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The Queen's Sorrow

Written by Suzannah Dunn

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The Queen's Sorrow

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For Peter Hunter

'If God is pleased to grant her a child, things will take a turn for the better. If not, I foresee trouble on so great a scale that the pen can hardly set it down.'

SIMON RENARD, Imperial envoy,
writing to EMPEROR CHARLES V, 1555

England, at last, in view: a small harbour settlement crouched on the shoreline. And rain, still this rain, just as he'd been warned. Mid-August, but rain for the three days – and nights, long nights – they'd been anchored offshore. It wasn't as if Spain didn't have rain. Plenty of it, sometimes, and sometimes even in August; sometimes lasting all day, perhaps even several days, but then done and gone and the sun hammered back into the sky. In Spain, you marvelled at the rain, you sheltered, you endured it. Exuberant, it was: a visitation. Not like this.

This English rain wasn't so much falling as getting thrown around on the wind. It had a hold on the air; it settled over him and seeped into his clothes, skin, bones. He should go back below. Yet he stayed on deck as the ship moved forward. A huddle of harbour buildings and, beyond, to the horizon, greenery. *Pelt* came to mind: *pelts*; the land looked green-furred. Spain had green: from the subtle, silvered blue-green of olive and almond trees to the deep, dark gloss of citrus trees, and, in the middle, vines, the gentle shade of vines. Plenty of green in Spain, cultivated, trellised and terraced. This, though, here, this English green, looked relentless, creeping into the very lie of the land rather than gracing it.

Six weeks, he'd been told. That's all. Six weeks, at most, in England. The first ship home will sail within six weeks. Do the job we're sending you to do, and then you can come home.

England: a small, narrow island up off the edge of everywhere else. A far corner of the world, where the sea turned in on itself, wave-wild, and the sun was cold-shouldered.

What were they doing, now, back home? Rafael closed his eyes to see the luminous shade of the courtyard, risked a hand off the rail to touch the little sundial in his pocket: just touch it, because of course it was no use, calibrated for a different latitude, and anyway there was no sun. He didn't know what time it was here nor there. But whatever the time back home, if not now then soon someone would be in the courtyard drawing water from the well: that particular, steady creaking of the handle. And even if the courtyard were otherwise deserted, there'd be the conversation of women behind the shutters: his mother, his aunt, his sister-in-law, and Leonor.

And Francisco, his little Francisco, who loved to crouch beside the well to pat the spillage. And if ever the filled bucket was unattended even for the briefest turn of a head, he'd skim it with his upturned palm, spoon it, let it well over his wrist and stream down his arm to splatter on the tiles. And then Leonor would call to Rafael to stop him, and Rafael would pick him up, having to brace himself, these days, against the strength of his son's reckless, over-eager lunge in the opposite direction.



Someone had made a mistake. That was what Rafael had heard. Someone senior on the Spanish side was supposed to have told the prince that his bride, the English queen, had provided for him; not financially (not a penny) but in terms of staff. A full household – hundreds of Englishmen – had been installed for him at court. The prince – ever-diplomatic – hadn't presumed that any provision would be made, so, despite meticulous planning for a smooth and inconspicuous arrival in England, he'd come with his own three hundred men, a month ago, to a palace which had very little room for them.

Various Londoners had been persuaded to take some in, it seemed. And now, Rafael and Antonio: belated arrivals, stragglers. Rafael didn't mind the change of plan. This initial inconvenience, yes, of course, he did mind: waiting to be allocated a host when they'd already suffered five days at sea and then the protracted journey overland in pouring rain. But on the whole, no. It wasn't going to cost – they'd still be fully provided for – and he'd rather lodge with a local family, he reasoned, than suffer the squeeze at court.

Antonio, predictably, did mind. No doubt he'd bragged back home that he'd be living in royal splendour. While Rafael waited at the office that had been designated to deal with Spanish matters, Antonio prowled around the courtyard outside, heedless of the rain, in search of commiseration with like-minded company. Which meant company other than Rafael's. How did he do it? – make Rafael feel as if he were his father. He did it all the time; he'd been doing it for the five years that they'd been working together: making Rafael feel middle-aged. In fact, Antonio himself was in his late twenties, by now; there were only twelve years between them.

