

Sasha Pacino was born on the Sunshine Coast in 1988. In her twenties, she travelled to Cairns where she heard the story of José Paronella. *After the Tempest* is her first novel. She lives in Queensland.

AFTER THE TEMPEST

THE MEMOIRS OF
A CATALAN IMMIGRANT

SASHA PACINO



BOOBOOK PRESS

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Boobook Press acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia, and we pay our respect to Elders past and present. We honour more than sixty thousand years of storytelling.

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For the dreamers



A NOTE ON SPANISH LANGUAGES

Spain is home to five official languages: Aranese, Basque, Castilian Spanish, Catalan (Valencian) and Galician. This work primarily uses Catalan as well as Castilian Spanish, depending on which province the narrative is set in. Although different languages, many words used in this work are the same or similar.

CONTENTS

PART ONE	1
An Unstable Atmosphere (1887—1913)	
PART TWO	105
The Eye of the Storm (1913—1924)	
PART THREE	203
The Eyewall (1924—1926)	
PART FOUR	287
Alchemy (1926—1939)	
PART FIVE	323
A Depression (1939—1948)	

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: Oh, my only
Light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

George Herbert, *The Flower*

PART ONE

An Unstable Atmosphere

(1887—1913)

Els catalans de les pedres en fan pans.

Catalans make bread from stones.

Catalan proverb

CHAPTER ONE

I am Born

I was born during a tempest. There was a squall outside—the storm—then a squall inside—me, red-faced and crying. It was a February storm, and I have been told—for I was too busy mewling to pay attention—that it was the worst one of 1887. The women of Casa Paronella swaddled me in blankets and thanked God Mare had survived her sixth childbirth, a mortal gift many *senyores* were not afforded back then despite the progeny of prayers sent to Heaven. After a little pondering—my quintet of siblings had exhausted the familial name pool—Mare and Pare christened me José Pedro Enrique Paronella, or as the immigration officer said many years later, ‘Quite a mouthful.’ Our pecking order was as follows: Pere and Fruitos, the girls Enriqueta and Dolores, then Teodoro and finally me, the twitching tail of the family, rushed forth with the frantic wind.

We lived in an old two-room cottage like penned rabbits. Mare was a strong, capable *senyora* who moved with ease from the *casa*

to the olive groves where she helped Pare in the hot, dry summers when the *petit*, bitter fruit grew abundantly—too abundantly. ‘A poor man can drown in olives,’ Pare lamented every summer solstice—and there were many varieties to drown in: Picual, Hojiblanca, Empeltre and Arbequina, to name a few. Pare drowned in Arbequina, courtesy of the Duke of Medinaceli, Lord of Arbeka. According to history—though it might just be legend—the Duke of Medinaceli brought the first Arbequina seeds from Jerusalem to Spain in the Middle Ages.

Pare was a tanned man, the suntan a currency of his labour in the fields, with a mop of curly hair the colour of the black Arbequina olives he picked. His countenance wore a resigned look set in like a perpetual winter fog. He dreamt of vernal change, a rebirth from the cold-hearted life of a peasant. He wished to own the farm he laboured on instead of working for another *senyor*, a rich *senyor*. But it was a dream reserved for night. His wealth of experience could not be exchanged for *pesetas*. We were as poor as the mice scurrying about the village church.

We lived a simple, hand-to-mouth existence. But we Catalan peasants have a saying, *Els catalans de les pedres en fan pans*. It means Catalans make bread from stones. And it was true. Mare and Pare, like their *mare* and *pare* before them, had turned the solid non-metallic mineral into bread for decades. There was always food on the table; any hunger pangs were soon swallowed. So despite my humble beginnings, I suckled like a lamb and grew accordingly. I gobbled my chicken, reluctantly nibbled the vegetables, relished Mare’s *fuet* and *botifarra*, which she made for special occasions, and grew even more. ‘Like a sprout,’ Àvia—Mare’s *mare*—said. I was an active boy, and everyone called me Pep, a diminutive of Josep, like José.

Every evening, after dinner, Àvia would relax, invite me onto her bony lap and narrate a fable before bed. I, being the youngest and most *petit*, was the only one allowed to sit there, as my dinky frame did not aggravate her rheumatic limbs. Àvia's lap was bony, for she had shrunk in old age, as is the curious habit of the elderly—a habit, I must admit, I am conforming to these days.

Àvia was a severe-looking woman with a face as hard as the iron the village boys nailed onto the hooves of the once wild horses. One of her steely looks, and you obeyed like a hound. She need not utter a word; the look spoke volumes. Like most womenfolk in the village, she dressed only in black as though in mourning for the hard life she had endured—Àvia was a widow; I never got to meet Avi, for he died before the worst tempest of 1887 and my birth—and her long hair, blue grey like a Chartreux cat, was always fastened in a tight bun, lifting the drooping skin on her forehead up a good centimetre.

One tepid spring night, in the dim light of the oil lamp, Àvia told me a Catalan fairy tale called '*L'aigua de Vida*,' 'The Water of Life.' The fable was about a quartet of poor but spirited children—a trio of brothers and a sister—who, through a chasm of black-and-white magic, changed the tune of their humdrum existence to end up living in a castle like the *noblesa*. After first hearing it, I begged her nightly to tell me the story before bed, crying, 'Àvia! "*L'aigua de Vida*!" "*L'aigua de Vida*!"' I always imagined it would be us living in a castle one day. It was a naïve thought, but then again, children specialise in naiveté. Like the way they believe in the *Tió de Nadal*, the Christmas Log, that defecates presents.

I think my saving grace was that I belonged to a generation where children were seen but not heard. I never voiced my dreams

out loud so was never laughed at or told no. I believe that moment—when Àvia told me ‘The Water of Life’—was when the seed of hope was sowed in my blue-sky thoughts. And how it grew over time—in part to Àvia’s nurturing!

When my Piscean mind was old enough to understand—six, maybe seven—Àvia imparted two pieces of folk wisdom. Firstly, she told me the Tempest’s Child leads an interesting life, and that my *vida* would be full of adventure like a Miguel de Cervantes story. I was destined to travel in many different directions like the wind that cold winter’s night, the night of my birth and the worst tempest of 1887. And secondly, she told me José meant ‘God will increase,’ and that I must always take the high road in this adventurous *vida*.

