” said Rupert turning toward Jack. “However, my company cannot condone illegality as it negates our insurance under the recently formed Air Travel Organizers’ Licensing scheme. Regretfully, Mr. Webster, unless you can show me your Opening Licence and the proper liability insurance, we will have to cancel our contract with you.”

“No worry, I have it here,” said Donna waving the builder’s contract.

“*Señora*,” said El Rubio alarmed at what he was seeing. “Before you present it Rupert, we needs talk?”

“What?” snapped Donna as El Rubio whispered in her ear.

“No show paper him.”

“He won’t know what it is?”

“He speak a perfect Spanish, *Señora*. Pretending building contract is opening license make everything *muy malo*.”

“Oh shit,” said Donna replacing the paper in the cabinet. “Er, sorry, Dario told me it was the wrong piece of paper.”

“Then I must inform you,” said Rupert. “Subject to confirmation in writing. The Wings contract with the Fontainebleau is cancelled immediately.”

“I think I’m losing the will to live,” said Jack.

“We’re all doomed,” I said.

“Why is everyone so glum?” said a tall, distinguished man with silver-grey hair entering the bar. He was dressed in a blue serge blazer, beige flannels, and a Panama hat.

“I am Felipe Represa de Castro, the hotel lawyer,” he said, delving into his black leather briefcase. “And this is the elusive opening license and a letter from the Guardia Civil withdrawing all charges.”

Donna slumped into the chair. My father and I hugged. Rupert and Antonio kissed. The lawyer looked on in amazement.

“I only delivered a piece of paper,” he said. “What’s all the fuss?”

“Might be to you, tosspot,” said Donna. “To us, it’s life or death.”

“I’m pleased to say,” said Rupert after reading the documents. “We can anticipate a long and profitable relationship. Regretfully, I’ll need to visit regularly to check everything is running smoothly and the cottage pies are up to scratch.”

“Crikey,” said El Rubio blushing.

Whew, I thought. What a landmark moment. If this hadn’t worked, we would have been deported and my parents Spanish assets been impounded.

And I would have to begin again.

Chapter 11 – Stolen stole

After several weeks of chipping away at how my parents and Mark had organized the bar and restaurant, breakfast at least was finally functioning like a well-oiled machine. The buffet layout worked well, and I had calculated the average percentage of coffee versus pots of tea. Thankfully, the British hankering for tea prevailed so the inadequate coffee filter machine was able to cope.

“Are you free?” said a middle-aged male guest as I passed his table.

“For you, Mr. Panter, always,” I said.

“It’s Painter,” he said holding up a plate with a croissant with a bite missing. “May I congratulate the chef on this piping hot croissant; however, it is soggy. Can you bring me a crispy one, please?”

“Straight away, Mr. Painter,” I said taking the plate and heading to the kitchen.

“How did you heat this?” I said showing the offending article to El Rubio.

“In micro,” said El Rubio. “Why?”

“Best do another one but in the oven,” I said. “Micro makes croissants hot really quick but soft not crispy. Can you do the same for future hot croissant orders?”

“I know they soggy, everything in micro soggy or solid ice?” said a distinctly miserable El Rubio as he inserted another croissant into the oven. “It also big problem with cottage pies.”

“My mom said. The machine is only a domestic model. Maybe it is just not man enough for a commercial kitchen. Try giving them a minute longer on a lower power setting and then crisp them off in the normal oven.”

“Crikey. You cook now as well?”

“No way, it’s just a suggestion. I only want happy diners.”

“Me too,” said El Rubio. While we wait for croissant, I speaked with Pepe owner of Bar Bilbainos, they thinking about darts but must makes a team. How many people they need?”

“Three.”

“Crikey, might be difficult but I say him,” said El Rubio opening the oven door and jumping back from the heat. “Here crispy croissant.”

“You sure?”

El Rubio stuck his finger in the end and nodded.

I shrugged and took it from him. The plate was too hot to hold, and I dropped it on the floor where it smashed into pieces.

“Crikey,” said El Rubio picking up the croissant and putting it on a freshly washed but cold plate.

I shrugged.

“Your crispy croissant,” I said placing the new one in front of Mr. Painter.

Painter prodded it with his finger and nodded. “Perfect,” he said. “Thank you.”

At last, an appreciative guest, I thought. If only he knew.

I spotted my parents enter the lobby and beckon me to join them.

I checked the full breakfast tables. Nobody seemed to need anything, and the coffee pot was almost full. I went out to the lobby closely followed by Mark and Susan.

“Hi,” I said. “What’s the problem?”

“We’ve been robbed,” sniffed Donna.

“What happened?” I said hugging her.

“They smashed a window in the Rolls, took my cassettes, and her silk stole,” said Jack.

“Doesn’t sound too serious,” said Mark.

“You callous bugger?” snapped Donna. “It was a wedding present from my mother and is irreplaceable.”

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“During the night,” said Jack. “They smashed the rear side window.”

“Didn’t you lock the garage?” said Mark.

“The up and over was closed but we never lock anything,” said Jack. “Even the car was open. All they had to do was try the door.”

“Didn’t you hear something?” said Susan.

“How could we?” said Jack. “The garage at the front is on the basement level, and the bedroom at the back is on the ground floor. They could have had a firework display, and we would still have been oblivious.”

“Have you informed the police?” said Mark.

“The Guardia Civil came immediately,” said Jack.

“Most impressive service,” said Donna. “Although we had to wait quite a while until a translator was available.”

“The police provided a translator?” said Mark.

“Of course not,” said Jack. “We had to phone tosspot.”

“Wait,” said Mark. “He came from Málaga for a stolen stole?”

“No, son,” snapped Jack. “It was done on the phone. Anyway, they found prints and some blood on the window and thought they knew the culprit. They’re going to arrest him now.”

“So, you might get your stole back, Mum?” I asked.

“Let’s hope so,” said Donna sniffing.

“Breakfasts are calling,” I said heading back into the bar leaving Mark and Susan to console our parents. “Let me know if I can help.”

Two hours later, two uniformed officers of the Guardia came into the bar. They were new faces, so I wasn’t immediately concerned. Until one pointed at me. My heart raced and stomach churned. Is this it? I thought fearing the worst. I went over and stood before them wondering what to say.

“We understand you speak some Spanish,” said the older one.

I nodded.

The younger one brought a brown paper package from behind his back and handed it over. “This is your mother’s scarf,” he said. “And your father’s cassettes. Please tell her we caught the thief who is being severely punished. He will not be bothering you or anybody else in Nerja ever again.”

They turned and left.

I heaved a sigh of relief and unwrapped the paper. Inside, were his mother’s stole and father’s cassettes. I took the package over to her. “Mum, your stolen stole is no longer stolen.”

She burst into tears, took it out of the package and cuddled it to her cheek, then unfolded it. She examined it closely and sobbed even harder.

“What is it?” said Jack.

“Someone blew their nose on my stole,” she wailed.

“We’ll find a dry cleaner,” said Jack.

“No,” said Donna throwing it in the waste bin. “I don’t want it now.”

Jack shrugged.

“Does this mean the Guardia have forgiven us?” I asked.

“Those two may have done,” said Mark. “But you are still in the secret policeman’s book. Watch out when walking home alone, especially at your usual time of four o’clock in the morning.”

That sense of foreboding I’d experienced during Hancock’s revolution returned. This is not how I expected to feel in Spain. In England, I’d never even met a policeman and now they were coming thick and fast.

What next?

Chapter 12 – Water bombs

The following evening after dinner was the trial music night. Mark and his family had moved into their apartment. Hancock plus fellow revolutionaries had departed, and the next tour group had replaced them. I sorted out a pile of discs and played the top one. Paul McCartney and Wings belted out *Band on the Run*. Worthy of higher volume I thought cranking it up a bit. One couple started dancing. Within seconds the limited floor space was packed, and some dancers spilled out onto the patio.

I increased the volume yet again. Now we were talking.

The drinks flowed.

The noise swelled.

The Fontainebleau was thumping.

The tobacco smoke wafted in the dim light as the bubble lamps created disjointed moving shadows around the bar. Finally, I thought, this was more like it, but it didn’t take long for our newly achieved positive ambience to be shattered.

About three seconds.

A woman dancing on the patio screamed and rushed into the bar pointing up at the third floor. Her hair was drenched, and blotchy make-up ran down her face as several women surrounded her to inquire what was wrong. She was too upset to explain.

I squeezed my way through the remaining dancers too wrapped up in each other’s arms to be bothered by this latest drama. I wondered where the water could be coming from assuming it must be yet another of the builder’s plumbing disasters.

I looked up and… splat. A water bomb hit me in the eye and drenched my polo shirt. Splat, then another, and not just me.

The decidedly unattractive aging spinster on the top floor in Room 203 was expressing her disgust at the excessive noise; her face was screwed up with rage as she yelled above the music. “How is a girl to get her beauty sleep?”

Every group will have at least one gremlin, I thought retreating to the bar where El Rubio handed me a towel grinning. Mark just howled. Hancock may have flown, but now we have this miserable bitch trying to spoil our fun, I thought.

Everyone crowded into the bar to escape a further drenching. Some men removed their soaking shirts and swung them over their heads, ensuring everyone received their fair share of spray. One woman’s white top turned completely transparent. She ran upstairs blushing but was back within minutes to rejoin the dancing to a barrage of ribald remarks. I reduced the sound and shut the patio doors. Now there was only room for slow dancing. I changed the music to *You are so beautiful* by Joe Cocker. The bar temperature was stifling with so many people crammed into a small space, even with the air conditioning on full. Drink sales went through the roof.

After the last client departed in the early hours, I was closing the outer doors when a couple in their mid-thirties arrived.

“Sorry,” I said. “We’re closed.”

“We understand,” said a cheeky, handsome young man, around thirty years of age. He was well-spoken with a hint of a London accent and very sure of himself. “I’m Mike, and this is my partner Eva from Sweden.”

Eva was blond and ever so slightly on the plump side but attractive, friendly, bubbly, and smiling.

“We wanted a quick word,” said Eva.

“We run Bar 23 on Calle Pintada,” said Mike. “Charles popped in on his way home and told us about your amazing music selection.”

“Come in, come in,” I said. “We don’t want to disturb the neighbours.”

“We’re in Spain, Robin,” said Mike. “Nobody worries about neighbours.”

“The thing is,” said Eva. “We run Narixa, the discotheque overlooking Playa El Salon. This Saturday is Eurovision. Spanish TV is showing it in colour, and we will have a national costume evening to celebrate the occasion.”

“We wonder if you’d like to come and play the music for us,” said Mike.

“And bring some of your discs,” said Eva.

“Which ones?” I said.

“We made a list,” said Mike handing it over. “Hopefully, you have them all.”

“Will you do it?” said Eva.

“My pleasure,” I said scanning the list. “But it’ll have to wait until I’ve closed the bar first.”

“So will we,” said Mike. “We don’t start until after midnight.”

“Then see you Saturday,” I said yawning before ushering them out.

Despite severe warnings from my father to the battle-axe on the top floor about being sent home if she continued her water bombing antics but continue she did. Whenever I turned up the volume, she appeared on the balcony with small plastic open topped bags filled with water and fired away at whoever dared run the gauntlet from the bar across the patio to the stairs. With such stifling temperatures most guests couldn’t care if they were splashed.

The following day, some came prepared with bathing suits under their evening clothes. A few ladies wore a swim hat, which turned into a competition for the most outrageous designs and garish colours. Subsequent evenings at dinner became a fashion parade of ladies sporting their latest head covering accompanied by huge cheers to gauge the most outrageous.

My mother purchased a large bundle of umbrellas and stacked them outside the bar door and at the foot of the stairs. Now instead of running across the space many danced and sang *Singing in the Rain* by Gene Kelly. What could have been a disaster turned out to be one of our best weeks ever.

On Friday morning, when Lola the Wings rep, came to collect them she was so amazed by the frivolous happiness of the group she led them out to the bus dancing a conga and singing *Viva España.* Eventually, ten minutes after everybody had boarded, battle-axe, who had been late for every meal and bitterly complained if the kitchen had already shut struggled out the front door refusing all offers to carry her enormous suitcase. She even shoved the driver away and heaved it into the luggage compartment herself.

As she turned toward the bus door, she faced a line of people.

A dozen of the group had cooked this up well in advance and were suitably prepared and armed for the occasion. In each hand, they held the same plastic bags thrown at them all week. They had filled them with ice-cold water, aimed and fired them at battle-axe in unison.

They hit the target simultaneously.

One photographed the occasion.

Battle-axe stood frozen in shock.

Everyone stopped laughing unsure what was wrong with her.

Then she started nodding, followed by a huge grin, and cackled so loudly the men came out of the bar opposite to see what was going on. She climbed onto the bus, where several of the women had a towel robe and a change of clothes waiting for her.

Several weeks later, Rupert Caterham the area manager for Wings came to check on El Rubio’s cottage pies and showed us thirty-odd letters written by this group congratulating the Fontainebleau on its hilarious entertainment program.

One was even from battle-axe.

But the events of the week and the excellent bar takings encouraged me to talk with my father about expanding the bar. Entertainment earned us far more than bedrooms.

Chapter 13 – I’m a lumberjack

While drying glasses after breakfast, I studied the layout of the bar to see what improvements could be made with any extension plans. What was the ideal number of heads we could cope with without increasing staff? How long should the counter be for one person maybe two when pressed to serve a larger number of customers? How many stools as against tables and chairs are required for diners? Where could the sound system be more logically integrated?

I spend nearly every waking moment within these four walls, so I need to feel comfortable the new layout could be as efficient as possible, then I would more likely be happy and content to converse with whoever needed me. The only people I ever spoke with were usually on the other side of the bar either lecturing me with their pet rant, or seeking my advice on something I had no knowledge of. If I was destined to be enshrined behind this wall of bottles, glasses, and beer kegs surely, I had the right to prepare the brief for its expansion. This was my domain now and should be harmonious with the way I worked.

So lost was I in my little world I failed to notice when my mum popped her head around the bar door. “Robin, we have a new guest, could you give him a hand with his luggage.”

“Sure,” I said drying my hands. “Which room?”

“Mark and Susan’s old room,” said Donna.

I walked into the lobby to find a short, skinny man in his early fifties with greasy black hair supporting himself on crutches. He wore a thick red and black plaid shirt and blue jeans.

“This is my son, Robin,” said Donna. “Robin, this is David Wilkes from Canada. As of today, The Fontainebleau will be his new home. He wants to live here for the foreseeable future.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” I said unsure to shake hands.

David solved his dilemma by moving both crutches into his left hand and holding out his right. We shook. “Is this all you have?” I said indicating the single suitcase.

“I don’t need much,” said David with a broad Canadian drawl. “I’ve been travelling the world with Bessie for nearly a year now but it’s time to settle for a bit and get back to work.”

“Bessie?”

“Sorry, my case is Bessie, named after my well-travelled Aunt and the typewriter inside is Susan, a favourite secretary back home.”

“You give all your stuff ladies names?”

“Sadly, it’s the only way I can get closer to the fairer sex.”

“I’m sure your fortunes will change in The Fontainebleau.”

“You er..., have plenty of available women?”

“All ages, shapes, and sizes but more importantly they are in holiday mode. After a couple of sherries, they tend to let their hair down more readily than back home.”

“Then I hope the excitement won’t kill me,” said David.

“Nice way to go though. Follow me, please,” I said picking up the heavy case. “What have you got in Bessie, a year’s supply of Canadian Club?”

“Ha, no. Just Susan along with several reams of paper and spare ribbons.”

“Are you a journalist?” I said as we went through to the patio.

“No, but I write.”

“Wow, our first creative guest.”

“I’ve been on a sabbatical for over a year but now I’m suitably refreshed my fingers are itching to stab the odd key or two. Spain is cheap enough for me to live comfortably and your mother has agreed the hotel will take care of my laundry and meals so I can concentrate.”

“What do you write?”

“That is my first challenge. I have gathered many ideas on my travels so need to sort those into some kind of package for a novel.”

“How long does it take to write a book?”

“How long is a piece of string? I’ve mainly done screenwriting for TV until now so this will be my first tome.”

“Please let me know if I can help.”

“Eventually, I’ll need a supply of A4 paper but in the meantime a lift onto a bar stool most evenings is fine.”

“Cool. I’ll introduce you to some of our regulars. Many have been here for years and have a host of tales to relate.”

“I look forward to that.”

“Here is your room,” I said opening the door and ushering David inside. “When you need laundry, just stuff it in the bag provided and leave it outside. Mealtimes are posted in your bedside information pack and for you, we will include room service if you fancy time away from the madding crowd.”

“Eh, thanks, Robin. Sounds perfect.”

“You’re welcome, David. Enjoy your stay.”

“I will, oh er one thing. When I hang the Do Not Disturb sign on my door, I mean exactly that. When I’m concentrating, the slightest disturbance throws me off my thread and it takes hours to recover. Just to warn you I may appear to be the mildest, easy-going sort of chap as you would expect of most of my fellow countrymen, but when I’m disturbed, I can be as mean as shit. Beware, these crutches can also be lethal weapons and my aim is deadly.”

“Fine, I’ll inform the staff. How about I make a special do not disturb sign? Something along the lines of *Danger, writer at work, enter at your own peril*.”

“Sounds perfect. I am so pleased you understand my needs. I can relax knowing I will be happy and productive here.”

“We’ll do our bit. You concentrate on your book.”

Chapter 14 - Waterloo

Luxemburg won the Eurovision Song Contest twice in a row, in 1972 and 1973. Running the contest for the second time in their small country was deemed too expensive, so Britain volunteered. The nineteenth contest was held at the Brighton Dome on Saturday, 6 April, 1974, and was hosted by Katie Boyle for the fourth and final time. Seventeen nations took part. Britain managed to escape the dreaded *zero point* and came fourth with Olivia Newton-John singing *Long Live Love*. Spain came ninth with *Canta y sé feliz* by Peret. The winners by a long way were Abba with *Waterloo*.

I arrived at Narixa on Saturday night a tad after twelve-thirty in my usual DJ costume, a fake Queen’s guard red coat, carrying the requested record selection in a plastic case.

Long before I turned the corner into Calle Tajillo I heard the music thumping so loud the church seemed to be vibrating in time to the music.

The Narixa building was decrepit, to say the least, but unheeded, I went through the open door and headed for the bar, where the dim lighting hid the damp spots and holes in the wall. The dance floor was packed with people in national costumes, some basic, others spectacular.

Eva and two other beautiful blond girls in Swedish costumes were behind the bar, rushing to keep up with the constant demand for exotic cocktails. She spotted me and indicated I should join Mike on the DJ platform. I went over, waited until the disc ended, and approached.

“Guess what,” said Mike as I joined him behind the deck.

“Go on,” I said.

“We have a major coup here tonight. Play track three every half an hour,” said Mike giving me an album.

I checked it out. It was in Swedish, but I recognized the picture of a brand-new group on the cover.

“Why is it a coup?” I said.

“Abba won Eurovision,” said Mike. “Usually, it took six months before we could buy the disc here in Spain, but amazingly, a Swedish friend bought their latest album in Stockholm in March. *Waterloo* is track three.”

“Have you played it yet?” I said.

“No, I waited for you,” said Mike putting the mike to his mouth. “It will be your launchpad as our new DJ.”

The crowd was pushing closer anticipating something special.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Mike. “Let’s give a traditional Narixa welcome to our new Disc Jockey, who recently arrived from England to become part-owner of the Fontainebleau, Robin Webster.”

I slipped behind the deck put on the headphones and grabbed the microphone as the crowd screamed my name. “Ladies and Gents,” I said into the mike while loading the Abba album onto the deck and setting the speed to 33RPM. “We have an incredible surprise. As you all know, the winner of the Eurovision Song Contest tonight was the Swedish group, Abba.”

I waited for the inevitable cheer. When it had died down, I dropped the needle precisely onto track three and set it turning. As the introduction played, I spoke over it. “At great expense, we have had their album flown over. It’s just arrived at Narixa, and you are the first to hear it live in Spain. It’s *Waterloo*.”

Narixa went wild.

Great, I thought while admiring some sexy girls in lederhosen strutting their stuff. At least this is something I know I can do well.

Every half an hour I played Waterloo.

We were still at it as the sun rose and its warm pink rays illuminated Playa El Salon.

Chapter 15 – Strapped for cash

Wiping, wiping, and more wiping the never-ending queue of surfaces and tables. As fast as one was ready, more people sat down and in half an hour it needed wiping again. I don’t know why I bothered but nothing irritated me more than sitting at a sticky table. If I objected, then what might customers think who were paying to use it? While the constant cleaning made me scream, my heart sang with pride when I overheard someone, usually a woman, comment on the cleanliness of the bar. So, there I was lost in the cleaning rhythm, wipe, wipe, wipe when a woeful scream from the front of the hotel wrenched me away from my coping mechanism. To my memory, only one person vented their anguish in such a dramatic fashion.

My father.

I headed outside only to bump into my mother in the lobby sprinting in the same direction, dad’s stomach tablets gripped firmly in hand.

“What the hell is wrong with him now?” I mumbled as I heaved open the door and she fumbled with the medication bottle top.

“No apoplexy, please,” she muttered. “On top of his delicate digestion, it’s potentially lethal.”

Jack was leaning on the car roof, breathing heavily, and shaking his head in dismay. The big Rolls Royce blocked the street entirely.

He pointed at the smears and fingerprints all over the roof and windows.

“Who has done this to my pride and joy?” he whined. “And why? I only stopped for a minute to unload a few cases of champagne. I come back and find some morons have decorated my beloved.”

Donna yanked off the bottle top and passed him a tablet. Jack gulped it down. “You, ok?” she said. He nodded. “Where did the marks come from?”

“Fucking dagoes,” said Jack. “No respect for property.”

“Unfair,” said Donna. “It could have been anyone, and you shouldn’t use such a derogatory term. It’s their country, and as migrants, we need to show respect.”

“If they’re happy to take my money, I’ll call them what I like. Anyway, who else could it have been?” said Jack. “Probably those commie bastards in the bar opposite.”

“You could be right, dearest but put yourself in their shoes,” said Donna. “How might you react to a fancy car stuck under your nose when living in poverty? Anyway, whose bright idea was it to bring the Rolls?”

“Perhaps nobody would have noticed your wealth,” I said. “If you’d arrived in a battered old jalopy.”

“And, the hotel might have been completed quicker,” said Donna. “And not been ripped off by suppliers.”

Jack regarded her, shoulders tensing.

“Don’t start,” said Donna watching him closely to see if the tablet was taking effect.

Jack nodded and sighed.

“Come, we need to clear the air on this,” said my mother.

“Shouldn’t I move the car first?” said Jack.

“We’re in Spain, not Staines. Whoever needs to pass, will wait happily in a civilized fashion until we’re done.”

We followed her into the lobby. The photo of my grandfather adorning the wall behind the desk was still askew. Donna straightened it as she did every morning, but after a delay of a few seconds, it swung back to its original position. She tried again with the same result. She shrugged with the well-practiced air of accepting the inevitable. Jack perched on the desk and peered sheepishly at my mum. I’d never seen him so down. Was this the tension I’d sensed between them? Was I about to hear a revelation?

“Look,” said Donna as my parents huddled over the calculator on the lobby desk. Donna tapped in a few rows of numbers and pressed enter. “When you see the total picture, we aren’t so badly off considering. We survived over a year with no income and still made all the outstanding stage payments for the hotel. Our villa and half-finished penthouse are fully paid for, and we have a fair number of bookings for the summer with Wings Tours.”

“I know, sweetheart, but it doesn’t change our situation,” said Jack studying the calculator display. “Yes, we have some clients but what about the winter when the package tours stop? We have to face the reality of no bookings for at least six months, yet we still have to pay Emilio de Miguel, the builder one more staged payment before the hotel is transferred to our name. If we don’t have enough, Emilio will repossess the building and we lose everything.”

“Surely, we have sufficient money, Jack,” said Donna.

“Assets yes dear, but they are tied up in the UK for another three years and will cost a fortune to cancel let alone the massive dollar premium when buying foreign currency. Our only option is to generate cash with the Fontainebleau.”

“We could sell the properties and move in here,” said Donna. “As you said, it would only be for three years.”

“With taxes and a fire sale price, we might lose up to sixty percent of the value and still be struggling to make the payment. Darling, we have only one option which is to make this place work. Three years of hard work and with a fair wind and we should be ok.”

“Not quite how we envisaged our retirement.”

“We are not yet old. We’ll still have plenty of years to enjoy the sun.”

“I’m beginning to think we should have stayed at home. I might not be decrepit, but the stress is killing me.”

“With Wilson in charge, the challenges in the UK would be equally as hard hanging on to what we have. Here at least if this place succeeds, we can make some money and we don’t need much to live on.”

“True, but what a come down,” said Donna. “From luxury living in our beautiful island home on the river Thames with not a care in the world, to this. I told you not to commit so much to investments,”

“You were right, but at twelve percent, the interest rates were so high it made sense at the time,” said Jack.

“What a mess,” said Donna. “At this rate, we’ll be the only millionaires living in a cave.”

“As I’ve said before, at least with the climate here, we’ll be warm troglodytes,” said Jack shaking his head.

Donna smiled at him. “I do hope you are joking. Our biggest mistake was completely underestimating how much we needed to set up this hotel.”

“Nobody could have envisaged the delays,” said Jack.

“Nor the staggering extra costs,” said Donna.

“Anyway, we are where we are,” said Jack. “On a knife edge, and now I’ve tipped us over because I’ve had to borrow to keep us going. For the first time in decades, we are in debt with no way of paying it back.”

“But not for long,” said Donna. “The hotel income forecast is promising. When they pay what’s outstanding, we’ll be in credit again.”

“Only temporarily. Our room rate is 235 pesetas per night with continental breakfast, but when we sell through Wings Tours, we must discount to 165. We need to sell a hell of a lot of room nights to raise enough to pay for everything and save up for the final payment to Emilio. And, don’t forget we have things to buy,” said Jack. “And staff to pay. I’ll have to borrow more for those unless I can persuade Emilio to accept part payment.”

“You’ll find a way, dear,” said Donna. “You generally do.”

“Thank you for your faith, but I’ve never been up against it like this. Let’s hope the German Club 18-30 also signs up. If they go ahead, the hotel should be full until October, and it needs to be because the interest on the loan is extortionate,” said Jack his eyes welling up. “We might even have to sell the Rolls.”

“Am I hearing this right?” I said. “We’ve gone from millionaires to paupers in just over a year.”

“I wouldn’t put it quite so extreme, son,” said Jack. “But we are certainly asset rich but cash poor.”

“Then it’s pointless making any suggestions to improve things,” I said.

“Depends,” said Jack. “What did you have in mind?”

“We proved last week entertainment is the way to increase our weekly earnings, but we are seriously hampered by the lack of space. Just imagine how much we could have taken with a bigger bar?”

“I agree,” said Donna. “We made more in one night than a week’s worth of full bedrooms.”

“I have no argument with you,” said Jack. “However, a bigger bar costs money we don’t have.”

“Then borrow more against your properties,” I said.

“No,” said Jack. “I’ve already overstretched my loan limit. The bank wants to see a history of positive cash flow before advancing me more which will take time. Our biggest problem is unless we can pack in a lot more successful weeks before the season ends, we won’t be able to repay the bank loan or make the final payment to the builder. Then we lose everything.”

There was another loud noise from outside. This time it sounded like a squealing pig. All three of us moved to the door and peered out.

Two ancient mopeds had stopped behind the Rolls and were sounding their pathetic klaxons. They had waited long enough.

Each driver carried a huge sack of potatoes perched precariously on top of the gas tank and secured between their thighs. The middle-aged farmers, wearing battered blue overalls and wide-brimmed straw hats, seemed unperturbed by the empty vehicle in front of them. Their noisy engines ticked over with stinking fumes billowing out from half-rusted exhausts. They shouted between themselves, shrugged, and gestured good-naturedly while waiting for the road to clear.

“Sorry,” shouted Jack waving at the moped drivers, but they were busy chatting and didn’t notice him. He scurried around to the driver’s door, climbed in, and set off. He wasn’t going far, only around the block, planning to park in the cul de sac at the side of the hotel.

He needn’t have hurried.

The two gentlemen on their mopeds were so engrossed in conversation they failed to notice the way ahead was free until a large truck transporting builder’s rubble crept up behind them and gave them a long blast on twin air horns. They jumped like startled rabbits, patted each other on the shoulder, and set off in a cloud of fumes along the street. They hadn’t gone but a few meters when one of the precariously perched sacks split, spilling potatoes of all shapes and sizes. They bounced and rolled everywhere. The carefree laughter as passers-by dived in to save the spuds was infectious. Nearly all the potatoes were rescued. A few disappeared mysteriously, but not because some had found their way into people’s pockets. Nobody stole food from a neighbour in a practically crime-free Nerja, but a few of the smaller ones disappeared down a drain where a grateful rat popped his head up thinking it must be Christmas.

For the recovered potatoes, however, there was a problem. There were no containers. The helpers surrounded the mopeds with arms full of potatoes hunting around helplessly for someone to solve the situation. The conversation was loud, mostly covering a wide range of implausible suggestions as to where to put them.

Thankfully, the rubble truck driver provided an empty cement sack from his cab. The potatoes were repacked and perched on the moped petrol tank within minutes. Muchas gracias was exchanged umpteen times, and the drivers resumed their short journey to the greengrocers just around the corner on Calle Cristo.

As mum had said, I thought. Most civilized.

Chapter 16 – Brotherly love

Mark and I were sitting about as far away as possible from each other at the bar lost in the dregs of a cup of coffee. He was probably dreaming of racing cars around Brands Hatch, whereas I was psyching myself up for another hard day wiping tables, drying glasses, and tolerating drunken ramblings. We had recently finished clearing the breakfast tables and returned the buffet items to their respective storage.

“Were you aware of how bad Dad’s finances are?” I said, not as an attempt to break the usual tense silences between us, but he was the only other person who I could discuss such a sensitive subject with.

“Yes, but I didn’t take much notice,” said Mark almost relieved at having an interested audience for his opinion. “As you know, I didn’t want to be here in the first place. If bankruptcy forces us to go back home, I will be delighted.”

There was a loud phut and a smell of electrical burning wafted into the bar from the kitchen.

“Joder,” screamed El Rubio. “Help.”

Mark and I rushed into the kitchen to find El Rubio frantically pushing buttons and twisting dials on the microwave. The interior was full of black smoke.

I yanked out the plug, grabbed a tea towel, wrapped it around the burning hot machine, and ran toward the back door.

“Mark, fetch a blanket or something to cover it,” I yelled.

I dropped the red-hot oven onto the middle of the cul de sac and turned back to Mark. He was standing at the door doing nothing, except smirking.

“Idiot,” I said, sprinting into the storeroom. I glanced around and picked up a dust sheet used for protecting the floor from paint drips. I unfolded it as I ran back outside.

I threw the sheet over the oven and wrapped it tightly around. The flames went out, but smoke continued to billow out from under. I withdrew, and we stood and watched as the smoke died down. When I thought it safe, I approached the oven, removed the blackened dust sheet, and opened the door. More dirty smoke poured out to reveal a blackened tin of open baked beans. I used the dust sheet to extract it.

“Who put this in the microwave,” I said.

“I did,” said Mark. “I fancied them for my breakfast. What of it?”

“Damned fool,” I said. “You can’t put metal in a microwave. El Rubio, why didn’t you stop him?”

“I was in the restroom,” said El Rubio. “The timer was ticking when I came back so I assumed someone was heating some water for a mug of tea or something.”