Rafael had hoped they might be dealt with separately, but then it was, 'Rafael de Prado and your assistant Antonio Gomez.'

'Assistant': Antonio wouldn't like that. He worked for Rafael on Rafael's projects; he didn't 'assist'. Luckily, he hadn't heard. The Spanish official conferred irritably with his English, Spanish-speaking, counterpart before pronouncing, 'Kitson,' and offering his notes to Rafael, tilting them, indicating the name with a fingertip. Rafael made as if to look, but didn't; just concentrated on repeating, 'Kitson.' A relief: it wasn't so hard to say. At least he'd be able to manage the name of his host.

'A merchant,' read the official.

Out of interest, Rafael asked, 'Merchant of what?' but the official shrugged, making clear that he was done.

Fair enough. Rafael stood aside to wait to be fetched. He leaned back against a wall, wishing he could also somehow shrink from himself. He needed to bathe. He longed to bathe. His skin was – well, it was *there*; it was a presence, where usually he'd be unaware of it, be at ease in it. Raised and tight, was the feeling. His dear hope was that there were no other 'presences', nothing having made its own little journey across from a fellow voyager. It was inevitable, though, he knew. Whenever he went to scratch, he'd stop himself, suffer the itch, will it away, try to think of something else. He could think of nothing but water, though: warm, fresh water. He'd had more than enough of sea water. His hair was wild with sea salt and his clothes stiff with it. But fresh, warm water, to lose himself in. Half an hour in it, that's what he craved. The sea-journey had been bad enough, but now he ached from

the wagon: there were jolts packed into his joints and he dreamed of soaking them loose.

Back home, it would be simple, he'd stroll across his family's land to the shrub-veiled pool at the bend in the river. He'd undress, then clamber over the rocks to meet the glare of the water and – this, he always relished – stare it down for a few moments before his surrender. He'd sit there on the rocks with the sunshine on his back. Still sitting, he'd ease himself forward for the drop and then – God! – the cold would snatch at him and crush him, but his shriek wouldn't surface because, like magic, the cold was warm. *Warm*! Warm all along. The trick of it. Tricked, and loving it. He'd wade and loll, gazing at the banks and feeling separate from the world, free of it.

Here, though, in England, in this chill, no one was going to strip off and brave a dip.

Two liveried men arrived, making scant eye-contact with Rafael and barely addressing him or Antonio. Between themselves, though, the pair shared plenty of comment, all of which sounded uncomfortably like complaint.

'No horses?' one of them asked Rafael; or barked at him, contemptuous. *Horses*, Rafael had to guess from the mime: the man exaggeratedly straight-backed, bobbing at the knees, fists paired and raised.

'No,' was all Rafael said. What he could've said, if it weren't forbidden to let on, was, *A thousand horses, and all of them destriers, no less; our Spanish ships sailed with a thousand war horses*. But none of them had sailed into Southampton; they remained moored offshore. The horses were for war with France; they'd soon be sailing on to the Low Countries, now that the wedding was done, as would most of the men and – rumour

had it – the prince himself, keen to do his bit but, as a new bridegroom, having to balance expectations and demands.

Not Rafael, though. No soldier, Rafael. Do the job we're sending you to do, he'd been told, and then you'll be out of there on the first ship home. Last ship in, first ship back. Six weeks at most, they'd said. He'd need only two or three. Six weeks at most, he kept reminding himself. He kept it in mind while – Antonio in tow – he followed the two miserable-looking men out of the courtyard.

