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The Return

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Chapter One

Granada, 2001

JUST MOMENTS BEFORE, the two women had taken their seats, the last of the audience to be admitted before the surly *gitano* slid the bolts decisively across the door.

Voluminous skirts trailing behind them, five raven-headed girls made their entrance. Tight to their bodies swirled dresses of flaming reds and oranges, acid greens and ochre yellows. These vibrant colours, a cocktail of heavy scents, the swiftness of their arrival and their arrogant gait were overpoweringly, studiedly dramatic. Behind them followed three men, sombrely dressed as though for a funeral, in jet black from their oiled hair down to their hand-made leather shoes.

Then the atmosphere changed as the faint, ethereal beat of clapping, palm just brushing palm, seeped through the silence. From one man came the sound of fingers sweeping across strings. From another emanated a deep and plaintive wail that soon flowed into a song. The rasp of his voice matched the roughness of the place and the ruggedness of

his pock-marked face. Only the singer and his troupe understood the obscure patois, but the audience could sense the meaning. Love had been lost.

Five minutes passed like this, with the fifty-strong audience sitting in the darkness around the edge of one of Granada's damp *cuevas*, hardly daring to breathe. There was no clear moment when the song ended – it simply faded away – and the girls took this as their cue to file out again, rawly sensual in their gait, eyes fixed on the door ahead, not even acknowledging the presence of the foreigners in the room. There was an air of menace in this dark space.

'Was that it?' whispered one of the latecomers.

'I hope not,' answered her friend.

For a few minutes, there was an extraordinary tension in the air and then a sweet continuous sound drifted towards them. It was not music, but a mellow, percussive purring: the sound of castanets.

One of the girls was returning, stamping her feet as she paced down the length of the corridor-shaped space, the flounces of her costume brushing the dusty feet of the tourists in the front row. The fabric of her dress, vivid tangerine with huge black spots, was pulled taut across her belly and breasts. Seams strained. Her feet stamped on the strip of wood that comprised the dance floor, rhythmically *one-two-one-two-one-two-three-one-two-three-one-two* . . .

Then her hands rose in the air, the castanets fluttered in a deep satisfying trill and her slow twirling began. All the while she rotated, her fingers snapped against

the small black discs she held in her hands. The audience was mesmerised.

A plaintive song accompanied her, the singer's eyes mainly downcast. The dancer continued, in a trance of her own. If she connected with the music she did not acknowledge it and if she was aware of her audience they did not feel it. The expression on her sensual face was one of pure concentration and her eyes looked into some other world that only she could see. Under her arms, the fabric darkened with sweat, and watery beads gathered at her brow as she revolved, faster and faster and faster.

The dance ended as it had begun, with one decisive stamp, a full stop. Hands were held above her head, eyes to the low, domed ceiling. There was no acknowledgement of the audience's response. They might as well not have been there for all the difference it made to her. Temperatures had risen in the room and those close to the front inhaled the heady mix of musky scent and perspiration that she spread in the air.

Even as she was leaving the stage, another girl was taking over. There was an air of impatience with this second dancer, as though she wanted to get it all over with. More black dots swam in front of the audience's eyes, this time on shiny red, and cascades of curly black hair fell over the gypsyish face, concealing all but the sharply defined Arab eyes, outlined in thick kohl. This time there were no castanets, but the endlessly repeated, rattling of feet: *clack-a-tacka tacka, clack-a-tacka tacka, clack-a-tacka tacka . . .*

The speed of movement from heel to toe and back again seemed impossibly fast. The heavy black shoes, with their high, solid heels and steel toecaps vibrated on the stage. Her knees must have absorbed a thousand shock-waves. For a while, the singer remained silent and gazed at the ground, as though to catch this dark beauty's eyes might turn him to stone. It was impossible to tell whether the guitarist kept up with her stamping or whether he dictated its pace. The communication between them was seamless. Provocatively she hitched up the heavy tiers of her skirt to reveal shapely legs in dark stockings and further showed off the speed and rhythm of her footwork. The dance built to a crescendo, as the girl, half whirling dervish, half spinning top, rotated. A rose that had clung precariously to her hair, flew out into the audience. She did not stoop to collect it, marching from the room almost before it had landed. It was an introverted performance and yet the most overt display of confidence they had ever seen.