“Perhaps we can claim it on the insurance,” I said. “Mark as you broke it, you can carry it into the storeroom and leave it there for the insurance assessor.”

“Fuck, you,” said Mark. “Carry it yourself. You bought the damn thing.”

“And thanks to you,” I said shrugging and picking it up. “We’ll have to buy a new one. Dad is going to be delighted.”

I carried it into the storeroom, heaved it onto a shelf, and heard the door close behind me. I turned. It was Mark. He was white with rage, picked up a small tin of paint, aimed at me, and threw it hard. I ducked. The tin smashed into the wall behind me and burst open. White paint splashed everywhere, including over my clothing and hair.

“What is wrong with you?” I screamed watching Mark pick up another tin and aim.

“I’ve had it with you,” shouted Mark. “Always thinking you know best, bossing me around, bullying my wife to cook your lunch. Life was almost bearable until you turned up; now it’s pure hell. It’s best for all of us if you fuck off back to England.”

“Still resenting me,” I shouted. “You’ve been doing it ever since I was born and replaced you as the baby of the family.”

“Rubbish,” shouted Mark hurling the can. It missed and smashed into the wall splattering me and shelves of cleaning materials. “You’re a spoiled brat demanding everything your way.”

The door opened and a timid El Rubio came in as Mark was picking up another can of paint. He jumped on Mark’s back, scratched his cheek, pulled his hair, and screamed, “Leave hims alone you big bully.”

Mark made to throw the can, but El Rubio restrained him.

“What’s going on?” said Donna from the doorway.

“Mark didn’t like the colour of the storeroom and decided to repaint,” I said. “Sadly, his brush skills haven’t improved, and as you can see, I have a new image.”

El Rubio went over to Donna and whispered into her ear. Mark stood defiant, glaring at me with his fists clenched.

“Mark,” said Donna. “You made the mess; you clean it up. Then we need to talk with your father.”

“No,” said Mark. “I will not clean it up. I’m done here. I’m a twenty-six-year-old married man being treated like a bloody three-year-old lackey. It’s about time I made my way in the world. Me and the family are going back to England.”

“I don’t think Susan,” said Donna.

“I don’t care,” said Mark. “I am going.”

He stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 17 – Goodbye Sally

Having a serious family conference without interruptions from guests, with fatuous requests that most idiots could have resolved themselves, was difficult. However, we urgently needed to sort out the situation with Mark before war broke out and disturbed the superficial calm of staff harmony. We adjourned to the nearest private and acoustically insulated place we could think of. The en suite bathroom in my room and perched on whatever surface we could find. Jack

And Donna sat on the side of the bath, I put the lid down and sat on the toilet, Mark, and Susan leaned against the sink. Nobody appeared happy or comfortable. Susan was sniffing.

“Mark,” said my dad after moments of silence caused by everyone’s reluctance to begin. None of us wanted to be here or reopen this smouldering can of worms. Thankfully, my dad commanded the respect of the room, so we listened and said nothing. “Son, irrespective of the reasons why you used up our entire stock of white paint in a futile attempt on your brother’s life, we need to resolve what it is you want and what is best for our business, this hotel.”

“I cannot work with my brother,” said Mark. “Look at him sitting on his throne like he rules the place. Until he arrived everything was fine. He has to go. That’s what I want.”

“No Mark,” said Donna. “Everything was not as you say fine before Robin arrived at my invitation. We had underestimated the staff we needed and were working twenty hours a day, even though this was meant to be our retirement. As I see it, we have two choices to maintain peace and a happy ship in front of the customers. Either Robin goes, or you, Susan and the kids go.”

“We can do this voluntarily,” said Jack. “Or I will decide bearing in mind we desperately need to reduce our costs. Robin, do you want to go back to the UK?”

“No thanks. I quit everything to come here and make this work. My entertainment evenings prove I can attract more customers, which we can continue with the residents during the difficult winter months. Whereas Mark adds nothing to the business and scowls at the customers because he is unhappy being in Spain. He was like it before I went back last time and was still the same on my return. If I may, I’d like to make a suggestion for Mark and Susan to consider.”

“I’d like to make a suggestion,” mimicked Mark in a fairy-like voice.

“Shut up, Mark,” said Susan. “Go on Robin.”

“What’s blocking clear thinking,” I said. “Is Mark having no idea how to provide for his family in England, especially with the economy tanking under Labour and inflation spinning totally out of control.”

“He could get a job,” said Susan.

“As what,” I said. “Car salesman like before with Mickey Jingles? First, car sales have plummeted. Mickey has had to wind down his car dealership and now spends most of his time here playing guitar. Second, he has no other skills so what could he possibly write in his CV to attract an employer? Painter, poster hanger?”

Dad stifled a chuckle.

“And your point is?” said Mark glaring at me.

“Mark there is only one thing you love above everything. Driving. Why not become your own boss and start a removal company? Start with man and van and grow from there, Dad, you could guarantee a loan from your rental income to buy the van. They could live rent-free in the Staines property to start with. It means Mark would be self-employed and in charge of his destiny which is what he wants.”

“Right son?” said my dad glancing tenderly at Mark.

“Yes,” whispered Mark, his eyes watering.

Susan hugged him and they wept together.

“Why didn’t you say?” she said.

“Because you and the kids love it so much here,” sniffed Mark.

“You can come whenever you want,” said Donna stretching out a hand and stroking Mark’s arm.

“You’ll have to share a room with the kids,” said Mark.

“Nonsense,” said Donna. “You will always be welcome.”

“Even by me,” I said. “You can keep me supplied with the latest hits.”

We stood and had a group hug.

For the first time since our arrival in Nerja, I felt we had truly bonded.

Chapter 18 – Spanish survival course for foreigners

Mine was an internal room, so the only window provided views of the patio. I pulled back the curtains and looked out to where the blue fountain trickled quietly in its centre. My mother loved this main feature of the hotel and relished turning it on every morning and off at night. It was her baby and it had been the inspiration behind the name of our Spanish venture. I remember the family debate, as if it were yesterday. We wanted a name to conjure up an image of a romantic holiday, but in English, Blue Fountain sounded like a motorway service station, and Fuente Azul in Spanish didn’t tick any boxes. Then Mum remembered when we visited Miami, the hotel we stayed in was called Fontainebleau. It rang so much better in French, so Fontainebleau it was.

The fountain hadn’t always behaved so gently.

Dear Emilio de Miguel, our builder, hadn’t wired the pump properly, so on first use, it had gurgled, spat a giant jet of water two meters high then cut off the electricity. It was just one of his many failings, but his worst was the electrical distribution board.

As part of his rip-off the foreigner policy, he had initially only installed one circuit, which wasn’t strong enough to power the kitchen oven and bar air-conditioning at the same time. Guests could either wait forever for the food in the cool or sweat while wrestling with their gammon steak and pineapple. My dad went bananas and ranted about what an idiot he would seem in front of his fellow bookies at their annual dinner in Mayfair. He was on the verge of physically attacking the builder but according to my mum, Mark had intervened, and Emilio had agreed, under the threat of violence, to install a second circuit. As these were the new 240 volts instead of the old 120, they were expensive, and most tradesmen were still learning how to work with the higher voltage. As always, Emilio’s excuses were plausible and the consequences expensive, but our main complaint was he was so slow. The second circuit was literally up and running the day before we opened and continued to be the source of mysterious power outages in the middle of dinner.

Several guests lolled on blue loungers, reading books, or chatting. One freckled man wore a handkerchief protecting his bald pate. A knot in each of its corners held it gingerly in place. His book though was real class, *Eye of the Tiger* by Wilbur Smith. Several male guests were standing on the galleried landings outside their rooms dressed in shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops with beach bags in hand as they waited for their partners. They were studiously avoiding each other by pretending to enjoy the crystal blue sky.

Four bougainvillea plants were starting to climb the walls they were planted in front of. Strange, I thought, one was streets ahead of the others.

I went into the bar for my daily ration of wiping, to restock, and open for the midday session. I’d hardly had time to wring out the damp cloth when Charles slipped onto his usual stool.

“My lunchtime special please, Robin.”

“How’s the car?” I said pulling his pint.

“Write off,” said Charles. “Desperately need another. What happened to your Jag?”

“I sold it a while ago to someone going back to England.”

“Pity, it was perfect for my job. Ferrying English house buyers around in it would have made them feel instantly at home. Have you bought a replacement?”

“Yes, a second-hand mini.”

“Could be a mistake,” said Charles.

“Why?”

“The mechanics here know nothing about British cars, only Seat, Renault, or Citroen. If it breaks down, you’re buggered.”

“Really,” I said. “I hardly use it, so fingers crossed it keeps going. Purely hypothetical but what is the best way to sell my dad’s car?”

“A good barman in Nerja should have answers for all these types of questions,” said Charles. “You’ll discover over time everyone trusts whoever is behind the bar. You serve both drinks and information. Good info attracts more clients.”

“Give us a chance,” I said. “I’ve just started my apprenticeship.”

“Fair enough,” said Charles. “Concerning the Rolls, best contact a dealer in London. For your dad’s model, they’ll bite your leg off.”

“Thanks, Charles, font of all knowledge.”

“You’ll be amazed at the shit I’ve had to learn in my five years of selling real estate,” said Charles. “Believe me, foreigners might have plenty of money but extracting it requires a far broader and practical expertise than any Encyclopaedia Britannica might offer.”

“Absolutely,” said David Rowcroft joining them. “Between us, we could write a book advising ignorant Brits how best to make informed decisions about pretty much everything. Right Charles?”

“Spot on David,” said Charles. “Except neither of us have the time for such a literary enterprise. Too busy keeping our heads above water.”

“Is it so difficult to make it here?” I asked.

“Just remember your own horror story,” said Charles.

“How could we have avoided all these problems?”

“Your example is epic,” said David. “And I’m sure we will be exploiting it with future customers to justify why they need our services. The most crucial ingredient is good local knowledge about how things are done here in Nerja and who you can trust to do a good job on time at a fair price. You fell into the trap of using a lawyer from Málaga.”

“And like most lawyers, he is a paid-up member of the Falange Party,” said Charles. “His job is to maximise how much money the state and he can extract from your overflowing wallet.”

“But he spoke English,” I said. “And came highly recommended by the developer who sold us the plot of land in Marbella.”

“And using your English approach to business, it sounded the logical thing to do,” said Charles.

“Er..., right,” I said. “We assumed he represented our interests.”

“Wrong,” said David. “Lawyers in Spain represent the state first, themselves next, and all their friendly suppliers fall in line at the rear. You, the customer are some twenty kilometres behind. The longer they can keep you strung along the more they can make you bleed.”

“Haemorrhage,” I said. “And now we will be lucky to survive, especially at the end of the season with no income.”

“And they will continue to hover over you,” said Charles. “Hoping to pick up the remnants for a song and sell them onto the next ignorant foreign punter for a massive gain.”

“To avoid nightmares, you need to build a team of trustworthy suppliers and service providers,” said David.

“And you just happen to know who they are,” I said.

“Of course,” said Charles.

“You’re just as bad as the lawyer,” I said. “All this scaremongering so you can fleece your ten percent from us.”

“One does not defecate on one’s doorstep,” said Charles offended.

“We’ve been crying out for a place we can call home,” said David equally resentful. “Decent music, light-hearted banter, sharing nostalgic memories of the old country, and grub you can sink your teeth into instead of poky tapas. The Fontainebleau could well become our local Rose and Crown. Why do you think we are sending friends here? We want you to survive for our benefit.”

“We don’t want your money, Robin,” said Charles. “It’s a quality-of-life thing. We prefer somewhere we can chill and be ourselves away from the stress of survival in this sunny but impoverished paradise.”

“Not to mention the fragility of our position,” said David.

“Sorry?”

“Don’t you read the papers or listen to TV?” said Charles.

“How could I? I can hardly order a cup of tea.”

“Franco has run this country with an iron fist for decades,” said David.

“Please, no politics,” I said. “It’s way too complicated for me.”

“Sorry, Robin,” said Charles. “But to have any chance of survival you need to be prepared for whatever the imminent death of Franco might bring.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “Whatever happens to Franco, I will still be serving gins and tonics in this bar.”

“How do you know?” said David.

“What do you mean?”

“A new dictator may stir up another revolution,” said Charles. “In which case, all foreigners will be asked to leave. You’ll lose everything overnight.”

“You’re joking.”

“Just read a bit about the causes of the Civil War,” said David. “The main point was the Nationalists were not about to sit by and let the democratically elected republic of communists and socialists ruin the country by grabbing all the assets for the common good. Franco represents the landowners and ruling classes and brutally eliminated his opposition. When such a dictator dies, all he has repressed usually bubbles over. Franco’s parting could rekindle all that pent-up hatred on both sides. Johnny foreigners would be the first target. You ought to be prepared to pack and leave instantly or face an irate crowd banging on the door blaming their frustrations on us.”

“On the other hand,” said Charles. “His death might open up a path to democracy. In which case prepare for a boom in tourism and real estate.”

“Those are two enormous extremes,” I said. “I’ve never considered either of them.”

“Which is why we are trying to help,” said David.

“Then where were you during Hancock’s revolution?”

“Bloody fool could have got himself killed,” said Charles.

“Low profile,” said David. “We see all but say or do nothing. It is why we are not in Cienfuegos’s black book, like some.”

“Irrespective of whether we agree with their politics,” said Charles. “This is Spain. It is completely different from the UK in language, culture, climate, law, and how they approach life. Sadly, every Brit falls into the classic trap of assuming Spain works like it does back home. In reality, it is a third-world country with an immature administration, no citizen’s rights, and the justice system is biased in favour of the state.”

“As for building inspectors. Did you see one during construction?” asked David.

“I wasn’t here but Dad told me they only ever saw the builder.”

“Before you purchased,” said David. “Did you check for a damp course?”

“Er..., no. We assumed with the superb climate it wasn’t necessary,” I said.

“That is the problem of assume,” said Charles. “It makes an *ass* out of *u* and *me* which is why potential buyers need us, our local contacts and knowledge.”

“For example,” said David. “There are rumours of a new reservoir being planned for the La Viñuela valley yet there is nothing in print about it anywhere. Imagine if you bought land up there and built a villa without knowing how high the water level might reach. You could lose far more than your garden gnomes.”

“Or you could make a fortune by buying the right plot,” said Charles.

“But surely the planning application process should prevent that from happening,” I said.

“Robin, we are not in England,” said David. “Planning permission is granted to anyone who pays the fee, irrespective of the legality of the project. Spaniards know this and mostly avoid making mistakes, but foreigners are fair game for ripping off. Just like you were. We are just trying to complete your education.”

“Oh, er... sorry,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Ok,” said Charles.

“It takes a while, but you’ll slowly pick it up. One more thing for today’s revelations, the consequence of Spain’s unstable political maelstrom,” said David. “Is a poor economy. Nobody wants to invest in a country with an uncertain future. It is why foreigners trying to make a living in Spain wearing only one hat, is impossible, because any one job won’t generate enough income to cover costs. Flexibility is the name of the game. First, have a go at anything to learn the language and how it works here, then gradually harden up on two or three things you can make bits and pieces of money at. Then when one income stream winds down you always have the other.”

“What other things can one do?” I asked.

“In addition to teaching, my wife translates where requested,” said David. “Last week alone she helped out at a chemist, hairdresser, and undertaker.”

“Isn’t that potentially dangerous,” I said.

“Why?” said David.

“It’s extremely technical translating,” I said. “What if she confuses cough drops, with coiffure, or coffins?”

“Thankfully,” said David sipping his drink with one hand while scratching his balls with the other. “The people paying her bear the burden of any mistakes. So far, she’s muddled through.”

“What about you, Charles?”“I am an agent for several insurance companies,” said Charles. “I sell home and car insurance to my buyers.”

“Perhaps you should inquire what policies they offer for dodgy translators?” I asked. “Just the one extra job for you?”

“Good lord, no,” said Charles. “I also collaborate with several lawyers and accountants to make sure tax returns are done on time and my owners and renters comply with current property legislation.”

“I also sell cars,” said David. “And act for various removal companies for Brits shipping their stuff over for their new house and take them back when they can’t adjust. In addition to my contacts for pools, gardeners, and refurbishment, I also represent furniture shops, garden centres, ironmongers, and electricals including white goods. Between the two of us, we maximise the yield from each client. This is something you could do as your Spanish improves.”

“Difficult, when I’m speaking English behind the bar all day and night,” I said pouring David another vodka and orange.

“Many a secret can be heard from behind a bar,” said David.

“Such as?”“I call it the Spanish holiday effect,” said Charles. “After a day turning pink on the beach and a couple of gins, couples often discuss with the barman how much nicer it is in Spain and wouldn’t it be wonderful to live here some or all of the time. These are the ones ripe for buying a property. Just like your parents did all those years ago.”

“The problem is,” said David after gulping down his drink and passing over his glass for a refill. “Is sorting the dreamers from the serious.”

“I’ve already had several conversations along those lines. But how do I recognize those genuinely interested?”

“If they are a tourist, flush them out by recommending a good estate agent,” said Charles.

“Whereas property owners tend to want medical services, insurance, cars, gardeners, pool maintenance, refurbishments or extensions,” said David.

“And I wonder where they could find such quality services,” I said.

“Here is my card,” said Charles.

“Mine too,” said David. “Here take a stack and keep them behind the bar. You never know when they might come in handy, and you’ll find the introduction fee most generous.”

“Seems I have a new job scouting for your clients,” I said placing the cards on the till. “But I can’t see many of the current group being interested. They are way too young.”

“You’ll be amazed at how many can afford Spanish prices,” said Charles. “Some of my best clients have been pop stars, footballers, and complete oddballs.”

“And you never know who has a rich Daddy,” said David.

I regarded them both, my mind buzzing with possibilities.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” I said. “You’ve just made me realize how incompetent us Webster are at this living in Spain thing.”

“A considerable improvement over last week,” said Charles.

“How can incompetence be an improvement?”

“Now you accept you are completely useless,” said David. “Things can only get better.”

“I’ve always believed ignorance is bliss,” I said. “I guess the first thing I should address is learning Spanish.”

“You’ll find going deeper than two beers and a ration of ham opens up all sorts of doors,” said David.

“Especially with Spanish girls,” said Charles. “You should find one, Robin. You’ll be amazed how much quicker it is to er...”

“Expand my vocabulary,” I said.

Chapter 19 – Hello Faulkner

After our amicable decision for Mark and his family to return to England, the day dawned for their departure. Half of me was delighted. Without my daily cause of conflict and snide remarks, I could wipe tables with impunity and life should be sweeter, but I could see my mother was hurting at the loss of her grandchildren, whom she doted on.

I stood at the back of the lobby watching while they hugged. Even my dad’s eyes were watering, although not out of sadness about Mark going, but because it reduced his weekly outgoings. He was angry at himself for the succession of disasters and losing family members was a sign of failure, something Dad was unused to and found hard to deal with. It had been his drive and enthusiasm for our Spanish business that had excited everyone to come and join him me included. Now, I worried he might just jack it all in.

What could I do if he did?

He spotted me watching and sidled over.

“I had a call from Club 18-30,” he said. “The first of seven German groups arrive next Wednesday. Without Mark and Susan, we have to find a way to deal with them without increasing our costs. It will mean some changes. Meanwhile, try and say a fond farewell to your brother for your mother’s sake.”

Amazing, I thought, a dicky digestive system, family falling apart at the seams, business on the verge of bankruptcy, and still, he is hungry to move forward. Now I had a tear in my eye. There was no chance my father was going to quit which was reassuring.

I hugged the kids. They didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. They had loved their time in Nerja, were both fluent in Spanish, and had many friends. Most of all they enjoyed the freedom of living in a safe place with few vehicles and happily walked themselves to school and back. Adjust back to the English way of life was going to be hard, and I suspected Nerja would always sit in a corner of their mind as they matured.

I kissed Susan on both cheeks, and she smiled but I could see she was hurting.

“Come back as often as you can,” I said. “It won’t be the same without you and I’ll have to make my lunch.”

“Then expect a giant leap forward in your nutritional intake,” she said.

“Take care of Mark and I feel sure this removal business will be the making of him.”

She nodded and wiped her eyes with a tissue. I turned to Mark and held out my hand. He took it and I pulled him to me into a man hug.

“Good luck, bro,” I said.

“Thanks, bro,” he said.

The profound exchange was one of our rare finer moments.

Dad stopped the Rolls in front of the hotel, we loaded their many cases into the spacious boot, Susan and the kids scrambled into the back seat hanging on tightly to their teddy bears. Mark and my dad hugged then climbed into the front. My mum and I watched tearfully and waved as they drove off. Just as a taxi arrived and deposited two couples and their cases at the front door.

“Must be the Faulkner family,” said Donna smoothing her blouse and wiping her eyes. “Robin, this is relentless, I can’t even say farewell to my family without interruption.”

I knew exactly how she felt. I hugged her and we went back inside. Donna sat down behind the lobby desk and tried to compose herself.

“I know we can be a tad insensitive,” said one of the men entering the lobby and spotting my mother’s distress. He was a mid-height medium build man in his mid-thirties with longish mousy hair as they heaved their cases into the lobby. “But as yet, I don’t think even I have said anything remotely upsetting. Is there anything we can do to cheer you up?”

Donna smiled and sniffed. “Sorry,” she said. “My grandchildren have just left.”

“Quite understandable,” said the other man younger man with a similar appearance. “Imagine us lot as your new grandchildren. Believe me, our behaviour is equally jolly.”

“Forgive their crassness,” said one of the wives. An attractive, slim, dark-haired lady in her late twenties. “We are the Faulkner family from London. This is my husband, John, he’s a printer. I’m his wife Jill. We’ve recently purchased the whole of the top floor at Rocamar apartment block on Calle Carabeo. We hope to complete the paperwork and move in sometime this week.”

“I’m his younger brother George Faulkner and this gorgeous girl is my wife, Cheryl, I’m a jeweller in Hatton Garden. We’re just along for the ride. We also have two other brothers, who are likely to be bothering you in the not-too-distant future. Bob, is a cabbie, and the other is Dougie; best not to inquire too closely about his career path.”

“We look forward to having you with us,” said Donna. “This is my son Robin he runs the bar and restaurant.”

“Hi Robin,” said George. “You will be seeing a lot of us. Us chaps are not great ones for wallowing on beaches, we leave that to the ladies while we sample the local goodies. Once we’ve settled in our rooms, we’d like some snacks, something along the sharing line. What can you offer?”

“Tapa of cottage pie, portion of fish and chips, or ration of cheddar?” I asked.

“Perfect,” said George. “I’ve been hankering after typical Spanish dishes since we booked the tickets.”

“Then let’s sign you in and write your passport details in the official Guardia Civil register,” said Donna. “Robin will give you a hand with your luggage.”

While I humped their cases up to the top floor, I couldn’t help but overhear the brother’s hilarious banter. Promises to be a good week. I thought.

Chapter 20 – Don’t mention the war

I’d never met a German before, so my perception of them was typical of our generation indoctrinated by war films and winning the 1966 World Cup at Wembley. I was therefore intrigued to learn what made them tick. Our first Club 18-30 German group had just checked in and from what I could see from the bar, there were more girls than boys.

My opening conversation was with a huge, muscular blond guy, who approached the bar not long after they had arrived.

“I am Hans,” he said in good English but with a thick accent. “Ze girls haf sent me to ask about good Spanish bars and restaurants. Can you help me?”

“We have a good restaurant here,” I said handing over the menu.

Hans read it. “Zis is English food, WI want Spanish.”

“Try Pepe Rico on Calle Cristo. They have a German chef, or Udo Heimer on Calle Andalucia. He is from Hamburg.”

“No, vi are in Spain, vi want Spanish food not more wurst, kraut or kartoffel.”

“Do you speak Spanish?”

“Of course, most of us speak a little. Vy?”

“Because the typical Spanish establishments only have menus in Spanish.”

“For us, zat is no problem. Vi are here to improve our Spanish.”

“Here is a map of the town. Try Rey Alfonso Restaurant. It’s built into and below the Balcony of Europe overlooking the sea. We have music and dancing here as well but if you want to see real Flamenco try Burro Blanco or El Molino.”

I pointed out the locations and Hans went off happy.

The next morning, he was not so amicable.

“Breakfast vas late,” he said glaring at me as if I had committed murder.

“Hopefully, it won’t ruin your day,” I said. “We had a problem with the hot water system. It was a choice of a hot shower and slightly delayed mealtime or no hot water and a punctual jam delivery.”

“Vot is jam?”

“It’s the sweet fruit spread for your toast.”

“You mean marmalade?”

“Marmalade is made from citrus fruit. We can’t import it from England, so use jam instead.”

“You English are zo difficult, marmalade, jam, zay are all marmalade. Never mind, vot is ze problem with ze plumbing?”

“Our plumbing is perfect, even I understand it,” I said refilling the coffee machine with water. “However, without propane gas cylinders even the BMW of hot water systems won’t work.”

“You don’t haff town gas?” said Hans.

“No vi do not,” I said failing not to mimic the giant of a man. “We leave our empty gas cylinders on the backdoor step signalling to the delivery man we need more. Sometimes he forgets, like this morning. It means we have to borrow one from a neighbour or drive to the gas depot on Calle Cruz to fetch one. As the depot doesn’t open until after breakfast, we had to knock on every door in the nearby streets to beg, steal, or borrow one. It’s part of the joys of running a hotel in Spain. Sorry if our three-minute delay has disturbed your morning plans.”

He nodded and smiled. “For me, it’s no problem,” said Hans. “But ze girls will be ferry angry.”

“Vi, er why?” I asked.

“It is my job to put towels on ze front row sun loungers at ze beach,” said Hans, shrugging. “Now the verdammt Englanders vill beat us to it.”

“Makes a change,” I said.

“Vot?”“Since 1945, you win everything against us. Well, apart from the freak occasion in 1966. And this year we didn’t even qualify for the finals.”

Hans returned my gaze blankly then twigged.

“Och ja, you mean ze world cup,” said Hans leaning forward and whispering. “My friend, let us agree. If you don’t mention ze var, I won’t talk about ze football. Now vot I need is a thermometer. Do you haff one?”

“Do you have a fever?”

“No, I am fine.”

“Then why do you need a thermometer?”

“To measure ze sea temperature.”

“Why?”

“Because below twenty-eight degrees Celsius, ze ladies vill not swim.”

“Could they try dipping their toes in the surf. Then they will know if it is too hot, too cold, or just right. Then you won’t need a thermometer.”

“You haf no idea about German ladies,” said Hans with an expression of horror. They need to know precisely how hot it is before zey get off their sunbed to swim. Toe dipping does not provide enough accurate information. Alzo, I ask again, do you have a thermometer?”

“No, just toes. In Spain, they are all we need for temperature testing devices.”

“Mein Gott, ve Germans are zo different. Our reasons for living are precision, machines, and medicine.”

“It’s why you make such excellent cars whereas ours are crap because we English follow our creative instincts,” I said. “Our reasons for living are poetry, love, romance, the arts and not forgetting dogs in all shapes and sizes.”

“Vot are you two discussing?” said a tall, slender blond German girl coming behind Hans and smiling warmly at me. I gauged she was around eighteen.

“Ah Bettina,” said Hans. “Vi are haffing a philosophical discussion.”

“How sexy, boys not talking about football or girls’ tits. Who is this?”

“Robin,” said Hans. “He is English but as he owns ze hotel, vi vill be nice to him. Who knows, we may efen get breakfast on time.”

“Hallo, Robin,” said Bettina reaching out her hand and grasping mine firmly. “Nice to meets you. You ver coming out of room three earlier?”

“Hi Bettina,” I said mesmerized by her ice-blue eyes wondering why such a gorgeous girl was holding my hand. “Yes, it’s my room.”

“Achso, you sleep in hotel?” said Bettina.

“Indeed,” I said.

“Ferry interesting,” said Bettina giving him a lingering stare. “Hope to see you later.” She turned and joined several other German girls heading out to the beach.

“I zink you vill be alright vit Bettina,” said Hans winking several times. “She likes ze tall dark men mit beards. Try leafing your vindow open tonight.”

“I leave it open every night,” I said. “We call it air conditioning.”

“Ach so,” said Hans as he headed out the door muttering to himself, his expression clouded by confusion.

Chapter 21- A dictionary is always useful

The July heat on the patio as I crossed to my room after clearing the lunch tables was fierce. All the guests had adjourned to the beach in search of cooler sea breezes, so the hotel was unusually quiet.

As I settled down for a siesta, I decided I liked Germans.

They were not how I had expected. At first, I found their directness unsettling, but I soon learned they just wanted accurate information for which they were extremely grateful. Punctuality for them was simply good manners and adjusting to the Spanish less rigid mentality was difficult. They were polite and enjoyed a drink but didn’t overdo it. If subsequent groups followed suit, we should press Club 18-30 for more because they were less trouble than fellow countrymen.

Since my brother had departed, the only change my parents had implemented was taking over the room cleaning. The rare tranquillity was often interrupted by door slamming, vacuum cleaners, and curses as I attempted to nap. I gave up and returned to the bar to polish glasses, which was becoming an obsession. I even dreamed about the damn things. They joined me and El Rubio for lunch dripping with sweat and exhausted.

I peered at them, shaking my head as we tucked into a tropical salad and a jug of ice-cold lemonade.

“El Rubio,” said my mum. “We need a full-time cleaner. Do you know anyone?”

I nodded.

“Yes, your neighbour Irena. She lives in the apartment opposite and cleans in the Nueva Nerja school but only during term, and occasionally in Bar Bilbainos. She needs a full-time job.”

“Does she speak English?” said Donna.

“Crikey, not a word,” said El Rubio. “But she is woman with two teenage children. Believe mees, she know how clean.”

“Could you ask her to come and see us?” said Donna with a huge sigh of relief.

“How much does she charge?” said my dad.

“Whatever it takes,” said my mum.

“The price for cleaners is thirty pesetas an hour,” said El Rubio. “If you no offer, I no ask. I not want get her excited if you disappoint her with cheap offer. And she need full contract like me.”

“What is her likelihood of pregnancy?” said my dad.

“Her husband killed by police years ago.”

“Then we’d be delighted to meet her,” said Jack.

“Even at thirty?”

“The price is fine,” said Donna.

My parents finished their lunch and drove up to their villa for a well-earned siesta.

I took one myself and reopened the bar at seven.

“We’ve completed our purchase,” said John Faulkner sticking his head in the bar door as I filled the ice bucket. “We will be down shortly to celebrate and perhaps you can give us a few tips on furniture shops etc.”

I nodded and waved as I put on a newly arrived Roxy Music album brought over by Mickey Jingles. Dad always let him stay in the hotel at a special price in return for playing guitar during dinner before he went off to perform in other bars and clubs around the area.

The Faulkner tribe certainly delivered on their intent and for me a pleasant surprise. When settling up their bar and food tab, they presented me with a list of items they needed for their Rocamar penthouse. It included everything you could imagine for a new apartment, including curtains and sunbeds and they wanted someone to escort them to the various shops to translate. It was perfect work for David Rowcroft from whom I would eventually receive a percentage.

I tossed up whether to head out for a night on the town or go to bed. After wiping everything down, I turned off the bar lights and went to my room to shower and think it through. I’d emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel when the window curtain was quietly pushed aside, and a barefoot decorated with red painted nails appeared over the sill. It was followed by its shapely owner dressed in the skimpiest of nighties, long blonde hair flowing halfway down her back.

She turned to face him. Her ice-blue eyes smouldering with desire.

It was Bettina.

“Decision made,” I said.

“Vot?”

“I was popping out for a drink but now you’re here, it seems churlish.”