He followed them and then, behind a building, around a corner, there was the river, putting a stop to the land, reclining on it, fat and silver, brimming and gleaming despite the leaden sky. A thousand yards wide, he'd heard, and, seeing it, he believed it. Chilly though the waterfront steps were, Rafael was glad to be there. There was lots to see, from nifty wherries of oarsman and solitary passenger to painted, gilded barges, canopied and fabric-draped, each hauled by its own boat of eight or ten rowers. Two of these barges were idling close to the jetty, self-important liveried staff frowning at the steps in an attempt to lay superior claim while their passengers made moves to gather up their finery. Another barge had just departed, heading downstream, presumably city-bound, gathering speed, its silky banners frantic in the breeze. More serviceable barges lacked the canopies but ran to cushioned benches. One drifted near the jetty, one was disembarking, its sensibly dressed clientele trying to clutch cloaks around themselves while feeling for handrails and accepting helping hands, its four rowers resting, flushed, their oar-blades floating placid. One disembarking gentleman had two dogs with him, on leashes, their collars as wide as their slender necks; they

slinked ahead of him on to dry land. Behind the barges, workaday boats jostled for position with their cargoes of hide-covered crates, their crews with rolled-up sleeves and heavy boots. Horses, too, Rafael saw to his surprise. Gliding into view was a vessel bearing five horses. All but one of them stood stock-still, on ceremony, noses raised to the breeze; the troubled one was giving fussy jerks of the head, and an attendant was doing his best to soothe. Wherries passed by, distantly, in both directions, their hulls glinting, the passengers hunkered down and the single or paired oarsmen hauling on the water. Amid all this, fishing boats were biding their time: a couple of dozen, he estimated, on this stretch. And everywhere were swans, some singular, many in conference, each and every one of them looking affronted.

Rafael envied the swans; momentarily forgetting the cold, he wanted to feel his feet like theirs in the water. Suddenly he was impatient to be on it, to feel it under him, buoyant, and to smell it, breathe it in, raw and fragrant. He and Antonio had to wait, though, for a quarter of an hour or so for a small craft – unpromisingly uncovered – to be brought to the steps, and their luggage to be hefted on to it. The three rowers had sweat-plastered hair despite the chill: clearly they'd been busy. To Rafael, they looked horse-faced – these long, flat English faces with big teeth, where they had teeth at all.

He wondered how he looked to them. Foreign, yes, undoubtedly, but how foreign? What kind of 'foreign'? He'd been attracting some stares on the jetty – he was aware of it – but that happened sometimes in Spain. There, though, it was because of the suspicion of Jewish blood. In Spain, he looked as if he was descended from Jews, as if he came from a family

of *conversos*. But there'd been no Jews in England for more than three hundred years: would the English even know what to look for? Antonio had been attracting some interest, but that'd be because – despite his efforts to appear otherwise – he was with Rafael. On his own, he might be able to pass unremarked, here, his hair not far off blond.

Once aboard, they and their two liveried attendants were rowed upstream, heading north in the shadows of the waterfront walls of Whitehall, the palace in which they'd had to while away the afternoon. The biggest palace in Christendom, Rafael had heard. A whole town had been razed just to make space for the tennis courts. It had been built by the queen's father, the one who'd had all the wives and killed some of them. The one who'd locked away his long-serving Spanish wife – the queen's mother – and turned his back on the Pope so that he could marry his English mistress. And now, twenty years on and against all the odds, time had turned and the sole, shut-away, half-Spanish child from that first, ill-fated marriage was queen and married, herself, to a Spaniard, and this palace was hers.

And England was hers and, like her, it was Catholic. That was the idea. Or, at least, the queen's idea. The problem was that the English people had other ideas, Rafael had heard. They weren't taking it seriously. At one church, last Easter, the sacrament was stolen some time between Good Friday and Easter Monday, so that, come the triumphant presentation, there was nothing, and the congregation laughed. No one would ever laugh in a Spanish church. No one would dare.