She was a wise *senyora*, my *àvia*, and I wanted to believe her, but I was sceptical. Nothing ever happened in La Vall de Santa Creu. It was—still is, I presume—a *petit* olive-farming village, a hamlet barely warranting a dot on a map. But then, one day, I was corrected. Something did happen, and it began a ripple effect. It set events in motion with the rapidity of lightning, and I learnt the hard way that the *petit* world I lived in was unpredictable and fragile: unstable like the atmosphere. I learnt there is not always a happy ending like in ‘The Water of Life,’ that *vida* can be sad and unchangeable, set in stone like the caves the wild bees make their hives in.

CHAPTER TWO

My Life Truly Begins

It was high summer, and I was picking ripe tomatoes in Mare's vegetable garden when screams rent the warm air. Never in my short life had I heard anyone scream like that. The screams did not belong to children playing silly games or a maiden stumbling across a scorpion or tarantula. They were unbearably shrill. I had no doubt: something bad had happened. I dropped the basket of tomatoes, the fruit rolling down one of the village's many slopes, and darted towards the sound. Dolores abandoned the fowl she was about to wring, and Àvia discarded the socks she was darning inside the cottage. We had to hurry. There was nobody else. Only us.

La Vall de Santa Creu was so *petit* few roads led inside its cocoon. In fact, there was only one road—a twisted track. I had never traversed it, but Pare had throughout his *vida*. One afternoon, when he was in a rare moment of ease and joviality instead of solemn exhaustion, I asked him about that lonesome road. He said it was two-donkeys narrow and passable only by foot or mule—and,

he added as a footnote, mules were for *senyors* with money, meaning not us. Never us. We were poor. He said the road's mood changed with the seasons, that it was stolid in the dusty summers, and fickle and rutted in the wet, muddy winters. And he said an old stone wall bordered one side. When I asked why only one side had a wall, Pare explained it was for safety, for the road wended its way down a steep hill and a *senyor* could get blown over the edge in bad weather, and I gasped, for what a way to go—death by squall. After he told me that, I both revered and feared that narrow road that connected our *petit* village to the outside world, and given what Àvia had told me about my *vida*, I wondered if the Revered and Feared Road would ever feature in my story, if it was the high road she had spoken of.

It was not until I was older that I understood taking the high road meant being honourable, and I must admit, I have not always done the honourable thing.

Due to that lonesome road, to our isolation, it was up to us villagers to help one another, to dispense our own brand of medicine using the sage knowledge passed down between generations and whatever was on our shelves, in our herb gardens. When Enriqueta's stomach ached every full moon, it was Àvia who concocted a potion to ease the pain; when Teodoro injured his working arm, it was Àvia who healed it with a poultice and a prayer; and when the old widower at the end of the street got a fever, it was Àvia who nursed him back to health with a tincture, the fever passing in twenty-four hours. But neither Enriqueta, Teodoro nor that old widower had screamed in such a horrific way, so I knew the owner of those screams was going to have more than an ache, an injury or a burning temperature.

Much more.

The screams continued long and loud, so loud they could wake the dead. I sprinted down the lane by the cottage, through the green gate, leaving it open like an astonished mouth, and regarded the cobblestone street for a split second. The screams were coming from the neighbour's cottage.

Only a stone wall separated our dwellings. Their cottage, like most in the village, was a crudely built white-stuccoed mud hut with a terracotta roof. It contained two rooms: one for living, the other for sleeping. Though I must say, our cottage was slightly more substantial as it boasted stone.

I wrenched open the neighbour's gate and hurried down the lane towards the front door. I knew I would be too *petit* to help, but my short, skinny legs hurried anyway. Deafening shrieks cut through the heavy air. I grabbed the handle—it was unlocked, as always—the village was too *petit* for crime—burst into the cottage and surveyed the room. To this day, I remember what I saw. It was a ghastly, confronting sight. Even the usually impassive Dolores failed to stifle a gasp.

Our neighbour, Senyora Soler, was wailing and mumbling a prayer as she darted anxiously around a foreign disfigured man. Her movements were so full of anxiety none were complete. They hung unfinished in the sultry air like questions begging to be answered. I wondered if the man was a pedlar who had unwittingly ventured up the Revered and Feared Road. He was not a local, of that I was certain. I had never seen him before, and La Vall de Santa Creu was an omniscient village where everyone knew everyone, a place where any new characters soon became known. Our hamlet was a world within a world: a cocoon.

‘*Ai* God, please! Please, God!’ she implored.

Senyora Soler had a shock of wavy raven hair that formed a widow's peak, and despite her labouring, she remained a pinch rotund, for she, like Mare, had given birth to a sextet of infants: three boys and three girls. The childbearing had given her wide hips, an ample bosom and a penchant, like all womenfolk in the village, for knowing the right prayer for the right *problema*. But I was unsure a prayer existed to help correct such a grave deformity.

Her daughter, Matilde, stood in the corner of the room weeping as she nursed her squalling baby sister, Margarita. The eldest sister was married and, like Pere and Fruitos, her brothers had left home. Matilde was only a year younger than me. She possessed the same hair as her *mare*. Sometimes I passed her when I walked the four miles to school—sometimes, for I attended sporadically. I was usually at home doing chores, a necessity that eclipsed enlightenment.

I must admit, I did not like Matilde much as a boy. One afternoon, while we were playing hide-and-seek in the lanes between the olive groves, she told me I had big ears; that was how she had found me. I imagined my elephantine ears sticking out past the olive branches. After that, I took to pressing my pair of hearing organs back each day for a minute in hope of resculpting them like an unfired clay artwork. But Mare's kiln had done its job. They still stick out a little to this day.

The disfigured man, groaning with pain, sat slumped in an old wooden chair in the corner of the room. His skin was inflamed with so many wheals they joined to make one big lesion the shape of Man. He was as red as fire, and I imagined touching him would cause the second party a severe burn. It was almost as if someone had committed the unnatural crime of treating him like a balloon, blowing into his mouth until he inflated, until he got bigger and

bigger, puffier and puffier. His lips were bloated; his eyelids so swollen they buried his chinks of vision in the enlarged folds of skin like a coffin in the ground; and his thick fingers touched one another, making his hands look like a pair of winter gloves. I wondered who the man was, what had happened to him.

‘*Ai, amor meu!* Oh, my love!’ Senyora Soler wailed.

Upon hearing the affectionate term, I realised the disfigured man was no stranger; he was her husband. Senyor Soler was a beekeeper who often traded honey for vegetables from Mare’s garden. Only the other week he had given Mare a jar of the sunny liquid in exchange for a basket of tomatoes I had picked. He was normally a spry, limber man like Pare, but that day he looked like he had stumbled out of the Underworld, not from among the wild oak trees.

‘What happened?’ Àvia asked.

‘B-bees. They—’ A sobbing Senyora Soler tried to speak, but the words got caught in her throat. ‘—a-attacked him.’