“Sorry?”

“Hi Bettina, I said dropping my towel on the floor. “How can I help?”

Bettina lifted the nightie over her head and threw it on top of the towel. We leaped towards each other and hugged.

“I haf to besser mein Englisch,” she said laying down on the bed.

“Perfect,” I said, panting. “I have a dictionary in the bedside drawer.”

“You are a gut teacher, nein?”

“Sometimes my conjugations miss the mark, but I vill try my best.”

For three nights, Bettina visited for more intensive lessons. By the time I kissed her farewell early on her last morning, I was amazed how much her English had improved. There must be something in this pillow talk, I thought. I’ll have to give it a go to improve my Spanish.

Needless to say, I only learned a couple of German words.

Nochmal bitte.

Again please.

Chapter 22 – Darts lesson

“I’ve been dusting this thing for a couple of weeks, now,” said Irena in Spanish standing in the Fontainebleau patio doorway, feather duster poised in hand and inspecting the dartboard. “What is it exactly?”

Irena, our amazing neighbour, and now new cleaning lady was dressed in the corporate Fontainebleau uniform of black pants and white polo shirt with our blue fountain logo on the front. She kept the place spotless and was incredibly quick. For the first few days, she’d worn a shabby black dress. A tradition among the many widows in Nerja, whose men had been carted off by Franco’s goons and never seen again. She was only forty with a trim figure but appeared older with greying hair. I loved it when she occasionally smiled. Such a tiny change to her normally sad expression radiated such warmth and happiness. She had the appearance of a person with a painful life, but we didn’t know her well enough to inquire. Mainly because our Spanish was less than basic but also, she spoke with a broad Andaluz accent which omitted ‘s’ and pronounced ‘c’ and ‘z’ as ‘th’ making it even harder to identify what she said. I didn’t understand her most of the time including now, but I guessed she was inquiring about the dartboard.

I consulted the dictionary now parked permanently by the till and found the word for darts. I extracted a container of three from the till, went over to join her, and opened up the dart board.

“Dardos,” I said, stood at the throwline, aimed, and put three consecutive arrows into the treble twenty. One of the benefits of my misspent youth. I pulled out one at a time and with each said, sesente puntos, en total ciento ochenta. I wrote the total on the chalkboard, presented her the darts, and nodded.

“Me?” she said.

I nodded again pointing at the throwline marked on the floor. She stood square on to the board and made to throw. I stopped her and showed again how to stand and aim. She grimaced but understood then threw all three into the board scoring seventeen. I added her score to the board and wrote down the target of 501. We carried on playing and by the time I had finished on a bullseye she had scored a respectable two hundred, taken a chip out of the wall, and blunted one of the darts.

“*Explíca a Bar Bilbainos*,” I said. “*Ellos puede pasar aquí para practicar y después un torneo.*”

Amazingly she understood my execrable explanation asking the bar to come and practice before we arrange a match. “*Si, si. Voy a hablar con Pepe, el jefe*.”

I replaced the darts in the till. Irena carried on cleaning often asking a question. I couldn’t understand a word and just shrugged. Thankfully, I was saved by El Rubio who sat down for his morning break with a coffee and a toasted bread roll smeared with grated tomato and olive oil.

“What is she asking me?” I said.

They spoke quickly often at the same time. I was amazed communication had taken place.

“She love your dad’s car,” said El Rubio. “Particular large boot and back seat. Plenty room for vegetables from campo. She wish she could drive for delivering to family. At moment, it take her ages walking there and back and with cleaning here she no longer have time.”

“Doesn’t she have teenage children?”

“Yes.”

“Then suggest they do it.”

After another rapid exchange, El Rubio said, “They tired. Many schoolworks. She also ask if you have girlfriend?”

“Why does she want to know?”

“She have daughter, nearly sixteen, big boobies. She also love car and want rich boy. If you interested, she arrange meetings.”

How the hell should I reply, I thought. I don’t want to hurt her feelings but also don’t want to be involved with staff beyond a professional relationship. It’s a recipe for disaster.

“Please say, I am sure her beautiful daughter would be an amazing girlfriend, but I need one who can speak English. Also like her I am always working and not have time to give a girl the attention she deserves.”

“Good answer,” said El Rubio. “I explain her.” Irena listened and said a few words. “She understand,” said El Rubio. “She hope you not object to her asking.”

“*Todo bien*,” I said.

She shrugged.

It was one of those gestures, which confirmed we understood each other and there were no hard feelings. At least, I hoped so.

Later, as I lay in bed wondering what Bettina was up to back in Germany, a thought struck me. What if I hadn’t recently enjoyed several nights of passion and Irena’s daughter turned out to be an absolute corker? Might I have rejected her mother’s offer so readily?

Chapter 23 - On the Oche

Irena must have pushed hard with Pepe from Bar Bilbainos because the next morning, shortly after we had cleared away the breakfast things, four gentlemen arrived at the Fontainebleau and approached me in the bar. “*Soy Miguel. Estamos aquí para practicar dardos,*” announced the veteran on crutches. His lack of teeth made him hard to understand but the rest of him was lean and wiry.

“*Buenos dias,*” I said holding up the palm of my hand to signify wait. “*Momento*.”

“Can you spare a minute,” I said to El Rubio, who came out of the kitchen drying his hands. I went around to the front of the bar and shook hands with each introducing myself.

“Soy Robin,” I repeated. I was stretching my Spanish now, but this was just what I wanted, learning by doing.

The others were Pepe, the owner of Bar Bilbainos, a short, stocky man in his fifties with long dark greying hair and a drooping moustache. Fran was a short, cheeky fellow in his early thirties with chiselled features, dark curly hair, and a muscular frame. Jorge was mid-forties, lanky, almost bald, and had a grip of steel. He had a piece of straw stuck to his shirt sleeve.

Irena chose that moment to start cleaning the bar, so we had a brief pause, while they all gabbled among themselves. They seemed amiable and keen to get on, so I fetched the darts from the till stood on the throwing line, and rattled three into the treble twenty. I chalked up 180, pulled out the darts, and offered them to our new friends.

Fran stepped forward, aimed, and threw and managed to hit the board with all three. I chalked up his score. Pepe and Jorge did the same. I explained starting and finishing with a double and the winner was the first to 501. El Rubio translated. After half an hour they were reasonably competent, and Miguel announced he wanted a go.

Jorge took his crutches. Pepe and Fran held him up while he aimed and threw. He also rattled three into the treble twenty. I applauded. Pepe gabbled something and they all laughed.

“He was expert grenade chucker in war,” said El Rubio. “They were laughing because Miguel said the darts would be good to throw at the Guardia Civil backsides.”

They departed happily and agreed to fix a date to have a match against the Fontainebleau.

I was amazed when Irena popped in that evening to confirm when. She brought a chubby but pretty teenager with her. “*Ella es my hija,* Natalia,” she said.

“*Hola*, Natalia,” I said relieved she wasn’t my type.

“*Hola*, Robin,” she said quietly blushing.

The darts match was to be for the following Wednesday evening. I made a poster in English and Spanish and had it copied. Irena went around town handing them out and sticking them up in prominent places.

From the chitchat I overheard behind the bar, the buzz around the migrant community was expectant. This was to be the first event of any nature between locals and foreigners. In a town renowned for nothing happening this was turning into a big deal.

After dinner on the appointed Wednesday, I rearranged tables and seating to point toward the dartboard and, in a humble attempt to save lives from wayward arrows, fixed ropes between the toilet corner and bar and between the open patio doors. El Rubio’s job was to control the ropes while games were in play. Donna and Jack were behind the bar, the kitchen was closed.

The other two hotel team members were Mike from Bar 23, and Mickey Jingles. David Rowcroft was referee and scorer.

“It’s nearly nine o’clock,” said Jack pouring a large vodka and orange for David. “Are they coming or not?”

“In true Spanish fashion, they’ll be here when they are here,” I said sitting on a stool at the bar sipping a pint, the go-to beverage for darts players. It was reputed to relax the throwing arm and enhance accuracy. Professionals swore sufficient beer consumption guaranteed a protruding belly anchoring the body while allowing the arm to swing freely.

There was a commotion at the bar entrance.

Pepe stood at the door with his regulars behind him plus a hoard of supporters talking loudly in Spanish. Sergio moved back the safety rope admitting the opposing team and their entourage who crowded forward to the bar and immediately ordered drinks all at the same time.

I spotted several girls. One pretty lady with fair hair caught my eye as she passed and smiled. My heart skipped a beat, she was my type.

“Service,” called Jack at the top of his voice.

I joined my parents behind the bar to cater for the initial rush. All the seats were soon taken, many with wives and girlfriends sitting on their partner's laps while the remainder stood where they could watching the dartboard expectantly as if waiting for it to light up.

“David,” I said. “We should explain what is about to happen so our Spanish guests can follow progress with some level of comprehension.”

“Fine,” said David taking a large gulp of his drink. He moved over to the board and clapped his hands.

Nobody took any notice. Donna tapped a spoon against a glass, and the din died down.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said David in Spanish, sweating profusely, his hands shaking. He pointed at the dartboard. “Today is a landmark occasion. Last month in Munich, Germany beat Holland in the World Football Cup. Tonight, England, because they are useless at football, compete in what is now their only remaining talented sport. Tonight, the first darts match ever between Spain and England will take place in The Fontainebleau.”

He gave a brief explanation about how play proceeded and the scoring system.

“Can the first two players step forward? Please tell me your names so I can inform everyone and silence while the players are concentrating. Any noise can put them off their aim and as scorer, I am standing in a most precarious position. Drinks will only be served in between rounds.”

Fran and I presented ourselves. David tossed a coin, and Fran was first to go. David held up his hand, and the noise volume faded, almost. Fran aimed and was about to let loose with his first arrow.

“What about the air conditioning?” said a Spanish lady from the back fluttering her fan madly.

“It’s on full already,” said David. “Wait, Fran. Can those near windows please open them?”

The windows were duly opened. They made not a scrap of difference.

Everyone was sweating, body odours began circulating. Jackets and wraps were discarded, sleeves rolled up. Cigarette smoke added a foggy ambience.

Fran aimed once again and waited until the noise abated slightly. He flexed his forearm and wrist several times and let rip. The dart flew straight and true into the double five.

His supporters went wild.

I stepped forward and settled into my stance. I waited like Fran for the noise to abate. When it hadn’t, I shrugged and swung my arm. I missed the double to a huge boo from the English supporters and a cheer from the Spanish. Somehow, I couldn’t find my normal rhythm, and much to the surprise of everyone, Fran won easily.

Mike and Pepe stepped forward.

Pepe was trying for his opening double by the time Mike finished with a bull.

It was one game each.

Mickey Jingles, a slender man of gypsy descent in his late twenties with chiselled face, brown eyes, and long curly hair stepped forward. He waited at the board impatiently tapping his foot to begin his game.

“Who is your third player?” said David to the Spanish team deep in conversation by the bar door.

“Me,” said Miguel. “I will play.”

“But you can’t stand on crutches and throw at the same time,” said David.

“We will hold him up,” said Fran. “Ok?”

“I’ll have to discuss it with the other team,” said David heading over to our team standing at the board.

“You’re not going to believe this,” said David. “But they want Miguel, the old war hero on crutches to be their player. He needs someone to hold him up, ok?”

We regarded Miguel, who calmly returned our gaze and smiled.

“He’s probably a genius player,” said Mickey. “Bring him on.”

David introduced the players. When Miguel’s name was announced the Spaniards were politely supportive but puzzled. Miguel shuffled forward and stopped at the throw line. He passed his crutches to Pepe and leaned on Fran’s shoulder with his left arm. Fran held his waist. Miguel took aim but, at the last minute, lost his balance and threw the dart.

It sailed through the air straight into the back of David’s hand as he was wiping the chalkboard.

“Ouch,” yelled David.

“Ooo,” said everyone sharing his pain. It went deadly silent. You could cut the mood of expectation with a knife. David scrutinized the offending object. It had only penetrated a little, but blood had begun to flow and was dripping on the floor. David grabbed the flights to pull it out.

“Wait,” shouted his wife Kay as she pushed through the crowd extracting a packet of tissues from her handbag. She took his hand away from the dart, surrounded the point of entry with the absorbent paper, and pulled the dart out. Blood flooded into the tissue.

“Vodka, quick,” shouted Kay holding the tissue to the wound, “And a plaster.”

Donna grabbed a packet of plasters from the first-aid kit by the till while Jack poured a shot of Vodka. Donna rushed around the bar and held up the glass.

Kay dipped another tissue into the vodka and wiped the wound clean to another wince from David. Donna prepared the plaster and as soon as Kay had dried the wound, slapped it over the top and stuck it down. Then for luck added another plaster.

They watched the wound for a moment.

The blood had stopped flowing.

David held it up for all to see.

There was a loud cheer from both sides.

David grabbed the remaining vodka and held it over the wound just in case it continued to shed blood, satisfied the plasters were working, he held up the glass, inspected the clear liquid, and downed it in one.

“Medicinal purposes, only,” he said some colour returning to his pallid cheeks. “Shall we carry on?”

Miguel seemed distraught. “I am so sorry,” he said. “Does this mean a red card?”

“What do we think?” I asked.

“Get on with it,” said Mickey. “Otherwise, we’ll be here all night.”

“I agree,” said Mike. “If he’s so bad, we should win easily.”

“It’s ok, David,” I said. “Let him continue.”

“You may carry on,” said David, moving away from the scoreboard. “But try and hit the target, please.”

Miguel reset his stance with his holders and threw his first dart into the double twenty. The Spanish went berserk. Miguel won by a whisker.

“First round to Bar Bilbainos by two games to one,” announced David.

The hotel narrowly won the second round. In the third, the decider for the match was between me and Miguel. Now, I was back to my usual form, hammering treble twenty with each dart.

“One hundred and eighty,” shouted David. “Leaving Robin with one hundred and seventy for a nine-dart finish.

Miguel seemed to be tiring, and his initial accuracy waned as I finished with two treble twenties and a bull.

“The Fontainebleau wins the match,” announced David.

Everyone cheered but were desperate to escape the fearsome temperatures as they stampeded out into the fresh night air. As the crowd pushed by me, some shaking my hand, others offering congratulations, the pretty lady with fair hair from earlier stopped in front of me and smiled. Several of her female friends stood at her back, nudging each other, and grinning.

“What a great night,” she said in Spanish. “My friends and I enjoyed it tremendously.”

“Soy Robin,” I said holding out my hand. Having failed to understand less than half of what she said. It was all I could think of on the spur of the moment to avoid behaving like a complete moron.

“*Encantada*, Robin,” she said taking mine firmly, “*Soy Lucía. Quiero aprender a jugar a los dardos me enseñas*?”

“*Por supuesto*,” I said hoping she had asked me to teach her darts.

“*Bien*,” said Lucía. “*Vendré una tarde.*”

“Say, *espero que*, idiot,” whispered Mickey creeping up next to me. “You look forward to it.”

“*Espero que,*” I blurted.

“*Entonces, nos vemos*,” said Lucía. She let go of my hand blew me a subtle kiss and left with her friends.

“Who was she?” said Mickey.

“Lucía,” I said.

“Wow,” said Mickey. “She is gorgeous.”

Chapter 24 - Fagman

“David, this is a rare appearance,” I said as the Canadian writer hobbled into the bar just before lunch. “I thought imbibing was strictly an evening indulgence.”

“I’m usually well disciplined,” said David. “But I’ve hit the proverbial brick wall and thought time away from the typewriter might reinspire me. I’ll take a beer, please.”

“I’ve accepted I never need an excuse,” said Charles joining them and lifting David onto his stool. “Enjoying a drink is an integral part of my daily life. The only variable is with whom and what shall we discuss.”

“Not my book or lack of it,” said David. “Otherwise, anything goes.”

“Maybe I can help,” I said. “I was asked by one of our guests last week why I referred to English residents as migrants and not ex-pats. I have my views of course but I’d be interested in yours. David, what do you refer to yourself as?”

“I’m an expatriate,” said David.

“Why?” said Charles.

“Because this is a temporary status for me,” said David. “I’m traveling the world and staying in Spain until I’ve either finished this book or given up on it. After which I fully intend to return to the freezing delights of Halifax, Nova Scotia.”

“Whereas I am a migrant,” said Charles. “I have permanent residency, pay my taxes here, and contribute to a state fund which will eventually provide me with a Spanish pension. I have no intention of returning home to Hitchin in Hertfordshire, ever.”

“Charming place, Hitchin,” said David Rowcroft joining them. “I know it well. Fascinating history. Apart from the weather, I’d have no problem living there except for my weird in-laws.”

“The joys of family,” I said pouring a vodka and orange for David.

“Not our lot,” said David.

“Do they visit?” I said.

“Thankfully, no. They don’t like flying. Kay pops back occasionally only to be nagged about the lack of grandchildren. They can’t get their head around the concept that many women today prefer a career.”

“Are they why you came here?” I said.

“Whoa,” said David. “We’re treading on dangerous ground here, Robin. The first rule of a barman is discretion. Never ask a personal question unless invited.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “This could prove difficult with all these Davids.”

“Calle me Wilkes,” said David.

“And me Rowcroft,” said David.

“It was the bar tabs I was more concerned with,” I said. “The debate is about expats or migrants.”

“I am neither,” said Rowcroft. “And this should go no further. Giving me a label implies I have made a permanent decision about where I want to be and what official bits of paper I should apply for. I refuse to comply with any of those and consider myself a nomad. Yes, I spend most of my time here, but I also wander off at will to anywhere my British passport permits me entry which thankfully is most of the world.”

“Then how do you raise invoices for your services?” said Wilkes.

“My wife is a resident. The business is in her name.”

“What about your pension?” said Wilkes.

“I doubt I’ll live that long,” said Rowcroft downing his drink in one and placing his glass in front of me for a refill. “At least, I hope not. My liver is shot to pieces, so there is no point in trying to repair it. I’ll continue living as I do until the grim reaper knocks on my door and when he does, I’ll welcome him with open arms.”

“What an extremely selfish and irresponsible attitude,” said Wilkes. “Leaving the tax avoidance issue aside, do you not consider the pain your early demise may cause your dear wife or other family members?”

Rowcroft stared at Wilkes and smiled.

“David, may I ask you a question?” he said.

“Eh..., of course.”

“What gets you up in the morning?”

“Other than an intense desire for a pee, I look forward to another day struggling to find the words, at the moment any words, to move my book forward and hopefully contribute what I can to helping others and doing my bit for my country. Which includes paying my fair share of tax.”

“May I presume your parents did the same?”

“All our family are staunch Canadians and proud of what we stand for.”

“Excellent. What a mess the world would be without such patriotism and dedication to the cause.”

“May I inquire where you are going with this?” said Wilkes.

“You are judging me by your standards without any knowledge of my background or why I choose to live the way I do.”

“Fair point. If I’ve offended you, I’m sorry.”

“Accepted and forgive me if I spare you the details of life before Spain. As I intimated earlier, it is extremely personal. I came here to forget them, and these,” said Rowcroft holding up his drink. “Are part of the memory-numbing process and I’m not alone. There are many ex-pats, migrants, or nomads escaping from a sordid past and Spain provides a host of distractions to help us adapt to new lifestyles and bury the pain. The friendly people and beautiful landscapes play a part, and the climate too. Some submerge themselves in arts or crafts, while others write or learn how to become photographers. A few choose the *Good Life* learn to raise chickens and live off the land. I even heard of a couple who turned mystic and became hippies dwelling in a cave. Most of us, however, resort to alcohol, it’s cheap, readily available, and makes no judgment.”

“Excuse me,” said a short, stocky Spanish man approaching the bar in his late thirties dressed in a bus driver’s uniform including a peaked hat. He glanced about furtively, placed a holdall on the bar, then extracted a carton of two hundred Marlboro cigarettes, a bottle of Johnnie Walker whiskey, and a Gouda cheese.

“Sorry to interrupt what must be a fascinating discussion, but I’m in a hurry,” he said lining them up in front of me. “These are extremely cheap imported products, but you have to buy them now before I sell out.”

“How much?” I said picking each up and checking its authenticity.

“Cigarettes are a hundred. Scotch is a hundred and so is the cheese.”

“Everything is a hundred?” I asked.

“I’m not educated. It keeps the math simple,” said the man.

“Why are the prices so low?” I asked.

“I work for the bus company,” said the man. “I drive passengers to Málaga and back several times every day and during my breaks buy these from er…”

“Smugglers?” I asked.

“I refer to them as my importers,” said the driver. “I fill up the luggage hold and drop everything off at my home before I return the bus to the depot. Then I deliver on my moped. Most bars in Nerja buy from me.”

“Can I place a standing order?” I said.

“Of course,” said the man.

“Are you sure they are genuine cigarettes, not camel dung from Morocco?” said Rowcroft.

“I only sell quality merchandise,” said the man packing away his stuff. “If you don’t want them, it’s fine by me.”

“No wait,” I said. “I’ll purchase one of each, and if it’s good, we’ll place a standing order next week.”

“Ok,” said the man. “Three hundred pesetas.”

“What do they cost from your usual suppliers?” said Charles.

“Over five hundred,” I said then extracted three one hundred peseta notes from the till and handed them over.

“Receipt?” I said.

“Are you joking?” said the driver.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Call me Paco,” said the man.

“Another Paco,” I said. “We will call you Fagman.”

“Fagman,” said Paco nodding as he headed for the door. “Me *gusta esto*, I like this.”

I slit the plastic wrap off the cheese, cut it in half, sliced off a few pieces, arranged them on a plate, and offered them around.

Everyone took one and nibbled away with appreciating noises and nods.

“Good purchase,” said Rowcroft.

“I agree,” I said. “I’ll be doing the same next week should anyone wish to place an order.”

“Never miss an opportunity to make a profit,” said Charles.

“I don’t want your money,” I said. “I’ll charge you the same as I pay. See it as a sweetener for your regular custom and promoting our bar.”

Rowcroft nodded.

“Excuse me?” said Wilkes emptying his glass and indicating his crutches leaning against the wall. “All this excitement has given me a theme for my book and a feel a burning need to make notes.”

“Settle up this evening,” I said handing Wilkes his crutches.

They watched him hobble out to the patio in the direction of his room.

“Splendid fellow,” said Rowcroft.

“You were a bit hard on him,” said Charles.

“I like to wind people up,” said Rowcroft.

“You should have more respect for his disability,” said Charles.

“His legs might not work properly,” said Rowcroft. “But his brain is way sharper than mine.”

“True,” said Charles. “Anyway, good luck to him with his book idea. I wonder if we’ll be acknowledged.”

“I can see the book splurge now,” said Rowcroft. “Inspired by the discerning locals of The Fontainebleau.”

“Bound to be a best-seller,” I said. “Hordes of Canadians will be clamouring to sit on his stool. I’ll ask him to carve his initials on the seat edge tonight. Tell me Rowcroft, I don’t wish to pry but all that stuff about your sordid past and drinking to dull the memory. Was it true?”

“I dunno, I forgot long ago,” said Rowcroft handing over his empty glass. “I’ll take the other wing now.”

“You’ve already had two,” said Charles.

“I prefer going around in circles,” said Rowcroft. “Then I can dodge the issue more easily. Robin, I thought you handled Fagman most professionally. Since the last time I heard you mumble in Spanish, it’s improved from non-existent to monosyllabic.”

“Thank you for the compliment but I order stuff every day,” I said. “Having a real conversation still stresses me out.”

“Did you follow our advice?” said Charles.

“Not as yet but I believe an opportunity to become a darts teacher might be on the horizon.”

“And your point is?” said David.

“At the darts match there were a group of girls, one of which was right up my street. She expressed an interest in learning. Well, I think she did.”

“Did you get as far as a name?” said Charles.

“Lucía,” I said. “Pretty with fair hair.”

Charles and Rowcroft exchanged glances and nodded approvingly.

Chapter 25 – Three hairs in a fountain

The latest group from Club 18-30 were mainly only just eighteen. Sweet innocent things on the verge of adulthood; lacking in self-confidence, capable in English but unlike many of the previous groups useless at Spanish. They had expressed a desire to spend the day waterskiing on Burriana Beach, followed by a group paella at Ayo’s.

Early the next morning, I was straightening cutlery with my usual precise attention to detail at the breakfast tables, when I heard a commotion on the patio. “Eek,” came a female voice followed by several more equally loud shrieks of laughter.

I went to see what was afoot.

The patio was jammed with a dozen half-naked girls trying to wash out shampoo from their hair in the fountain water.

“*Scheiße*,” said a young blond from the Club 18-30 Group. “*Es gibt nicht genug Wasser*.”

“Vass, er, what is the problem,” I said trying not to ogle the mass of shapely young curves on display.

“Ze showers in our rooms haf run out of water,” said one, giggling. “In the middle of vashing our hairs. We cannot go to ze beach with shampoos in our hairs, ze saltz vill make alles kaput.”

Soapsuds were spilling over the fountain's edge, which began making some worrying gurgling sounds. Hair and soap had not been included in the filter design criteria. The waterspout shot in the air about two meters, there was a bang, and the water stopped flowing completely.

“Zis is a disaster,” said another girl. “Vot are ve going to do?”

“Attention, gals,” said a posh elderly lady coming down the stairs dressed in a long white dress and a straw hat. She was followed eagerly by her aging husband in matching white shorts, shirt, and a Panama hat. “You can use our room.”

“I’ll show you up, ladies,” said the old man fumbling desperately in his pocket for the key.

“Humphrey,” commanded the old lady. “Give me the key. You will wait in the bar and no gin.”

Seeing a solution had presented itself, I returned to the bar to find Humphrey tapping his fingers on the counter checking out the patio nervously. “Give me a large gin,” he said, handing over a hundred peseta note. “Make it quick.”

I served him straight away and with a relieved expression, he gulped most of it down.

“Humphrey,” shrieked the old lady entering the bar followed by the scantily clad Germans. “Put it down.”

Humphrey ignored her, emptied his glass and placed it on the bar. He grinned at me like a naughty schoolboy, then turned to face the wrath of his loving wife.

“There,” he said.

If looks could kill, he should have died on the spot.

“Barman,” continued the old lady glaring at her husband. “We need a plumber straight away. The water supply in all of the hotel has been cut off.”

I tested the bar tap and she was right. There was no water and based on previous attempts at just before nine in the morning, it was impossible to find a plumber until tomorrow at the earliest.

“Sorry, ma’am,” I said in my humblest tones. “Emergency plumbers are not available here. If showers are still required, may I suggest you head to the beach and use the public showers there?”

“But we haff not ze breakfast,” said one of the girls.

“Then take what you want from the buffet,” I said. “Wrap it in a serviette and eat it on the vay to the beach.”

The girls didn’t hesitate. Within seconds there wasn’t a bread roll or pastry in sight and minutes later they trooped off to the beach munching happily dressed in bikinis with towels wrapped around their heads.

“See you at Ayo’s later,” they shouted.

“If we can find a plumber,” I said.

The plumber arrived mid-morning and discovered the ballcock in the tank had rusted. We were up and running within an hour, so I changed into beach gear, grabbed my bag, and headed off to Burriana.

Sugar cane plantations still stretched right to the edge of the sand on Playa Burriana. Colourful fishing vessels, in various conditions of maintenance, lined the shore. Several fishermen, most of them middle-aged, sat in between the boats mending nets in readiness for another night on the water. They used bright lamps, hoping to attract a bountiful catch of sea bass and sardines. A giant rusty hand-winch was anchored into the sand near the sugar cane and used to haul the heavy craft well clear of the water line.

Francisco Ortega Olalla – Ayo, a legendary local character renowned for his marathon running and informative guided tours around Nerja caves started selling drinks on the beaches in the 1960s. As sunbathing grew more popular, he opened the first Chiringuito in 1969, a flimsy temporary structure built on sand covered with cane panels for shade. As the business expanded, the kitchen became too small, so he moved outside and cooked a giant paella over an open fire. His outdoor cooking demonstrations rapidly grew into a huge tourist attraction.

I found the group lying on sunbeds in front of Ayo’s, said ‘Hola,’ to everyone, waved to Ken Taylor and his son Chris beavering away with peddle boats and water skiers, stripped off my shirt and lay down next to them.

As the sun warmed my pale body, it reminded me this was my first time on the beach for ages, yet I had always loved stretching out and enjoying the rays. It was relaxing and soporific. When Tracy was here, we were on the beach every day, playing beach tennis, volleyball or just paddling along the shore holding hands and exchanging lustful glances.

I watched a father building a sandcastle wall within reach of the surf and trembled with joy when a wave knocked over his endeavours and drenched his children. Their laughter was carefree and infectious, and I couldn’t resist giggling with them. Then Chris took a group out on the banana boat and made sure they all fell off by turning quickly. Again, I giggled along. It was so peaceful and relaxing.

Why didn’t I come here more often? Because I worked seven days a week. How could I?

I promised myself, somehow, I’d make time to enjoy the beautiful facilities Nerja had to offer.

“*Es ist zwei Uhr, Mittagessen*,” yelled one of the group.

“*Endlich*,” shouted another.

Which I understood as, at last it’s time for lunch.

Ayo lived with his family next to the Fontainebleau, so I knew him to say hello to. He had long hair tied back into a short ponytail, a round handsome face and an athletic body. A new giant paella had just been started with Antonio Breitner his bearded assistant. We nodded at each other. “*Un grupo de alemanes,*” I said.

He smiled at them. Ayo smiled at any pretty girl with blond hair especially if they were German or Swedish. His reputation with the ladies was well known.

“Robin, you must explain vot he is doing,” said one of the blond beauties.

How could I refuse such a pleading expression?

“It’s logical,” I said. “He is adding more wood to the fire under the giant paella pan for an initial high temperature to heat the olive oil. When the oil is sizzling, he will add the bucket loads of chicken and pork and stir them around with the massive wooden spatula, so they don’t burn. When the meat is nearly cooked, he will add squid and after a couple more minutes stirring, the stock.”

“Wot is the stock made of?” said blondie.

“From restaurant leftovers of meat, bones and chicken carcasses,” I said having learned it from El Rubio. “With wine, water, bay leaves, salt and pepper and a pinch of saffron.”

Some of the girls were making notes. Hope I have this right, I thought.

“How much stock?” said blondie?

“Ideally about three fingers deep,” I said. “But in restaurants, they make paella deeper to feed more diners from one batch. When the stock is boiling, he will add the rice.”

“Wot type of rice?” said blondie.

“Round grain absorbs the liquids better than long grain,” I said.

“How much rice to stock?” said blondie.

“Two litres of stock to one kilo of rice. See he is pouring the rice in an H shaped pattern. When he has enough, he will stir it around, and add yellow colourant until it starts to absorb the water. After that no more stirring while he lets the fire die down as the rice expands. Five minutes before it is cooked, he will scatter prawns and muscles, and clams around the top. They will cook in the steam. Then he will remove the pan from the heat, cover it with towels, and let it stand for twenty minutes for the rice to absorb the juices. Shall we grab a table?”

“Vy colourant not more saffron?” said blondie.

“Spaniards like their paella yellow. The amount of saffron needed to give the right level of colour intensity would dominate the flavour whereas colourant is tasteless.”

“Mmm,” said blonde. “Ok, wi can take a table now.”

“Vot should wi drink mit paella?” said a young man.

“Sangria, of course,” I said. “See, the barman is mixing one now. We all turned to see the typical drink the tourists loved. It was shunned by most Spaniards because they knew what rubbish wine went into it. The barman added ice to a glass jug, sliced lemons, oranges and peaches, orange juice, red wine from an unlabelled bottle, a splash of brandy, and topped it up with Casero, a local brand of lemonade.