The first dancer and the accompanist followed her out of the cave, their faces expressionless, still indifferent to their audience in spite of the applause.

Before the end of the show, there were another half-dozen dancers, and each one conveyed the same disturbing keynotes of passion, anger and grief. There was a man whose movements were as provocative as a prostitute's, a girl whose portrayal of pain sat uncomfortably with her extreme youth, and an elderly woman in whose deeply furrowed face were etched seven decades of suffering.

Eventually, once the performers had filed out, the lights came up. As the audience began to leave, they caught a glimpse of them in a small backroom, arguing, smoking and drinking from tall tumblers filled to the brim with cheap whisky. They had forty-five minutes until their next performance.

It had been airless in the low-ceilinged room, which reeked of alcohol, sweat and long-ago smoked cigars, and the crowd was relieved to emerge into the cool night air. It had a clarity and purity that reminded them they were not far from the mountains.

‘That was extraordinary,’ commented Sonia to her friend. She did not really know what she meant, but it was the only word that seemed to fit.

‘Yes,’ agreed Maggie. ‘And so tense.’

‘That’s exactly it,’ agreed Sonia. ‘Really tense. Not at all what I imagined.’

‘And they didn’t look particularly happy, those girls, did they?’

Sonia did not bother to answer. Flamenco clearly had little to do with happiness. That much she had come to realise in the past two hours.

They walked back through the cobbled streets towards the centre of Granada and found themselves lost in the old Moorish quarter, the Albaicín. It was pointless to try to read a map; the tiny alleyways hardly had names and sometimes even petered out in sets of narrow steps.

The women soon got their bearings again when they turned a corner and were confronted with a view of the Alhambra, now gently floodlit, and though it was

already past midnight the warm amber glow that bathed the buildings almost convinced them that the sun was still setting. With its spread of crenellated turrets that stood out against a clear black sky, it looked like something from *The Arabian Nights*.

Arms linked, they continued their walk down the hill in silence. The dark and statuesque Maggie reduced the length of her stride to match Sonia's. It was a habit of almost a lifetime between these two close friends, who were physical opposites in every way. They did not need to talk. For now, the crisp sound of their feet on the cobbles, percussive like the claps and castanets of the flamenco dancers, was more pleasing than the human voice.

It was a Wednesday in late February. Sonia and Maggie had arrived only a few hours earlier but even as they were driven from the airport, Sonia had fallen under Granada's spell. The wintry sunset illuminated the city with a sharp light, leaving the snow-capped mountains that were its backdrop in dramatic shadow, and as the taxi sped into the city along the freeway, they caught their first glimpse of the Alhambra's geometric outline. It seemed to keep watch over the rest of the city.

Eventually their driver slowed to take the exit into the centre and now the women feasted their eyes on regal squares, palatial buildings and occasional grandiose fountains before he turned off to take a route through the narrow cobbled streets that spread through the city.

Even though her mother had been from Spain, Sonia

had visited this country only twice before, both times to the coastal resorts of the Costa del Sol. There she had stayed on the slick stretch of sparkling coast, where all-year sun and all-day breakfasts were marketed to the British and Germans who came in droves. Nearby plantations of matching villas, with ornate pillars and fancy wrought-iron railings, were so close and yet a million miles away from this city of confused streets and buildings that had been built over many centuries.

Here was a place with unfamiliar smells, a cacophony of ancient and modern, caf  s overflowing with local people, windows piled high with small, glossy pastries, served by serious men proud of their trade, tatty shuttered apartments, glimpses of sheets hung out on balconies to dry. This was a real place, she thought, nothing ersatz here.

They swung this way and that, left and right, right and left and left again, as though they might end up exactly where they had started. Each of the small streets was one-way and occasionally there was a near miss with a moped that was going the wrong way up the street and approaching them at speed. Pedestrians, oblivious to the danger, stepped off the pavement into their path. Only a taxi driver could have negotiated his way through this complex maze. A set of rosary beads suspended from the rear-view mirror clattered against the windscreen and an icon of the Virgin Mary watched demurely from the dashboard. There were no fatalities on this journey, so she seemed to be doing her job.