As soon as she said the words ‘bees’ and ‘attacked,’ my eyes shot to the open window. Through its mouth, I saw a swarm of the insects moving as one, as a devilish apparition, hovering around the bushes. Their harrowing buzz, though distant, possessed a strange, thunderous quality. Witnessing the damage they had inflicted upon Senyor Soler, I thought it just of Mother Nature to decree the stinging insects die after such assaults. Except, of course, for the queen bee. Always different rules for the *noblesa*.

‘Antonio,’ Senyora Soler quavered, ‘was retrieving honey from the hive, b-but the bees became agitated and a-a-attacked him.’ She paused for a moment, stomach heaving, body trembling. ‘They stung him from head to t-toe.’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘Even through his c-clothes.’

My young eyes flitted to Senyor Soler's garments. I do not know what I expected to find. Perhaps thousands of holes from the stings in the material, but they merely looked like the average farmer's rags, soiled with dirt and sweat. My mind conjured up an image of his person becoming black with a colony of bees. To think it had happened while I was picking tomatoes. I was surprised I had not heard him cry out in pain, but shock, as I now know firsthand, renders you motionless.

Just then a torrent of knocks boomed, and a woman's voice yelled, 'Is everything okay?' The adults exchanged brief, knowing glances. No one looked at me. I was only a boy. But they looked at Dolores. She was old enough to be included, to be considered an adult. Senyora Soler put her head in her hands and wailed. Àvia, seeing the woman was in no state to answer her own door, assumed the role of host. Behind the wooden slab stood a group of villagers, their presence, despair and curiosity only adding to the disorder in a burst of queries:

'What happened?'

'You need help?'

'I'll go get Senyora Borda.'

Senyora Borda, a sort of *curandero*, a healer, lived on the outskirts of the village. Her weathered cottage was crammed with folk medicines to cure every ail. She consulted books written in Latin, though not a soul knew how she had mastered the foreign tongue. Some said she had learnt it on her travels, others that she was born knowing it, that she possessed a curious gift for seeing things mortals were blind to.

But Àvia declined their offers, assured them everything was under control and suggested firmly—she never 'ordered'—they be

on their way. The villagers acquiesced. She was a difficult person to say no to. How can you say no to a face as hard as iron?

So, one by one, the villagers left, lumbering down the lane, good intentions in tow, but not before telling Senyora Soler to call if she needed anything, anything at all. Senyora Soler, too distraught to reply, stood snivelling. Once the last do-gooder departed, Àvia walked over to Senyora Soler and whispered something in her ear, but she remained stunned. Àvia gently squeezed her limp arm, squeezed the thoughts out of her, squeezed her back to reality—or tried to. Senyora Soler merely nodded while staring vacantly into space. I looked at that space, expecting to find something. But there was nothing, just a scratched wall, a clawed floor: an injured void. That peculiar place between the severance of calm normality and shocked disbelief.

Àvia turned to me: ‘Pep, close the windows.’ Then, to Dolores: ‘Help Senyor Soler to bed.’

Without another word, Àvia disappeared in search of medicine to soothe the wheals, ease the pain, and reduce the swelling. She would heal the malady just as she had fixed Enriqueta’s stomach pains, Teodoro’s injured arm, and the old widower’s fever. Like the villagers, we obeyed. I hurried over to the window and grabbed the latch, but it was difficult to shut. Proportion rendered my arms as short and skinny as my legs, and I feared that despite being the help, I would need to ask for it. I pushed and pulled, pulled and pushed. It took all my might to close that window, and when it clunked shut, I heaved a sigh of relief.

Dolores was by Senyor Soler’s side helping him up. For a moment, I thought her slender frame was going to buckle under his weight, but Senyora Soler followed suit, shouldering her

husband's other half. Together they awkwardly transported him to the bed in the second room of the cottage. He was oblivious to being carried like a helpless child. A veil of shock had been yanked over his soul, making him detached from reality, from the people and movements around him. They eased his swollen body down on the straw mattress, Dolores supporting his torso and Senyora Soler adjusting his legs. Once he was arranged, Senyora Soler sat by her husband's side and recommenced praying, prayer being the only remedy within her immediate control. She prayed until Àvia returned a few minutes later with a poultice. Dolores helped her apply it. Àvia was already passing on her sage knowledge to my sisters, just as she had to Mare. Senyor Soler groaned when the poultice touched his inflamed skin. His wife watched on, hands shaking uncontrollably, tears blinding her eyes.

When the poultice was finished, Àvia rose, brushed her skirts, then placed a hand on Senyora Soler's shoulder, leant down and said to call if needed. With that, she turned and headed towards the door: we were leaving. We Paronellas had done everything within our power to help. All we could do now was pray. I was still unsure the right prayer existed for such a *problema*, but if anyone knew the right prayer, it would be Àvia.

That afternoon, we returned to Casa Paronella a solemn lot. Àvia finished darning our socks, Dolores wrung the fowl that Fate had ordained to live an extra hour, and I picked up the bruised tomatoes, replacing them in the wicker basket before continuing to pick the ripe ones. But nothing was the same. Everything was different. The fruit's red epidermis and plump flesh reminded me of Senyor Soler's inflamed skin, and I wondered if he could recover from a trauma so grave. I thought about it so much, with such

nervous energy, I was surprised to learn I had soon picked every ripe tomato in the garden.

I took the basket to the kitchen, a separate building at the rear of the cottage, and set it down on the shelf next to a half-empty jar of honey. That sticky, yellow substance had now acquired an ominous feeling. I would not knock on the door of Casa Soler on the morrow to exchange tomatoes for the syrup. Nor the next. Something told me it would not happen for a long time.

Later, as the summer sun bade us farewell, I helped Dolores kindle a fire with split wood, then she boiled a pot of water and plucked the fowl, its feathers gumming to her. We had no running water or electricity. Our water came from a crystal-clear stream that flowed down the mountain and was channelled to a spout for drinking and a communal pool for washing clothes. In the hot, dry summers, the stream was thirsty for rain, while in winter, it froze over. After darkness had descended upon the hamlet, our light came from oil lamps and candles, but we used both frugally. Staying up late and talking or reading was an indulgence not afforded to us. We had to rise with the morrow's sun and begin a hard day's work all over again. Such was our simple, hand-to-mouth existence.

Dolores hastily basted the fowl and roasted it, the wafting aroma making my tummy rumble. Everything Dolores made was delicious. Mare had taught her and Enriqueta how to cook, just as Àvia had taught Mare, just as she had imparted her wisdom of folk medicines.