And just as the queen had been mistaken in her assumption that her people would take easily to the return to Rome, she'd

also been mistaken to assume they'd welcome news of her forthcoming marriage. The ship had been full of it, on the way over: the appalling reception they were facing from the English people. Someone who knew someone who could read English said he'd seen a pamphlet claiming that thousands of Spaniards would be living and working in London by the end of the year. *Jack Spaniard*, it said, coming to rob the English of their livelihoods. According to someone else, snowballs had been lobbed at the dignitaries arriving at the palace with the marriage treaty. That particular scare-story had less impact because no one knew quite how serious an assault that was: did snowballs hurt? Someone from central Spain was consulted, and – to everyone's relief – found it amusing.

English women were shameless: that, too, Rafael had heard on the voyage, but he knew better than to believe what men said about women. He hadn't seen many English women, so far, and had had only fleeting glimpses as he and his fellow countrymen had passed through towns, villages, courtyards. What was striking about them was their minimal headcovering. Certainly no veils. He'd worried that he'd look at them, exposed as they were. Well, he *had* looked at them. He didn't know *how* to look at them: that was what it was. They'd looked at him and at his fellow countrymen, turned and looked, but as yet he'd never once been able to read the expression.

Like most Spaniards, all he'd ever known of England before the scandal of the philandering, excommunicated king, was King Arthur and his round table of knights. Back in his boyhood, he and his best friend Gil had lived and breathed

stories of the English King Arthur. He'd forgotten those stories until he'd known he was coming here; but in his boyhood, as for so many Spanish boys, that for him had been England. Likewise for most of his fellow countrymen, he imagined. Now, though, he didn't seem able to remember anything other than a sword-bearing arm rising from a lake. A woman's arm, rising strong and unequivocal from the murk and weeds: *Here, have this*. Handy. Well, from what he'd already seen, England had no shortage of watery habitats. Ladies of the lakes could be a common feature, for all he knew.

He sniffed before he could stop himself. He'd noticed that everyone in England sniffed all the time, and now he, too, was at it. The prince, he'd heard, had had a dreadful cold at his wedding, within four days of coming ashore. Antonio's nose and the rims of his eyes were red-raw in the wind. He was dishevelled: there was no other word for it. How he must hate that. His near-blond hair, unwashed and damp, was dark; the feather in his hat, lank. Not that Rafael himself would be looking too good, of course, but he didn't expect otherwise. He didn't have Antonio's boyish charm. Mind you, Antonio didn't have Antonio's boyish charm, at present. And he was lost without it. It was how he won people over; everyone except Rafael, of course, no illusions about that. Here, so far, in England, it hadn't been working. Presumably just because he was Spanish, people here turned from it, refused it. It was interesting to witness, but Rafael shied away from gloating. Because, like it or not, they were in this – this trip, this escapade – together.

On the far bank, there was nothing but pasture. Some trees, massive but lopped for firewood. Well, they'd certainly need

that, here. A few patches of cultivation – vegetable gardens, by the look of them, although impossible to see from the boat what was being grown – and an occasional orchard. Nothing much, then, south of the river.

When the river curved east, they were at last beyond the palace and the cluster of official-looking buildings. This, now, was residential, and what residences! He'd thought he'd never see anything to rival the finer houses of Seville – nowhere in the world was as rich as Seville – and having been told that the English were a Godless people, he hadn't expected such elegance. These south-facing houses had their own riverside landings and through the immense ironwork gates there he got glimpses of long, geometrically laid gardens, and statues, fountains and – defiant under the dull sky – sundials. In the distance, behind the riverside walls, were the buildings themselves of rose-red brick and their banks of twisted, towering chimneys.

As the boat came to glide alongside the city itself, Rafael's overriding impression was of the many, many chimneys in a haze of smoke. This time of year, the fires would only be for cooking. How bad would the air be in winter, when Londoners needed heat as well? Above it all, though, reared a Heaven-high, needle-sharp spire. One of the men saw him looking, and gestured towards it, said: 'St Paul's.' He'd spoken grudgingly, but Rafael smiled his thanks for the information.

