

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Orange Blossom Days

Written by Patricia Scanlan

Published by Simon & Schuster

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Patricia Scanlan

Orange Blossom Days



SIMON &
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2017
A CBS COMPANY

Copyright © Patricia Scanlan 2017

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.

No reproduction without permission.

® and © 1997 Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.

The right of Patricia Scanlan to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-4711-5112-5
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4711-5113-2
eBook ISBN: 978-1-4711-5115-6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places
and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or
are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or
dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset in Bembo by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Simon & Schuster UK Ltd are committed to sourcing paper
that is made from wood grown in sustainable forests and support the Forest
Stewardship Council, the leading international forest certification organisation.
Our books displaying the FSC logo are printed on FSC certified paper.

It was such a treat to set *Orange Blossom Days* in the south of Spain where I've had great holidays and made some dear friends over the years.

*He pasado algunos de mis momentos más felices en **El Capricho, Calahondo**, donde he degustado comida maravillosa y he llegado a conocer al fantástico personal, los mejores de la costa. Salvador, ir a tu chiringuito es como volver a casa. Me hace muy feliz dedicaros este libro a ti, Svetlana, Maurizio, Pedro, Juan, Antonio, Alberto, Antonio, Paco y Sylvia. Gracias por los abrazos, las cálidas bienvenidas y los muchos Bailey's en la casa.*

(I've spent some of my happiest times in **El Capricho, Calahondo**, where I've eaten wonderful food and got to know the fantastic staff, who are the best on the Costa. Salvador, coming to your chiringuito is like coming home: I am so happy to dedicate my book to you and Svetlana, Maurizio, Pedro, Juan, Antonio, Alberto, Antonio, Paco, and Sylvia. Thanks for the hugs and warm welcomes and the many Baileys, on the house.)

To Monir Alina, John and Sylvia Roots, and Sinead, Alannah and Oliver, great neighbours.

And to Emma and Brendan of **Be Clean** who looked after and maintained our apartment as if it was their own, and who have become great friends.

And huge thanks to Aurora Garcia and Carlos, who worked so hard to make Mi Capricho a little piece of paradise, and who were always extremely helpful. And of course, Tommy and Fabiana also who run a fantastic Pool Bar, and always give us a great reception when we come back.

And to new friends Jason & Luis, owners of **Atlantis Property Management and Real Estate SL**, thanks for taking us all under your wings.

And to the staff of **The Hotel Petit Palace Santa Cruz**, Seville: thank you for delightful stays in your lovely hotel. Looking forward to coming back for many more.

Muchas gracias queridos amigos

La Joya de Andalucía

The Jewel of Andalucía

PROLOGUE

ANNA

The AGM was in uproar. The clique from Madrid was protesting loudly at the attack on *El Presidente*.

‘Standards are dropping,’ roared a French owner from Block 3.

‘Pets were not allowed in the original constitution. And it should be kept like that. I am not prepared to pay maintenance fees to be kept awake by yapping pom-poms, and have the smell of their turds wafting across my balcony! Just because he’ – A German owner whose visage was the colour of a crushed plum pointed a shaking finger at *El Presidente* – ‘because he wants his dog coming on holidays with him. Probably too mean to pay kennel fees,’ he added irately, wiping his dripping brow with a freshly laundered handkerchief.

‘I want to know if *El Presidente* is prepared to pay, out of

his *own* pocket, the money the community has been forced to pay, so he could appoint his smarmy little friend Facundo as a new concierge. How much of a backhand did he get for *that?*' Moira Anderson's indignant Scottish burr rang out over the hum of the air conditioning. The *Madrileños*, led by *El Presidente's* cousin, erupted in furious denial at this scurrilous accusation.

'Well said, Madam, well said!' an Englishman from Block 1 applauded. 'Answer the question, Mr President. Or even better, resign!'

Anna MacDonald felt the throb of a headache begin over her left eye and temple. The ruckus would put the Barbary Macaques in Gibraltar to shame, she thought wearily as the noisy yakking increased in tempo.

She and her husband, Austen, had holidayed in the south of Spain since their three children were toddlers. Taking charter holidays with JWT, which they'd saved hard for in the Credit Union. She'd always loved when the holiday brochures came out every January, and paid particular attention to the complexes that offered children's clubs.