The sickly, boiled-sweet smell of air-freshener

combined with the turbulence of the journey had made both women feel nauseous, and they were relieved when the car eventually slowed down and they heard the grating sound of the handbrake being yanked into position. The two-star Hotel Santa Ana was in a small, scruffy square, flanked by a bookshop on one side and a cobbler on the other, and along the pavement was a row of stalls now in the process of being packed up. Smooth golden loaves and hefty tranches of flat, olive-studded bread were being wrapped, and the last remaining segments of some fruit tarts originally the size of wagon wheels were being stowed away in waxed paper.

‘I’m ravenous,’ said Maggie, watching the stallholders loading up their small vans. ‘I’ll just grab something from them before they disappear.’

With typical spontaneity, Maggie ran across the road, leaving Sonia to pay off the taxi driver. She returned with a generous section of bread that she was already tearing into pieces, impatient to satisfy her hunger.

‘This is delicious. Here, try some.’

She thrust some of the crusty loaf into Sonia’s hand and they both stood on the pavement by their bags, eating and scattering crumbs liberally on the stone slabs. It was time for the *paseo*. People were beginning to come out for their evening saunter. Men and women together, women arm in arm, pairs of men. All were smartly dressed and though they enjoyed a stroll for its own sake they looked purposeful.

‘It looks attractive, doesn’t it?’ said Maggie.

‘What?’

‘Life in this city! Look at them!’ Maggie pointed at the café on the corner of the square, which was packed with customers. ‘What do you think they talk about over their *tinto*?’

‘Everything, I expect,’ replied Sonia with a smile. ‘Family life, political scandal, football . . .’

‘Look, let’s go and check in,’ said Maggie, finishing her bread. ‘Then we could go out and have a drink.’

The glass door opened into a brightly lit reception area that was given a sense of grandeur by a number of chocolate-boxy arrangements of silk flowers and a few pieces of heavy baroque furniture. A smiling young man behind a high desk gave them a registration form and after photocopying their passports, told them the time for breakfast and handed them a key. The full-size wooden orange attached to it was an absolute guarantee that they would never leave the hotel without handing it in for replacement on the row of hooks behind reception.

Beyond the lobby, everything else in this hotel was tawdry. Nose to nose, they went up in a tiny box of a lift, their luggage balanced in a tower, and on the third floor emerged into a narrow corridor. In the darkness they clattered along with their suitcases until they could make out in large, tarnished figures the number ‘301’.

Their room had a view of sorts. But not of the Alhambra. It looked out onto a wall and, specifically, onto an air-conditioning unit.

‘We wouldn’t spend much time looking out of the window anyway, would we?’ commented Sonia, as she drew the thin curtains.

‘And even if there was a balcony with gorgeous furniture and far-reaching views over the mountains we wouldn’t use it,’ added Maggie, laughing. ‘It’s a bit early in the year.’

Sonia quickly threw open her suitcase, squashed a few T-shirts into the small bedside drawer and hung the rest of her things in the narrow wardrobe; the scrape of metal coat hangers on the rail set her teeth on edge. The bathroom was as economically sized as the bedroom, and Sonia, though petite, had to squeeze behind the basin to shut the door. Having cleaned her teeth she tossed her brush into the single glass provided and reappeared in the bedroom.

Maggie was lying on top of the burgundy bedspread, her suitcase on the floor, still unopened.

‘Aren’t you going to unpack?’ enquired Sonia, who knew from experience that Maggie would probably spend the week living out of a suitcase that frothed over with bits of flirtatious lace and tangles of ruffled blouses, rather than actually hang anything up.

‘What’s that?’ Maggie asked distractedly, engrossed in reading something.

‘Unpack?’

‘Oh, yes. I might do that later.’

‘What’s that you’re reading?’

‘It was with a pile of leaflets on the table,’ Maggie replied from behind a flyer, held close to her face in an attempt to make out the words.

The low-voltage lighting lifted the gloom of the dark beige room only a little and scarcely provided enough

illumination to read. 'It's advertising a flamenco show somewhere called *Los Fandangos*. It's in the gypsy area, as far as my Spanish can tell, anyway. Shall we go?'

'Yes. Why not? They'll be able to tell us on reception how to get there, won't they?'

'And it doesn't start until ten thirty, so we could go and eat first.'

Shortly afterwards, they were out on the street, a map of the city in hand. They wound their way through a labyrinth of streets, partly following their noses, partly the orientation of the map.