Standing to disembark, he turned to see an immense bridge downstream. Just the one bridge – all crossings elsewhere were made via the little wherries that had been cutting across in front of and behind their own vessel – but if a city was going to have just one bridge …

'Look at that!' he heard himself say aloud. It was made of arches: nineteen, he made it with a rapid count. Just as impressive, if not more so, was the street of many-storeyed houses that ran down its length. It was like a whole small town afloat on the river.

At the quayside, the two men engaged the services of a porter to assist with the rest of the journey, which was to be undertaken on foot. The cart bearing the trunks trundled off ahead – two near-misses of pedestrians before the first corner – and was soon gone from view. Rafael understood why boating was the preferred mode of transport. The streets were like tunnels: narrow in the first place but made narrower still – almost roofed – by extended, overhanging floors above ground level. Timber-frame buildings. There'd be a big risk of fire even without all the fireplaces these homes and shops would be running during winter. Almost every house was also, on the ground floor, a shop. Doors flew open in their path, admitting and discharging a considerable traffic of customers whose elbows bristled with baskets. Many of them were unaccompanied women. Almost every shop also had a trestle table outside, at which Londoners stopped – usually abruptly – to browse. He'd never seen anything like it: these people clearly loved to shop. As long as you had money to spend, this was the place to be.

Some lanes were paved, but many were lined with planks along which everyone had to process. Londoners were, of course, much better at it than he and Antonio. Londoners were good at it, they were practised, they'd learned to balance. Over-balancing meant sliding into mud and muck, and

within yards his boots were in an appalling state. One of the liveried men shook him by the shoulder to get his attention and then clapped his own hands to his pockets: *Be wary of thieves*. Rafael nodded his thanks, but he didn't need to be told how to protect himself from thieves – he was from Seville. The problem was that he couldn't balance if his hands were in his pockets.

He saw beggars crouching in the muck at every street corner, barely clothed, bootless, and often with children. He presumed they were children, but there was nothing childlike about them. Small people. Pitifully small, with scabby scalps and claw-like hands. In Seville, there were beggars, of course, by the thousands, black and white, from all around Spain and from the colonies: they all came to Seville. But here, in London, it seemed somehow different. Worse. These people – the small ones, particularly – looked abject. Because they were cold, perhaps that was it. Perhaps because of the smell of roasting of meats, which seemed to be everywhere here but wasn't for them – that couldn't help. Something he'd learned on the ship was that there was no charity in England. There was no one to do it; no monks, no nuns. There'd been no religious houses for the past twenty years, thanks to the old king. Nowhere for people to go in hard times but on to the streets. *I hate it here* sprang up in him and squeezed his throat. *I hate it, I hate it*. The choked air, the crammed streets, the pitiful children. How on earth was he going to survive this? Even a day of it, let alone six weeks.

A quarter of an hour or so later, they were in a quiet little street where there were no shops other than what looked like a glove maker's. The two liveried men consulted a note

produced from a pocket, waylaid the sole passer-by for confirmation, and then indicated to Rafael and Antonio that they'd arrived. Rafael was finding it hard to get his bearings, the sun hidden behind tall buildings and then behind cloud, but he decided that the lane ran roughly north–south. All that was to be seen of their destination was a high redbrick wall in which was a solid wooden gate overhung by a sign of crossed keys. A knock on the gate provoked the barking of some dogs and summoned a man in a blue jerkin that was a lot less fancy than the brass-buttoned, braided and crest-embroidered finery of royal households, but nonetheless had the look of livery. Tussling with two wolfhounds, he ushered the visitors through into a cobbled forecourt and there was the house: four-storeyed and newly built, ochre plaster and silvery timber, glassed windows glinting greenish. There was a simple sundial on the wall, a double decliner – north-east facing, then – that'd be no use except on the sunniest of mornings.

They followed the porter and dogs towards the main, rosemary-flanked door of the house on which was a large, interesting doorknocker: the head of some beast, something feline, a leopard. A rap of it got the door opened – and more pandemonium with more dogs – but then someone else had to be found to welcome them inside. And quite something, he was: a tall, slender young man with hair like golden silk. All smiles. Good teeth: just the one gap, but barely visible. The household steward, Rafael later learned. He made much of their welcome to the household, not that they could understand what was actually being said; but whatever it was, it was delivered with flair. Slick, was the word that came to mind. And slick would definitely do, after a day of being fobbed off.