It tasted sweet and refreshing, and after the second glass, they were giggling.

“How do wi know if zis ist a gut paella?” said blondie as we were served by waiters who had to run in order to keep up with demand.

“It should be moist but not runny,” I said. “You should be able to identify the taste of the individual ingredients and the rice should have a toasted crust at the bottom. Shall we try?”

It was delicious.

I checked around the table to gauge their reaction. Nobody said a word as they savoured their first mouthful. Their faces said it all. They were extremely happy Germans.

But it didn’t last long.

When we arrived back at the hotel, and I relieved my dad from behind the bar blondie rushed into see me with a furious expression.

“Vi cannot open our doors?” she said.

I went up with her to see what the problem was. Some bugger had glued the locks. I quickly found some solvent and let them in.

We never discovered who the culprit was, but the German boys were smirking like crazy while the girls waited desperate to enter their bathrooms. The sangria with the paella had done its damage and they disliked the public toilets on the beach.

My dad though was even more angry at the broken fountain.

He would have to pay to get it repaired.

It took over a week.

Chapter 26 – Flirting with darts

As the season was drawing to an end, we weren’t busy, so the Faulkner family decided to have a game of darts and invited me to join them. I’d have to keep them waiting while I served customers, but they had no problem with that. After such a long break in Nerja, they were well chilled and accustomed to the local pace.

It was getting late for most Brits, and we were halfway through getting to 501 in our final game when I heard several Spanish women enter the bar all chatting at once in the usual volume, loud. This was a first. To date, Spanish customers were there to sell us something or had come in by mistake and when discovering we were foreign, took one drink to be polite and left.

I saw one of the women waving at me.

It was Lucía.

My heart soared. I’d been wondering if she’d forgotten all about me.

I went over, shook her hand and she introduced me to her three friends.

“Dardos?” said Lucía.

“You want learn?” I said.

“*Por supuesto*,” said Lucía.

“Take seat, we finish game then I learn you,” I said.

“Your Spanish is really good now Robin,” said George as I returned to the board and took my turn. “Even I understood it and can see you are keen to teach the ladies the finer points of our national sport. We are off back home tomorrow anyway so an early bath is called for. Bring us the bill and we’ll leave you to it.”

“Thanks, George,” I said grateful for his sensitivity as the Faulkner tribe headed up to bed merrily singing the Hi Ho song.

It was unusual to share an empty bar with four beautiful Spanish women. If they understood English, I could impress them with my array of terrible jokes but as none of us could speak anything other than each other’s language I would be wasting my time. My solution was to combine my limited Spanish vocabulary and sign.

I poured them a shandy each, picked up the darts, aimed, and put three in the treble twenty then indicated to Lucía to copy me. She took the darts, stood on the throw line, and with a most serious expression aimed as if mimicking me. She spun around to see how her mates were reacting, and then threw. They burst into laughter as the first dart dug out a chip of plaster from the wall below the board. To compensate, she shifted her stance and let one rip straight down the passageway to the toilets. By now she was laughing so much she couldn’t do anything with the third.

And so, the first darts lesson continued.

After half an hour or so, we were also exhausted from laughing and the wall around the dartboard resembled a bombsite, I suggested we sat down around a table. I topped everybody up and we attempted a conversation.

Astonishingly, we made some progress and what I found fascinating was they were as interested in learning English as I was Spanish. For example, Maria, who wore one of the shortest skirts I have ever seen and had shapely legs to go with it, pointed at things around the bar. I said what it was in English and they in Spanish. I was then to say it in Spanish while they repeated it in English.

This was much more fun than darts as each of the many mispronunciations on everybody’s part was accompanied by fits of giggles. We agreed we had to keep repeating the word until everybody pronounced it correctly.

I had a huge problem with rolling my ‘r’s, for example, the word for jar is jarra. No matter how often I tried wrapping my tongue around the double letter, it continued to sound like an ‘r’. Whereas they had a problem with ‘s’ always trying to put an ‘e’ in front of it so school was escool.

“When we’d runout of those Maria said, “*Qué errores vergonzosos has cometido*?”

Thankfully the dictionary was still by the till and together we translated it into what embarrassing mistakes had I made.

Because of my ignorance, the list was probably immensely longer than I knew but I did recall several shopping expeditions in the early days before I returned to the UK. My explanation was in terrible Spanish that nobody understood but after lots of questions and discussion, we found some basis of communication which I’ll summarize in Spanglish.

Mark’s kids often requested baked beans so on my way to Antonio’s, the corner shop referred to as Ultramarinos, on Castilla Perez, thought I’d inquire. I always carried an English-Spanish dictionary and looked it up. There was no direct translation so I had to combine individual words I thought might describe them. White beans were alubias, baked was horneado, tomato sauce was, salsa de tomate. Logically, alubias horneados con salsa tomate ought to be baked beans. Easy, or so I presumed. The shop was fitted with long and narrow racks, so I wandered back and forth along the aisles but saw nothing resembling the kids' favourite.

Then I spotted Antonio himself. He at least had some experience with the growing number of inept foreigners, so I asked, ‘Antonio, *tienes alubias horneados con salsa de tomate*?’ I watched his face . He was bemused, paused for thought, and indicated for me to follow him. He grabbed a glass jar off the shelf containing large white beans in a clear liquid and gave it to me. I studied the Spanish text carefully, which didn’t help. I held the jar up to the light and concluded they didn’t resemble baked beans. Matthew and Sally would never go for whatever these were. I handed the jar back to Antonio shaking my head having no idea what the contents of the jar were or what to do with them.

“*Conocemos alubias blancas, pero nunca hemos oído hablar de alubias horneados con salsa tomate. ¿Qué son?*” said Lucía.

“¿*Conoces a* Heinz?” I said.

They shook their heads, so I deemed it politic to change the subject.

“On another occasion,” I said. “I needed eggs, so said to Antonio’s young daughter, *tienes huevos*?”

They howled.

It was only later I learned I’d inquired if she had balls.

The correct question should have been, ‘*Hay huevo*s?’

I was buying baguettes freshly baked in a natural wood-burning oven when another Brit who didn’t speak a word was asking for sliced bread. The girl had no idea what he meant, so I stepped forward and said, ‘Hay Bimbo?’, which is a popular brand of sliced white bread. The English guy regarded me strangely and, on his way out, said, I wanted bread, not a dollybird and walked out.”

The girls failed to get this completely and just shook their heads.

“Do you want to know my most embarrassing moment,” I said yawning.

They nodded furiously.

“On my first day in Spain, I ordered a Sandwich de polla.”

They fell off their chairs and had to go to the restrooms to recover.

Polla is slang for a male appendage. Pollo means chicken. Being unaccustomed to gender-free language, I was discovering the importance of using the correct definitive article with its appropriate ending only to be horrified by the enormous quantity of irregularities such as *buenos dias or el problema*.

As the night wore on, I noticed none of the other girls made any attempt to flirt with me. Whenever I asked a question, they deferred to Lucía and eventually, I understood what was going on. They were accompanying her not only as friends gauging what they thought of me but also as her chaperone.

After midnight they were still full of energy, but I was flagging and needed to be up for the breakfasts. Lucía noticed and announced they should go. Immediately they asked for the bill and insisted on paying for my two beers.

These evenings became regular events, but they weren’t always with the same three girlfriends. Over the remaining weeks as our first season ended, I was introduced to some twenty friends and relatives including her sister and brother.

Every time we shook hands and said goodbye, I found myself keenly anticipating our next meeting. I longed to escort her home and kiss her goodnight, but beyond her long lingering looks and stroking my arm, she never hinted she wanted more. Despite our communication difficulties, we became great friends. By the warm vibes I received from her friends, I could only assume they approved of me, but I did wonder where this was going.

As the guest numbers dropped and I had more time to myself, I could have hit the town or struck up a relationship with one of the many available girls at Narixa, but I was drawn to Lucía. If she was English, we would be mutually exploring each other’s bodies by now, and much as I wanted to be alone with her, I respected their way of courting even though I had no idea of the boundaries or how I was expected to behave.

With the prospect of long and lonely winter months, I thought one morning as I showered, I should probably do something to make this more formal. But I had no idea how without breaking their rules of engagement which were completely different from mine. After all these times together, we had never been alone, held hands, or kissed. I certainly yearned to. The question was, did she?”

Chapter 27 – Chaperones required

“Hola Lucía,” I said one morning on the way to the greengrocer on Calle Pintada. She was about to enter a house at the top end of the street. It was the first time I had used the shortened version of Lucía, and she nodded approvingly. I smiled; we were moving forward. “Is this where you live?”

“It is. Checking up on me already?” she said with a cheeky grin.

“Of course,” I said in English. “Start as you mean to carry on.”

“Perdon?” she said, frowning.

“English humour,” I said.

“Don’t waste your breath,” she said. “Even Spanish jokes are beyond me. Where are you going?”

“El Rubio, our chef, he need potatoes. Fancy a coffee?”

“When?”

“Five minutes?”

“I’ll check with my mum.”

“How old you are?”

“Gentlemen don’t ask such questions?”

“Sorry, what I try say, is you old enough to decide go coffee.”

“Of course, but not alone with a young man. I appreciate it is difficult for you to understand, but when we are out in public, my whole family is judged by the community on my behaviour. When we can grab the occasional private moment, you will find me passionate and demanding. At all other times, I shall be prim and proper as expected of a single woman by our traditions.”

“This mean I need meet your parents?”

“Yes, but it works both ways. My parents will also need to meet yours.”

“Could be a stimulating conversation,” I said. “Your parents speak English?”

“No.”

“Do you speak English?”

“You know I don’t.”

“Then no misunderstandings.”

“Not much communication, either.”

“Sounds like the perfect combination for a long and happy life together.”

“Ha, not yet, but we seem to be communicating despite our lack of language skills. You make me laugh and like me, no?”

“I do,” I said nodding. “I want to kiss you but have to be patient.”

“Yes, but not too patient, in Spain, we marry young and have lots of babies. Many of my friends are already married whereas I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“You do now,” I said reaching out and caressing her arm.

She clasped my hand, stroked it and gazed into my eyes. “At last, we are agreed, now we have to win the parents over.”

“It problem?”

“My father is anti, but my mother is ok. She likes your hotel and especially the car.”

“You discuss me already?”

“Of course. My instincts tell me we would be good together and I could help you in the hotel, but you must win their approval before we can continue, or my life won’t be worth living. Oh, and don’t forget the rest of my relatives and friends, you need to impress them too.”

“I thought I had done.”

“There are more?”

“How many?”

“About sixty?”

“Wow,” I said. “My mini car too small, have to buy coach.”

She giggled.

“Then I buy potatoes and we have coffee in Plaza Cantarero.”

“If my mum is free, I will be there. If not, another time?”

Our touch lingered as we admired each other.

“*Bueno, hasta lluego*,” said Lucía and closed the door.

My heart was thumping as I waited in line to pay for the potatoes. Coffee with my dream lady at last, but what a palaver to arrange a date. Ten minutes later, three shoppers remained in front of me each exchanging family updates with the elderly lady manning the cash drawer. She weighed each item on some antique scales, wrote down the prices of each item on a scrap of paper, and added up the total. Spanish bookkeeping at its finest. We should try it, I thought, fascinated by the ultimate in tax avoidance schemes. Fifteen minutes later, I arrived breathlessly at the crowded café to find Lucía sitting at a table with an older version of herself and a slender, middle-aged man with a deadly serious expression.

“Sorry, late,” I said. “Queue in fruteria.”

“De nada,” said Lucía. “We’ve just sat down.”

The man stood and proffered his hand. I took it and gave it my best.

“This is José, my father,” said Lucía. “And Francisca, my mother.”

Francisca held out her hand appraising me thoroughly. I shook her hand gently wondering if I’d passed muster.

“Please meet you,” I said as I parked the potatoes under the table and sat down in the spare chair. “Coffee?”

I placed their orders when the waiter eventually arrived and glanced at Lucía.

“Please forgive,” I said turning to her parents. “For not applying to see daughter. English ways not habitual to your culture.”

“Did you take Spanish lessons?” said José.

“I exercising in England. But classes no include traditions, and asking way to train station in Nerja waste of time. Best way learn by doing.”

“And you wish learn by doing with our daughter?” said Francisca with a dead straight face.

“Pleases,” I said trying my best to not laugh out loud. “And learn language same time.”

Nobody smiled.

“It is traditional for parents to ask a few questions of potential suitors,” said José. “Do you mind?”

“I happily react questions,” I said. “But can I interrogate one?”

“Please,” said José.

“Before meet parents in England, couples are cognizant for several months, have kissed, are friendly, and intimate. Parents embroiled when both agree amalgamation progress from casual to serious. Why necessary in Spain meet parents before first kiss? For example, what happen if when kiss there no chemistry and we rupture? Everyone waisted time.”

“Good question,” said Lucía.

“I agree and it’s one I have never considered,” said Francisca nodding at her husband. “Let my husband explain, because we prefer you to understand and be supportive of how we do things. Then you and Lucía have a much greater chance of forming a wonderful couple.”

“You see, Robin,” said José. “Regardless of whether you are religious or not, our traditions are influenced by the church and centuries of experience. Because we abide by this code of conduct, we have an extremely low divorce rate and children grow up in a stable, loving environment supported by the entire family, not only the parents. Life is hard enough as it is. To struggle through it as a couple on your own is even more difficult. Whereas, if you lose your job, or become too ill to provide for your wife and children, the family will chip in and help until you recover. In short, you are not only building a relationship with our daughter but with all of us. And to do so successfully, it is only fair if we are all involved in the courtship. If you turn out to be a charlatan or bad person, we expose these possibilities before long-term commitments are made. Whereas if we left it to the two of you, you would be blinded by lust clamouring to be at each other all the time and ignoring the key ingredients to a long and happy marriage which are building friendship, loyalty, and trust. Have I explained myself, do you understand?”

“I think so,” I said nodding. “However, forgive me while I absorb what legislation means. I am bound to make mistakes.”

“As you said,” said Lucía grinning. “Learning by doing is best.”

So, it wasn’t lost in translation, I thought. I’m impressed and if I’m not to make a complete arse of myself, I ought to treat this relationship seriously and not as another opportunity for a quick shag.

“Having explained our traditions, Robin,” said José. “And I am satisfied you understand them, I remain sceptical about granting my approval to this relationship. The odds of two foreigners overcoming their differences add another dimension and area of stress to cementing a strong bond. However, you seem like a polite and intelligent young man with reasonable prospects, so I am prepared to allow you time to convince me otherwise. Ok?”

I studied Lucía, my mind buzzing. She gazed back at me while I pondered, remembering the summer. I’d had a wonderful time with Bettina and other hotel guests, and many a night clubbing until breakfast. But winter was coming. Work was boring with few guests and most of my free time was likely to consist of long, lonely nights nursing a beer with my parents or elderly ex-pats. Having someone, especially a local Spanish girl to share those moments with sounded appealing. And when Dad eventually does dip his short arms into his deep wallet and expand the bar it would be so much more fulfilling to run it with a meaningful other half.

I turned to Francisca. She nodded.

I grasped her hand and squeezed it gazing deeply into her eyes wondering what the hell to say to my potential mother-in-law.

“What must do?” I said.

“Let me define our rules,” said José. “You may see Lucía but unless you are going to a restaurant or cinema, she must be accompanied either by friends or members of the family. Don’t buy her alcoholic drinks and make sure you bring her home on the dot of midnight. More importantly, you are not allowed to touch intimately until we are happy your intentions are honourable. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” I said. “Will it be ok if we are with my parents?”

Francisca and José exchanged glances and nodded.

“Yes, but only after we have met them and explained our ways,” said Francisca.

“Then can I invite you to join us for lunch in our hotel?” I said as the coffee was served. “You can meet my parents and sample our amazing English food at the same time.”

“When do you suggest?” said Lucía, eyes twinkling.

“As soon as possible.”

By their doubtful expressions, her parents appeared not to share her enthusiasm.

Chapter 28 – The in-laws come to lunch

“What’s for lunch?” said Jack as he strode into the hotel lobby.

“Change of plan,” said Donna sitting behind the reception desk. “Robin has invited his new young lady with her parents. He wants us to meet them.”

“Bit early to be meeting parents?” said Jack. “They hardly know each other.”

“In Spain dear, it’s the other way around. The families get together first to see if everybody gets on. If both sides approve, the relationship can proceed.”

“Cart before the horse, if you ask me,” said Jack. “Anyway, I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Just as well,” said Donna. “They are in the restaurantay already.”

Jack and Donna went through to the bar. El Rubio was serving and chatting with José.

I looked up from the table with a relieved expression as my parents approached, stood, and introduced everybody. They all sat down. Jack picked up the menu and offered it to Lucía’s parents. They glanced at it and shook their heads.

“Sorry,” said Jack. “It’s in English. El Rubio, can you explain?”

El Rubio was at his most effusive.

“What is the best of this English food?” said José.

“Shall we say, it is different,” said El Rubio.

“What do you recommend?” said Francisca.

“The beef casserole was freshly made this morning,” said El Rubio. “It’s a bit like *Rabo de Toro* without bones.”

“Then three of those,” said José deciding for his family.

“Good choice,” said Jack. “Me too, please.”

“Sorry, boss,” said El Rubio switching to English. “Only enough for three.”

“What?” said Jack. “I’ve been savouring it all morning, can’t you make smaller portions and pad it out with extra chips?”

“Of course, they not know difference.”

“What you like imbibe?” I said. “Wine, beer, water?”

“Let’s have champagne,” said Donna. “To celebrate our new friends.”

“Water,” said Eduardo. “We have to work in the campo this afternoon.”

“Where campo?” I said.

“On the Camino de Rio Seco riverbed leading down to Playazo beach,” said Lucía. “We have a little house there where we spend most weekends. My sister Paqui and her husband Antonio run the farm, but you can join us for one of our famous *Matanzas*.”

“Wow,” I said. overdoing the enthusiasm. “What *Mazanta*?”

“*Matanza*. We slaughter our fattest pig, butcher it, and barbecue some of the tender meat,” said Lucía. “We share the remainder of the carcass but save the blood and guts and mix it up in a giant bowl. After lunch, we sit around the table chatting and stuffing the intestines with the mixture to make morcilla, black pudding. We hang it to dry and when ready share it with the rest of the family. Care to try some?”

I failed to understand almost every word. Thankfully El Rubio stepped in and translated.

“Er…, no thanks,” I said after hearing out El Rubio. “But I luxuriate in barbecue meat.”

“I bet you can’t singe the sausages as well as my dad,” said Lucía.

“Lucía,” said her mother grinning. “Your Dad is a wonderful grill expert.”

“Perhaps he and Robin can make a team,” said Lucía. “Burnt burgers and crucified chicken.”

“I bring El Rubio,” I said. “He can translates and roast beef.”

“English roast beef?” said Francisca. “I have heard of it but never tried it.”

“It my favourite,” said Donna. “With Yorkshire Pudding.”

The Spaniards were astounded as El Rubio served the food.

“Puddin’ with meat?” said Lucía. “Sounds disgusting.”

“Believe me, it good,” I said. “Wait you try before deciding bad.”

“Fair point,” said José nodding favourably in Robin’s direction before trying a forkful of casserole. After a few more mouthfuls, he said, “The stew is good.

“What you grow in Campo?” said Donna.

I was amazed. This must have been my mother’s longest-ever sentence in Spanish.

“It’s a large plot,” said José. “In addition to raising pigs, goats, chickens, and rabbits, we grow most fruits and vegetables.”

“Do you sell any?” I said.

“The family takes the most,” said Lucía. “But we always have too much.”

“Perhaps we buy direct?” I said.

“Good idea,” said José wiping his mouth and standing. “Sorry, but the beetroot needs watering. Nice to meet you and thanks for the er excellent stew.”

José and Francisca shook hands with my parents, said their farewells, and headed for the front door but Lucía hung back and held my hand. I smiled lovingly at her. She glanced down.

“How we do?” I said.

“No idea,” she said. “I’ve never seen them disguise their feelings so tightly.”

“Should I be worried?”

“I’ll let you know, but what concerns me more is when we need to discuss serious issues, how little we understand each other. I was grateful El Rubio was there to translate but I wouldn’t want him along on every date.”

“Me neither but does this mean you want stop?”

“No,” said Lucía shaking her head vehemently and squeezing my hand more tightly.

“I happy keep trying,” I said.

“Me too, but for how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

For the first time, she hugged me.

Chapter 29 – Christmas in both your houses

Despite the constant communication struggles with Lucía and her family, somehow our relationship continued to blossom through the winter. Slowly our basic level of understanding of each other improved, but as soon as the conversation turned to more complex issues, we were both lost. She, trying to explain them in simple terms, and I, grasping the point.

I still failed to accept why I wasn’t allowed to take Lucía away for a weekend or stay out beyond midnight without a host of family trotting along in close proximity. I had several heated and frustrating arguments with her father, who was determined to keep a tight rein on his unwed daughter.

I assumed things were heading to an increased tolerance level when I was invited to join Lucía’s family at their house on Christmas Eve. It was only close relatives, so there will be seven of us. At least I should remember their names, I thought, but had no idea what the etiquette was with regards to presents. I took an enormous bouquet, and a treasured box of Lindt chocolates, given to me by my sisters on their arrival at the hotel yesterday. I was scolded for bringing anything. Christmas was not the time for exchanging presents. That was reserved for Three Kings, Los Reyes Magos when children received one gift each.

When Lucía escorted me into the single-floor house, I was shocked. First by the lack of space for so many people. The front door opened out into a passageway with a bedroom off either side, leading to a large kitchen and family room at the back. A glazed door provided access to a tiny walled-in open-air terrace with a few pot plants and a couple of easy chairs. Steps led up to the roof where laundry was hung out to dry. For such a significant celebration for their still heavily religious country, there wasn’t a Christmas tree in sight. No fairy lights either, just a small pine branch with a few homemade folded paper ornaments hanging from it standing on a sideboard next to a sizeable nativity scene and many framed family photos. More family portraits hung on the walls. Lucía explained who was who.

“I like this,” I said pointing at the nativity. “Why is it so big?”

“It’s a Belen,” said Lucía. “It represents the city of Bethlehem, hence the Roman soldiers and buildings surrounding the stable. Some of the figurines have been in the family for generations.”

“Excuse me,” I said pointing at a man, who had lifted his robes and was taking a dump in the corner outside the stable. “Isn’t that a?”

“He is the Caganer,” said Lucía grinning. “No Belen is complete without him. Adults believe he is fertilizing the ground to ensure good luck and the return of Belen for the coming year. To children, particularly adolescents, he represents a playful spoilsport, an element of fun among this serious tribute to the birth of Christ.”

Francisca was busy cooking while José, Lucía’s brother, and sister sat at the table all chatting at once. They carried on as I exchanged the customary cheek kisses with the ladies and shook the hands of the men. It felt like a normal family gathering and didn’t feel Christmassy at all.

The table was laid but the only sign it was as a special meal were three plates in the centre of the table. One contained homemade Roscos, sugar-coated donuts flavoured with citrus, cinnamon, and anis, another had wrapped sweets known as pestiños. The third was piled high with Magdalena sponge cakes. Ovens were rare in Spanish homes so at Christmas, the women prepared the dough at home and had them baked in the local bakery. In Christmas Eve mornings whereas Brits would be queuing at the butchers for turkey and sausage meat filling, the ladies of Spain formed lines outside bakeries.

The meal was pleasant enough.

“Everything is from our Campo,” said her father.

We started with a potaje de nochebuena; Christmas eve soup, morcilla; and slices of fresh goat’s cheese followed by goat in garlic and a dessert of homemade flan. We raised our glasses with one glass of sweet white Frigiliana wine each. This promises to be my most sober Christmas yet, I thought.

The flan spurred me to try and explain Christmas puddings, cakes, and logs but when Lucía’s mum asked how they were made, I was done. Translation overload. The recipes were way too technical even if I knew how to make them.

Then they began to sing villancicos, carols.

This was more what I expected as they burst into Jingle Bells in Spanish. I could at least hum along but I wasn’t quite sure if they were singing the serious version or like English kids do when questioning Batman’s deodorant or the location of Uncle Willy’s equipment.

I was asked to sing it in English.

I gave it my best discordance and tried to encourage them to join in, which was a good laugh when they sang Hingle Bells, Hingle Bells, Hingle all the bay.

After an hour or so, I’d reached the point where my brain just couldn’t process anymore. I made my excuses and stood to go.

Lucía escorted me to the door with a questionable expression.

“You don’t want to come to misa del gallo; midnight mass with us?” she said.

“Church?” I said. “I didn’t know you were religious.”

“Not really, but under Franco, if we don’t attend church regularly, it can be held against you. However, at Christmas, we go because it’s hilarious.”

“Sorry, you’ll have to explain.”

“Didn’t you notice the garbanzos in the soup; chickpeas? By the time we arrive at church, we will pedo like crazy.”

“Chickpeas turn people into pedophiles?”

Lucía was astonished, turned, bent over, tapped her backside, and made a farting noise.”

“Now I understand, Pedo means fart. And that’s funny?”

“In a serious place like a church, we think it is especially when some disguise it by letting rip it in time with the organ music. Others bottle it up for the Amen.”

“And I thought church was meant to be a spiritual occasion.”

“God moves in mysterious ways.”

“Bowels also. I am not religious or Catholic. Is that a problem?”

“I expect not. Any donation to the collection plate is welcome, irrespective of denomination.”

“Sorry,” I said yawning. “Another year perhaps. I have to do the breakfast tomorrow.”

“What did you think, it’s different from your Christmas, no?”

“Carols, yes, farting in church, no. Listen, El Rubio is cooking a traditional English Christmas lunch tomorrow, why don’t you join us? Maybe you will appreciate while we might celebrate in different ways, it is still families spending time together and sharing the same terrible jokes and anecdotes. And you can meet my elder sisters and their families.”

Lucía nodded and looked nervously over her shoulder toward the backroom. Happy everyone was embroiled in conversation she pushed me against the wall and kissed me more passionately than ever before.

As I crossed the road heading home, I knew. Despite our differences, she was the one for me. It got me thinking. All night I tossed and turned. Everything was churning. My mind with what to do about Lucía, while my guts wrestled with the garbanzos. Just before dawn, I had resolved two things. If I wanted more enduring passionate experiences, I had to get Lucía away from the clutches of her parents and now I understood why the incense in Catholic churches was so overpowering.

“Will, you marry me?” I said to the mirror in my bathroom while brushing my teeth the next morning. “Will you, marry me? Will you marry, me? Te quieres casar conmigo?”

I’ve no idea which was the most romantic way to say it, I pondered but was worried about using the wrong word. Casar, to marry and casa, house sound similar, especially with my execrable pronunciation. I didn’t want her to think I was asking her to share a house with me. Her parents would not approve of any form of cohabiting until after a church wedding.

But the real question was, am I ready to make such a major life-changing decision at the tender age of twenty-one? It meant a long-term commitment to one-person, potential parenthood, and no more illicit nights out with demanding guests.

I’m flattered such a beautiful girl declares her undying love for me, but is she only seeing the Rolls and the hotel? In other words, a route to a wealthier lifestyle unlikely to be offered by most Spanish men. Yet without her vivacious and enjoyable company, these long and lonely winter nights would have been unbearable.

The entertainment program was working a treat, the bar was full most nights of the week but as Dad is saving to pay the builder not much finds its way into my bank account. How could I afford a wedding? And with the final payment due to Emilio de Miguel at the end of January Dad can’t either. The brain turmoil continued through the night, and I woke on Christmas morning feeling worse than with a hangover.

I had breakfast with our sole guest, David Wilkes. I often envied his independent and responsibility-free lifestyle, travelling, writing, and not having to worry about anything other than his next chapter and he seemed happy being on his own for Christmas. I invited him to have lunch with us.

My parents arrived to join my sisters and their respective families who were staying in the hotel. We unloaded the presents from the Rolls and arranged them around the tree. I think we had more lights and decorations in the bar than the rest of the town put together.

My sisters started straight away.

“How was your evening?” said Diane.

“When are you getting married?” said Gloria.

“I haven’t asked her yet. She might refuse me.”

“No, she won’t, son,” said Donna. “I can see the twinkle in her eye.”

“What twinkle?

“Women know these things,” said Donna. “Believe me, she is ready for the plucking.”

We spent the morning preparing for lunch singing along to carols from Kings Cambridge, deterring the kids from ripping the crackers to shreds, and chatting about the usual family nonsense. After a couple of sherries, we were passably merry when Lucía arrived, and the translating began again. The alcohol helped and Lucía was soon ready to practice her limited English.

Lunch was a drawn-out affair with roast turkey, all the trimmings, and plenty of wine.

Traditionally, my father made a speech after we were all stuffed with Christmas pudding. My mother tapped her glass, this year was obviously to be no exception.

Dad stood, raised his glass, and toasted the family.

Normally he was relaxed, cigar in one hand, whiskey in the other, and entertained us with amusing family anecdotes. But for the first time in my life, I saw him downtrodden and distraught. He regarded each one of us with a pained expression and said, “I’m sorry to be so negative, especially at this joyous time of year, but this business venture in Spain has been the worst experience in my life. We, er I, have failed miserably and are now stuck between a rock and a hard place. We cannot sell until we have paid the final instalment to the builder, which is due next month and as it stands, we cannot make the payment. Therefore, we have only one choice.”

He stood before us with tears running down his cheeks.

“We have to sell the Rolls.”

He sat down, shoulders shuddering.

Chapter 30 – Engaging Pursuits

Christmas Day never recovered after the sobering admission of failure by my dad. We all did our best to cheer him up, but it was only when my mother dragged him off after lunch back up to their villa the rest of us could relax and the fun could begin. We ripped open the crackers, chuckled at the rubbish jokes, solved the puzzles in two seconds, donned our party hats, and danced the evening away.

“How will your father sell the car?” said Lucía as I escorted her home to beat the ever-looming Cinderella deadline. “There are no Rolls Royce garages in Andalucia, especially for one with the steering wheel on the wrong side.”

“We will call the dealer where we purchased it in London in the New Year and see what they advise,” I said. “What did you think of your first English Christmas?”

“It was wonderful,” she said, pulling away from me and twirling in the middle of the road. “And completely different to ours.”

She danced her way to me and jumped into my arms.

Thankfully, I managed to catch her. She wriggled to the ground pushed me up against the apartment block wall and kissed me passionately. It was now or never. I eased her away from me and dropped to one knee.

“*Te quieres casar conmigo?* Will you marry me?”

She threw her arms around me and said in English, “Oh yes, please. When?”

“As soon as we can afford it. I have enough to buy you a ring. I thought I’d ask George Faulkner, the jeweller guy from London who often stays with us to make one. What do you fancy?”

“Anything will do,” she said. “As long as there is a sliver of diamond in there somewhere. Listen, can we not announce anything until I can show them the ring and have an idea of a date? When my parents see it, they will know you are serious and will present fewer objections.”

“Ok, my love. George is due out in February; I’ll ask him to bring his catalogue and we can choose together.”

Maybe my smug grin had conveyed my victorious excitement to him, but her father peered at me most suspiciously as Lucía disappeared into the house with a skip and a wave. Finally, I could be alone with his daughter. At last, he could no longer keep her locked up in his fortress.

I thought I ought to tell my parents about my impending nuptial obligations but wondered after Dad’s miserable announcement the previous day if now was the right time. As always, when my parents arrived at the hotel the next morning, he surprised me with his normal jolly and confident disposition. It was as if having decided to sell, a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. With the proceeds, we could move forward or in this case, at least survive until the first guests began to arrive in April.