As they became more affluent and their three children got older, they'd camped in France, explored Tuscany, and golfed in Portugal, but Andalucía's charms – the Moorish cities and towns, the food, the hospitality and friendliness of the Spanish people – lured them back many times over the years and when she and Austen had first bought their penthouse apartment in La Joya de Andalucía, they'd been over the moon with delight. They'd taken early retirement

to enjoy their sixties and they'd envisaged spending the long, dark winter months in their idyllic paradise. Now, several years down the road, life had changed to one she'd never imagined. And community politics, a recession, and bad behaviour had turned life in La Joya sour. 'The Jewel of Andalucía' had lost its sparkle for sure.

This carry-on just affirmed that she'd made the right decision. Anna noted *El Presidente's* cold, stern and forbidding gaze. *I've had enough of you, you little dictator*, she glared back at him, knowing that despite the uproar he would most likely be re-elected because most of the owners couldn't bear the hassle of taking on the responsibility the position entailed. And many wouldn't travel to attend the AGM in August, due to the oppressive heat. The Spanish clique would have their way once again and *El Presidente* would be king of his own little fiefdom. As autocratic as a Saudi despot. Yapping dogs were a new lowering of standards, maintenance fees would rise, and *El Presidente* would sit on his balcony, monarch of all he surveyed while his subjects grumbled among themselves at the poolside bar, plotting his overthrow at the *next* AGM.

Would she want to sit here in this hotel, in the small town of San Antonio del Mar, this time next year and listen to the same sort of carry-on? *Nope*, Anna decided. The Spanish dream was over. It was time to face up to reality, mend fences with her family and go home. She'd run away for long enough.

SALLY-ANN

Sally-Ann Connolly Cooper watched the shenanigans at the AGM, amused in spite of herself. This annual event was always so entertaining. At other AGMs she'd attended, she would meet up afterwards with her Spanish lover and tell him all the news. After their lusty lovemaking they would laugh and chat as they always did, sipping champagne, before he would leave her. This year, though, everything was *very* different. Her lover was getting married, and circumstances had changed radically in her own life. At the wrong side of thirty, it was time she settled down, Sally-Ann thought in amusement.

Who would have thought things would turn out the way they had? She would be going home to Texas with her twin daughters, to a very different set-up. A better, more positive situation for *all* of them. And she wouldn't be saying goodbye to La Joya. She wouldn't have to saddle up and move on from her Andalucían paradise.

From the moment she'd stood on the wide wraparound balcony of the penthouse and looked, in awe, across the shimmering sea to the mysterious, magical High Atlas Mountains on the continent of Africa, and seen the Pillars of Hercules stand guard over the narrow strait that separated the Atlantic Ocean from the Mediterranean, she'd known that Andalucía was special. It had been her first visit to Spain. A business trip with her husband, Cal, who owned a successful holiday rental company in the States. Branching out in Europe was a relatively new development

for Cooper Enterprises, but it was paying dividends in more ways than one.

Sally-Ann sipped her complimentary Prosecco, surprised at how relieved she was at the decision she'd made about her relationship with Cal. A relationship that had brought moments of grief and joy in equal measure, and a family unit that had survived because she hadn't let bitterness ruin her life.

EDUARDO

Eduardo De La Fuente strove to keep his composure while he listened to the many complaints being hurled in his direction. What was wrong with these *imbécils*? Could they not see the improvements he'd brought to La Joya de Andalucía? The changes he'd wrought under his presidency had brought order and ease to the ungrateful owners' lives.

It was imperative that he be elected to continue his raft of improvements. But he knew too that he could not face being deposed in front of Beatriz, the woman who had reared him after his family had moved to New York. Her immense pride in his elevation to the position of president of the community had been heartwarming. At last he'd truly achieved something, in her eyes. Not even his position as a notary had given him this much satisfaction, Eduardo admitted ruefully.

And very soon he would be exchanging his third-floor apartment for the much sought-after penthouse apartment he'd long desired, from the moment he'd set foot in the

luxurious apartment complex. The closing of his property purchase was occurring in the next hour, in a notary's office in Marbella. *That* acquisition would be his crowning glory. Beatriz would not be able to tell him ever again that 'second best was not good enough'. For the first time in his life he'd taken a risk and it would be worth it.

He hoped his wife, Consuela, would be pleased. Since she'd started her *menopausia* she'd become more forceful, less pliant to his needs and wishes. Sometimes she was uncharacteristically stubborn. And as for all this New Age stuff she'd got into with her cousin, this so-called 'Renewal of Divine Feminine Energy' she was embracing, such nonsense!