Rafael wished he could respond more fulsomely to it, make the effort to enter the performance, but he hadn't realised how exhausted he was until faced with this ebullience.

The man moved them swiftly to a staircase, shooing back the house dogs, up a flight and then along a rush-carpeted gallery – its walls papered, printed with a design in orange and turquoise – to more stairs, three flights of them. The room was small and simply whitewashed, with a glassed window but no fireplace, and the daylight was so weak that he couldn't immediately ascertain its aspect. Their two chests had been delivered. On the bed were two piles of bedclothes, folded. A truckle bed was perfunctorily demonstrated: for Antonio, Rafael realised with a lurch of despair; he, too, was to be in here. There was no desk. When the truckle was out, there'd be no room for one.

The steward was confiding something, speaking quickly and quietly, his eyebrows raised; he indicated the doorway, the stairs, perhaps the house beyond. Rafael felt this was an explanation and an apology. The house was full and this was all there was. Rafael was careful to keep smiling and nodding; Antonio, he saw, was staring moodily at the window. The steward wore the same blue as the porter, but better cut and better kept, and beneath it was a shirt of good linen, perhaps even Holland linen. He'd stopped speaking and was instead presenting one hand to Rafael, palm upwards; the other hand prodded at it and then at his mouth. Forking food? Then a sweep of the hand that had held the imaginary food, from the doorway: *Some food will be brought up to you*, Rafael understood him to mean. More smiles and nods. No mention of dinner. They'd be having dinner daily at the household. Lunch at the

palace, dinner at the Kitsons', both at no cost: that was the arrangement, or so he'd been told. Could they have missed dinner? What time did these people eat? The steward was going, bowing out of the doorway, off to shower someone else with his abundant beneficence. They'd been dealt with.

Rafael sat on the bed – where else was there to go? – and felt he'd never get up again. Such a long, long day, it'd been; it seemed to have started days ago. And in a way, it had – thirteen days ago, when he'd left home. Two days to the port, five days sailing across the sea, three anchored, and then three travelling through England. And here he was, arrived; only just arrived, but ready now to go home. The journey was done – he'd done it, come to England – and now he wanted to go home. He had a home, and the very fact of it was compelling: home was where he should be. All he had to do was turn and go. Yet he felt adrift, and despaired of ever seeing it or Leonor and Francisco again.

Antonio said, 'I'm going out for a drink.' He spoke from the doorway; he hadn't come in any further. He didn't say, *You coming?* And of course Rafael didn't. He could imagine that there might have been a temporary truce on this first evening at the end of their very long journey. A grudging truce. But no, and he was glad, really, and relieved. They'd been in each other's company all day and – the horror of it – were going to be in each other's company all night. He said, though, 'You don't speak English.' Meaning, *You're Spanish*. And Spanish – as they all knew – wasn't a good thing to be, at present, in London.

No one expected problems from nobles and officials – they'd be well schooled in manners and they'd have jobs to do

and be kept busy doing them – but the common people were known for their dislike of foreigners at the best of times, Rafael had heard, to say nothing of when their reigning monarch had just become a foreigner's wife. Their ruler: now someone's wife, and, worse, someone who wasn't just anyone but heir to the world's biggest empire. Who, in this marriage, was to obey whom? Should she obey her husband, or should he, mere prince in her country, obey her? But he was her husband, and how could a wife not obey? Well, with considerable ease, in Rafael's experience and, he bet, in the experience of a lot of husbands with varying degrees of happiness and success. But the Church, in its unmarried wisdom, saw it as impossible. A wife obeys a husband: simple as that. And, anyway, one day soon, this husband – amenable though he was reputed to be – would be ruler of most of the world, which was another reason, so the thinking went, for his wife to get used to knuckling under. They'd been warned over and over again on the ship to anticipate the Englishman's ambivalence and try to understand it. Play the grateful guest at all times and never rise to provocation because the English – Godless people stuck there on their island – are barbarians and we won't sink to their level. And remember, above all, remember that it's not for long. Six weeks and we'll be gone, diplomatic mission done. Until then, keep your head down.