“You seem pleased with yourself,” said Mum as she took her seat behind the lobby desk. “Lucía said yes?”

I could barely contain myself.

“She did,” I said. “But until I can buy a ring and put it on her finger, we are keeping it schtum.”

“Why?” said Dad. “You should be shouting it from the rooftops.”

“Out of respect for her parents,” I said. “She feels a ring and an exact date demonstrates my commitment and will minimize any family objections. She is after all breaking tradition and marrying one of those bloody foreigners.”

“Not just any blood foreigner,” said dad. “One invested heavily in their country.”

“Makes no difference,” I said. “We all look the same no matter the size of our wallet.”

“Fair enough, we’ll keep it quiet until you’re ready,” said mum. “And when we’ve sold the car, we’ll have a bit left to contribute to the wedding.”

“Fantastic,” I said hugging them both. “How do you propose to sell the car?”

“I’ll call Jack Barclay in London after New Year,” said dad. “We’ll see what they advise.”

Chapter 31 – Goodbye Rolls

“Good morning,” said a smartly dressed man in a tweed jacket and military tie as he strode into the hotel lobby one morning in early January. “Name is Hustler. Captain Hustler. I’m from Jack Barclay’s in London. Is that the Rolls parked in the alley?”

“Just a minute,” I said. “I’ll fetch my father. He’ll take you for a spin. I ought to warn you though, he delights in telling the history of the car so be prepared.”

“Just what I want to hear,” said Hustler.

What an unfortunate name for a car salesman. I thought as went to collect Dad.

We left mum in charge of the bar, went outside, and stood gazing at the car. Hustler prowled around inspecting the bodywork occasionally wiping a fleck from the otherwise gleaming bodywork. After a thorough inspection of the engine and boot accompanied by nods and hums from Hustler, I climbed into the back, and we headed off toward the main road.

“I’ve owned this little beauty for nearly nine years,” said dad as we crossed the bridge over the river. After the recent rain, the usually dry riverbed was swirling with muddy water. “She’s one of only six special long wheelbase, custom coach-built editions in the world? When I purchased her in 1966, I couldn’t believe my luck when the previous owner Sir Robin Ian Bellinger, The Lord Mayor of London, who bought it new in 1961, decided to leave his numberplate AFC 27 on the car. He was also the president of Arsenal Football Club, and the number represents their first appearance in the final of the Football Association Cup in 1927 against Cardiff. They lost 1-0.”

I’d heard the story hundreds of times but still cherished hearing him talk so lovingly about what had been a significant part of his life. Hustler nodded but didn’t comment.

Twenty minutes later, after a round trip to the recently started Torrox-Costa Centro International apartment blocks on the beach, we pulled back into the cul de sac by the hotel. My dad turned off the engine turned toward Hustler. “What do you think?”

“It’s a perfect example of a well-maintained Rolls Royce,” he said. “Anybody would be proud to own it.”

“But?” I said.

“Thanks to the oil crisis and Wilson fleecing the rich, not many are buying new luxury cars anymore,” said Hustler. “However, it means fewer cars are being manufactured so second hand has become much demand among the nouveau riche, such as pop stars and football players. The bottom book price on this car is therefore currently worth more than its cost at new. I am therefore authorized to offer you eighteen thousand pounds providing you accept a banker’s draft and I drive it away today with all the relevant papers.”

“I was expecting a lot more,” said Dad.

“Sorry, sir but that is my final offer,” said Hustler.

“Then I reluctantly accept,” said Dad.

We went inside where dad dug out the papers from the lobby filing cabinet and handed them over. Hustler extracted a draft from his jacket, filled in the amount, and handed it over.

Dad gave him the keys and we went outside to watch him drive away.

I anticipated more tears from Dad but as the car disappeared around the corner at the end of the street, he turned to me and said calmly and bright-eyed, “Do you think Lucía can help me get a discount on a new car?”

“Why Lucía?” I said.

“They won’t rip her off like they would me.”

“What model are you thinking of?”

“The mechanics in Nerja only understand Renault, otherwise I’d have to drive to Málaga every time it needs servicing.”

“You want a Renault?”

“Not bloody likely but it’s the most practical solution and means we will have plenty of change over to pay the builder and the wedding.”

“Wait,” I said. “You’re paying for the wedding?”

“Not the ring and dress but cars, reception, and honeymoon are on me.”

“Well thanks, Dad, but why so generous?”

“You’ve worked for hardly any pay for nearly a year now. Without your contribution, we would be even worse off. Take it as a sign of appreciation.”

Normally, emotions were kept under wraps in the Webster family. Stiff upper lip and all that but we hugged tightly in the middle of the street both of us sniffing like schoolchildren.

Chapter 32 – Last minute doubts

The day we paid the builder and received the deeds for the hotel, unencumbered by debt, was a massive milestone in our Spanish adventure. Finally, I was paid a decent wage and could afford the diamond cluster Lucía dreamed of. George Faulkner and his wife Cheryl brought it with them a couple of weeks before the wedding and thankfully it fitted perfectly. Lucía adored it and insisted on sticking it under everyone’s nose.

The only date available for the wedding on the church calendar had been mid-July. I was so pleased the priest had agreed to marry us, I stupidly forgot to think about the implications. Lucía was hectic making most of the arrangements as the hotel was full and I had no free time to help out but the week before, tragedy struck. Lucía’s brother was knocked off his moped and killed. The family were devastated. I suggested we delay the wedding at least until they had time to grieve but they insisted we go ahead.

The day dawned.

I was terrified.

“Good morning, Dad,” I said as I cleared the final breakfast table. “Ready for the big event?”

“Yep, suit pressed, shirt and tie selected but I wish you had arranged an earlier date when the weather was cooler. The middle of July has to be the worst time ever for a wedding in Spain.”

“I agree but it was the only date available.”

“Are you sure Lucía’s family is up to this? It’s only a few days since the funeral. They must feel devastated. I would be.”

“They are but remain determined life shall go on.”

“A funeral and a wedding in one week are a bit much and with Lucía leaving the house today, they will have lost two of their three kids at the same time. It will take a huge amount of readjustment.”

“As her father said to me months ago, the advantage of having large families is you are never alone. Someone will visit every hour of the day to share their grief.”

“Fair point. Your mother and I will pop in next week. We won’t be able to chat much but it’s the thought that counts.”

“Kind of you, they will appreciate it. You know what you have to do?”

“Not much as I understand it, turn up and pay. How do you feel?”

“To be frank, I’ve had some last-minute nerves. I was convinced I was too young to be wandering up the aisle, but I had a long chat with Tony and Elizabeth, the young couple staying with us for a month. We’ve had a few nights out with Lucía, and they know her quite well. I was persuaded she doted on me and was barmy to even consider not marrying her.”

“I agree. Listen, son, I had the same doubts before marrying your mother, everybody groom does but look at us now. It’s been a wonderful life and I’d have been a fool to have her left in the lurch. Lucía is a lovely girl and you’re fortunate she wants to marry you. Your mother and I are convinced she’ll be a good wife, mother, and asset to the business. One question, how did you manage to persuade the priest to marry you in the Catholic church?”

“Lucía managed that, all I had to do was produce my Anglican Baptism Certificate to prove I was associated with religion and sign a waiver to raise any children in the Catholic way. I’ve also had to attend a few sessions with the priest.”

“Bet it was interesting.”

“Didn’t understand a thing but I pretended.”

“Good lad. It’s a load of nonsense really but I sympathize the church provides a haven away from the stress of living under a brutal dictator. It’s not surprising so many locals attend.”

“Dad, they don’t have a choice. While Franco remains a figurehead, the parliament is managed by professionals who are also members of Opus Dei, a deeply religious group of men who strive to sanctify ordinary life. While it’s not the law to attend church, from a political standpoint it’s mandatory. As Franco’s philosophy is based on, you’re either with me or against me, not going is judged to be antiregime.”

“The delicacies of Spanish politics are way beyond my understanding. All I know is Franco is back out of the hospital but under close medical supervision. If he lives or dies, I couldn’t care. My sole interest is our business surviving.”

“It’s more likely to succeed when he’s dead and Prince Juan Carlos has taken over as King. If, as expected, he continues with the Opus Dei regime running Parliament, I suspect nothing will change and we plod on as we are. However, if he surprises everyone with a move to democracy and allows other political parties, tourism could explode. Then we will desperately need a bigger bar.”

“Here we go again, speculating on matters over which you have no control. Now forget about bloody Franco and concentrate on the most important day of your life. Go and spruce yourself up. We’ll meet in the lobby at midday, and I’ll drive us down to the church. What about the hire car?”

“They’re delivering it to Meson Toledano on Castilla Perez at six this evening. When the reception is finished, we’ll head off to the UK.”

Chapter 33 – The wedding

Dad dropped me and mum by the church then went hunting for a parking spot near the restaurant. Some fifty or so smartly dressed Spaniards stood in the shade of the pine tree chatting quietly among themselves. They were Lucía’s family and friends. With the recent death fresh in their minds the mood was subdued. We moved among them shaking hands and exchanging a few words before finding the thirty-odd English-speaking guests gathered by the church door.

It was shortly before midday when someone indicated Lucía was due to arrive in the wedding car. It was the signal for me to enter the church. Catholic tradition determines the groom is not permitted to see the bride on their wedding day until she stands by him before the altar. The guests followed me in, and while they took their seats, a vintage white Mercedes in immaculate condition pulled up in front of the church.

Spanish weddings are a family affair with no best man or bridesmaids. Her mother and sister fussed over her veil, long white dress, and orange blossom bouquet. Lucía took her father’s arm, walked up the aisle accompanied by the traditional wedding march, and joined me in front of the altar. I gasped as she lifted her veil, she was gorgeous. My heart skipped a bit and at last, I knew I had made the right decision. My mother stood to my right, her father to her left.

My heavy tailormade midnight blue velvet suit with flared trousers and matching bow tie were typical al la mode for the mid-seventies. However, the material was more appropriate for weddings in the Arctic Circle. In the sweltering July heat of Spain, I melted, or was it my nerves, I thought. My white carnation was already wilting and putting my hand into my inside pocket to fish out the rings was a sticky affair.

Five minutes later, or so it seemed, me and Lucía were on the Balcon being photographed before climbing in the Mercedes for the short drive to Meson Toledano. In reality, the service was a good hour. I understood little and remembered practically zilch but was informed later, I responded as requested without disgracing myself.

Vicki wore her engagement ring on her left hand, but both wedding rings went on our right. Orange blossom was the traditional Spanish wedding flower, a custom arriving in Spain from the East during the Crusades. The white petals represent purity, and since orange trees flower and bear fruit at the same time, they represent happiness and fulfilment.

The restaurant was owned by Castor and his brother. They were originally from Toledo but had worked in London where coincidently Jack had met them on several occasions.

After a splendid meal the celebrations began.

We twirled around the floor dancing the traditional Seguidilla Manchega folk dance. It originated from La Mancha well before Cervantes penned Don Quixote and spread around the country where in Sevilla it evolved into the Sevillana. Spaniards learn this dance as children and move gracefully and automatically in harmony with each other and the music. It had taken weeks of coaching to convert me from a blundering Morris dancer to something resembling half-decent. Thankfully, male guests cut in after a few minutes by paying Vicki for her favour. Some bid for her garter. The money would go towards our new life together. I declined offers for cuttings of my precious bowtie.

I hadn’t told a soul about the hire car being delivered to the restaurant but somehow our wily English invitees had located the Seat and embellished it according to British customs. A Just Married placard penned in red lipstick filled the back window, balloons made with inflated condoms were tied to the radio antenna, colourful streamers were knotted to the rear bumper with tin cans attached and a rotting fish was taped to the top of the exhaust. Everybody crowded outside and gathered around the vehicle to send us off with a loud cheer and outrageous clatter.

The Spanish are accustomed to celebrating noisily. After a wedding, the guests drive around the town in a convoy beeping horns and shouting viva las novios out of open windows. Onlookers wave and wish them luck. When we rattled by, they stopped and stared with open mouths unsure whether to offer congratulations or condolences.

We returned to the Fontainebleau as man and wife for some final photos, rid the car of its appendages, and changed for our long journey north for our two-month honeymoon in England.

Chapter 34 – From honeymoon to flood

Talk about baptism by fire. Mr. and Mrs. Webster, or so I had anticipated, turned out not to be the outcome of exchanging vows and signing umpteen registers. Lucía continued with her two surnames just as before the wedding. Our children would share her family name of Garcia with mine. I discovered this when signing the register at our first hotel in Northern Spain, when she unduly informed me, she was not Mrs. Webster. What’s in a name, I thought as I gave her the hotel pen to sign for herself.

I must have done something right, as she was most attentive during breakfast the next morning, making sure I had enough to eat and fetching me another coffee when my cup was empty. I could soon become accustomed to this I thought as we drove up to Calais.

This was my first trip back to the UK and after nearly two years of driving on Spanish roads I was confused momentarily as we drove off the ferry at Dover with the steering wheel now on the wrong side of the road, I was too busy concentrating on my driving to notice Lucía had her eyes tight shut as I negotiated her first ever roundabout.

It was also a culture shock for Lucía. She had to speak English, but she quickly adjusted and could soon manage basic conversations with the family and when shopping.

“Could you live here?” I said after a few weeks.

“It’s different,” she said. “But I miss my family, so it couldn’t be for long.”

“You’ve only been away for a month or so.”

“This is where we differ, Robin. My family is an integral part of my life. We share everything all day, every day. Especially since my brother was killed. It is something you must learn to accept.”

“I have no problem with it. Do you want to call them?”

“Yes, but we don’t have a phone.”

“We could speak to my parents, and they could take a message.”

“Thank you, my mother would appreciate it.”

At the end of September, we headed back to Spain, relaxed and happy with a boot full of the latest albums. As we sped by Barcelona, I noticed even more hotels had gone up since I last passed this way. Somebody thinks hotels in Spain are a good thing, I thought. Surely, we must succeed.

On our return to Nerja, we moved into a larger room on the second floor as husband and wife and Lucía started work in the hotel. She put her hand to every task and was a great addition to our tiny team.

“Settling in ok, Lucía?” said my mum as she joined us for breakfast in the bar.

“My room bigger than home, thanks, Mother-in-law. I have more spaces in cupboard for my clotheses.”

“Excellent, think of the Fontainebleau as your home now. Do tell me about your honeymoon.”

“Many new experiences,” said Lucía, blushing .

“I should think,” said Donna, laughing. “But where did you go and how was meeting the family?”

“My first trip out of Spain, my first voyage on ferry, on double bus, and underground train. Carnaby Street fantastic. Robin buy me nice tops. Family very nice, you have many grandchildren.”

“I miss them, hopefully, they will come to visit this year. What about you? You want to have children?”

“Oh yes.”

“Wonderful. What did you think of Paris?”

“Dirty like Barcelona. We pass near Eifel Tower but not stop. Robin drive all way through France in one go.”

“So, like his father. I have to resort to blackmail for a pee.”

“How you do?”

“At your age, I withdrew bedroom favours. Nowadays, I struggle.”

“Why they no like stopping?”

“Yes, Robin. Why?” said Donna.

“It’s not rocket science,” I said. “I like driving and once I begin a long journey, I become obsessed about finishing it faster than the previous attempt. How are we doing?”

“We’ve been full all summer with Germans Club 18-30 and Wings Tours. Bookings are good until early November.”

“But still Dad won’t expand the bar?”

“No, but I’m working on him.”

“Any more problems with the police?”

“We see Cienfuegos often but only when passing by or standing watch for furtive activities in Bar Bilbainos. The news about Franco’s health isn’t good, we hear a big cheer from them every time there’s another scare.”

There was a knock on the door and in came a sheepish Irena. She had something in her hand. “Excuse me, please,” she said in Spanish holding up a broken bathroom wall tile. “This fell off when cleaning.”

“Robin, can you check it out,” said Donna.

I followed Irena up to the top floor and into the bathroom.

“Ye gods,” I said. Most of the tiles on the inner wall above the bath had buckled and were bowing outward. How they all hadn’t fallen into the bath with the other one was a mystery.

“Is anyone using the room?” I asked.

“Tonight, no but tomorrow, more Germans are arriving.”

“Can you call the builder? If he can’t come immediately, I will have to repair this.”

“Ok,” said Irena scuttling off downstairs.

Should I remove these now or wait, I thought but destiny intervened and as one, they collapsed into the spotless bath. Every single one of them broke.

This was the third room in as many months. The original cement had dried out breaking the bond between tile and wall. The previous two rooms they repaired using glue. Adhesive and spare tiles were now permanent items in the storeroom along with a tile cutter, so it wasn’t much of a disaster, builder or not. The shower tube was also on its last legs and if not replaced could cause a flood in the bathroom.

Needless to say, the builder couldn’t attend until the following week. So, I repaired the tiles myself. Just as I had finished, the heavens opened. Giant flashes of lightning lit up the black sky and the thunder clapped so loudly overhead, the building shook. It happened regularly during September, so it wasn’t a surprise.

The outcome though was shocking.

The wastewater downpipes from six of the bathrooms had no connection to a storm drain or sewer. They emptied directly into the flower beds edging the patio which overflowed into the patio and ran down the slight incline to under the fountain. Underneath the fountain were four small drains to allow rainwater to supposedly flow into the sewers. This had been a problem from day one, but this thunderstorm was the mother of all tempests. The drains couldn’t cope, flooded the patio, and then backed up into the bar, lobby, and rooms.

David Wilkes paddled into the bar in bare feet with his trousers rolled up to the knee. He leaned his crutches against the dartboard.

“I didn’t request a room with a pool,” he said. “But I seem to have one. I trust you won’t be charging me extra.”

“I never thought we ordered a pool bar either but there you go. Let me ease the pain with a beer on the house,” I said. “I’ve called the plumber, but every house will be suffering from similar problems. All we can do is ride out the storm and hope the waters recede before inundating the whole of the ground floor. Meanwhile, I’ll sweep as much water as I can out through the lobby and into the street.”

“It will be a long night,” said David savouring his beer. “Wait, there goes one of my crutches floating into the lobby?”

I splashed through the ankle-high water but missed the crutch as it sailed out through the front door.

“Oh no,” screamed David. “There goes the other one.”

By the time I had recovered them both, I was drenched. But as I brought them back the plumber arrived, and the rain ceased as suddenly as it had started.

Three days later the plumber graced with his presence to scientifically investigate the cause of the flood.

“The drains are blocked,” he announced attacking the area under the fountain with a hammer and chisel, only to reveal its drains also went nowhere. It accounted for the flourishing bougainvillea climbing the patio walls.

The complaints during the next few days were unbearable as the patio was dug up and drains connected to where they should have been in the first place.

Because of the flood, the ground floor of the Fontainebleau suffered permanently from rising damp. Although each room was equipped with a small electric two-bar heater for the occasional cool winter night, all they did for the ground floor was increase dampness and humidity. To avoid complaints, we attempted not to allocate the lower rooms during winter.

All thanks to my father’s failure to appoint a decent builder from day one. The unexpected costs tore him apart.

It wasn’t the best time to repeat my expansion wishes.

Chapter 35 – Franco dies

“Finally,” shouted El Rubio leaning against the kitchen door hands covered in flour. “He’s dead.”

It was the twentieth of November 1975. Franco had died early that morning at La Paz Hospital in Madrid. A string of heart attacks over the last five weeks had finished him off. He was eighty-two.

The bar had been packed every morning with eager patrons starved of English news and desperate to hear the latest bulletin on Franco’s health via El Rubio’s transistor radio in the kitchen. There were all nationalities united by their lack of Spanish. It never ceased to amaze me how many foreigners had chosen to live in Spain, despite the potential hazards of dictatorship.

Now Franco was gone, deceased, stiff as a dead parrot, we were desperate to know what might happen next. Could we stay, or would we be forced to return to our homelands and face whatever demons we had escaped from?

I opened the bottles of Juves y Camps I’d been guarding vigilantly for this life-changing occasion. When everyone was served, El Rubio raised his glass. “To freedom,” he said.

This was not a concept English were familiar with so politely and quietly mimicked El Rubio. Bar Bilbainos opposite, however, was not so restrained. They were ecstatic and dancing in the street screaming ‘Libertad, Libertad, Libertad.’

“What if Cienfuegos is watching?” I asked. “Surely, he won’t tolerate such flagrant disrespect to the regime.”

“Believe me,” said El Rubio. “Until they resolve what happens next in Madrid, we won’t see hide nor hair of him or any Nationalists.”

“Period of transition,” said Charles. “What does Juan Carlos mean?”

“He will be crowned Head of State exactly as Franco had decreed,” said El Rubio. “He also pleaded for peace and forgiveness while a solution for the future is discussed and agreed upon between those who cared to contribute. This period of transition will take as long as it needed to address the concerns of all citizens.”

“It sounds positive but vague,” said Charles yawning.

“Poco a poco,” said El Rubio. “Little by little. They don’t want to upset anyone at this delicate stage, so rather than announcing a grand plan, they must build a consensus among the ruling party change is necessary unless Spain is to continue as a pariah state and remain isolated from the rest of the world.”

“The military will also need to concur,” said El Rubio. “They will prove exceptionally stubborn.”

“The prince has his work cut out,” said Charles. “If he seriously wants all to contribute, he has to consider the wishes of the Basques, Catalans, Unions, Socialists, and Communists, all of whom are considered by the military and nationalist movement as persona non grata.”

“Nobody said it was going to be easy,” said El Rubio.

“At least the prince seems to be implying he is interested in change,” I said.

“It will probably take a year or two to make sense,” said El Rubio. “And while Arias continues as Prime minister, I fear nothing will happen and we continue as we are.”

“Possibly,” said Dad. “And don’t forget, while Arias remains in power, they could be back at any moment.”

It was the most astute statement he had ever made about Spanish politics.

“How long do you anticipate Madrid will take to decide?” said Donna.

“To avoid mass chaos, it needs to be quick,” said El Rubio. “I anticipate they will announce something within a week.”

“This could be the turning point of our business,” said dad. “Hopefully, democracy will prevail but if it doesn’t, we could be in serious trouble.”

“Not much we can do about it,” I said.

“We could pray,” said Charles.

“Or drink,” said Rowcroft joining Charles at the bar. “I usually find alcohol more effective.”

Chapter 36 – What next

“If Spain does revert to a democratic monarchy,” I said cuddling Lucía as we lay in bed sharing a cigarette early on the day after Franco had passed. “It will surely be a boost to tourism. Visitors should no longer fear the Guardia, hotel investors will pile in, and airlines will extend their flight schedules.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Lucia. “My dad told me the last democratic republic was chaos. Nothing ever got done, the economy was shot, unemployment was rife, and many starved. It must be a modern democracy like other European countries.”

“And you could join the European Union,” I said. “What I’m trying to say my love is this hotel could be perfectly poised to make a killing. Think full hotel year-round. We could buy a house and move out of this poky room.”

“Really,” said Lucia all excited. “You mean it?”

“Of course.”

“And we could try for a baby?”

She threw her arms around him, and they kissed.

“There’s only one minor stumbling block,” I said coming up for air.

“Your father,” said Lucia.

“In one. The big question is what do we do if Spain does move to democracy and Dad refuses to expand the bar?”

“We to continue live in this room?”

“Correct.”

“Is that so bad? We have each other, a roof over our heads, a job to feed us and provide a small income plus a few tips. Believe me, I’ve had it worse.”

“But I haven’t. For the future I am aiming for, we need a larger and more regular income stream. In England, I could earn a lot more money and we could purchase a property quickly. Whereas here, if we don’t expand the bar, our income will remain the same and we will never be able to save up the deposit for a house.”

“What could you do in England?”

“Drive a cab, restart my music business and you could teach Spanish.”

“I will support whatever you decide.”

“You don’t mind leaving Spain?”

“Permanently, no, but for a while, it will be an adventure and I can improve my English.”

“What about your parents, won’t they object? You guys are so close you see each other ten times a day.”

“We will miss each other dreadfully but if they know I’ll be returning, will accept. What about yours, won’t you miss them?”

“Not really, I grew accustomed to living my own life when they sent me away to school.”

“I remember how horrified I was when you told me. No Spanish parent ever sends their children away and I can tell you now, I won’t agree to send our kids anywhere.”

“Believe me, having been in boarding school, I couldn’t inflict the same agony on ours. Although, I did acclimatize to not being at home, and some aspects of the school probably toughened me up, somehow, I will never lose the feeling my parents didn’t want me. It was as if I wasn’t good enough for them.”

“You seem to have forgiven them.”

“It’s not something we talk about.”

“So sad. Our family chats about anything and everything, especially with my mother.”

“You talk about us?”

“Of course.”

“Your whole family knows everything about us?”

“Where else would I learn to be a good wife and mother? They have more experience about the crucially important issues than anyone. You will benefit from it. You are, aren’t you?” said Lucia caressing me.”

“You discuss what we do in bed?”

“Not with my dad, but with mama and my sister, yes. Where else could I learn this, for example.”

“Oh, then I shouldn’t complain. Any er more tricks?”

“Plenty, but I’m not going to play all my cards at once. You’ll have to be patient. Can you?”

“If the rest are as good, I’m in your hands.”

“Exactly.”

“Then lead on McDuff, I’ll follow you anywhere.”

“Who is McDuff?”

“It’s a hangover from English literature, a misquote from Shakespeare then bastardized by Rider Haggard in King Solomon's Mines, a book I was obliged to read at school. It means a call to action.”

“Wow, a literary genius, there is more to you than meets the eye.”

“Nothing to do with literature, your mother’s tips must be working. There is no way I could discuss such intimate matters with my parents.”

“It’s a shame. Parents bring you into this world, help, guide, and are always there for you. It’s why we Spanish feel loved and well-balanced. We are never alone.”

“We’re completely different. From almost as soon as you talk, it’s made quite clear when educated, you find your way in life.”

“How sad. I hope this doesn’t become a problem between us.”

“I don’t see how it could. If we can talk this frankly after a few months of married bliss and despite our linguistic inadequacies, we should be able to handle most eventualities.”

“Ok, then mentally, I am prepared for whatever happens. However, I think it will be difficult for you to leave Spain, not me.”

“Why?”

“You’ve grown accustomed to the pace of life here, the good food and wine, the wonderful climate and not forgetting the best attraction of all, our amazing women. It will be depressing to return to bad weather and miserable people whose priority is money and possessions.”

“You’re probably right but I’m a married man now. I have responsibilities and want to provide for any children we may have and not be reliant on my father. Ideally, if we could expand and run the Fontainebleau while paying him a small rent, we could afford to save. Then I can see a future here. At the moment, not.”

“Have you thought about working somewhere else, for example in Real Estate for Charles and Jean?”

“Yes, but being an employee doesn’t suit me.”

“You work for your, Dad.”

“True, however, I run the bar as I want, and he lets me because he knows my entertainment program brings in a substantial amount of business. I’m a partner in what is our family business. If I worked for others, it would only be to earn money, I’d be bored to tears within hours.”

“I understand completely. My father is the same. Our campo is his heart and soul.”

“There you go. So, let’s agree to wait until we know for sure which way Spain is going,” I said. “If my father says no to expansion, we go to England.”

“Fine,” said Lucia snuggling closer and kissing my neck. “I agree we wait, however until then, lack of money and grand political plans shouldn’t interfere with having a baby, it’s the one thing we do control. You know what to do?”

“You married me for my experience.”

Chapter 37 – More dictionaries required

I don’t know why but when Franco died, I expected a big change, but life carried on pretty much as before. The only visible difference being no secret police and fewer Guardia officers on the street. After so many years of brutal repression, Spaniards were still suspicious of authority and continued to keep their mouths firmly shut. However, as winter turned to Spring, we were worried about the lack of bookings. Tour Operators were telling us until there was a definitive political solution in Spain, they were holding back their marketing.

“It’s been a long winter,” said Jack coming into the patio, where I was cleaning the fountain. “But we scraped through. Good to see the travel groups back again albeit in smaller numbers.”

“It’s great Dad,” I said. “Something to do at last. The question is, are you ready to shake the mothballs out of your wallet.”

“Cheeky bugger,” said Jack. “But no, not yet. Nice to see some new faces.”

“And some old,” said Donna taking her husband’s arm. “Bettina is back.”

“She must have enjoyed her previous stay,” I said, blushing. “When was it?”

“According to the file, it’s two years now,” said Donna. “I don’t need to remind you about being a married man, do I?”

“No, Mum. Anyway, I expect Bettina has moved on.”

“I don’t think so,” said Donna. “She’s sharing with another extremely gorgeous girl.”

“Then, I’ll inform her about my new relationship status as soon as we bump into each other,” I said.

“Please,” said Donna. “We don’t want any international incidents.”

“Or international intercourse,” said Jack.

“Oh, and Robin, next month, we have a capacity problem,” said Donna. “We need another room.”

“Lucia and I could find an apartment,” I said. “Assuming the budget will stretch.”

“There’s one available on Pintada,” said Jack. “Opposite Kronox and above the small supermarket. I’ve made a viewing appointment for you this evening. If you approve, move in next week. It will give us time to repaint your old room and replace the bathroom tiles.”

“I see you’ve thought of everything,” I said. “Lucia and I will be happy to be out of here. Two of us in one room is becoming claustrophobic.”

“It’s what we assumed,” said Donna. “Your best interests are always at the forefront of our minds.”

“Of course, they are, dearest parents, nothing to do with cheap labour.”

We loved the apartment, which was less than a ten-minute walk from the Fontainebleau and agreed to move in as soon as possible.

After a busy evening in the bar, Lucia and I adjourned to bed for our last night ever in the hotel. It was shortly after midnight, and we had just entered our room when an ear-piercing scream reverberated around the patio.

“Lock the door,” I said slipping back into my jeans. “It might be the Guardia Civil making a comeback.”

I ran barefoot downstairs only to bump into a scantily dressed young girl sprinting in the opposite direction. She was concentrating on negotiating the steps and failed to see me. I held out my arms and as gently as possible placed them on her shoulders in an attempt to stop and reassure her she was safe. At my touch, she screamed and looked up but all I saw was a mass of beautiful long blond hair.

“Robin, Zank godt,” she said, threw her arms around me, and wept.

I put my arms loosely around her and patted her shoulder wondering who it was. I recognized her perfume.

“Bettina?” I asked. “Vot er, what is happening?”

“I vanted to surprise you. You nefer said you changed rooms.”

“I expect Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were a tad surprised.”

“I didn’t stay to find out,” said Bettina. “When she screamed, it was enough. I make big mistake, nein. What shall I do?”

“Let’s keep it a secret, just the Robinson’s affair.”

“Vot?”

“Forget it.”

“Ja, you are here now,” said Bettina. “Take me to your new room please, my English needs more improvement.”

“Er Bettina, slight problem. My wife might not be so enamoured to see you.”

“You are married?”

“Yes.”

“How embarrassing, I go now.”

Bettina wiped her eyes, put her hand up to his cheek, and stroked my beard. “Your vife is lucky lady. Congratulations.”

She gave me a smouldering look and continued her sprint up the stairs.

“What was all the fuss?” said Lucia as she let me back into our room.

“Nothing much. A guest was confused about her room. It’s resolved.”

“Which guest?”

“Did I ever tell you about dictionaries?”

Chapter 38 – Happy motoring

I don’t know what it is about the British obsession with vehicles. When you see the Spanish chatting in cafes or bars, they are talking mainly about family or football, whereas we talk about anything on four wheels. After we sold dad’s Rolls, he followed Rowcroft’s advice and bought a brand new bright yellow Renault 12 familiar from a main dealer in Málaga*.* The servicing, however, would be done by a local mechanic proficient in Renaults because they were what most people purchased.