That evening, when Mare and Pare returned from the olive groves, Dolores served the roasted fowl for dinner. But as we ate, instead of talking about olive groves, olive presses and olive oils, all we spoke of was Senyor Soler and the tragedy that had befallen him. Àvia relayed the event: the screams, the stings, the poultice.

‘Bees,’ Mare said, ‘who’d have thought?’

‘I’ve never seen a man so red,’ I prattled on, ‘so swollen. He—’

‘*Pst!*’ Mare hissed. ‘Let Àvia speak.’

Head hung low, I retreated to my plate and swallowed the words with a mouthful of chicken; the dead fowl did not scold me. When Àvia had finished, Dolores gave her version. With each account, Mare, Pare, Enriqueta and Teodoro listened intently and shook their heads in disbelief. As I sat there, I could not help but notice they had omitted a lot of description, but I said nothing and swallowed such opinions with my chicken too. I would tell Teodoro when we were alone. He was the closest in age to me and would appreciate my detail.

That night, I fell into a slumber thinking about what I had witnessed. As I slept, nightmares swarmed. I heard Senyora Soler’s screams, saw Senyor Soler’s disfigured body, then realised it was me: I had been stung. Wheals rose up on my skin. I tossed and turned. As the sun rose on the morrow, shrieks awoke me with a start.

I was no longer dreaming.

It really was Senyora Soler.



We hurried next door to find Senyora Soler crying and gesticulating wildly. Upon seeing us, she disappeared inside the cottage. Àvia, Mare, Pare, Enriqueta and Dolores followed, Teodoro and I behind them. Matilde, her face like a grey sky about to burst, stood in the corner of the first room cradling baby Margarita. In the second room, the adults spoke in hushed tones over Senyora Soler’s cries. I searched their countenances for an answer as to what was happening.

Their faces were as white as the snow-capped Pyrenees in winter, and white is not only the colour of shock but the colour of truth, for shock has neither chance nor time to lie. Whatever had happened was worse than the day before. Senyora Soler seemed to sense this, for suddenly long, loud sounds of lamentation filled the cottage. I stepped forwards, wriggled and pushed my way through the knot of limbs and torsos, and peeked around the doorframe. There, I saw a lifeless man's body. His skin was pasty, his joints as stiff as wood. One leg was buckled so uncomfortably it begged for correction.

The man was Senyor Soler.

He was dead.

Mort.

Lightning had struck. I was young, merely a boy, and certainly not versed in the intricacies of death. I knew only that it happened to the fowl in the chicken run, that it happened to the goats, sheep, cows and pigs; and I knew it had a finality about it, for the animals were as still as statues and never resurrected from the dead. Instead, they morphed into meals. They became our dinner and the *fuet* and *botifarra* Mare made for special occasions that I devoured without a hint of guilt.

Àvia tried to help a distraught Senyora Soler sit down, but shock had rendered her inconsolable, unable to move. She could do only one thing: keen. Matilde wept, and baby Margarita cried; she cried for her *mare* but had to settle for her sister. There, in that domestic mausoleum, we all crossed ourselves. That morning, I returned home with two new sisters; Mare had offered to mind Matilde and Margarita while Senyora Soler—with her sister's help—tended to the funeral arrangements.

‘A wife! A wife and six children!’ Àvia said to Mare, who was kneading dough in the kitchen. Àvia shook her head in disbelief and crossed herself between bounces, one hand bobbing baby Margarita up and down while the other assumed the religious rites of her upbringing. ‘One minute you’re smelling the flowers, next they’re the dozen at your funeral.’

I looked out the window; Matilde was walking with Dolores in the garden. It had never occurred to me bee stings could be fatal, but it seemed it had not occurred to anyone else either, for Senyor Soler’s death was a great shock to the village. People died of *other* things, of illnesses, heart attacks, knife wounds and shying horses.

Not bees.

Never bees.



That night, I asked Àvia about those murderous insects. She invited me onto her bony lap and told me a fairy tale inspired by the ancient Near East. She called it ‘The Spirits of the Gone.’ All these years later, I cannot recall the actual story, only the myth behind it. There are cultures, Àvia said, on this earthly plane that believe bees bridge the Natural World to the Underworld, the place where the spirits of the gone go. I knew by gone she meant dead—*mort*—for the fowl that was alive at dawn, killed by noon and gracing our plates by evening was gone, never to return. When I asked her why bees were bridges—why not butterflies or beetles?—she said it was because wild hives were almost always located in caves, and caves were mortal entrances to the immortal Underworld.

The story was meant to comfort me, but as I lay on the straw mattress that night, I came to the conclusion that death only frightened me more. So, in addition to the Revered and Feared Road, I also came to fear caves and the wild hives I found in the cracks of rock walls, for it meant an entrance to the Underworld was nearby, and although I could not see it, I had no doubt it existed, just like the air I breathed. Whenever I saw one, I would gasp and run as fast as my short, skinny legs would carry me.



Every *casa* in the village heard the bells tolling. To their macabre *ding-dong, dong-ding* we made the pilgrimage to the *petit* church in town. The bell tower's body was like a trigger finger pointing at the Heavens. My eyes followed its long figure up to the low-slung sky. I hoped to see a celestial sign—of what I did not know. Perhaps confirmation of Senyor Soler's arrival up there, in Heaven. Something that made me fear the finality of death less. But I saw only gloomy clouds begging to break.

When the service began, ululations of grief, the shrillest belonging to Senyora Soler, echoed throughout the building. Tears streamed down Matilde's cheeks and dripped onto little Margarita's head. Margarita was too young to know what was happening and would be too young to remember that *senyor* called *pare*.

I soon became restless on the hard wooden pews and wriggled about. Àvia nudged me, told me to be respectful and listen to the priest. She told me with one word—*pst!*—and one look—the look as hard as nails. I obeyed, gluing my eyes to that consecrated man who officiated death.

I mention the beekeeper's passing not only because it was the day I lost my naiveté of the world and comprehended the twin workings of Life and Death, but because it was the beginning of a series of events that would bind the Paronellas and Solers together for a lifetime.

CHAPTER THREE

I Have a Change

One morning, one full moon after Senyor Soler's death, Mare was in the kitchen kneading dough, the weight of her body leaning into the mixture as she transformed it from stones to bread like we Catalans do, when she said:

‘Pep, go collect your *mòmia* some eggs.’

‘Sí, Mare.’