So, how was striding into a London tavern and speaking Spanish keeping your head down? But, of course, Antonio had an answer, as to all things, unintelligible though this one was to Rafael. It was English, he knew: probably, *A jug of your best ale, please, sir.* Too fast, though, for him to grasp. They'd all learned some English during the voyage – greetings, pleasantries, a few

crucial nouns – from English-speaking seamen, and Rafael had worked longer and harder at it than most, but what Antonio had lacked in application, he was clearly making up for in confidence. And so now here he was, ready for drinks with the locals.

Well, good luck to him. Left alone, Rafael lay back on the unmade bed. *This is so far from home*, came to him. *Leonor, this is so far from home*. She wouldn't want to hear that, though; she'd want to hear about the house. What could he tell her? *I'm in a grand house in London. Blue-liveried staff. Dogs, though, indoors.* In his mind, he walked himself back through the house, the way he'd come, this time taking note and trying to glance ahead. *Everything new, by the look of it: freshly painted panelling, the frames red, the insets gold. Tapestries with a sheen to make you blink. There's a clock just inside the main door, Leonor, and you'll know that I'll be going down there to take a closer look at that.* She wouldn't be interested in the clock; clocks were no interest of hers. He sat up, but laid his head in his hands. *Francisco, Poppet, the doorknocker's a leopard's head. Yes! Snarling, keeping guard on the house. I'll have to be brave, whenever I knock. And there are dogs, too, inside the house. I came here, to this house, on a river; it's almost as wide as you can see, and it's so busy, it's like a town in itself. Not just boats, but swans, hundreds and hundreds of them. And along the river are huge red houses like castles. Do you remember, darling, your 'purple house'?*

No, he wouldn't remember, and Rafael himself was surprised by the memory. Francisco hadn't mentioned his 'purple house' for a long time, perhaps a year or more, but back when he was two or so, if he liked something, he'd say he'd have it for his 'purple house'. *I'll have that in my purple*

house: a little stool; an ornate-handled knife; a neighbour's donkey. No one but Francisco knew what or where this purple house was. Nonetheless, it was well furnished. Long forgotten, now, though. He'd moved on.

What would I have in my purple house? Rafael laughed to himself even as he was aware of being close to tears. These past thirteen days, he'd been shaken to the core by how homesick he felt: the savagery of it, its relentlessness. Dizzied by it, was how he felt. About to buckle. Hollowed, as if something had been ripped from him. His chest sang with the pain and he was confused and ashamed because he saw no sign that other men felt like this. Antonio certainly didn't. But, then, other men too would hide it, wouldn't they, so there'd be no knowing. He hadn't anticipated feeling like this. He'd often been away from home – sometimes for a couple of weeks – and had never enjoyed it, but nothing had prepared him for this. And because he hadn't anticipated it, he felt tripped up, tricked by it, taken unawares and thereby enslaved by it. He couldn't see how he'd get from under it, or how he was going to cope, to continue, from day to day. Common sense told him that he would, that it would lessen, but he didn't believe it. This homesickness was going to hunt him down.

He missed his little Francisco – God, how he missed him – and in six weeks there'd be so much more to miss, because he was growing so fast. A head taller at a time, he seemed. Rafael felt that his son's head came up to his chest now, even though he knew it couldn't be so – but that's where he felt the lack of him, that's where the hollowness was. That little head. Rafael longed to cup the back of it as he had when Francisco

was a baby; take the weight of it, enjoy the fit and solidness of it in one hand. His little boy's hair, too: *his silly blond hair*, as Rafael thought affectionately of it. He longed to touch it, to relish its abundance. Not much of it was there when he was newborn, most of it had grown since – which Rafael found almost comical, and touching: all that busy, vigorous but gloriously oblivious growing that Francisco had done for himself.