Cars were still a rarity in Spain, people just couldn’t afford them and walked everywhere. The roads were full of slow-moving surprises. Mopeds converted into agricultural trailers. Scooter drivers holding up umbrellas when it rained. Even in the Rolls we often had to screech to a halt to let an ox cart trundle by or watch a herd of goats chewing the verges munch their way past.

There was also an inherent lack of knowledge about things mechanical. Manolo, the guy who owned the hostal at the end of our street had purchased a brand-new Seat 124 and driven it back the seventy-odd kilometres from Málaga in first gear. He knew perfectly well how to change down but had been petrified his new engine should be run in gently.

Then *Trafico* demanded dad attend a test in Málaga to prove his driving capabilities. I went with him to translate. The test was to take place on a quiet country road on the fringes of the city. We arrived in good time to find several other foreigners waiting to face the same ordeal.

“Did I tell you I never took a driving test?” said Dad.

“Then how did you qualify for a licence?”

“I drove a staff car during the war which was considered enough,” said Dad, as the examiner strode toward them clipboard in hand. “Now I’m petrified I’ll screw up.”

“You’ll be fine,” I said as we climbed out to greet the diminutive officious man with greasy hair who stunk of garlic and body odour. “Drive like you normally do.”

Dad presented his English driving license, which was subjected to intense scrutiny. The original was in English, but we had brought an official translation, which cost an arm and a leg. Eventually, the examiner nodded and invited Jack to take the wheel. I sat in the back.

“Vamos,” said the examiner.

“Drive Dad,” I said.

Jack set off confidently as he always did but with one minor difference, he was on the wrong side of the road.

“Dad, we’re in Spain, not Britain,” I said as calmly as he could. “Drive on the right.”

Jack glanced nervously at the examiner but continued on the left.

“*Para el coche*,” said the examiner.

“Stop the car, Dad.”

Jack checked his mirror, signalled, pulled onto the side of the road, and stopped as a car sped by in the other direction. He was as white a sheet.

The examiner, clearly annoyed, rattled off a string of Spanish.

Jack looked helplessly in the mirror at me.

“*Lo siento,”* I said. *“Mi padre está muy nervioso*.”

“Dad, I’ve apologized,” I said. “He prefers that while in Spain it is advisable to drive on the right like everybody else. Now begin again.”

This time Jack drove on the correct side.

After a short journey of some ten minutes, we arrived back at the start point. The examiner ticked the form and presented it to my dad with a wry smile.

It had been quite a while since I sold our mini so when I went home, I decided to surprise Lucia.

“I’ve saved up enough tips this summer and think we should buy a car,” I said as we settled down to watch *Rocky* dubbed in Spanish on our new Betamax machine. The season had ended and another long winter with not much to do meant we had time to enjoy the delights of Nerja and the surrounding area.

“To commute to work?”

“Hardly, it would take us longer to find a parking place than walk. No, I loved our little countryside trips out in the mini. Didn’t you?”

“I did but then we were single. I recall fending off your wandering paws most of the time.”

“Won’t have to now.”

“Make sure it’s not another mini.”

“I’ve seen a second-hand Renault Dauphine for sale from one of our neighbours, the back seat is enormous, well it’s bigger than a mini. It’s getting on a bit, but I could buy it for one hundred pesetas.”

“It sounds remarkably inexpensive. Are you sure it’s mechanically sound?”

“I took it for a test drive. It was as you expect for an elderly machine, slow and loud but for the two hundred meters around the block seemed solid and reliable.”

“Then do it.”

As usual with anything needing official involvement, the transaction took seconds, but the paperwork and insurance needed weeks of back and forth between various offices. Eventually, the car was mine. I parked it outside our apartment and washed it to celebrate. I wish I hadn’t bothered. The months of accumulated dust and mud were holding it together. When the washing revealed a rusting heap, I splashed the filthy water back over it. When done, I stood back and admired my handiwork.”

“A fine vehicle,” said my neighbour joining me on his way home from work.

“You serious?” I asked.

“I’d love a car like this. When you’re done with it, give me first refusal?”

“You sure?”

“Listen, some men have a campo to escape domesticity. I prefer aging vehicles. They are more appreciative of my tender loving care and don’t argue.”

“I’ll bear you in mind,” I said astounded my pain in the backside was his dream of perfection. I picked up my empty bucket and headed indoors.

“Thanks,” he said with a grateful expression.

I thought I’d made his day. Oh well, it takes all sorts.

“I don’t recall the Frigiliana Road being so steep in the mini,” said Lucia a few weeks later as the old banger struggled around another hairpin bend. Air whistling through the hole in the floor under her feet.”

“What do you expect for a hundred pesetas, a Ferrari.”

“Bit of a come down after the Rolls. A mule would have been a better buy.”

“Yes, but without a nearby stable and hay supplier rather pointless. At least this does have a spacious back seat.”

“Don’t even go there,” said Lucia. “It’s probably flea-ridden.”

“More likely springs in uncomfortable places. Anyway, nobody is likely to steal it, so we can continue to park on the street with impunity.”

“Never mind, in this throw-away society you can shove it over a cliff and buy another one.”

“At this rate, next week,” I said.

“Then make sure you only buy gas one litre at a time. Otherwise, the tank contents will be worth more than the car and frankly, I don’t feel comfortable with the engine in the rear. Every time we go downhill it vibrates so dangerously; I think it will join me in the front.”

“Fingers crossed it gets us home.”

After a delightful lunch at a tapas bar in the pretty mountain village, we headed back home. As we turned into the top of Calle Pintada, there was a large explosion, the car lurched into the air and landed with a crunch of metal as the front bumper fell off and hit the tarmac. We lurched to a halt.

We regarded each other with raised eyebrows.

“At least home is nearby.”

“How embarrassing. I’ll walk. You sort it.”

I watched my wife walk away more quickly than I had ever seen her move then tentatively opened the engine compartment.

Oil had sprayed everywhere and was dripping profusely onto the road. The engine must have seized. As I stood there scratching my head, the drivers accumulating behind me began losing patience. Horns started blowing louder than the town band with similar discordance. I wonder, I thought as I closed the boot, or was it bonnet?

I stuffed the bumper in the back seat, climbed behind the wheel, and turned the key praying for a miracle. Surprisingly, the motor stuttered but caught. I half-drove and freewheeled down Pintada to park outside our apartment. As I peered back up the street, the trail of oil was markedly obvious.

Before I could even reach our front door, our neighbour was hovering around the vehicle, and kicking the tyres. After his first declaration of love, he had regularly gazed at it longingly and inquired if it was for sale yet, but each time I said no. Now it was ready for the scrapheap, I was prepared to hear his offer. It was cheaper and quicker to sell than have the expense of scrapping it officially.

“How is the interior?” he said.

“Spacious,” I said handing him the keys. “Here, decide for yourself but be careful with your weight on the floor, your foot might go straight through the hole.”

The man opened the door and gingerly climbed inside. He seemed mechanically minded as he tapped the speedometer and nodded knowingly. Had I missed something? He pressed the pedals, moved the gearstick, and released the handbrake. As the car began to move downhill, he yanked it up again. The rear wheels squealed and skidded but thankfully, it stopped a millimetre before crashing into the vehicle in front.

He tried the motor. As it shuddered into action a huge cloud of black smoke appeared from the rear. He climbed out and went around to the rear.

“Show me,” he said.

I opened the bonnet.

The man studied the mess momentarily. “Piston roto. How much?”

“To repair?”

“No, to buy.”

“You want to buy it?” I said trying to disguise a, you must be stupid expression.

“Yes.”

Amazing, I thought but what should I ask?

“Fifty pesetas.”

“Here,” said the man holding out a coin. “But keys and papers now.”

“The papers are in the car,” I said, palming the money.

“I’ll collect it later,” said the man removing the car key from the fob and handing it back.

We shook hands and I headed back upstairs.

Rowcroft would have been proud of me.

“Fixed it?” said Lucia as I entered the kitchen where she was fixing supper.

“Permanently,” I said flicking the coin in the air and catching it.

“Wow, super salesman,” said Lucia. “Perhaps you’re in the wrong profession?”

“I don’t see myself as a second-hand car dealer my love.”

“What a relief. I don’t think I’m ready to be the wife of such a high-standing young man just yet.”

The next morning, when I peered out of the window, the car had gone. A huge pool of black oil in the shape of a cross marked its passing.

I smirked and went to shower knowing my old wreck was in good hands.

Chapter 39 – We’re leaving on a jet plane

The lack of hotel guests was causing us a huge problem and we were struggling to make ends meet. We all assumed everyone was sitting on the fence waiting for Madrid to announce something, anything, and then finally, halfway through summer, it came.

“Have you heard the news?” I said as Rowcroft walked toward the hotel bar.

“Give me time to have a drink,” said Rowcroft stretching and yawning. “I’m not worth a damn in the morning until I’ve had at least one drink.”

“Coming right up,” I said.

“Thanks,” said Rowcroft as I placed his first of the day before him. He stared at it with intense longing raised the glass to his lips with trembling hands, gulped it down, and banged his glass in front of me. I refilled and he repeated the process then nodded his head with an appreciative grin, “Now I’m ready to be enlightened by the day’s headlines.”

“Today, the first of July 1976, Carlos Aria Navarro has resigned as Prime Minister. In two days, King Juan Carlos will appoint Adolfo Suárez as his replacement. He will be sworn in on the fifth and form a government by the eighth. Their purpose is to preside over the governance of the country, oversee the formation of new political parties, and lead the way to democracy. When ready, a date will be announced for when free and open elections will be held in which all citizens over the age of eighteen can participate.”

“Really, but we all know Spain. It could take years. Did they happen to mention a date for this supposed first general election?”

“The date will be set sometime next year. Do you know what this means?”

“Forgive my scepticism, they may have announced their intentions, but it doesn’t mean elections will happen.”

“I know, but you cannot deny they are setting out their stall for democracy. If they go back on their word, they will become a global laughingstock. I doubt they would make their announcement without having thought this through.”

“I can’t disagree with your logic, but we can only wait and see. The question is, will this positive step persuade your father to extend the bar?”

“I doubt it.”

“Then what will you do?”

“I have to consider our future. We are thinking about having children. Without the income from an extended bar, we won’t be able to afford it.”

“Then I say again, what will you do?”

“I’ll talk it over with dad and if we can’t agree on an actual date, we will go to England until he is ready.”

“What makes you think you can earn more money in England? What with the winter of discontent and strikes everywhere, unemployment is rife.”

“I know but the big difference is in England there are jobs available in a wide range of activities. Here, as we have discussed before, foreigners are limited to tourism or real estate which is currently a disaster. Whereas in London, I can drive a cab and Lucia can teach Spanish.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Rowcroft.

“Perfect timing,” I said as my parents walked into the bar.

“I’m off,” said Rowland downing his drink and scurrying out the door.

“Talking about me?” said dad.”

“No,” I said as my parents took a table for breakfast. “About me and Lucia. We need to talk, Dad.”

“Sorry, son,” said Jack. “The answer to yet another request to expand the bar is still no. Franco’s death and the possibility of a tourist boom in Spain make no difference to our current finances. The hotel is only half full and another long winter looming ahead of us. With the return of David Wilkes to Canada, we have lost our only permanent resident. Our overdraft limit is blown, and income will be practically zero until April. We have to wait at least another year before I can spend capital without incurring dollar premium, or early withdrawal penalties. Believe, me in my position, you would do the same.”

“I understand, Dad, but I’m a married man now. Lucia and I have dreams for a house and family which means more income. I can’t sit around here wasting another year, we need to get on. Either expand the bar soon and we rent the business from you so you can retire as planned. Or, we will have to make other arrangements.”

“It’s a difficult one, son and please don’t take this personally. Your mother and I would love to say yes but if we are to relax and enjoy our retirement, we need to be solvent enough to do so. Sorry, we’d love to help, but you and Lucia should do what you must. I will understand entirely and won’t condemn your decision or change my mind.”

“Then, sorry, Dad, Mum but we will go to England. We’ll take our leave as soon as Lucia has said her goodbyes and I’ve sorted plane tickets.”

“What will you do?” said Donna sniffing.

“I’ll drive a cab and restart my music business. Lucia will teach Spanish.”

“Is she prepared to leave Spain?” said Donna taking her handkerchief out of her bag. “Her family will be devastated.”

“Listen, neither of us wants to go but stagnating here waiting for you to dig your hands in your pocket would be unbearable. Like my brother, Mum, I must take control of my destiny, and this is the only way forward I can see.”

“I’m pleased you have thought it through,” said Jack. “And I will pay for your tickets and deliver you to the airport. No hard feelings?”

“No, Dad, only sadness. England might be fine for earning money, but Spain has my soul. I’ll be back as soon as you push your spending button, and I can earn a respectable income.”

“Good,” said Jack. “Let’s hope Spain sorts itself out and next year we can pay what you need.”

Chapter 40 – Back where we belong

Lucia had been right. I had found it difficult coming back to England, whereas she had loved it. Silvia our first daughter was born in Ashford Hospital and was everything we had dreamed of. A gorgeous little girl, whose every gurgle stirred the cockles of our hearts despite the sleepless nights and stinking nappies.

My brother Mark had kindly loaned me the money to purchase a second-hand car and I signed up with Heathrow Cars ferrying people back and forth to the airport.

Sadly, Lucia’s family couldn’t afford the trip to come and see their first grandchild, but we mailed off a weekly photo, so they could monitor her progress.

I stretched myself to the limit financially to buy a terraced house in Cove, Hampshire to take advantage of the property price inflation gold rush. It was cramped but it was ours.

By now we had no problem communicating in either language. It had taken us more than two years to understand each other so I spoke to Silvia in English and Lucia in Spanish.

Nearly a year after we had left Nerja, mum and dad came to visit. They stayed in a local hotel as we had no spare room at home and after they had become besotted by Silvia, my dad invited us to return to Nerja. Finally, he could exit his investments with impunity and transfer cash without paying dollar premium. At last, I could build the bar and restaurant I knew could set our hotel on the road to success.

We rented out our house and moved back to Nerja in June 1977, the day after the first free and fair elections since before the Civil War. After forty-one years, democracy had returned to Spain. At the end of a quiet summer, we closed in early October and let the builders loose. This time we used tried and trusted contractors who agreed to penalty charges if they were delayed. Most of the punitive cost overruns and delays incurred back in 1974 were because we trusted supposed professionals and left them to it. Not this time. Every waking moment through the winter I was on site. We had to be open for the following Easter and the arrival of the first groups from Wings. If I had to shovel cement or plaster to ensure we were ready in time, I would.

Thankfully, by Valentine's Day it was done. The family walked around with the builder checking the work.

“I love the backward clock,” said Dad as we prowled around the new bar now three times larger than the previous model. “If late drinkers can’t work out what the time is, they’ll say fuck it, let’s have another one.”

“Where did you find the clock?” said Lucia hugging little Silvia who burped as she kicked her legs.

“How cute,” said Donna gazing at her.

“David Wilkes sent it from Canada as a thank-you for our hospitality,” I said. “He dedicated his book to the hotel.”

“He finished it?” said dad.

“Best seller apparently,” I said.

“Do we know what it’s about?”

“It’s titled *Blue Summer* and is a sitcom set in a Spanish hotel,” I said.

“How appropriate,” said dad. “Our happy and efficient disposition must have made an impression.”

“More like lambs to the slaughter,” I said.

“Has he sent a copy?” said dad.

“Signed copies arrived with the clock,” I said. “Have a read. It’s hilarious?”

“Probably too near the truth for my liking,” said Dad. “What happened to Mark’s racing posters?”

“Still there,” I said. “We beefed up the air-conditioning. They are above the false ceiling we installed to hide the ductwork. and we included your bottle club idea.”

“What?” said Lucia.

“With a longer bar and more shelving, Dad suggested we build some bottle-sized boxes. He stole the idea from the sixty’s nightclub scene in London. Each box has its key and owner’s name engraved on the door. Regular customers buy a bottle of their favourite spirit and have access to it each time they drop in. We provide mixers and a bucket of ice, they serve themselves. At the end of each session, we return their bottle to its box and charge them for the mixers. Hopefully, they will brag about it in other bars by saying, oh, I have my bottle at the Fontainebleau. We’ll have to put one up for you, Dad. What will it be, scotch or gin?”

“Gin, and with the pathetic rent I’m charging you, don’t expect me to pay.”

“How is the new apartment, Lucia?” said Donna.

“It’s a bit cramped with Silvia and her paraphernalia,” said Lucia. “But it will do until we can find a house to buy.”

“Did you make a profit on your house in Cove?” said dad.

“We are renting it out for now. The rent pays the mortgage.”

“Keeping your options open?” said Dad.

“No. House price inflation in the UK is rampant, it’s a good investment.”

“Wow, at last, a chip off the old block.”

“Amazing what a difference it makes being in charge of my destiny.”

“Proud of you son,” said dad turning to mum and putting his arm around her waist. “Well, my dear, the new facilities should make an enormous difference to the bar takings, especially in winter. I think we can finally say, we can now retire.”

“About bloody time,” said Mum.

Chapter 41–A fresh approach

With Dad no longer involved in the day-to-day running of the Fontainebleau, I was free to explore new avenues to move the business forward. Although the rent we agreed to pay him was far less than it should have been, it still had to be paid even though the winters remained long and quiet. Now Spain had decided to join the rest of the democratic world, the future was bright but somehow, we needed to attract clients all year round if we were to exploit this exciting potential.

I failed to understand why people ignored the low season. The best time of year weatherwise for me was November through March. The average daily temperature was over twenty-two degrees with no crowds and cheaper flights. We’d celebrated several Christmas Days on my parents’ terrace in our shorts, so why would Brits prefer to stay and home and freeze their backsides? Was the pull of too many presents and overindulgence of mince pies stronger than balmy beaches and kaleidoscopic sunsets? With a large bar and restaurant to fill, it was a mystery I set out to remedy.

During our absence from Nerja, both in the UK and while hovering over builders, the rest of the town had moved on. It was expanding rapidly on all sides, particularly in Capistrano Village, the new development to the northwest of Nerja. It was started by Ken Brabant, a Canadian, whose goal was to attract his fellow citizens here to escape their arctic winters. The construction of the five hundred-odd villas and townhouses built in the style of a typical Andalusian white village was well under way. However, the Canadians were not buying as many houses as envisaged, so they expanded their marketing to the UK. Every weekend nearly all year round, they sold cheap inspection trips. Interested parties were flown in from Gatwick on a Friday, accommodated in completed Capistrano villas, then wined and dined in the Capistrano Caves Bar. On Saturday, they were bombarded with the sales spiel and flew home on Sunday with, hopefully, a deposit paid for their new place in the sun. The sales team of Jeff Mason and Bill Reed often popped in early during the week for a drink and a chat with me and our guests. The next time they came in, I asked Lucia to step in behind the bar, while I sat them down with coffee and chocolate digestives.

Jeff was a tall, well-built, charming man with longish dark hair, a chiselled face, and grey eyes. Bill Reed was a burly dark-haired flamboyant character. Both were in their early thirties.

“How can we help?” asked Jeff, while stirring his drink.

“How do you know I want something?” I asked.

“Free coffee. Impossible to get hold of biscuits, warm smiles, and for a rare occasion, out from behind the bar,” said Jeff.

“Fair enough, but I only have a couple of questions,” I said. “I understand your inspection trips are going well but can I ask why we never see any of the people in town?”

They exchanged concerned glances, then nodded.

“Why do you ask?” said Jeff.

“I think your clients are more likely to buy if they knew there was an English-speaking bar and restaurant in town with affordable rooms to accommodate their friends with a live entertainment program.”

They both nodded.

“Our sole objective is to sell inspection trippers an off-plan house in Capistrano Village,” said Jeff. “If we let them off-site, they may be distracted by another property.”

“Understandable, however, correct me if I’m wrong. They usually decide and pay on Saturday. Why not bring them here to see our new Flamenco show as a thank-you for their purchase on Saturday evening? Showing them more of our fantastic town should ensure they have made the right decision to buy. Those sitting on the fence may then change their mind and you can sign them up on Sunday morning.”

“Sounds good,” said Jeff. “Let’s give it a whirl. When can we start?”

“Our first Wings group arrives on Friday, and we hold the show on Saturday after a fish and chip supper starting at eight. The whole evening with two drinks included for only one thousand pesetas.”

“And who pays?” said Bill.

“You pay for those who have reserved a house, non-purchasers pay for themselves. It adds another pressure point to buy but you need to give me a warning how many front-row tables you need as early on Saturday evening as possible.”

“No problem,” said Jeff. “See you Saturday.”

We stood and shook hands. I resumed my usual stance behind the bar inevitably polishing glasses feeling chuffed with myself. All I had to do now was organize a weekly Flamenco show.

As part of my new marketing approach, I also put a little brochure together with some of the more favourable comments from our guest book to send to other travel companies and airlines. Meanwhile, I asked Rupert Caterham the area manager of Wings to come and see me to show him the new bar and explore how we could mutually expand our business.

He was there the next day.

I was unsure if his eagerness to see El Rubio again was the driving force behind his prompt response or if my idea excited him. Either way, when he arrived, we sat down in the bar with a pot of tea. He brought Lola, their local representative with him.

Lola had been escorting the Wings Groups back and forth to our hotel since the beginning of over three years ago. We hadn’t had much time to get to know each other as we had been both busy with our tasks ushering out the old and welcoming the new groups. This was the first occasion we had time for a more detailed appraisal of each other. She was in her early thirties with classic Latin looks, alluring brown eyes, prominent chin, narrow face with long dark hair pinned up in a bob decorated with a red carnation matching her uniform jacket and figure-hugging sky-blue skirt. She could have been a poster girl but for some unearthly reason preferred working with British tourists. Her charming Spanish accent, sense of fun, and attractive appearance was custom-made for her profession and my instincts told me I could learn a lot from her. Hopefully, I could improve the role our hotel played ensuring Wings guests had the holiday of a lifetime.

“You should join me at the airport for the first group of the year,” said Lola while Rupert and El Rubio exchanged admiring glances across the bar. “Waiting in the arrival hall to meet a Dan Air or British Caledonian flight is a great place to learn about the various quirks and personalities of travellers. As I observe the hordes struggling by with heavy cases, checking around expectantly for whoever is there to greet them, I try and guess who belongs to me before they spot my clipboard and sign. People-watching is a fun exercise and believe me, in the space of fifteen minutes every type of human trails before me. They vary from awful to adorable. When an unappealing one does appear, I smile but mentally wish them onto my colleagues from other tour companies.”

“Does it work?” I asked.

“Most of the time but thankfully, as Wings are more expensive than most of our competitors, we attract a more discerning quality of traveller. This hotel is the only product we offer on the eastern side of Málaga and because it's further off the beaten track appeals to the more adventurous with deeper wallets. Those seeking larger and more popular resorts with pools and in house entertainment head west to the beach factories between Torremolinos and Fuengirola.”

“Beach factories?”

“Two weeks of sun and sand in massive hotels with everything included. They never venture far from the hotel mostly because they are too drunk to move from their bar stool and that is just the women. It is a side of tourism I find bestial. Why come to Spain just to get pissed when we have so much more to offer?”

“Sadly,” I said. “Most Brits don’t know how to appreciate a cultural experience if you shoved it under their noses for free. Back home, their only escape from the monotony of tedious jobs is tanking up on alcohol every weekend. As booze here is incredibly cheaper than in the UK, every day is Saturday night.”

“Aren’t they interested in our rich history? What about our ancient cities and Moorish architecture?”

“If they don’t care about British history, it’s unlikely they will show an interest in yours. Sorry, Lola but these beach factory tourists only want to drink and go home with a suntan to impress their friends in the pub. We are so lucky they don’t come here. I would love to find some cultural attributes in Nerja that appeal to the more enlightened but other than caves and beach, Nerja doesn’t have anything to offer.”

“Nonsense, you have been spending too much time polishing glasses. Have you seen the Easter processions?”

“No.”

“San Isidro Romeria?”

“Er, no.”

“Caves Festival?”

“Sorry.”

“Hiking in the mountains?”

“Regretfully.”

“Robin, if you want to attract discerning people out of season, they do not want to sit on a beach for fourteen days but want to appreciate Spain as a country. You should arrange some excursions; such as language lessons, escorted cooking classes, or tapas tours. Become an expert in Spanish music, not just this English pop nonsense. Make some maps for hikers, enter a hotel float into San Isidro, and watch Semana Santa. Think about day trips to the Alhambra Palace in Granada. Offer a special package for Christmas and New Year. They can choose what excursions they want and pay for these as extras included in the price with flights and accommodation, so you know in advance how many people want to take advantage of these. This will completely change the profile of your hotel and gradually attract direct clients all year round.”

I regarded Lola astounded at her suggestions. Why hadn’t we thought of this?

“Thank you, Lola, you’ve set my mind racing. I am organizing a weekly Flamenco Show but will discuss it with Lucia, do some research, and see which of your ideas we could start with.”

“This is how we prefer to work with our suppliers,” said Rupert, finally contributing. “We want to continually expand our offering to reach those prepared to pay a little more for their holiday.”

“You are fortunate to be working with us,” said Lola. “To date, most of your guests other than the odd exception have been fun.”

“Such as the Hancocks?” I askedl.

“Exactly, but at least they weren’t throwing up everywhere,” said Rupert.

“It was a close call, mind,” I said.

Chapter 42–Airport scrum

The following Friday, I heeded Lola’s suggestion and caught the bus to Málaga Airport to learn about the arrival experience of our first group of 1978, which for many was their first-ever trip outside of the UK.

There was only one terminal. It was built during the sixties to a typical Franco specification with grey cladding, single glazing, low ceilings, and poor air conditioning which even in early April, couldn’t cope with the combination of body heat and sunshine.

Lola was exactly where she said, right by the railing outside the only door from the customs hall. It was a prominent position and easily visible. The brand-new mechanical arrivals board to the side clicked every minute or so with updated flight status.

I counted the number of meeters and greeters in the shape of taxi drivers, private individuals, and tour company representatives holding up signs. There were at least thirty.

“In summer, there are more than a hundred,” said Lola. “It’s unbearable and we all complain bitterly about the lack of air conditioning. It’s hardly welcoming to our visitors.”

“The Brits won’t notice,” I said. “They have no idea what air conditioning is, they just open the window. Their first reaction will be yippee, it’s hot.”

“Which is why they come, right?”

“That, cheap booze and ever hopeful of a quick shag.”

“You’ll be amazed how many lose their virginity on the beach or in a tiny sweaty hotel room. I overhear them bragging about it on the bus back to the airport.”

“And probably half of Britain’s youth have their first taste of alcohol poisoning here, me included. For the under twenties, it’s the land of firsts,” I said.

“And something they will never forget.”

“Are they on time?”

“They landed a few minutes late, but the luggage will take a while. I anticipate another thirty minutes. Why don’t you get a coffee?”

“Do you want one?”

“No, I’m ok, I need to keep my liquids down as there are no toilets on the bus. And, I am busy answering questions, I dare not leave the group even for a minute.”

“Good advice, I’ll skip it. So, can you teach me what to look for and why it’s important?”

“Sadly, some people have no sense of direction and are completely disoriented. I have to treat them like children but it’s ok because they are too scared to wander off. The worst are those who think they know it all and ignore my instructions. As they approach me, I attempt to categorize them into incapable, or competent.”

“How?”

“When they start coming through, I’ll let you know.”

“How can I help?”

“Take them to the marshalling point by the exit, show them where the toilets are and where to change money. Once comfortable, they must wait at the marshalling point until we have everyone and can summon the bus.”

“Your office told me there are twenty-eight in this group?”

“And they all boarded at Luton.”

“Do you ever lose any?”

“No, but if their luggage goes astray like Hancock, it can take ages for them to register at the lost luggage window and they keep everybody waiting. Tempers can fray if they have small children or are elderly and need to sit down. These are all the things to take into consideration. If there is a long delay, the bus driver needs to be kept informed as he is only allocated half an hour of free parking.”

“Fingers crossed then.”

“Everything crossed,” said Lola, grimacing.

There is more to this than being bright and breezy, I thought.

We watched the previous two flights disgorge their passengers into the arrival hall. Most had an expectant air about them as they peered curiously about for their travel rep. Others seemed tired, some relieved to be back on terra firma. Couples of all ages, some with very young babies shuffled through the narrow door. A group of boisterous lads with long sideburns in tight flared pants and bright-coloured shirts jumped up and down in an attempt to locate their travel rep. A group of girls in their late teens giggled while tugging down their microskirts, smoothing their figure-hugging tops, and adjusting hairbands. They looked self-consciously around checking out the boys but on the whole, I failed to notice anybody unappealing. Perhaps I was more accustomed to this typical cross-section of Brits. Without exception, they were white, Caucasian with few obese or sporting visible tattoos.

As one group of lads found their travel rep. I heard her say, “Does anyone speak Spanish?”

“*Si*,” shouted one, even though he stood right next to her. “*Un poco.*” At which I howled. His accent was broad Birmingham and it sounded like powcow. But at least he had tried and to be honest, not too many years ago my pronunciation must have been equally as bad.

“Comic accent,” I said. “Why is he shouting?”

“I’m surprised you don’t you know.”

“Sorry?”

“Raising the voice is the traditional English solution to speaking foreign languages.”

“How?”

“It emanates from colonial days, when to gain cooperation with an indigenous population, you shouted at them in English. If they hadn’t complied after a few repetitions, they were shot to encourage others to speak your language because you were too lazy to learn theirs.”

“I never knew.”

“They were hardly going to put it in your history books, but the Spanish did the same in the Americas.”

“True, but why do we English continue with this ignorant rudeness?”

“Old Empire habits die hard but at least you have stopped shooting.”

Our first couple approached smiling and nodding with a sense of relief they had found us. Smartly dressed and well-coiffured, they were way above the unappealing category.

“Competent,” whispered Lola.

“The Brayshaws from Harpenden,” said the tall well-spoken man in his early fifties wearing a beige linen suit and Panama hat. “Stuart and Daphne for the Fontainebleau.”

“Great,” said Lola. “Welcome. This is Robin, the hotel owner, please go with him to the marshalling point. He will show you where the rest rooms and money change kiosk are. Then please kindly wait at the marshalling point until I have everybody, and we can summon the bus driver.”

“First time in Spain?” I said as I escorted the Brayshaws to the area by the main bus park exit.”

“Good lord, no,” boomed Stuart. “We were in Calella on the Costa Brava back in 1969 with our four daughters, but this is our first time on the Costa del Sol.”

“Amazing, our family stayed near there in Tossa del Mar around then,” I said. “I’ll never forget gingerly squeezing between the weekly market stalls with sunburned shoulders trying to avoid bumping into anyone.”

“We’ve all done it,” said Stuart. “And because the booze is so cheap, it’s easy to overindulge.”

“We went to a mock bull fight just outside Calella,” I said grimacing. “We stopped at a brandy distillery on the way and then had free champagne at the bullring. Needless to say, I never saw the fun with the young bulls, I was throwing up in the toilets.”

“We went on the same excursion,” said Stuart. “They had shot glasses with different flavour brandies lined up on the table.”

“And I tried them all,” I said.

“So did I,” said Stuart, grinning.

“Thankfully we have girls,” said Daphne. “The booze didn’t interest them but three of them fell in love with the same Spanish singer performing in a boy band on the beach,” said Daphne. “We spent most of our time trying to drag them away and then referee the squabbling about who was going to kiss him first.”

“Treasured memories,” said Stuart.

“The girls still go on about it today,” said Daphne. “Even though they are paired off or married.”