Outside, I poured water into the hens' trough, opened the chicken coop and, while they squabbled over who was first, went in and gathered their eggs. When I returned with a full basket, Mare clapped her hands together, the flour dusting the counter like falling snow, then wiped the stubborn remains on her smock and beckoned me over. I placed the basket next to the honey and followed. She pulled out a chair and scooped me up onto her lap. It was warm and thick with middle age, not bony like Àvia's. Then she combed her fingers through my unruly black curls. It was a rare gesture, and I relished being so close to her, inhaling her scent: flour, herbs, soap.

‘Soon,’ she said, ‘you’ll have a little brother or sister. But—’ She held up her index finger. ‘—don’t tell anyone. Not yet.’

I nodded uncertainly. ‘*D’acord, Mare.* Okay, Mother.’

Mare had spent a good portion of her married life either pregnant or in a period of convalescence after childbirth or a miscarriage. Looking back, I consider it a feat of biology Mare and Pare managed to have so many children. They seemed to set eyes on each other only at dinner, and the darkest hours of the night did not even belong to them, for we all slept crammed in the same *petit* room.

Mare kissed my cheek, then next I was standing on the ground, and she was back kneading the dough. It was not until evening, when I overheard Mare and Pare talking, that I understood why it was a secret.

‘My goodness,’ Mare said, ‘Senyor Soler loses his *vida*, and we get blessed with a *nova vida*.’

Pare agreed. ‘The timing’s not good.’

‘What should I say? Before long, I’ll show.’

‘The truth. She’ll find out sooner or later, no?’



Time disappeared like rain into a deep, dark well. Summer departed, and autumn arrived with shortened days and leaves the colour of terracotta, moss and mustard. Senyora Soler started leaving Casa Soler and doing the things she did before the bee-keeper’s death, and slowly the womenfolk in the village, Mare and Àvia included, stopped helping her, ceased bringing food and minding the Soler girls.

Mare's stomach was now bloated with new life. She looked like she had swallowed a melon. I was surprised to learn the melon moved. One afternoon, while Mare was resting her swollen feet and aching back, she placed my hands on her stomach, and I felt a kick.

‘Does it hurt?’ I asked.

She laughed. It was a loud, uninhibited laugh. ‘No, Pep. It feels like ripples under the skin.’

Ripples, I thought. ‘Like when the wind blows the stream?’

‘*Sí*. Only under your skin.’

But the melon was hatching a sickness inside her, and I came to think of it as poisonous, like the wild red berries in the Iberian forests. Her symptoms only worsened until, one evening, everything came to a head. We were seated around the old wooden table finishing dinner when Àvia swallowed a forkful of chicken, looked squarely at Mare and urged her to stop working until the baby was born:

‘If you're unwell, the baby will be unwell.’

But Mare dismissed such a notion with the wave of her hand. ‘I'm fine. Besides, there's too much to do. The fowls won't wring themselves, the eggs won't collect themselves, and the bread won't knead itself.’

I wanted to tell her I would happily collect the eggs, like I did that summer's day she told me I would have a little brother or sister, but I stayed silent, for Àvia was about to speak. But before Àvia could utter a word, Mare heaved her bloated body up, one hand on her lower back, the other on the tabletop. Once standing, she picked up her plate and headed to the basin. She was halfway there when a wail shot out of her mouth, and she doubled over in pain. The hand holding the crockery darted to her abdomen, and

the plate and cutlery fell to the floor, the dish smashing and the utensils landing with a clang. The colour drained from her face. There was no trace of her usual tan from labouring in the garden. For a moment, I thought she might faint, but instead she hunched over and vomited, the pungent odour suffocating the *petit* room. We shrieked:

‘Mare!’

‘Maria!’

We rushed to her. Mare remained on her hands and knees, vomiting until only bile came up. We looked at Àvia. Only she understood what was happening to Mare, to her daughter. Only she knew what to do.

To Pare and Teodoro, she said: ‘Help her to bed.’ Then to Enriqueta and Dolores: ‘Come.’

But Àvia said nothing to me. I was too *petit* to help, though I desperately wanted to. ‘Should I get Senyora Borda?’ I ventured, thinking of the *curandero*.

‘No.’

Àvia’s answer was curt, and I felt bad in the stomach for having asked. Mare, weak and vulnerable, clasped Pare’s arm with one hand, her abdomen with the other, and shuffled, stopping every few steps to cry out in pain. Blood trickled down her legs onto the floor. I yearned for the stern matriarch to return. I wanted the same Mare who had scooped me up a few months ago, the Mare who had combed her fingers through my unruly hair.

In the second room, Pare and Teodoro helped her lie down. Her swollen ankles were streaked with blood, and her sullied skirts were like a stage curtain revealing a provincial drama. Hurried footsteps echoed. Àvia, Enriqueta and Dolores, all carrying old

remedies—nettle, rue, artemisia, boiling water—entered and set everything down on the old dresser, then got to work making poultices and potions. Such was the precarity of time, it seemed like I only blinked and the sheets were dyed red with blood. Mare was pallid, the paleness a stark contrast to her black hair, the only sign of age the grey streaks stroking her temples. She was sweaty too, but it was a cool night. A draft stole through the open window, making me shiver. Àvia dabbed the salty moisture from Mare's forehead with a damp rag.

'What's happening?' I asked.

'The baby is leaving your *mare's* body.'

I nodded. I was a country boy and had witnessed many a farm animal give birth, but that was different. Very different.

The rag soon became wet with sweat. Àvia wrung it out, then turned to Teodoro and I and said, 'Go to bed.'

We obeyed. We were in the way. We dragged the second mattress into the corner of the first room and lay down head to toe, but I was too worried to sleep.

'Mare will be okay, won't she?' I whispered to Teodoro.

'Of course. Àvia will heal her.'

'But she didn't heal Senyor Soler.'

'That was different.'

'How?'

'Senyor Soler was attacked. Mare is sick.'

He spoke with certainty, and I wanted to believe his reasoning. I did believe him. Again, I reminded myself how Àvia had healed Enriqueta's stomach pains, Teodoro's injured arm and the widower's fever. Yet I worried. I could not stop thinking about Mare, about the baby, about how I had felt it move with my own hands. *Like ripples,*

she had said. This thinking eventually wearied my mind... my blinks grew slower and heavier... and I drifted off... It was a light slumber, and between snatches of sleep I heard Àvia, Enriqueta and Dolores tending to Mare, but despite their efforts, the blood flowed like a vermillion stream. Two shades of red showed time like a clock: the new blood was bright; the old blood tinged brown. I heard the words ‘hem’ and ‘rage,’ but I was too young to understand their meaning. So was Teodoro.



I awoke to a shadow hovering over me with a candle burnt almost to the wick. Outside, the midnight moon hung like a clock in the violet sky.