Eduardo refrained from rolling his eyes in derision. Consuela was seated in the audience, looking into the far distance, a million miles away in spirit, from the AGM and him!

How he looked forward to moving into his new abode. His eyrie, from which he would be able to overlook everything and everyone in the community. Knowing that the owner who was selling up was a fierce opponent of his, and would never have sold to him, Eduardo had bought the penthouse through a third party. A sly move but necessary. A faint flush tinged his sallow cheeks as a memory surfaced. This was not the time or place to think of her or *that*!

Eduardo turned his attention back to the business at hand, noticing the Irish woman who had been elected to the position of secretary at the first AGM was glaring at him. She was very friendly with Constanza Torres, the concierge, another thorn in his side. He stared back coldly at Anna. Soon he too

would be a *penthouse* owner and she could keep her glares to herself, as could the rest of the plebs with whom he was not in favour. He had his loyal supporters and today they would keep him – *por favor, Dios* – in his post as *El Presidente* of La Joya de Andalucía, a position in which he rightfully belonged.

CONSUELA

Consuela De La Fuente prayed fervently that her husband Eduardo would be re-elected to the position of president of the management committee, so she wouldn't have to live with his gloom and ire if he was rejected. Who would have thought Eduardo would turn this heavenly place into a . . . a . . . combat zone, she thought irritably. It was her own fault. She'd always adored the south and the sea. Coming down to the Costa reminded her of childhood days when her dear Papa would drive the family from Madrid to spend a month with his brother and family in a house with blue shutters, and a shaded, cobbled courtyard, two minutes from the sea, in La Cala, further up the coast. Eduardo had had no such treats. A week in a village in the Pyrenees with Beatriz's cousin had been his annual childhood holiday. The highlight of which was a trip to Girona.

When Consuela had introduced him to the delights of La Cala and Andalucía Eduardo had taken to it immediately, and from the first year they were married, he'd always spent most of August playing golf, enjoying the reviving sea breezes

and laid-back lifestyle and escaping the scorching heat of the capital. It had always been a relaxing holiday, until they'd bought their own apartment. Or rather *he* had bought the apartment without telling her . . . to 'surprise' her!

Sometimes, especially at AGM time Consuela wondered if it was more trouble than it was worth.

JUTTA

Jutta knew her window of opportunity was limited. She had to stay calm and make the most of the AGM at La Joya that was, very fortuitously for her, taking place right now, giving her some leeway to get on with her business. She felt sick. Nerves, she supposed disconsolately. She still couldn't believe all that had happened in the space of six weeks to turn her life upside down.

Her phone rang. It was Felipe, her husband.

'Did you get the tickets?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said coolly, 'I printed them out.'

'OK, good, see you soon.' He hung up.

Jutta sighed. Felipe, the love of her life. And this was what he'd brought them to. Perhaps her father had been right about him. Her Papa had always had his reservations about his son-in-law.

A tear coursed down Jutta's cheek. Angrily she wiped it away. She didn't have time for tears or regrets. She had work to do. She glanced at her watch. The AGM was well underway. Would Eduardo De La Fuente be re-elected? He was a

very complex man, very power hungry. It would be a huge disappointment for him if he wasn't voted back in.

Jutta always enjoyed getting the gossip from Constanza. What would the concierge and Anna, Sally-Ann and all her other clients say about her when they heard the news? To think she'd once dreamed about buying a penthouse in La Joya, and becoming neighbours with the people she worked for. And it could have happened. In her mid thirties now, she'd achieved far more than she'd ever expected out of life and been well on track to realize her dreams, she thought bitterly.

'Oh just stop feeling sorry for yourself and get going,' Jutta muttered irritably. She had to feed her young daughter as well as everything else because her au pair had left her in the lurch. What did she care about the owners in La Joya de Andalucía and their drama-filled AGMs? She'd enough drama in her own life.

PART ONE

TIMES OF OUR LIVES

APRIL 2006

Opening week

Señora Constanza Torres, the community manager for the newly completed apartment complex, La Joya de Andalucía, logged into her computer, arranged her pen and notepad tidily on her desk, and placed the stack of acceptance forms containing the names and addresses of the new owners into a clear plastic folder that was neatly labelled. Constanza was nothing if not organized.