“After a couple of gins, a lot of our guests open up to me about their youth. Some are in tears, so intense are their emotions about loves lost or unique family moments.”

“Nostalgia is a weird and powerful feeling,” said Daphne.

“Especially as one ages,” said Stuart. “When the only thing to look forward to is illness and dying, so you tend to reflect on the past. The memories that burn deepest are those teenage ones where you play games wondering how your life might have turned out if only you had said or done something different.”

“You mean you would have married the dreadful Louise you were always banging on about?” snapped Daphne.

“Don’t be a silly moo,” said Stuart. “Anyways, she was better than the drip you had as a first boyfriend. What was his name?”

“Stephen, dear,” said Daphne. “Alzheimer’s setting in already?”

Stuart roared and the two hugged like a couple of teenagers.

“We’re thinking of buying a villa in Nerja,” said Stuart after they exchanged loving glances. “But want to look around first. Perhaps you can give us a few pointers?”

“My pleasure,” I said. “I’m in the bar every evening.” I pointed out the toilets, café, and money kiosk and went back to Lola to collect the next arrivals.

If all the couples were like this, I thought as I elbowed my way through the meeters and greeters, we might not have to bother with organized activities.

Needless to say, they were not.

Another couple were bombarding Lola with questions. They were in their early twenties and dressed conservatively.

“Ah, Robin,” said Lola. “Jack and Jean Braithwaite from Chelmsford. The next couple is about to hit, can you take them to the marshalling point.”

“This way, please,” I said.

“Incapable,” whispered Lola in my ear as we moved off.”

“First time in Spain?” I said sticking with the traditional opening.

“First time anywhere,” said Jean with a shrill voice. A shrew-like woman with short dark hair, no make-up, and a permanent frown.

“We, we, we, er... have lots of questions?” said Jack in a whining voice. His old colonial clothing reminded me of Hancock but with a nervous disposition. “But you dragged us away from Lola before we heard the answers.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Arrivals are hectic, and we don’t have enough time to talk in detail with everyone. When we are all safely on the bus is the time to ask.”

“Oh,” said Jean. “We prefer to discuss these issues privately.”

“Can you wait until we reach the Fontainebleau?”

“If we must,” said Jack, frowning. “But this is most unsatisfactory.”

Thankfully, the majority were ordinary folk, nicely turned out, and polite. They were mainly couples, along with three pairs of ladies, two single men and two studious young single women busy eyeing each other up as discreetly as they could. They were typical of most of our groups except for the final couple Mr. and Mrs. Brash. Their names were Bert and Doreen Woodford dressed gaudily in matching checked shirts and striped trousers. They were overweight, red-faced, and perspiring heavily. Their loud, overbearing manner was instantly repulsive. They assumed everything they said was amusing and every statement was followed by a burst of forced guffaws.

I smiled and forced myself to grasp their proffered hands. Their grips were excessively powerful, overly long, and lank.

At least their bar bills should be large. I thought. Should be some compensation for putting up with their behaviour for a fortnight. Finally, we loaded everyone and their luggage onto the luxury Mercedes coach and headed off to Nerja.

I sat in the front opposite the Brayshaws and behind Lola in the guide’s fold away next to Luis, the driver. A happy, chain-smoking man in his fifties dressed in a light-blue shirt with the bus company logo and black pants. He stank of cigarettes, and I thought I was bad, but he smiled warmly at each client and repeated a badly pronounced ‘good morning’ as each passed him on their way to the back of the bus. Nobody bothered to say ‘*buenos dias*.’

As soon as we departed the airport, Lola grabbed the microphone and after a brief explanation of the three-hour route to Nerja and to not drink the water, began to talk about Málaga City and its current population of some four hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants. I learned more in fifteen minutes about how Phoenicians, Romans, Visigoths, and Moors had influenced the layout and architecture during its three thousand years of history than ever before. The ruins of the Alcazabar, a Moorish castle, on top of Mount Gibralfaro, peeked over the tops of jaded seven-floor apartment buildings as we crawled through the city centre past the port hidden behind decaying warehouses. The overall impression was uncared for and after decades of neglect the income from coastal tourism hadn’t yet reached the city itself.

As we headed out along the N-340 coastal road there was a big cheer when we drove right along by the shore at El Palo and could see the sparkling Mediterranean for the first time. At Rincon de la Victoria, the road passed under a narrow tunnel and ran right along the side of the beach. Everyone clamoured for Luis to stop so they could have a paddle.

I thought Lola handled their demands diplomatically with an apology that buses could only stop where scheduled, which in our case was the Fontainebleau.

As we wound along the bendy coast road through Algarrobo, Torre del Mar and Torrox-Costa, the general atmosphere in the bus was chatty and excited. Finally, we turned a corner and there was Nerja ahead of us. Lola announced a brief history of the town and summarised the key landmarks as we approached the top end of Pintada and squeezed into Calle Alejandro Bueno.

“Welcome to the Fontainebleau,” she said as we pulled up outside. “You need your passports to hand for registration. Please wait in the bar while we check you in and issue room keys. Your luggage will be delivered to your room, and Robin invites you to a welcome drink in the bar at seven. If you have any questions, please ask me inside.”

I jumped off first.

My real work was about to begin.

Chapter 43–Groups with Wings

While Lucia dealt with the passports and distribution of keys, El Rubio and I unloaded the cases, marked them with room numbers and heaved them upstairs to their owners’ rooms. Although I was on my feet every morning until midnight, this was the only real aerobic exercise I had time for. When we were done, we were both glad of a cigarette break and a snack in the kitchen while everyone settled in.

I’d only just sat down in the lobby chair when the Braithwaites sidled in through the patio door.

“Can you answer our questions, now?” said Jack.

“I’ll do my best,” I said remaining seated.

“We don’t like the sun so are not beachgoing types,” said Jean. “Don’t smoke, drink alcohol, or eat fish and meat.”

“Ok,” I said wondering what they were doing on a package holiday to Spain.

“Are there any day trips you can recommend?” said Jack.

“Day trips are a problem,” I said. “You experienced the roads and traffic from the airport to here. It took us three hours to cover fifty miles. The nearest city with any meaningful things to see is Granada but it takes four hours to get there and four hours back. In other words, by the time you arrive, you have to return. I recommend an overnight stay, should you want to visit the Alhambra Palace. Nearer to home we have Nerja Caves in Maro village, which are amazing, and the Easter processions start next Wednesday, which if you appreciate religious activities are well worth seeing, so I’m told. We have a street market next Tuesday. The mountain village of Frigiliana is about five miles inland and is famous for its history and Arab water channels. Every evening you can watch the Spanish take their evening stroll on the Balcon de Europa, where the church is. Other than that, the local bus service can connect you with nearby villages such as Competa, or further east along the coast is Almuñecar. To the west is Torrox, and inland is Velez-Málaga which has an incredible number of ancient monuments and old churches. Do any of these appeal to you?”

“We’ll have a think,” said Jean. “Where can we buy bus tickets?”

“On the bus,” I said.

“Is there a timetable?” said Jack.

“Yes, if you check the information pack in your room, you can find a map, a list of activities, the Easter program, and a bus timetable. There are also brochures of the nearby villages and a list of vegetarian restaurants.”

“We don’t speak Spanish,” said Jean. “How are we to buy things if people don’t understand us?”

“Do you have a phrasebook?”

“No,” said Jack.

“During my early days here, I used a combination of pointing at a map and signing my needs such as drink or food. Most places are accustomed to dealing with tourists, so you shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Thank you,” said Jean. “Do the pillows or eiderdowns have feathers?”

“Of course,” I said. “We use the finest quality bedding.”

“I’m allergic,” said Jean. “Can we have some feather free bedding?”

“I’ll send you up some extra blankets and remove the pillows and eiderdown,” I said doing my best to disguise my exasperation. “Anything else?”

They looked at each other. Jean nodded at Jack.

“Is there anywhere we can see ballroom dancing?” said Jack.

“To dance or watch?”

“We prefer to watch,” said Jean.

“Occasionally, there is a Tango display on the Balcon. Our evening disco includes many South American dances, and some couples enjoy a slow waltz toward the end of the evening. Do you like hiking?”

“We don’t walk,” said Jack.

“What do you like?” I said refraining from tearing my hair out.

“I collect stamps,” said Jack.

“I arrange flowers at the church,” said Jean.

“We have a dart board,” I said somewhat desperately.

“We don’t play darts,” said Jack frowning at me lighting a cigarette.

“How about Monopoly?” I said off the top of my head wondering where I had stored the family games collection.

Their eyes lit up and before my eyes, they morphed into a happy relieved couple.

“We love Monopoly,” said Jack.

“And chess,” said Jean.

“Then wait a minute,” I said dashing off to the storeroom where thankfully, I located the game's compendium buried under a pile of towels.

They scurried off into the bar like a couple of heroin addicts desperate for their next fix only to be replaced by the Brayshaws.

“As I said at the airport,” said Stuart. “We are interested in buying a villa but wish to take our time and be represented by a professional agent, who will work on our behalf. We do not want a high-pressure sales pitch, just someone who will listen and stick to the brief.”

“An English couple, Charles and Jean Bishton run, INFO,” I said. “It’s an estate agency located on Calle Granada. They are independent, have been here for several years, and are competent. They are regular customers and are often in the bar. I could introduce you this evening and leave you to it.”

“Sounds perfect,” said Daphne.

I waited in reception for another half an hour in case other customers had any special requests or questions and then went into the bar to prepare for the welcome drinks.

The Braithwaites were so engrossed in their game of chess, they didn’t notice.

The group filtered down from their rooms, ordered their one drink on the house, and waited for the seven o’clock gathering to kick off munching peanuts and crisps scattered in bowls around the bar.

Lucia and I counted heads every five minutes in between pulling pints, when we had twenty-eight, I banged on a glass with a spoon until the chatting petered out.

“Ladies and gentlemen, cheers,” I said raising my glass of water. “Welcome to the Wings Tours group holiday at the Fontainebleau in Nerja, I hope you enjoy your stay with us. My name is Robin Webster, the owner and this is Lucia my wife, the boss. If you have any questions, please ask. The impossible we do at once; miracles may take a little longer. As you are a small group, we find you get to know each other quicker if you introduce yourself. Starting on the left here, please state your name, what you do, and where you come from.”

I pointed to the gentleman and his wife on the extreme left.

He stood, raised his glass, and spoke loudly and clearly in BBC English.

“Good evening, everyone, we are Alan and Jackie Green from Dagenham in Essex. I work at the Ford Motor Company.”

“And I am an infant’s teacher in a Dagenham school,” added Jackie.

And so, it continued around the room.

The two girls were standing next to each other and squeaked with delight when they discovered they were practically neighbours in Plaistow.

The Bishtons were on time as usual, so I introduced them to the Brayshaws and announced dinner orders could now be taken.

The barriers were broken. They paired off quickly and sat down at the tables for their first Spanish culinary experience. Steak pie and chips.

Chapter 44 – Flamenco

As Saturday evening drew nearer, the more nervous I became. Would the Flamenco group turn up on time? When Jeff and Bill arrived with twelve inspection trippers just after seven, they still hadn’t arrived. We always served our meals early to suit English bio rhythms, so at seven thirty we wheeled out the fish and chips and let our first Flamenco evening begin.

Thankfully, Mickey Jingles had offered to play during the meal. We let him stay free of charge in return for strumming his guitar quietly during dinner. He was a slender man of gypsy descent in his late twenties with a chiselled face, brown eyes, and long curly hair. He had been walking between the tables playing well-known Spanish numbers to the many couples sharing a romantic evening over their beautifully presented fish and chips. He finished up at the bar, bowed, and walked out through the patio to appreciative applause.

The dancers still hadn’t arrived.

I was now a complete wreck.

Jeff Mason and Bill Reed flitted from table to table checking on the inspection trippers and making sure glasses were topped up and everyone was happy. When the meal was over, they helped clear the tables and rearranged the chairs into a cinema format for the main event of the evening, the first Flamenco show at the Fontainebleau.

I heaved a sigh of relief as the dancers arrived while people were taking their seats. The conversation rumbled on, cigarettes were lit, and a smoky haze filled the bar. People chatted as they waited and waited.

I was about to explode.

Then, about a microsecond before my fuse was about to blow, three women in red and black Spanish dresses, plus two men in black pants and red shirts one carrying a guitar, and another a wooden box, walked in via the patio from the storeroom where they had been changing. Four chairs were lined up in the corner between the lobby and the front window. The chairs stood on a thick timber panel covering the floor tiles on which the dancers would perform. The man with the box placed it on the panel and sat on it, the remainder sat on the chairs and waited. The timber was to protect the tiles from stamping feet and to provide the appropriate quality acoustic effects for the dancers.

“Welcome to our first Wings Tours group of the year and regular customers,” I said through the microphone. “And to those joining us from El Capistrano Village. To celebrate the opening of our expanded bar and restaurant, tonight we have a special treat. Appearing for the first time at the Fontainebleau, from Vélez-Málaga, is Cecilia Fargo and her Flamenco Spectacular.”

Cecilia, a tall slender woman in her mid-thirties with jet-black air pinned back into a bob and covered by a red rose appeared at the patio door. She wore a bright red Flamenco dress with a trailing ruffle. Heads turned as she walked to the corner her dress swishing and metal-studded shoes clicking on the tiles. She took her pose on the stage. One arm raised, head down, foot cocked. For a brief moment, total silence engulfed the bar.

A single guitar chord shattered the stillness.

The dancer leaned forward slightly from the waist, weight favouring her left leg, both arms raised above her head forming a heart shape as the guitarist continued strumming the introduction. She glanced at the audience through dark brown eyes set in a striking face with well-defined cheekbones. She smiled fleetingly before setting her jaw in a serious mask of concentration.

The guitarist upped his tempo and volume. The fluid rhythm of the traditional Spanish instrument echoed around the bar as dexterous fingers with long fingernails reinforced with glue; flew over the frets and strings. The man on the box tapped its front between his legs, he provided the percussion.

The musicians paused. Cecilia breathed in deeply, her pert breasts rising under her sleeveless gown. She raised a thigh, stamped her heels three times, bent one knee, pointed her foot at the floor, and tapped it once with her toe. The wooden floor amplified the raucous sound, highlighting the difference between the heel's robust stomp and the toe's more delicate tap. The music restarted.

The three seated young women poised their hands ready to clap. These were the performers of *Jaleo* - *jaleadores*. Jaleo means racket or noise, but this application describes the loud clapping which forms a key element of discerning Flamenco. One will clap the beat, another the offbeat, the third will weave in and around the others.

“The first dance is a *soleá*,” I announced. “A highly expressive individual dance.”

One of the *jaleadores* began to sing as she clapped. Her rasping but powerful voice reminded me of Joe Cocker, as she wailed her way through a sad poem about a sick goat. The other *jaleadores* took turns to call out; *olé,* or *así se canta*, that’s the way to sing, or *así se baila*, that’s the way to dance. Cecilia began to twirl, moving her arms, wrists, and hands, then stamping in beautifully coordinated elegant movements. The harmonious combination of guitar, clapping, and foot-stamping generated a thunderous noise bouncing around the far corners of the bar. It reached out to the inner musicians in the audience who tapped their feet or fingers more or less in time.

While the music created the ambiance, it was Cecilia who captured everyone’s hearts. Her accentuated hip and body movement drew the eye to her curvaceous femininity. Her waving hands and arms emphasized her hips, waist, breasts, and swan-like neck, while her sparkling eyes engaged the spectators with smouldering, intense glances.

The audience was mesmerized by the speed of Cecilia’s foot stamping. Her heels and toes thundered against the floorboards, which at times created a sound reminding me of the drum rolls at the Queen's Trooping of the Colour birthday parades. Then she spun out of the stamping into a series of elegant pirouettes where she lifted her skirt, exposing bare athletic legs. She swept the ruffled train of her dress up in the air with one leg while spinning around on the other.

This was Flamenco surpassing its finest, blood-stirring, erotic, and captivating.

After Cecilia finished the soleá to tumultuous applause, she performed a mixed bag of traditional dances including a *buleria;* a fast-moving dance originating in Jerez de la Frontera considered the home of Flamenco. The music was octosyllabic with the three, sometimes four verses varying in mood from deep pain and sadness to abject joy and pleasure. The jaleadores expressed each emotion with their body language, facial expressions, and cries of agony or delight.

When the number finished to the audience's deafening roar of *olé*, Cecilia stood centre stage with arms by her sides, head bowed, waiting, and breathing hard.

A tall, handsome man with long dark hair and a superb physique joined her from the patio. He was dressed in tight black pants, and a frilly white shirt and carried two pairs of *castañuelas* or *palillos* also known as castanets or clackers. He handed her one set of the traditional percussion instruments.

They faced the audience, bowed, turned toward each other, raised their arms, and clicked their castanets . Then the pair weaved around each other, turning, arms undulating, foot-stamping, and castanets clacking in a fast-moving fandango. But this display was far more than a dance. Their hip movements and admiring glances toward each other, as they moved around the stage, were subtle, but no one could miss the raw sexual chemistry exuding between them even though they never touched.

The evening’s entertainment progressed to its climax with another final spine-tingling fandango. The performers joined hands and bowed to a well-deserved standing ovation. An encore was inevitable.

After the performers had departed, I started playing records while Jeff, Bill, and Lucia pushed the chairs around the fringes of the bar to make space for dancing.

“Brilliant,” said Jeff as he ordered more drinks. “Where did you find them?”

“El Rubio tracked them down in Vélez-Málaga,” I said. “There is a large gypsy population living in the town centre where there are many Flamenco bars. It was a question of who was available.”

“Then we need to make this a regular event for our buyers,” said Jeff. “I’m already hearing positive comments about how great it would be to have the Fontainebleau down the road from their Spanish property.”

I heaved a sigh of relief and gulped down a large whiskey.

Chapter 45 – Foolish Games

For the next two weeks, the Braithwaites played Monopoly in the bar each morning, Chess in the afternoons, and Scrabble in the evenings.

Then, I found the Tiddlywinks.

Somehow, the combination of alcohol and Tiddlywinks inspired the best of British behaviour. The Braithwaites were calmly enjoying the game as it should be played, seriously and with concentration. They were reasonably adept at landing the discs in the cup, but when a crowd gathered around urging longer distances, chaos ensued.

The Woodfords, by now halfway through their evening's consumption of brandy insisted on sitting at the Braithwaite’s table and demonstrating how distance Tiddlywinks could be mastered. It proved impossible to limit the game to one table, so before long they had pushed back the tables and were grovelling around the floor on hands and knees with discs flying everywhere.

At one point, Bert Woodford knelt at one end of the bar with the cup in hand, while his wife Doreen aimed from the other. The disc flew through the air and landed in someone’s pint glass. Jean went over, fished it out with her hand, sucked it dry, and tried again.

By now, the crowd had gleaned what was a foot and were cheering and taking bets as to Jean landing it in the cup.

None did and it only took ten minutes for the discs to be lost forever, scattered around the bar under chairs and tables. At least, the bar returned to normal, the furniture repositioned, and drinking resumed.

Then the dancing started.

Once again, the Woodfords launched themselves into centre stage with an ungainly version of jiving, as Bill Haley belted out *Rock Around the Clock.* They were soon joined by most of our customers and then there was a huge cheer.

The Braithwaites had succumbed to everyone’s nagging and had started to jive. Where had they been hiding this little gem, I thought watching them move in beautiful unison. The crowd stepped back to give them room and they obliged with a superb display of rock and roll.

The Woodfords glared morosely as their pole position was taken from them.

When the record ended, The Braithwaites bowed shyly and scampered up the stairs to bed accompanied by raucous applause and demands for an encore.

I could understand their reticence. It had been a long hard day at the gaming table.

A little later on, Charles Bishton approached the bar.

“Do you have Juves y Camps champagne?” he said.

“Coming up,” I said pulling a bottle from the fridge. “Celebrating?”

“We made a sale today.”

“Well done, where?”

“A villa up at Capistrano to the Brayshaws. I have to say Jeff was most prompt with his commission and there will be a little something for you as soon as the check clears.”

“Thanks,” I said popping the cork.

“This place is bumping now. You must be pleased,” said Jean.

“Bit early to tell,” I said. “It seems promising.”

“Then you must be ready to buy a house.”

“I’ve sold my house in England,” I said. “The profit was more than enough for a healthy deposit.”

“Where are you thinking?”

“Job done. We went with Paco Rico to see his development below Nueva Nerja with views over Burriana Beach.”

“La Hacienda?”

“Yes. A German couple had already moved in, and we visited their house. We loved the design so told Paco to copy it for ours. It’s so convenient for the hotel, we can walk to work within minutes. It’ll be ready by next year.”

“And in my experience with Paco it will be,” said Charles. “Don’t bother pouring, give me the ice bucket and a couple of flutes. I’ll take care of it.”

Chapter 46 – Easter fun

I was surprised by how many of the group and other guests wanted to accompany me to watch the procession on Thursday evening, while Lucia manned the bar. Perhaps, we should make more of Easter, I thought as nearly thirty of us stationed ourselves on the Balcon at the top of the passage leading down to Playa El Salon. It was a balmy evening with a gentle breeze as we absorbed the stage before us. It was dimly illuminated by candles and a few streetlights, which when combined with cigarette smoke from almost every adult created a misty ambience usually associated with an Alfred Hitchcock horror film.

I was probably not the best person to explain the intricacies of Catholic ceremonies, but I had been well-schooled by Lucia and her family about the history and rituals of their tradition.

The crowds were three deep around us with many chatting quietly. Many of the women were dressed in conservative long black dresses with long sleeves. Some of the balconies overlooking the Balcon had their railings decorated with red fabric and a gold cross. Traditionally, Easter is the most significant of religious festivals in Spain far more so than Christmas. Apparently, celebrating the end of a purposeful life is more meaningful than its beginning. To prepare, property owners whitewashed their facades, painted the black wrought iron window bars, and spring-cleaned the green window blinds. Those who didn’t were ostracised for at least a week.

Knowing when the action kicked off my voice would be deafened by the band, I explained to the group what they were about to see.

“Do you know what a cofradia is?” I shouted.

“No,” said some, others shaking their heads. “It’s a brotherhood or group of men who pledge allegiance to each other and their saints. Every town and village in Spain has at least one. In Nerja, we have three, founded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They carry their thrones around the street in a procession exclusively for them and their members. They also wear unique clothing and carry various badges of office. The boss is the hermano mayor, senior brother. Tonight, it is the turn of Cofradia Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno y María Santísima de los Dolores. The members wear white robes and a variety of purple headwear depending on their position. The first throne represents Jesús carrying the cross toward Mount Calvary in Jerusalem. The second is María Santísima trailing after him weeping. Both thrones are extremely heavy and difficult to manoeuvre, and it is a great privilege to be one of the costaleros, the guys who carry them. They practice turning corners and negotiating steps for weeks in advance. They sway side to side and shuffle slowly forward as one. Their stops, starts, and rests are controlled by a senior member who rings a handbell with their instructions. You’ll see how big and cumbersome each throne is as it emerges from the church. Imagine in Antequera, a hilly town to the north of Málaga, they carry their Virgen de los Dolores out to the fields to bless the crops then run it back to their church at the top of the hill. This tradition is known as ‘Correr la Vega.’

“The people wearing robes, masks, and conical hats carrying large candles are penitents, also known as Nazarenos. The mask allows them to pay penance without revealing their identities. The cone symbolizes rising toward heaven and brings the penitent closer to God. The shape resembles the cypress trees we plant in cemeteries to symbolically raise the dead upward rather than down to hell. Depending on their seniority in the brotherhood, some members carry an ornate staff, others’ candles. Look, the church doors are opening.”

The crowd noise faded away as the first throne crawled down the steps and took up its position to head off around the main crowd-lined streets of the town. Every citizen was watching from somewhere.

The brotherhood band was forming up dressed in smart blue uniforms, their spotless brass instruments sparkling in the warm sunlight. When the band was ready, a bell rang, the thrones were heaved back onto strong shoulders, and the band started playing a loud and raucous dirge, the drummers setting the pace for the costaleros. Many of those on the Balcon fell in behind the procession as it headed up Calle Cristo. Having absorbed all we were expecting to see we headed back to the Fontainebleau via Pintada and the more serious business of more beer.

I’d been pouring drinks Lucia when Ted Bartlett approached. I went to top him up.

“Sorry, Robin,” said Ted. “I don’t want to be alarmist, but the patio is a tad smoky. Has Antonio burned the cottage pie?”

I checked the kitchen, but all was as usual.

I left the bar to Lucia, rushed into the patio. Smoke was everywhere and getting thicker by the second, but I couldn’t see where it was coming from. I climbed the stairs to the first-floor gallery and walked around but spotted nothing. I ran up to the second floor, where the smoke appeared thickest, and concluded it was coming from one of the rooms but failed to ascertain which one.

This is bad, I thought as the smoke started choking me. I put my hand over my mouth and climbed the metal ladder leading to the flat roof, where I removed my shoes and padded about in my socks to establish where the heat was coming from. The hottest spot was above room 205. I rushed downstairs to fetch a spare key.

By this time Lucia had evacuated everyone out onto the street where some were shouting, “Call the fire brigade.”

“Forget it, I mumbled to myself as grabbed a fire extinguisher from the toilet passageway and rushed upstairs again. “We will have burned down by the time they arrive from Velez- Málaga.”

Now what, I thought as I paused outside room 205. I delved back into my civil defence training at school. Doesn’t oxygen feed a fire? I slowly and deliberately opened the door terrified the cool night air from the patio blowing at speed into a raging inferno interior might fan the flames. The smoke was extremely dense, and it was impossible to see around the interior. I couldn’t decide whether there was an actual fire. I pushed the door ajar bit by bit expecting an imminent rush of flames. Once the door was fully open, I sprayed the entire contents of the fire extinguisher in all directions because I couldn’t see any flames. Gradually, the smoke dissipated to reveal everything in the room was smouldering. The walls were black, some of the plaster had fallen, the double mattress completely burnt, and the place was a wreck. On further inspection, a long strand of cigarette ash lay in the ashtray. The lighted butt must have fallen onto the mattress and started the fire.

As the smoke cleared some guests came up to see what all the fuss was about all rendering their own, expert opinions of the cause.

“I spotted the occupants leave only a few minutes before the fire started,” shouted someone above the melee. “They are an American couple. One of them must have been smoking, left a cigarette burning, and then went out.”

“At least the fire is extinguished,” I said. “And we can do nothing until the morning.”

We retired to the bar to continue the scientific debate as to the cause.

“Smells somewhat smoky in here,” said the American couple when they returned two hours later.

“No thanks to you,” I said.

“What do you mean?” said the man approaching the bar.

“You left a lighted cigarette in your room,” I said.

They rushed upstairs and returned moments later.

“Oh my God,” she said. “All our things are destroyed.”

“They are replaceable,” I said. “I’ve lost a complete room, which will need replastering and redecorating. Plus, smoke has penetrated the adjoining rooms via the air ducts in each bathroom.”

The next morning, Lucia called the insurance company, who sent a rep to inspect. There had been substantial, collateral smoke damage to other rooms. Several rooms of which had to be completely repainted and all the furnishings in room 205 had to be replaced. Thankfully, the insurance company paid up.

The American couple left immediately with nothing more than the clothes they stood up in followed by the arrival of the Guardia Civil to prepare their official report.

The general smell of smoke hung about for several days until the painters and decorators had completed their work. As it was early in the season, we were only just over half full so the guests on the top floor were relocated to the one below. There were complaints but we soldiered on.

After our success with the Flamenco Show, The Easter fire rather burned the edge off things. Meanwhile, the Braithwaite’s soldiered on with their games marathon and I introduced the Brayshaws to David Rowcroft.

When the bus arrived at the end of this first group’s eventful fortnight, and the cases had been loaded, Lola and I took up our traditional farewell station at the bus door. I handed each, one of our brochures as they boarded. The two single girls were holding hands and exchanging loving glances. The single men had bonded with a pair of ladies all four glowing with sun-bleached hair and golden tans, smiling self-consciously. After their fortnight at the gaming table, the Braithwaites were ecstatic. “Never had such an enjoyable holiday,” they both announced.

Finally, the Brayshaws thanked me profusely for my help in resolving their villa acquisition and discreetly slipped me a brown envelope. The contents of this shocked me into rethinking my future life in Spain.

Chapter 47 – San Isidro

The Brayshaws envelope had contained one hundred pounds, which to me was incredible. So much for so little when all I had done was introduce them to two friends from whom I had already received a generous reward. I expected it from Charles and Rowcroft, but never anticipated the client might pay me something for my services. But when I thought about it a bit more, I concluded arriving here to buy a villa, without knowing a soul or anybody trustworthy was a huge risk my introductions had ameliorated. What if they had chosen one of the more unscrupulous agencies and been ripped off? More and more I had heard of people losing their deposits or buying unregistered properties. It germinated an idea in my head. Perhaps, I could offer, a safer way of property purchasing. I tucked it away in the back of my mind while I changed into my festival clothing.

Today, was the fifteenth of May, and I was escorting a small group of Fontainebleau guests to celebrate the Romeria San Isidro, the patron saint of farmers and labourers. As we headed down Pintada, after breakfast, there was a loud whoosh followed by an airborne explosion. On the Balcon, we paused to watch the official town firework igniter, dressed in his usual uniform of a battered straw hat, torn baggy trousers, and grubby T-shirt sending yet more rockets aloft into a clear blue sky. The noise echoed around the countryside, summoning the surrounding populace to the town centre.

While the church bells tolled, spent rocket sticks headed earthward with luck to land harmlessly. It wasn’t always so. One year, a fishing boat on Calahonda beach went up in flames, another, the mayor’s laundry drying on his terrace.

The word Romeria evolves from processions of pilgrims going to Rome. Sprigs of the aromatic herb Romero or rosemary were stuck in travellers’ hats to ward off evil spirits and robbers. Romerias are famous all over Spain, none more so than the largest, held every May in Sevilla Province. Over a million pilgrims take a week walking, on horseback, or in elaborate caravans to trail through the Doñana National Park to El Rocio, a village purposely built just for this one week. The village consists of several hundred houses, a cathedral, and a hotel. The roads are made of sand so horses can be tethered right outside the property owners’ doors.

From the edge of Doñana, it takes the pilgrims several days to reach the village. Campfire smoke, grilling meat, music, and song waft over the huge procession as it parks up for the night. It is a remarkable and spiritual occasion. The modest consumption of the favoured fiesta beverage, chilled dry sherry, assists where it can.

Nerja’s San Isidro Romeria procession is minuscule by comparison, but still attracts some six thousand people. It kicks off at the church around midday and ends two kilometres away on top of a hill overlooking the coast road and Playazo beach where a small hermitage has been built to accommodate the effigy for the duration.

We joined Lucia’s family outside the church and waited amid a crowd buzzing with anticipation, nearly all dressed in Romeria attire. The men wore a white shirt with a red bandana knotted around the neck. A black or grey cordoba hat tilted forward to shade the face, and black trousers or blue jeans held. The wealthier wore tight-fitting suits of striped, grey trousers, waistcoats with black bolero jackets and boots. Women wore brightly coloured, figure-hugging long Spanish dresses, which for San Isidro were traditionally patterned with polka dots. No matter what shape, age, or dimensions, these garments transformed the wearer into gorgeous, elegant women who carried themselves gracefully. They were a pleasure to behold. Most men were doing a lot of beholding.

Cute children ran about everywhere wearing mini versions of whatever festival clothing their parents had on and endearing themselves to everyone by drenching them with water pistols. Few complained; they soon dried off in the sun.

Then the church doors opened.