‘Pare?’ Rubbing my eyes, I edged my body upright and looked around the *petit* room. Teodoro was gone. I studied Pare’s countenance in the dying candlelight. Upon witnessing his furrowed brows, watery eyes and downturned mouth, I knew something bad had happened. The message was written on his face like the day of the beekeeper’s passing. ‘The baby,’ I said, ‘it didn’t make it?’

Pare, swallowing tears, shook his head in shocked disbelief and stared at the floor as though the words he wanted to say had fallen there. I followed his gaze but found no letters, only darkness. A pregnant silence hung in the stagnant air for what seemed like an age.

‘It’s your *mare*...’ His voice was *petit*, peculiar: unrecognisable. ‘She’s—she’s gone. She and the baby.’

Gone. I thought of Àvia’s fairy tale, ‘The Spirits of the Gone,’ of bees, the bridge and Underworld. More silence, more stillness followed. It hung in the suffocating air like a ghost: invisible but

ever-present and strongly felt. In that moment, despite the draft, despite the chill rattling my bones, a foreign heat pulsed through me, burning away flesh and muscle, leaving me feeling light and seeing black. As I tried blinking away this blackness, Pare's face contorted and a strange noise escaped his mouth, a high-pitched sound of distress, almost hysteria. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach. The sight scared me. I had never seen Pare cry before, and I did not want to. It confirmed what I did not want to know—that Mare was gone.

Pare was an unyielding man, hardened by labour, by the universe's inability to grant him the dream of owning a farm, of some sort of lenience like a reprieve from the drudgery of everyday life. He was a *senyor* who yelled, not cried. Pare seemed to sense my shock, for self-consciousness suddenly seized him, and his hand shot to his face to try to mask the grief. I averted my eyes. I could offer no other comfort. Without another word, he walked out the door and disappeared into the darkness, the dying candle extinguishing in the draft.

All I heard was crying. Everyone was crying. Sobbing. Weeping. Wailing. Plumbing the depths of sadness. Àvia was loudest. She paced the cottage as she keened for her lost daughter, her voice raw and primitive. Every few steps, she stopped and looked up at the ceiling as though there, in that quarter of the *casa*, she would find either God, Mare's spirit or an answer to the tragedy that had just befallen us. As she focussed on a spot, she mumbled a prayer, crossed herself and said, 'Oh my dear Maria.' Then her eyes shot to the floor, the Devil's quarters. Ritual completed, she shuffled a few more steps before repeating the process. Her visceral voice, coupled with her movements, only added to the ethereal feeling the *casa* possessed that

fateful night. She received no answer. None of us did. The cottage was no longer a home but a coffin, and Mare had died at its edges. I walked over to her body, the shell of her being, reached out and touched her cheek: it was as cold as winter. The rusty, metallic smell of blood and the sodden straw mattress suffocated the *petit* room.

‘Mare,’ I cried. ‘*Mare.*’

Lightning had struck.

It had struck us just like it had struck the Solers.



I awoke in a daze, my face sore, puffy and tight. The only sounds of life were the warbling birds and moulting trees rustling in the breeze. Then it hit me like an equine kick. I remembered last night, remembered the darkness, blood and relentless crying that had pushed me to sleep in the early hours of the morning. My body was heavy like a grave of dirt was on top of me, holding me down, suffocating me.

My eyes darted around the room. The walls were the colour of honey. Seeing the glaring sunshine, I expected to find everything normal, untouched by God’s hands, to find what had happened a nightmare and nothing more. To find the sun glimmering and Mare breathing, or a tempest raging and her breathless, would have made sense, but that was not the case. Nature’s—life’s—ability to continue was, I felt, insulting to her memory. It was as though the world had never needed her. But I did.

I needed her.



Mare was buried as swiftly as her death, too swiftly for understanding. The day of her funeral was respectfully overcast, unlike the morrow of her passing. Even the birds whistled sombrely. Again, my eyes followed the church bell tower to the low-slung sky. I hoped to see a sign of Mare's arrival in Heaven, but I saw only gloomy clouds.

The service was a black blur. I remember seeing my brother, Pere, and his wife, Antonia—they had travelled from the nearby city of Girona where they lived—and I remember seeing Fruitos. Next, I was back at Casa Paronella, the cottage as quiet as the church graveyard. It was no longer a home, merely an upside-down hole as cavernous as a crater that no soul, try as they might, could hope to fill.

That afternoon, Senyora Soler brought over a dish of food: it was now our turn to receive succour. Àvia wept at the curse of Eve women must bear, and Senyora Soler knew better than to offer comforting words as hollow as the ancient tree trunks in the Iberian forests. Other women in the village brought food too. Their entry and exit from the cottage was like a funeral procession, only in lieu of flowers was cuisine. But we were not hungry; our bodies were bloated with grief.

Mare's death on the physical plane haunted us, and a pall of misery hung over the cottage. At night, when the moon was high in the violet sky, I thought of her. My mind floated with the breeze to her resting place in the *petit* church cemetery. Though only the shell of her being remained there, I could not shake the image of her sunken face, her uninhabited body. In winter, when it rained or snowed, I imagined her longing for shelter, for the warmth of the fireplace; in summer, when her headstone was

burning hot to touch, she was sweltering, in want of a cooling breeze; and in autumn, when dead leaves rained down on her, she prayed for a zephyr, for someone to brush them away so she could see the world. *Spring*, I thought, *when the orange blossoms bloom, is the only time she will be at peace.*

CHAPTER FOUR

I Begin Life Alone, And I Don't Like It

As the seasons passed, an incipient fuzz sprouted from my upper lip, and my voice changed from countertenor to bass: the beginnings of manhood. The fuzz looked like duck down, and my voice lacked operatic talent. I was now too big to sit on Àvia's lap and listen to 'The Water of Life.' But having heard the tale so many times, I knew it by heart, and despite my age, I often told it to myself of an evening, lying in darkness waiting for sleep to come—especially on nights spent thinking of Mare. The story was like warm milk to a baby; it nourished my dreams.

More responsibility, more chores, came with the fuzz and bass, and I attended school less, if that was possible. I was a sporadic pupil at the best of times, but after Mare's death, I became a stranger. One less pair of hands equalled twice as much work. Since Mare's passing, the weight of the domestic burden had fallen on Enriqueta and Dolores' shoulders. Àvia helped as much as she could, but being older, her contribution was confined to a chair.

Sorrow had aged her more. I did what I could. If Pare needed a hand in the olive groves, and if Enriqueta or Dolores needed help plucking a fowl, I, like my brothers before me, helped. There was no penalty for truancy. I simply told the teacher the truth.