What if something happened to Francisco while he was away? This was what had got a hold on him, these last two weeks. This was what was haunting him: the fear that he'd never see his son again. That he'd already seen him for the last time. A fever, a fall. An act of negligence by a servant, or cruelty from a stranger. An abscess deep in an ear, the poison leaking deeper. A cat scratch going bad, a loose cart wheel, a rotten branch, a misfooting on the riverbank, a kick from a horse … Anything or nothing, really: it could be nothing that would do it, in the end. *It happens*.

He longed to ask Leonor, *How do you live with this fear?* In thirteen days, he seemed to have forgotten how to do it.

But Francisco was so full of life, he was crammed with it and, if he were with him now, he wouldn't be sitting around like this. *Snap out of it*, Rafael urged himself. Stop this. For his sake. Because what kind of a father are you to him, to sit here like this, foretelling his death?

And it was at that moment that he saw the child. The door had been left ajar by Antonio and in the gap was a small face, a child, a boy of perhaps four or five years old. Huge blue eyes, serious expression. From behind him came a reprimand, 'Nicholas!' to which he reacted immediately, scarpering. The

voice had been pitched to reach not only the child but also Rafael. And now, pitched even higher, for him alone, came a word he understood: 'Sorry!' The tone was cheerful, confident of acceptance, but no less heartfelt for it. He was across the tiny room in two steps. He couldn't just stay sitting there in silence: he should accept the apology. And make clear that he hadn't minded. On the contrary, any distraction was welcome, even a mute child.

Below on the stairs was a woman – a servant, judging from her simple linen dress and blue apron. She was poised to descend further, coifed head bowed and nape exposed. She was neither very young nor old. She was very pale. A plain, pale woman. Not plain in a bad way, though. Tall, long-boned and broad-browed: that's what he noticed about her. That, and how she touched the child. Over one arm was looped some fine fabric – clothing, probably, for repair – and her free hand was on the little lad's shoulder, ostensibly directing him down on to the step in front of her but, Rafael felt, less a shepherding than an excuse for contact. He recognised the quality of that touch. Parental.

She looked up, saw Rafael, gave a surprised, 'Oh!' and a smile. It spoke to him, that smile, he felt, although it said nothing much, said only pretty much what you'd expect: *Kids, eh?!* That affectation of resignation which was in fact senselessly proud. He did it all the time, he knew, back home, back in his life. He would've loved to have been able to say to her, *Oh, I know, I know, my own little boy* … and he felt she'd have welcomed it. An easy exchange, unremarkable, but such as he hadn't had for weeks. The possibility of which, he realised, he'd begun to despair of. As it was, he returned the

smile and said, 'It's fine, it's fine,' forgetting his English and speaking his own language. She understood him, though, he saw.



The next day, Rafael and Antonio had lunch at court – a whole separate sitting for Spaniards – before returning to their host, as arranged, for supper. Supper was served at five o'clock, they'd learned to their dismay. As such, it would follow their afternoon rest. They'd thought they'd stay at the palace for the afternoons – finding somewhere to bed down – but now they realised that, tide permitting, they might as well go back to the Kitson household after lunch and rest in the relative comfort of their room until supper. The problem concerned afterwards: no doubt everyone at the Kitsons' would return to work after supper for a few hours, but for Rafael and Antonio there would be the journey all the way back to Whitehall. And, again, there was the tide to consider. The cost, too, although the fare was regulated and reasonable. Rafael had been told he'd be fully provided for, but of course he'd come with some money in hand. Whichever way they worked it, there would be, most days, a lot of waiting around, some unanticipated expenditure, and two long return journeys on the river.

Not for the time being, though. Apart from a couple of site visits, Rafael didn't need to be anywhere in particular to do his work, although it would help to have space to lay out his drawings. In a couple of weeks' time, though, Antonio would need a workshop in which to execute the design.