The San Isidro effigy, passed through on a portable throne resting on the sturdy shoulders of six Costaleros. The men selected from the religious brotherhoods, swayed in unison as they shuffled down the church steps and over to the lead oxcart elegantly decorated with palm fronds and dangling loaves of bread.

The effigy was a wooden statue, a metre, and a half tall, with a golden halo mounted over his head, wearing a long brown cloak, green clothing, and beige boots. A carving of a pair of oxen yoked together, pulling a plough, was at his feet. The throne was placed reverently onto the cart while a group of women danced, swirled, and twirled in unison in front of the church, to shouts from the crowd, “*Viva, San Isidro, Viva* (Long Live, San Isidro).”

Once the effigy was secured onto the cart, a single uniformed horseman carrying San Isidro’s intricately woven green-and-purple banner led the procession off passed the church toward Plaza Cavana.

The remainder of the procession was waiting in the wasteland to the north of the cinema. They fed into the procession tailing the oxcarts. As each cart arrived at the church the family members who had been watching the activities climbed aboard or fell in behind. Our small group of six were too many to hitch a ride on the small cart which was occupied by Lucia’s mother, her aunt, and an array of younger children. We walked behind them.

Following us were finely groomed and well-muscled horses of every colour, then mules, donkeys, and a tiny Shetland pony. Some of the exquisitely dressed riders were accompanied by beautiful girlfriends perched on the horses’ hindquarters behind the saddle. They were most decorous and photographed intensively by the spectators as the procession crawled by.

Behind the riders there were an array of stylish carriages. They varied from four-seaters drawn by three elegant matching pairs of horses to single-seaters pulled by dobbin the bedraggled mule, a stubborn grey beast needing constant prodding with a whip.

Up next, were rusting tractors towing large trailers carrying up to twenty people. They were highly decorated with flowers, palm fronds, polka dots, and shields representing their club or association. One was equipped with a generator to power a fridge and the latest audio system blaring with popular Latin music. On one rig, a chef stood dressed in kitchen whites, flamboyantly carving a leg of *serrano ham*. Each piece cut was added ceremoniously to a nearby plate with accompanying shouts of, “Ole.”

Beer, fino, and a summer punch of red wine, ice, and lemonade known as Tinto Verano flowed, but not excessively; this was a family occasion. Dancers, mainly women, followed the trailers and when the procession paused to give the oxen a rest, the women danced together, receiving much appreciation from the spectators.

Finally, the charabancs—a mixed array of new, old, and wrecked vehicles clad with an occasional palm frond, the odd polka dot painted on cardboard, and masses of soccer club scarves. Here were the town’s youngsters enjoying themselves. Their music was so loud the speakers were vibrating, but they were having fun, and their behaviour, although boisterous, was inoffensive.

Lucia’s father led the oxen on foot with stick in hand, while her sister walked alongside keeping him well provided for with water and a cloth to keep his shoes clean. It was almost impossible to tread carefully—the joys of processions with live animals. It was even worse further back, where over a hundred horses had added to the oxen’s outpourings.

San Isidro was born Isidro de Merlo y Quintana sometime in the Twelfth Century. His miracles with never-ending sacks of corn and bottomless pots of stew had endeared him to the poor and needy. In recognition of his talents, he was beatified nearly five hundred years later in May 1619, hence the loaves of bread hanging from on his processional oxcart.

Few festival-goers were aware of the saint’s achievements. This was an excuse for another grand social occasion. One of half a dozen throughout the year. Since Franco’s death, religion had been fading throughout Spain, yet the traditional religious festivals were more popular than ever because they presented one of the few opportunities for the hard-working mainly agricultural community to meet up with old friends and discuss mutual problems.

We trundled slowly up Calle Granada stopping at fifteen-minute intervals to rest the oxen from the uphill haul. Lucia’s family cart was covered by a U-shaped awning covered in polka dots and palm fronds. The large wheels were woven with flowers. I took these opportunities to refresh the sherry glasses of my guests and encourage conversation with Lucia’s family. Their lack of Spanish reminded me of the communication hardships I had in the early days, so I bantered back and forth translating anything I thought interesting to my guests.

They were loving every moment.

The procession progressed over the bridge, turned up the Frigiliana Road and after a few hundred meters, left onto a farm track which led to the hill topped by the hermitage. The track up to the top was rutted and steep, so most passengers on the carts dismounted and walked up behind pushing. The carts were parked in the shade of some pine trees, the oxen unyoked and left with plenty of water and hay while we carried our picnic boxes and folding chairs to a vantage point where we could enjoy the folk music and dancing events after lunch. There were also dressage competitions to discover the finest equestrians.

People started leaving around six, so I gathered my group together and we headed back to the Fontainebleau.

“What did you think?” I said as we walked down the hill.

“Gatherings of this nature in England are disgusting drunken affairs,” said one man. “It’s why we no longer have carnivals or village fetes. Today, I haven’t seen one drunk, just families having a great time with their kids.”

“I agree,” said his wife. “I particularly loved the folk music and dancing. The youngsters were so cute and extremely well-coordinated, especially dancing the Sevillana. Hubby and I can both dance, but we had a go and were completely useless.”

“They start as soon as they can walk,” I said. “Our daughter is brilliant aged three, whereas I trip over.”

“The picnic was delicious,” said another woman. “My first taste of home-made Spanish food. Sorry, but for the remainder of our stay, we will be sampling tapas bars.”

“You are so right,” said another woman. “I have never tasted such delicious Serrano ham and Manchego cheese.”

“And those chicken croquettes were divine,” added another woman. “Why don’t you add them to your menu?”

“Good idea,” I said mind racing. “We have a Spanish chef, perhaps we could have one or two evenings a week with a Spanish theme.”

“You should,” said another man. “We are in Spain, after all. What other Spanish specialties should we be trying?”

“All the tapas are usually excellent,” I said. “But cold soups such as gazpacho or ajo blanco, are superb, the fresh locally caught fish such as Lubina or Dorada are exquisite, chorizo sausage or morcilla which is black pudding are good. My favourites are Fabada, a white bean stew from Asturias not too different from the French cassoulet, and Albondigas, meatballs in an almond sauce.”

“Now you are talking,” said the man. “We should try these while we are here. Why don’t you serve them in the hotel?”

“Sadly, most of the group aren’t as adventurous as you guys. They chose our hotel because they prefer British food. However, there is nothing to stop you from trying a Spanish bar.”

“We will,” said the man.

So much for my first attempt at group activities. I thought as they thanked me in the hotel lobby. I could forget escorting others to future festivals, otherwise, they might all dine elsewhere.

Chapter 48 – Property matters

The following week we and our nanny Mercedes moved into our new house in La Hacienda.

On the first morning, we stood on the terrace arms wrapped around mesmerized by the sunrise over Burriana Beach.

“We did it,” I said.

“Finally,” said Lucia. “But what if there is another fire when we are not there?”

“We should make the rooms no smoking,” I said.

“We can put up signs, but nobody will take any notice.”

“It would make us feel better.”

“We could take the lock off the phone.”

“And have a gigantic bill when the guests phone Auntie Sheila in Australia. No thanks. Anyway, the emergency services don’t speak English.”

“True, then try the signs. We’re insured, right?”

“Premiums will increase after our claim but yes we’re covered for contents and the building itself.”

“Whew. First time I’ve been insured for anything.”

“You’re joking.”

“Thankfully, fires in domestic properties are unheard of here so nobody bothers and it’s way too expensive.”

“Fair point. Shall we go to work?”

“I heard you’re moving into a new house on La Hacienda,” said a new face coming to pay his bill at the bar during the lunchtime session.

“Yesterday,” I said. “Who told you?”

“I overheard your parents talking about it yesterday lunchtime. So came back today to talk to you about it.”

“Are you a friend of my parents?” I asked.

“Sorry, no. I’m Bob Richmond. My wife and I are renting in the Miami apartment block. We adore the views over Burriana. I’m a car dealer from Southampton and want to buy a three-bedroom property with a similar panorama. Yours sounds perfect. Is there another one nearby?”

“The plot next door is for sale. If you like I could introduce you to the builder and help with the translations.”

“Could we view yours first? I don’t want to be a bother but if we like it, we’ll sign up straight away.”

“Of course, if you hang on until the lunch trade has quietened down, I’ll take you myself.”

“Thanks, most kind.”

“I’ll give you a nod.”

“As you can see,” I said standing with the Richmonds on our terrace, the house is well-designed and built with a spectacular view over your favourite beach. Think and let me know and I’ll introduce you to the builder.

Two weeks later, Paco Rico, a short balding man in his mid-thirties came into the bar one evening. We knew each other well as members of the Lions Club. I assumed Paco was there to discuss Club activities, but he reached into his pocket, extracted his check book, scribbled on one, ripped it out, and handed it over.

I glanced at it, but it was too distant to see the detail.

“For Señor Richmond’s house,” said Paco.

“Not necessary,” I said. “But thanks, can I offer you a drink.”

“Another time, I’m meeting my wife. See you.”

I read the cheque. Half a million pesetas. I whistled. Over sixteen thousand gin and tonics at thirty pesetas each, I thought.

I’m in the wrong business.

As summer progressed and the faint stink of smoke dispersed completely, we had our first response to my brochure mailing to travel companies and airlines. The Kerrigan brothers owned a travel agency in Dublin. Completely coincidently, they were frequent visitors to Nerja and were among the growing number of regular Irish visitors who drank in the bar. They promised to send some guests. At the time, I took it with a pinch of salt putting it down to whiskey fuelled bravado and as it had been a while since I had heard from them, I’d forgotten their assurances.

I was pleasantly surprised when the phone rang.

“Hi Robin, it’s Brian Kerrigan. Do you remember our last conversation about me sending guests.”

“Hi Brian, of course I remember but it was a while ago?”

“To be honest, I’d probably had one over the eight but then your brochure arrived and prompted me to find some new customers for you. I hope it’s not too short notice but the Buckingham family will be arriving in three days.”

“Great, thanks, Brian, a double room?”

“Good heavens no. There are thousands of them. They own a hotel here in Dublin, a chain of fifteen butcher’s shops, and have about a million children. This time they only require six rooms but next time who knows, maybe more.”

“Sounds like my sort of client,” I said.

“Indeed, but they can be a bit demanding so make sure to be on your toes.”

“After fending off the secret police for years, they can’t be that bad.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“What time are they due?”

“Around noon, ok?”

“Perfect.”

Three taxis arrived at midday on the appointed day. The cab drivers unloaded their enormous suitcases into the lobby while two burly men with ruddy complexions, freckles, and fair hair carried in several large duffle bags.

“Sean Buckingham,” said the largest in his mid-forties. “Where do you want this meat?”

“Sorry,” I said suitably perplexed while I sorted the room keys.

“I have prime quality vacuum-packed Irish meat which needs to be kept cool. Do your rooms have fridges?”

“They don’t, I’m afraid.”

Sean’s colour was changing, not for the better.

“Do they have cooking facilities?”

“We are not an aparthotel,” I said.

“Could you store them in your kitchen?”

“We have a busy restaurant. Our fridges are jampacked.”

“Then we’re fucked,” said Sean. “All this way for nothing. Right back to the airport, we might get this meat back to Dublin before it crawls there by itself. Are the taxis here?”

One of the twelve in their party peered out the door. “Nope,” they said.

“Then order us some taxis and make it quick,” said Sean.

“If you tell me what you need,” I said. “I’ll try to find a solution.”

“We need a fridge and somewhere to cook plus double rooms for this lot.”

“Would an apartment nearby be ok, the rest of you could stay in the hotel and meet for meals?”

“It’s not what we ordered but sounds fine,” said Sean.

“Then may I suggest you take a seat in the bar? Drinks are on the house while I organize something. Meanwhile, work out among yourselves who will sleep where?”

“Oh, I see,” said Sean nodding. “Didn’t those lazy Kerrigan bastards say what we wanted?”

“Six double rooms are all he said.”

“Fucking eejit,” said Sean his wife trying to restrain him with a hand on his arm. “I’ll chop his legs off. Can you get him on the phone?”

“I’ll try,” I said dialling the number. When Brian answered he handed over the handset.

It was not a pleasant conversation concluding with “fucking useless travel agents, I’ll sue you when we return.”

Thankfully, Irena saved the day.

There was an apartment available in her block.

Robin took Sean and his wife across the road.

“Don’t mind him,” said his wife, a pretty redhead. “I’m Eire. His bark is worse than his bite.”

“Not when he needs to be,” said Sean scowling. “And this is disgraceful, we won’t be recommending your hotel.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said. “However, I’m providing you with exactly what the Kerrigan’s requested. Wings Tours and Club 18-30 have used us for years, we seldom have complaints. Hopefully, after a few days and some of our finest Cottage Pie, you’ll change your mind.”

“Harrumph,” said Sean agitated.

The apartment on the second floor came with an impressive balcony and a spacious kitchen-diner. The décor was traditional Spanish with timber cupboards and floral armchairs, but it was clean and had an enormous fridge, a new electric oven and hob, and like many Spanish families, a huge dining table.

Robin regarded Sean. He was looking at his wife.

“This will do fine,” said Eire.

Once they had settled into their assortment of rooms, the Buckingham family came into the bar for a drink to calm their nerves. They seemed concerned about Sean’s happiness and accustomed to deferring to him.

Sean continued to grumble. I continued to apologize and blame the Kerrigan’s. The prognosis for their two-week stay was ominous. But Robin hadn’t considered the Nerja effect.

Three days later, after copious sangrias on the beach, they relaxed and began to enjoy themselves. The Kerrigan affair seemed forgotten.

The following lunchtime Sean and Eire came into the bar with a huge bag.

“Prime Irish beef steaks,” said Sean. “Try them, see what you think.”

They were delicious.

“It’s not so bad here,” said Sean one night during the following week. “Pretty little town, intimate beaches. What might a property cost me?”

“Three beds, sea view, brand new, and er with fridge?” I said.

“Sounds perfect,” said Sean, laughing.

“There’s one only a short walk away,” I said. “The price is between three and four million pesetas depending on plot size.”

“Really?” said Sean. “In Dublin, you can’t buy a garage for that even with a view of the duck pond. When can I see it?”

Here we go again, thought Robin.

“I’ll take you there in the morning.”

After breakfast, Sean, his wife, and the other ten Buckingham family members crowded onto our terrace. I didn’t bother to mention the crystal blue waters and azure sky. Nature said it all for me. They were keen to commit before returning home, so the Buckingham’s signed up within hours for a large three-bedroom apartment on the top floor in the block overlooking the La Hacienda pool on one side and Burriana on the other.

“Paco needs a deposit to secure the purchase,” I said.

“I don’t have a Spanish account,” said Sean. “I’ll phone my bank and instruct them to transfer the funds, but I’d feel happier sending them to someone I know. Do you mind if I sent it to your account, Robin? And you give it to Paco.”

“Mine?” I said, astonished as Sean was going to kill him for ballsing up his holiday only a week before. Now, he thought, he trusts me enough to send several thousand pounds.

The transfer was sent, and Sean completed his holiday and returned to Ireland. He called me a few days later to confirm safe receipt, and I had forwarded it to Paco.

A year later, when the apartment was completed, the Buckingham clan came over to furnish it and move in. Their first celebration was to throw a party to which we were invited. For many years afterwards, various members of the family came over regularly and met in the Fontainebleau bar cementing a warm friendship after what had started as a disaster. But for me, my second commission cheque from Paco of another half a million pesetas changed my perspective on hotel management.

It was the beginning of the end.

Chapter 49 – The fisherman

“They call me the fisherman,” said a thick-set middle-aged Spaniard approaching the bar wearing an open-necked shirt and baggy jeans. “Or if you prefer, Miguel.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miguel,” I said, shaking hands. “I’m Robin. For what do you fish, boquerones?”

“Properties,” said Miguel. “Paco Rico pointed me in your direction.”

“Really, why?” I said, pouring him a beer and handing it over.

“Thanks. Paco has concluded you might be considering becoming a real estate agent. More money than gin and tonics.”

“I never mentioned it,” I said. “But you’re right I have been giving it some thought. I need to work out how to sell this place and then how to structure an agency. Where do you fit in?”

“I find the people who want to sell,” said Miguel. “And bring their properties to the agent. We split the commission.”

“Do you have an office?”

“Not necessary. I move around the local bars talking to people. When I hear somebody wants to sell, I go talk with them.”

“Do you know of many for sale?”

“When you add up the plots of land, fincas, ruined cortijos, and single-floor family homes to be converted into apartment blocks or townhouses, it is more than two hundred.”

“Don’t local people buy them?”

“Rarely, we have no money, whereas you guiris buy almost anything.”

“True. It will take a year maybe two to disentangle myself from all this, when I’m ready how do I contact you?”

“Tell Paco. He knows where I live.”

“Thanks for coming by,” I said as Miguel knocked back his drink and reached into his pocket. “On the house.”

Miguel nodded. We shook hands and he left.

Is fate intervening here? I thought as Ted Bartlett and his wife arrived at the bar.

“Hi Robin,” said Ted. “Back again for more punishment. Know what I mean. Bottle of bubbly and we are going to need about eight glasses. The Faulkner family is in town. Can we shove a few tables together, it will probably be a long night. At some point during their stay, George wants to talk to you. You’ll find out why later.”

“Intriguing. Please sit where you like.”

As their table filled up, Ted pointed at the empty bottle. I delivered two more with ice buckets. He opened both and topped everybody up.

The benefit of regulars, I thought. They ease my workload.

It had taken a while as not all of them were here at the same time, but the Faulkner tribe knitted with the Buckinghams, Bishtons, Bartletts, and Bill Reed. Altogether they were hilarious often entertained by George and his endless repertoire of jokes. I will never forget the one about polar bears.

A teenage male polar bear says to his parents, “Are you sure I am a polar bear?”

His father says, “What do you see?”

“I see my father polar bear and my mother polar bear, and I know I am your son, but I don’t feel like a polar bear.”

“Son,” said father polar bear. “Don’t you like hunting seals or fish?”

“It’s not that, dad.”

“Are you confused about something?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, if you resemble like a polar bear and certainly smell like one, what on Earth is wrong with you?”

“I’m cold.”

Their bar bills were enormous.

One evening, George and Cheryl arrived on their own. The bar was quiet, so Lucia tended the bar while I joined them for a drink.

“I’ve been thinking,” said George.

“Dangerous,” I said. “Could get you into trouble.”

“Seriously,” said George. “Cheryl and I want to try some sort of part-time business venture in Nerja.”

“What do you mean by part-time?”

“Cheryl isn’t keen to relocate here permanently but we want to spend more time in Nerja. If we could establish an income stream, it would give us more purpose for our visits. Any ideas?”

“Mmm,” I said mind racing. “I’ve been thinking about selling this place and moving into real estate, I can source properties but from here, it’s difficult to reach foreign buyers. Jeff Mason from Capistrano advertises inspection trips in the British National Press and sells extremely well but only on their development. I believe people who don’t buy there might be interested but want something in the town centre near beaches, bars, and restaurants or out in the countryside. As you know Charles and Jean run a profitable agency, but they aren’t getting any younger and don’t do any UK marketing. Could you consider doing that from London and send buyers over to me to show them around? You could fly over with them from time to time. Then you achieve your objective of coming here for a reason but at the same time retain your base in the UK.”

George and Cheryl exchanged excited glances.

“We have an empty shop we could use for an office in London,” said George. “Is it easy enough to set up one here? Here, we’d need good window space to display properties to catch passing holidaymakers and a comfortable meeting room to chat with customers.”

“I know a man who could find us one,” I said. “And until I sell this place, we could accommodate the inspection trippers here. What do you think?”

“Food for thought, Robin,” said George. “Food for thought. Let’s have another drink and kick around some ideas.”

Chapter 50 – The finger incident

An ear-splitting scream reverberated around the Fontainebleau patio. Lucia dropped the glass she was drying in the sink behind the bar and rushed out with me to see who the perpetrator was.

It was Silvia, our dearest daughter only three years old.

She was lying on the floor, a patio table on its side next to her, and holding her finger. A pool of blood spread slowly toward the fountain drains.

“I’ll call the ambulance,” I said.

“No,” said Lucia comforting our sobbing daughter. “She’s lost the top of her finger and is bleeding out. Fetch the First Aid box. We must stop the flow of blood, then we’ll drive her straight to the local doctor.”

Lucia bandaged up the finger as best she knew how. I carried a sobbing Silvia out to my newish Renault, and we set off for the clinic on Calle Angustias. Only to find a long queue to join Pintada.

“Ignore it,” said Lucia with a whimpering Silvia on her lap. She passed him a large white dressing pad from the First Aid box. “Beep the horn and wave this out the window. Everyone will recognize you have an emergency.”

I waved furiously and was amazed as the traffic melted magically out of the way.

“Just like that,” I said.

“What?”

“They swerve out the way, just like that,” I said. “It’s brilliant. In England, they would ignore you totally, probably wave back with two fingers.”

“Just drive.”

I double-parked outside the doctor’s house. We rushed in yelling ‘Sangre, Sangre, blood wound’.

Doctor Don Carlo saw us immediately and unwrapped Lucia’s handiwork. He took one look and said, “I can do nothing. Take her to Urgencias in Málaga.”

We set off along the busy coastal road with Lucia cuddling Silvia and me waving furiously waving the white bandage out the window. It took just over an hour to reach the Carlos Haya Hospital in the city centre, which must have broken all records. I stopped outside the emergency entrance and Lucia rushed in with Silvia while I parked the car.

“Where’s the rest of the finger?” said the doctor who attended to them immediately. “I can sew it back on.”

We froze wishing we had brought it with them.

I called Antonio, our favourite taxi driver in Nerja, and asked him to go to the Fontainebleau, pick up any stray fingers lurking on the patio and drive like hell for Carlos Haya.

Not batting an eyelid at such an unusual request Antonio did exactly that. He arrived with said tip wrapped in a bandage and presented it to the doctor.

He took it away returning several minutes later shaking his head.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s dead. We’ll have to make the best of what’s left.”

We returned home several hours later with a sleepy daughter, who, immediately on arrival, insisted on showing everyone in the Fontainebleau her bandage and where she was injured.

On the patio, there was a low, wooden outdoor coffee table with rounded legs making it a little unstable, and top-heavy. Silvia had been sitting on top of the table playing with a doll when she dropped it. On trying to retrieve it, she leaned down towards the floor, only for her weight to topple the table over. Instinctively, she spread her arms out to break her fall and hit the floor with them outspread simultaneously as the table edge landed on the index finger of her left hand and sliced the end off.

“Is she alright?” inquired a young dark-haired man in Spanish carrying a clipboard.

“Yes, thanks,” I said. “Minus the end of a finger but recovering.”

I nodded at his clipboard. “Can I help you with anything?”

“What, er... thanks just drinks and snacks,” said clipboard man. “We are a film crew. We’re making a new TV series set in Nerja. I’m the assistant director and this is my schedule for the day. She is so cute.”

“Thanks, what’s the film?” I said.

“It’s a TV Series called *Verano Azul*,” said clipboard. “A group of children called Bea, Desi, Javi, Quique, Piraña, and Tito spend summer with their parents in Nerja. They meet Pancho, a local boy, a milk delivery man, Julia, a painter, and Chanquete, an old fisherman. Today, we’re filming the first episode where they all meet in a difficult situation. It leads to friendships that will make this summer the most important of their lives. The idea is to paint a portrait of youth and the social reality of Spain today.”

“When is it due for broadcasting?” I said.

“Early next year, in 1980. It will go out all over the Spanish-speaking world and in Eastern Europe.

“This should put Nerja on the global map,” I said.

“We hope so,” said clipboard.

Chapter 51 – Wish you were here

The future of Spain was starting to feel rosy. It had been four long years since Franco died. Four long years of desperately hoping dictatorship had disappeared and democracy had been accepted and taken hold. Four long years of us biting our nails wishing bookings to slowly increase, so our hotel would be a success. I forget how many times we thought we’d made it, only for there to be another setback or unforeseen cost. By the number of repairs carried out, we had practically reformed every room all because of a bad decision we made at the beginning choosing the terrible builder. On reflection, we should have followed Charles and David's advice and had them steer us through the project. But everything is easier with the benefit of hindsight. All we needed now was an injection of luck to reward us for our five hard years. However, when the first municipal elections delivered Antonio Jiménez Gálvez, a communist as mayor, our hopes were dashed, and we worried about all our properties being wrested from us by the state.

Then one morning in 1979, it all changed.

“Excuse me,” said a well-spoken long-haired man in English to Lucia manning the reception desk. He resembled a well-dressed hippy minus flowers and bells. “I need to talk with the hotel manager.”

“Concerning?” said Lucia.

“I’m the assistant producer for an English TV consumer series. We’d like to include your hotel in our next program about the Costa del Sol.”

“I’m the owner’s wife,” said Lucia. “How may we help?”

“Oh, er... cool. Are you happy if I return the day after tomorrow with our film crew?”

“Of course. Do we need to prepare anything special?”

“Could you type up a summary of key points such as contact details, distance from the airport, a bit about Nerja, beaches, highlights, and your price for a week or fortnight’s stay? While our narrator describes all that. We’ll be filming your bar and restaurant for which we need you to provide some people enjoying themselves. Then we’ll shoot one of the bedrooms with a chambermaid cleaning it.”

“Anything we should avoid?”

“No drunks in the bar but otherwise go about your business as usual.”

“My husband, he’s English, will ask the name of the series.”

“Oh, didn’t I say? It’s for ITV and is called *Wish you were here*. The narrator is Judith Chalmers and it’s one of our most popular shows. You should be prepared for a massive influx of Brits almost immediately after the show is broadcast.”

“Eek,” said Lucia. “When does it go out?”

“In a month.”

“How long will the filming take? We don’t want to overly disturb our guests.”

“It doesn’t take long but setting up the lighting and equipment does. Have you somewhere we could park our truck?”

“There is a cul de sac to the side of the hotel. We’ll make sure there is a space available.”

“Great, thanks. Here is my card should you have any further questions.”

“Wonderful. Here is our card. See you on Tuesday. What time will you be arriving?”

“Around midday and please don’t change any timings, we’re on a tight schedule and need to be out of here by four pm to arrive at the next hotel while there is plenty of light.”

“What?” I said returning from the usual marathon visit to the bank to see Lucia prancing about like the cat who got the cream.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Lucia.

“So, you’re just happy to see me?”

“As always my love but actually, have you heard of a TV program called *Wish You Were Here*?”

“Of course, why?”

“What if we could have our hotel on their show?”

“I’d ferry you to the moon and back.”

“Then get your spaceship out babe because the TV crew and Judith Chalmers are coming here to film us in two days. The program goes out next month and the producer said we should be prepared for a massive increase in bookings.”

I leaped around the desk. We hugged long and hard.

“You’re not messing with me,” I said coming up for air.

“Here’s the man’s card. Call him if you don’t believe me.”

“Ok, ok. Should we do anything special?”

“Pick an available room to film and decide who will be the chambermaid. And we need people to be enjoying themselves in the bar.”

“Then tell Irena to clean the place top to bottom until it gleams. You can be the chambermaid, see if you fit in one of the uniforms.”

“Cheeky bugger.”

“When are they coming?”

“Tuesday, midday. They need to park their truck in the cul de sac.”

“Then we have a serious problem.”

“What?”

“Tuesday is market day; access will be impossible until after three pm.”

“Fuck. They have to depart by four. My love, we must do something, they cannot alter their schedule.”

“Right, you prepare hotel and find some beautiful people to pretend to be enjoying themselves. I’ll deal with access.”

By Tuesday morning, the hotel gleamed inside and out.

It cost me dear but for the first and only occasion, the market stalls usually set up outside the hotel had been moved elsewhere.

The TV truck arrived bang on time and drove straight into Calle Alejandro Bueno. The producer loved the market and took some shots before starting on the hotel exterior.

My parents, Lucia and Silvia with Mercedes, Irena, and El Rubio had no problem pretending to have fun sitting at the bar while I served. When the producer was happy, Lucia dashed up to the first floor and changed into the maid’s uniform. However, there was no sign of Judith Chalmers. Her narration was to be recorded in the UK studios describing the delights and costs of staying in the Fontainebleau.

They sent us a video of the final cut. It was fantastic and we waited nervously for the next month until it was due to be shown on live TV.

Could this be our crowning moment? Could the hotel now be worth something to yield a return on our investment of blood, sweat, tears, and a huge amount of dad’s money? Would George Faulkner and I now be able to set up our estate agency or would I be forever marooned behind the four walls of the bar polishing glasses and wiping surfaces?

There still wasn’t English TV anywhere in Spain so we listened to the *Wish You Were Here* show by the only means available. My sister Gloria held the phone in front of their TV while we listened in. It was only when I had heard The Fontainebleau on air, I believed it had happened.

The next day we waited patiently by the phone willing it to ring.

We were not disappointed.

Bookings went through the roof.

Epilogue – 2024 - Fifty Years On

Finally, our hotel was full all year. Our objective had been achieved and the now thriving business had a value worth selling. At last, I could escape the daily tedium of wiping tables, polishing glasses, and being nice to horrible people. My family sold the Fontainebleau in 1980 to Ian Anderson, a retired newsagent from the West Midlands and I started a property business. Ian managed the hotel successfully until the 1990s when much to the concern of his two children who ran the place, he went completely off the rails with alcoholism and squandered the profits on perversity. He went bankrupt in 1996 when it was taken over by his secret sleeping partner, Andy Pryor, a businessman from Inverness whose money came from care homes. He ran out of money before his plan to upgrade the hotel to a designer boutique establishment could be completed. Due to the complicity of Spanish bureaucracy and nobody around to pay lawyers to resolve the mess, the half-finished building sat abandoned with the upstairs open to the elements. Years later, a Spanish hotel company bought the ruin from the bank, knocked it down, and started from scratch. It is now a luxury Aparthotel known as Toboso Plaza.

Each time I walk past the elegant façade of the Aparthotel, I pause outside Bar Bilbainos, still going strong after fifty years, and take a trip down memory lane. The Fontainebleau was basic by comparison but for just over twenty years, the old wreck of a building had played a huge role in developing Nerja tourism from zero to over seven hundred thousand annual visitors.

Thousands of people enjoyed their first night in Spain under its roof. They returned year after year with their kids and then grandchildren. It was where I learned Spanish and met my wife. Occasionally, as a tear dampens my cheek, my aging brain flashes back to our happy times there. The great sounds we belted out until well after midnight, Abba, Pink Floyd, Stones, Beatles, Moody Blues and more. The evening Alison, my first love turned up from nowhere. For five minutes only, we both fondly recalled our tender kisses as teenagers before she disappeared once more into the ether never to be seen or heard of again. The money we raised for the Lions Club with treasure hunts so we could donate an ambulance to the town. I could go on but enough now. The ghost of the Fontainebleau will haunt me forever, it is where my and so many others' love for Spain took root. It is as much a part of me as I am of it.

Paul S Bradley - Author

The Bradley family has resided in Spain since 1974. Initially, in Menorca, they relocated to Nerja in 1987. In 1987, Paul sold his office interior business in London to Martin Sorrell of WPP and joined his parents. He ran a marketing agency from his home in Nerja and published guidebooks and lifestyle magazines in German, Spanish, and English until he retired. Paul continues to escort groups of discerning American Alumni around Spain on behalf of AHI Travel Inc. Five novels of his Andalusian Mystery Series have been self-published since 2018, two more are in the pipeline. His mother, Edna Bradley, arranged the flowers in the Fontainebleau during Ian Anderson's time, and Bat Carrott, his brother-in-law, managed the refurbishment project in Andy Pryor’s tenure.