On one of the rare occasions I did attend school, I returned home to find Pare waiting for me. My stomach knotted at the sight of him. He had never waited for me before, and I feared that I had either done something wrong and was in for a scolding or another bad thing had befallen us. We said *hola*, then he told me he needed a word and gestured for me to go outside. I glanced at Àvia, but she gave nothing away. She sat like always, hunched over a pile of clothes, mending the endless holes that ravaged them. Since Mare's death, she worked without her usual contentment. She no longer hummed Catalan folk songs, just sat there, rocking, looking up every few stitches and staring into space as though searching for her daughter's spirit; and when she hobbled around the *casa*, she lamented that her joints were not only consumed with arthritis but the weight of grief, for it was a terrible thing to bury a child. I understood, for it was a terrible thing for a boy to bury his *mare* too.

I followed Pare through the back door outside. He sat down in the late sunshine. I installed myself next to him and focussed on a Eurasian magpie in the distance to try to abate the sinking feeling in my stomach. The corvid tilted its head and looked at me, then plucked a worm from the ground, its long, narrow body spilling out of the bird's beak. One moment, alive; the next, gone: that strange, ominous circle of life. It reminded me of Àvia's words, *One minute you're smelling the flowers, next they're the dozen at your funeral*. Pare cleared his throat and spoke:

'Pep, it's time for you to leave school for good and find a job.'

‘Sí, Pare.’

A wave of relief washed over me, purging my unrealised fears. I had done nothing bad, and nothing bad had befallen us. I was to earn a wage like my brothers before me. Money ruled our every breath like a dictator. No matter how much we worked, there was never enough of that precious metal to reflect our endless toil, the cost of the labour on our bodies. *Pesetas* earnt, *pesetas* spent.

According to *senyors* who ought to know, I knew enough, especially for a labourer’s son. I understood my place, accepted it, albeit reluctantly. I was not destined to be a clerk or hold any suit-wearing job. Work, not study, was most important, its importance second only to the sun rising. Work equalled money; money equalled food; and food equalled life. *Vida*. But I must say, a part of me felt excited, in a nervous way, to abscond from the final shackles of childhood, to step forwards into the world of *senyors* and earn a wage, even if most of it would go to Pare. At the end of the day, school was a place I had scarcely frequented. But I had learnt more than the generations before me, more than Pare, who signed his name with an X. I was good at arithmetic and could read and write—albeit begrudgingly, for I struggle to sit still—and speak! I was a storyteller, and whenever time permitted, I would tell stories to the boys in the village.

‘And until you find a job,’ Pare continued, ‘you can help me in the olive groves like Teodoro.’

‘Tomorrow, Pare, I’ll find a job.’

‘It doesn’t have to be tomorrow, but soon, Pep. Soon.’



The next morning, under the content gaze of the golden sun, I departed Casa Paronella for the village centre with the optimism of youth and *sort*—luck—from Dolores. But within the hour, I was returning home, wiping away tears to hide evidence of my disappointment. I had asked everyone conceivable for work—not a big task in a village as *petit* as La Vall de Santa Creu—but no one was hiring. *Senyors* barely had enough work for themselves. I wiped my eyes again before entering the cottage, but they must have been rimmed red, for as soon as Dolores saw me, she knew my venture had been an unsuccessful one.

‘Come, sit.’ She beckoned me over, and we both sat down at the old wooden table in the first room.

Through the window, I saw Àvia and Enriqueta in the herb garden, and I wondered if there was a poultice for disappointment.

‘It’s not easy, Pep.’ She was trying to comfort me, trying to play the role of *mare*.

‘No.’

‘The village isn’t as prosperous as it once was. People don’t want Arbequina olives anymore. Picual olives yield higher.’

‘But they’re bitter.’

‘Quantity over quality.’

‘Why?’

‘Industrialisation.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Pare says rich *senyors* are interested in electricity.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Miguel says it’s the sun in your *casa* at night.’

Miguel was a travelling man, and once a year Dolores bought fabric from him to make a new dress.

‘Will we ever have it?’ I asked.

‘No. We’ll always have oil lamps fuelled by olive oil.’

‘Always?’

‘Sí, we’re poor.’

Poor. How I loathed that condescending word. I thought of ‘The Water of Life,’ of those lowly children who had worked hard and built a castle. But to work hard you needed a job, and jobs in La Vall de Santa Creu were as extinct as the Portuguese ibex. I wondered if I should leave, if that was the adventurous high road Àvia had told me about as a boy.

Dolores, pitying me, made me something to eat, then I walked to the olive groves where I laboured with Pare and Teodoro for the remains of the day.



Vida plodded on. The clock rotated like the olive oil press, and before long a month had passed. I was still jobless, but I remained resolute; once a week, I went to town and asked the same *senyors* for work, only to be told the same thing: there was none. It got to the point I dreaded asking. I saw the word *no* forming on their lips before I even asked the question. Then, despondent, I would head directly to the olive groves and labour with Pare and Teodoro in great apprehension. During that month of labouring, I came to loathe that *petit* bitter fruit that made oil as golden as distilled sunlight. I loathed the tedium it represented, loathed the monotony, loathed the low wages. I feared that month was a precursor to the rest of my life, and Àvia was mistaken; my *vida* would not be interesting like a story but boring and bitter like an olive.

Walking to the olive groves was the most peaceful part of the day. Thereafter, it was hard, monotonous work, and boredom ferried me away like a bird gliding on a breeze. I often stole a glance out across the terraced land, at the never-ending trees and distant mountains, and wondered what lay beyond our *petit* village. Then my gaze would shift to Pare and Teodoro. I wondered how Pare coped knowing the groves would always be his life, then I wondered how Teodoro was so indifferent to the work, to the prospect this might always be his life too. Sometimes, while picking olives, he hummed Catalan folk songs like Àvia once did. He seemed content rather than resigned. I should mention Teodoro was born on a Saturday, and according to Àvia, Saturday's son is industrious with an alchemy for the fruits of the land. But I was not Saturday's son. I was the son of a Tempest, and I longed for the wind to blow me someplace else like Girona. Pere had gone to Girona and found employment. In fact, he had found more than employment: he had found a wife.

Just thinking about Pere's freedom made me feel like a fowl in the chicken run, destined to escape only in Death. *Death*. I brooded like a trapped spirit over that fateful night and dwelt on what our lives would have been like if Mare had lived. Her passing was as fresh as a crisp winter breeze, but that burning sphere in the endless sky heeded neither sadness nor happiness. It rose with the regularity of a poor man accustomed to toil and drudgery, to a routine that offered no bend from the straight and narrow. I was on the path to becoming that surrendered man. Then one day, when Pare and I were walking home from the olive groves—Teodoro, I recall, was meeting with friends—he suddenly said my name:

‘José?’