Today, after months of preparation, the apartments were ready for occupancy. The immaculate grounds were superbly landscaped. Lush flowering waterfalls of pink and purple bougainvillea cascaded over walls and balconies. The two swimming pools seemed in the early morning sun as though the universe had cast handfuls of glittering diamonds into their still, azure water. A hint of a breeze whispered through the drooping green fronds of the palm

trees dotted around the lawns, and the scent of mimosa and lavender added to the luxurious ambiance of the gated frontline complex, which was so aptly named. The Jewel of Andalucía was her pride and joy and today, and in the weeks to come, Constanza would welcome the new owners and help them to settle in to their holiday homes on Spain's southern coast.

The setting was unrivalled anywhere else on the Costa, Constanza thought proudly. Within sight of the majestic, imposing rock of Gibraltar to their right; mysterious Africa looming in awe-inspiring grandeur on the horizon, and, to the left of them along the curving coastline, Estepona and Puerto Banús, playgrounds of the wealthy, international jet set. Behind the impressive development, the high Sierra Bermeja with their jagged-edged peaks was Constanza's favourite view, especially when the setting sun slipped gently down behind them, burnishing the sky with a kaleidoscope of pinks, purples, and gold banners.

She'd spoken to many of the new owners on the phone over the past months: soon, she would finally get to meet them in person. This new community would house a wide variety of residents from all over Europe and beyond. Most of them had been friendly, polite, excited, but a few had ruffled her feathers, most notably a dour Belgian lady who insisted she be allowed to bring her pet poodle, Poirot. Patiently but firmly, Constanza had explained there was a no-pet policy, enshrined in the Articles of Association which were part of the terms and conditions of purchase. After many vexatious

phone calls, Constanza was not looking forward to meeting *that* particular owner.

A rather serious and intense man from Madrid, Eduardo De La Fuente, was extremely insistent that all business be conducted through his secretary, and under no circumstances was any post to be sent, or phone calls made, to his private residence. Constanza wondered if he was buying his apartment as a love nest for his mistress. The secretary, a brisk, bossy, decidedly un-chatty lady, always spoke of her boss in hushed tones as though he were God and, of course, conveyed the air of superiority common to the *Madrileños*. Constanza was extremely interested to meet *him*.

The complex was unnaturally still. No builders, gardeners, plumbers and electricians. It would never be this silent again, never be totally hers again as it had been all these past months.

She sat absorbing the silence, preparing for the busy days that lay ahead. The bell on the intercom rang. Her first clients. Constanza patted her hair, sat up straight and pressed the entry key, watching as the gate opened smoothly to permit a taxi to enter.

As graciously as though she were inviting guests into her home, Constanza stood, hand extended, and smiled a welcome as a middle-aged, smartly dressed couple came through her office door.

‘Welcome to La Joya de Andalucía. I am Señora Constanza Torres, your community manager,’ she introduced herself, both in Spanish and English, as she would to many new proprietors during the following days.

CHAPTER ONE

ANNA / AUSTEN

‘Mr and Mrs MacDonald, these are your keys and gate fob. This one is for the entrance to your building, the community gates, and the garage. This one is your door key. My name is Señora Constanza Torres. I am the community manager. If you have any problems please don’t hesitate to contact me. Let me take you to your new penthouse.’ The petite, middle-aged Spanish woman with flashing brown-black eyes and henna-hued, neatly bobbed hair, smiled at Anna and her husband Austen as she handed them the keys to their new holiday home. Her English, though heavily accented, was perfect.

‘*Por favor,*’ a slim, handsome Spanish man in a navy suit who was standing in the doorway interrupted brusquely, and began speaking in rapid-fire Spanish that Anna, with her schoolgirl Spanish, could not follow.

Constanza Torres held up her hand authoritatively. '*Un momento por favor, Señor—*'

¿Cuánto tiempo llevará esto?'

He was asking how long this would take, Anna translated, guessing that he was a new owner also. Imperious, arrogant, and a tad rude were her first impressions of the Spaniard and she hoped that he wouldn't be their immediate neighbour.

'Be seated if you please. I'll come to you when it is your time. There are others before you.' Señora Torres spoke in English, unimpressed with her fellow countryman's officious impatience. She gave a dismissive wave towards the cane lounging chairs dotted around the tiled terrace at the entrance to the building, where another couple, a tall red-head and an equally tall dark-haired American man waited to be given their keys. The community manager turned her attention back to the MacDonalds, a hint of exasperation flickering in her expressive brown eyes.