Jardines, Mirasol, Cruz, Puentezuelas, Capuchinas . . .

Sonia remembered the meaning of most of these words from her schooldays. Each one held its magic. They were like brush strokes, painting the landscape of the city, each one helping to build up a picture of the whole. As they got closer to the heart of this city, the street names clearly reflected the dominance of the Roman Catholic religion.

They were making for the cathedral, the city's central point. According to the map, everything emanated from here. The narrow alleyways seemed an unlikely way to reach it but it was only when Sonia saw some railings and two women sitting begging in front of a carved doorway that she looked up for the first time. Towering above was the most sturdy of buildings. It filled the sky, a solid mass of distinctively fortress-like stone. It did not reach up to the light, like St Paul's, St Peter's or the Sacré-Coeur. From where she stood, it seemed to blot it out. Nor did it announce itself with a huge empty space

in front of it. It lurked behind the workaday streets of cafés and shops, and from most places in these narrow streets was unseen.

On the hour, however, it reminded the world of its presence. As the two women stood there, the bells began to toll. The volume was enough to make them reel back. Resoundingly deep, metallic clangs banged inside their heads. Sonia cupped her ears with her hands and followed Maggie away from the deafening noise.

It was eight o'clock and the tapas bars around the cathedral were already filling up. Maggie made a speedy decision, drawn to the place where a waiter stood outside on the pavement, smoking.

Once they were perched on high wooden stools, the women ordered wine. It was served in small stubby tumblers with a generous plate of *jamon* and each time they ordered another drink, more tapas magically appeared. Although they had been hungry, these small offerings of olives, cheese and pâté slowly filled them up.

Sonia was perfectly happy with Maggie's choice of venue. Behind the bar, ranks of mighty hams hung from the ceiling, like giant bats suspended upside down in trees. Fat dripped from them into small plastic cones. Next to them were *chorizos*, and on shelves behind sat huge tins of olives and tuna. There were rows and rows of bottles just out of reach. Sonia loved this dusty chaos, the rich, sweet smell of *jamon* and the hum of conviviality that wrapped itself around her like a favourite coat.

Maggie interrupted her reverie. 'So, how is everything?'

It was a question typical of her friend. As heavily loaded as the cocktail stick onto which she had speared two olives and a cherry tomato.

‘Fine,’ answered Sonia, knowing as she said it that this response would probably not do. It sometimes annoyed her that Maggie always wanted to get straight to the heart of things. They had kept conversation quite light and superficial since they had met up at Stansted early that day, but sooner or later, she knew Maggie would want more. Sonia sighed. This was what she both loved and loathed about her friend.

‘How’s that dusty old husband of yours?’ This more direct question could not be deflected with one single word, especially not ‘Fine’.

Since nine o’clock, the bar had filled up rapidly. Earlier in the evening the clientele had been mostly elderly men, gathered in tight-knit groups. They were neat figures, Sonia observed, small and smartly jacketed, with highly polished shoes. After that, slightly younger people began to pack the place out and stood chatting animatedly, balancing wine and plates of tapas on the narrow ledge that ran around the room especially for this purpose. The volume of noise meant that conversation was more difficult now. Sonia drew up her stool so close to Maggie’s their wooden frames touched.

‘Dustier than ever,’ she said in her ear. ‘He didn’t want me to come here, but I suspect he’ll get over that.’

Sonia glanced over at the clock above the bar. Their flamenco show was beginning in less than half an hour.

‘We really should go, shouldn’t we?’ she said, slipping

down off her stool. Much as she loved Maggie, for the time being she wished to deflect her personal questions. In her best friend's view no husband was really worth having, but Sonia had often suspected that this might have been something to do with the fact that Maggie had never had one, at least not one of her own.

Coffee had just been served to them on the bar and Maggie was not going to leave without drinking it.

'We've got time for this,' she said. 'Everything starts late in Spain.'

Both women drained their rich cups of *café solo*, manoeuvred their way through the crowds and went outside. The throng continued into the street and almost all the way to the Sacromonte where they soon found a sign pointing to 'Los Fandangos'. It was set into the hillside, a white-washed, roughly plastered building, the *cueva* where they were going to see flamenco. Even as they approached, they could hear the alluring sound of someone picking out chords on a guitar.