Anna suppressed a smile. It was clear the other man was not used to being so summarily dismissed and ignored. His mouth opened in astonishment at the manager's impertinence. He turned on his heel and marched over to a chair, glowering at them once he was seated, his fingers drumming a tattoo on the armrest.

'Let me show you to your apartment building,' Señora Torres offered, disregarding him.

'Thank you, Señora.' Austen stood back politely to let her precede him.

Constanza bowed graciously and led the way across the terrace and down the steps to the pathway that led through the verdant gardens towards their whitewashed building – with its Moorish arches and mosaic-tiled finishes – that faced the sea.

‘Oh Austen, I’m so excited.’ Anna took her husband’s hand and he squeezed hers back. ‘Isn’t it something else that we own a place in Spain and can come out whenever we want? It will be great for the family to come over and join us now and again.’

‘Now and again,’ he warned. ‘Conor won’t be interested, Tara will come to flop, but you know what Chloe’s like . . . she’ll want to bring all her pals out to party. We’ll be lucky to get a look in!’

‘She’s just very sociable,’ Anna defended their youngest daughter.

‘Too sociable for me,’ Austen retorted. ‘This is *our* haven, Anna.’

‘I know,’ she agreed lightly. ‘I can’t quite believe it.’

‘Me neither. Imagine spending our winters out here away from freezing winds and non-stop rain. Imagine playing golf every single day!’ Austen grinned at her, his tanned face flushed with pride at the rewards their hard work over the years had now brought them. A penthouse apartment in a plush seafront complex on Spain’s southern coast. Who would have thought they would ever be able to afford such a luxury, he reflected, remembering that at the beginning of their marriage, all those years ago, he and Anna hadn’t had two pennies to rub together.

‘We deserve this and how!’ he declared, inhaling the scents of the flowering shrubs that wafted by on the balmy, salty sea breeze. ‘I was dreading retirement, but not now.’

Anna laughed. ‘You mean you were dreading spending all that time with *me*. Sure, I’ll probably see even less of you now than I did before, if you’re going to be spending *every* day on the golf course.’

‘Well, not *every* day and not *all* the time. Think of what we can do for siesta in our little love nest,’ Austen murmured, winking and jangling the keys to their new abode.

Señora Torres opened the door to the first block of apartments that faced the sea and led them through a cool, marble-tiled entrance hall painted in shades of cream and duck-egg blue, towards a lift. ‘Each floor has two apartments but the penthouse does not share a landing, it is most private,’ she explained as the doors slid open. She jabbed the button for the fifth floor and they glided smoothly upwards. Anna couldn’t contain her excitement when she stepped into the tiled hall and saw the white-painted door facing her with the number 9 in gleaming brass, just above the equally shiny brass doorknob.

The concierge smiled proudly at Austen as though she was personally gifting them their new home. ‘You may open.’ She indicated his keys. ‘Enjoy your new penthouse. I’ll be in the office if you have any queries,’ she said before re-entering the lift, smiling at them as the door closed and the lift began its descent.

Anna’s first impressions were of bright lemony light, as

sunbeams spilled in through the floor-to-ceiling windows onto the honey-tinted tones of the marble floor. The smell of new wood and fresh paint was intoxicating and she stood in the centre of the lounge breathing in the scents, remembering, unexpectedly, her exhilaration when she and Austen had got the keys to their three-bed semi in a newly built estate in Swords, over thirty-two years ago.

Where had those years gone? How was it possible that she had two daughters, twenty-eight and twenty-three, and a son of twenty-five? How was it possible that in four years time she would be sixty? Sometimes the notion shocked her to her core!

Don't think about it, enjoy this new chapter in your life, she told herself briskly, gazing around at her surroundings. She would paint the lounge a buttery cream, she decided, with light blue accessories: this was going to be fun with a capital F.

Standing on the terrace looking out over the sapphire Mediterranean, a molten silky sheath with hardly a ripple on its gilded waters, Anna wondered would she wake up and discover it was a dream. Austen was going to retire from his position as senior account manager with an international advertising agency, and she was going to hand over the reins of the cleaning company she'd built up – from a two-person operation to a company employing forty – to her manager.

It was going to be a massive change, she admitted, handing over control of the company she'd birthed, grown, fretted over and run, with time-consuming passion, for so much of her married life. Would she adjust to a life not controlled by

the demands of business? Even now, on holidays in Spain, she was edgy, constantly restraining herself from checking emails on her phone, expecting calls about some crisis or other. Austen had warned her to stay off her mobile. His was turned off. He'd no problem disconnecting, or retiring.

'I want to enjoy life while I'm still able to, before sinking into decrepitude. It's not all about work and material things, Anna, and I want to enjoy time with you. It's our time.' Austen was surprisingly firm about it. And he was right, she admitted with some relief. She was exhausted, burnt out, and flying on fumes. Being a full-time wife, mother and MD was getting harder to juggle as she aged. In her thirties and forties she'd had boundless energy, but not anymore. She lived with a permanent weariness, chasing her free time like a miser chasing gold.

Her husband was right: they had worked damn hard for decades. He was sixty-two, she was fifty-six; their three children were reared and two had flown the nest. From now on it was all about reaping the rewards of their endeavours.

She couldn't wait to start decorating and buying furniture. They were going to employ the services of a German woman – a friend of theirs had suggested employing her – who operated from Marbella and was an expert at fitting out new apartments . . . fast.

Anna and Austen wanted to be able to use the penthouse as soon as they possibly could, without the hassle of waiting for furniture and drapes and kitchenware to be delivered. This Jutta Sauer person came highly recommended. She would

supervise all deliveries and have the apartment cleaned and ready for occupation the next time they came out to Spain. They were meeting her later for an initial consultation and then the following morning to start furniture shopping immediately.

They were staying at a friend's apartment further up the coast, and though it was gorgeous, and they'd always enjoyed visiting, now that their own was handed over to them, they were longing to move in.

'Oh Austen, look!' Anna exclaimed, noticing the bottle of champagne in an ice bucket, and two champagne flutes on the kitchen counter. 'What a classy touch,' she remarked, reading the welcome card from the sales firm who had sold them the penthouse.

'Let's crack it open! That's the joy of taking taxis. You can imbibe at any time of the day.' Austen expertly uncorked the bottle. He poured the sparkling golden liquid into the glasses, handed her one and raised his to hers. 'I'm so glad we've done this, Anna. I know you weren't too sure at first when I showed you the brochure, but right this minute I couldn't think of anything better to do with my lump sum. It's an investment that's going to give us a *lot* of pleasure. To retirement, to us!' he toasted, his eyes glinting with anticipation.

'Yes, Austen, to us,' Anna clinked back, feeling a surge of love for her husband. 'We've done our bit, now it's *all* about us!

*

Austen tucked into a feast of perfectly cooked mussels in his favourite *chiringuito* on the southern coast of Spain: El Capricho. Anna was relishing every mouthful of her crispy lemon whitebait. 'I love this place, I love the staff, I love the food and I love the views,' his wife said, taking a sip of chilled white wine and offering him one of her fish.

'Me too. There's some fine restaurants in San Antonio del Mar, and the *chiringuito* on the beach is good, but El Capricho has something that brings you back time and again, doesn't it?' Austen shucked some of his mussels onto her plate.

'I always feel completely relaxed the minute I sit down and order a G&T here. I love that Svetlana and Maurizio always know our drinks order every time we come back.' The waiting staff of the popular restaurant were consummately professional but great fun, and there was always a lot of good-humoured banter between them and the diners. Eating there had become a much-enjoyed ritual of their annual holidays.

It was coming to stay regularly with his golfing friends over the years that had persuaded Austen to consider buying a property on the coast. When he'd seen a glossy brochure for La Joya in the golf club in Marbella, he'd shown it to Anna and persuaded her that they should buy. She'd demurred at first, and he knew that part of her reluctance was because of their 'children', as she persisted in calling them, to his mild irritation. She spent too much time running around after them. They were adults now, he pointed out, perfectly capable of running their own lives without their parents by their sides. She was only using them as an excuse, he'd insisted.

His wife had got defensive, and told him he was talking rubbish and gone into one of her snits, but he'd stuck to his guns and told her she'd need to make a decision quickly as the apartments were getting snapped up. He'd bulldozed her, he admitted privately, but she'd come around to his way of thinking and had given the joint purchase her blessing.

Now that they owned a property abroad, and he was retiring, he intended spending long chunks of time with Anna, exploring the cities and diverse regions of Spain at their leisure.

Leisure, what a delightful concept, Austen thought contentedly, sitting back in his chair, replete, signalling Maurizio to refill their glasses. Anna might have difficulty letting go of work; he would have none. After years of conscientious hard graft, Austen was looking forward to a work-free, 'child'-free retirement immensely.