I knew it was serious because he had not called me Pep. I looked up. I did not have far to search, for along with the fuzz and bass tone, I had sprouted like a common weed. Upon seeing Pare's thick, bristly brows furrowed pensively, I feared I had done something wrong and tried to recall the day's events. Pare had nudged my arm and admonished me: 'Concentrate,' he had grumbled. *Concentrate*. I had been daydreaming. Again. I loved to daydream, loved being anywhere but where I was: the olive groves.

'I'm grateful for the help,' he said. 'I am.' A pause. 'But you must find a job, even if you must search further afield. Even as far as Girona.'

My big brown eyes widened at the word: Girona. I was relieved Pare had voiced our tacit thoughts. A weight had been lifted from my shoulders. That evening, I resolved to write to Pere, whom I had not seen since Mare's funeral, and ask if I could stay with him.

So, as the late summer sun shone through the window, I sat at the table with an ink pen and a blank piece of paper feeling lost. I had never written a letter before, and it caused me much anxiety. I began with a few pleasantries before explaining how in La Vall de Santa Creu a job could not even be found under a rock, and of how, with his permission, of course, I was thinking of moving to Girona. When finished, I read the letter to myself and was annoyed and embarrassed at how clumsy it sounded, at the awkwardness of the handwriting. My hand was childish and unsophisticated: the hand of an uneducated man. But it would have to do. I placed it in an envelope, carefully wrote Pere's name and address on the front, then licked a wafer and sealed it. I would post it on the morrow.

Change was in the sultry air. But only time and the wind's breath would reveal which direction Fate and Destiny were conspiring to blow me in. Would I go north towards the Bay of Biscay; east where the Mediterranean Sea ebbs and flows; south to Andalusia; or west where the Portuguese ibex had ceased to breathe?



The clock tick-tocked, olive oil presses turned, and still I had not received a reply from Pere. Anxiety consumed me—I worried the letter had gotten lost or that Pere had not replied because he did not want me to come. How I worried! Then one day, I returned home from the olive groves to find an envelope, my name scrawled across the front, propped up against an unlit oil lamp on the table. I had never received mail before; it was an exciting, foreign thing. I picked up the envelope and, staring at it in amazement, traced my name with my index finger from the loop of the *J* all the way to the *A* at the end of Paronella, then I touched the stamp in the right-hand corner. But as I studied it, my excitement turned to distress. What if Pere said no? Too anxious to sit, I opened it standing. The letter was as concise as a bank note, which is to say it contained no trivialities: Pere's answer was clear. Footsteps echoed. I looked up to find Pare standing in the doorway.

'I got a reply,' I said.

'And?' He spoke matter-of-factly, as though my future was not hanging in the balance.

'He says *sí*.' Smiling, I glanced down at the letter. *Come. Stay with us*, it read. I did not hand the letter to Pare; to him, the words were as foreign as the Orient.

Pare nodded, then disappeared into the second room. A few seconds later, he returned with an old brown leather suitcase. ‘For your trip,’ he said, setting it down, then leaving nonchalantly—as though I was not going anywhere, especially a place so far away and so soon. My innards suddenly felt strange.

I unbuckled the straps and opened the case, its rectangular mouth breathing an overwhelming musty odour on me. But my nose did not curl. The smell was invigorating. To me, it was not the smell of the past but the scent of change and adventure. The prospect alone made me forget the fate assigned me. I forgot I was a labourer’s son, forgot I was a peasant, and started to prophesy the many possibilities awaiting me. I started to dream.



I tossed and turned on the straw mattress as if it were a bed of burning coals. The certainty that it was my last night in Casa Paronella hit home like a series of panicked knocks on the door. A frisson of anxiety and excitement kept rapping me awake. *Rap, rap, rap*. Everything was happening too quickly. I had never lived anywhere except in that cottage, just as I had never ventured beyond the isolated village or worked anywhere other than the olive groves, yet in several hours, with nothing but a suitcase and the little money I had saved from labouring with Pare, I would trek down the Revered and Feared Road towards a *nova vida*. I wondered if the road would lead to the adventure Àvia had proclaimed was my destiny—I wondered about a lot of things—and as is always the way with the world and its love of irony, my exhausted mind fell asleep just before dawn beckoned.

Behind the fog of slumber, roosters crowed and footsteps echoed. Enriqueta and Dolores were up, as always. I rolled over and dozed until the aroma of coffee awakened my senses. Yawning, I rose, dressed, then entered the first room where I said *bon dia* to everyone for the last time. I sat down between Àvia and Teodoro and poured myself a cup. The brew invigorated an urgency in me, adding to my newfound frisson of anxiety and excitement.

Àvia nodded at the plate of *pa amb tomàquet* in the middle of the table. ‘Eat up,’ she said. ‘You’ve got a big journey ahead of you.’

I nibbled at the bread, at my last breakfast, but it was difficult to stomach. As I licked tomato from my lips, a great tenderness for my family overwhelmed me. Then Pare, finished, rose and announced to the table, ‘We’d better get going.’

Teodoro also rose. He was the *we* in the sentence. I rose too. It seemed I had only just sat down and they were leaving. This was goodbye, and a parting of uncertain duration at that. As I stood before Pare, I regarded the *senyor* who had given me *vida*. The strong, unyielding man I knew suddenly appeared old. His tanned skin was weathered and wrinkled like a well-used map, every line on his drooping face a road travelled, a bridge crossed. His curly hair was no longer black like Arbequina olives but grey and white like the sullied snow that slid down the Pyrenees in the winter sun. Only one thing differentiated this *adéu* from a normal one—he said, ‘*Bona sort!* Good luck!’ Teodoro wished me luck too. Then, without another word, Pare patted me on the back and, along with my brother, headed for the olive groves—the place he had gone every day since I could remember—the door banging shut behind them. I sat back down.

‘Eat, Pep,’ Àvia said. She spoke as though nothing had happened, as though Pare and I would talk about our day that evening over dinner.

I took a bite of bread but struggled to swallow. I wanted to chase after Pare, call him back. A mistake had been made. He was not meant to leave, not yet.

I nibbled at the crust until my plate was clean, drank my coffee to the dregs, then rose—just like Pare had—and announced to the table that I, too, had better get going. Enriqueta kissed my cheek and ruffled my hair; Dolores hugged me, handed me lunch wrapped in cloth, and implored me to take care; then Àvia embraced me and, cupping my hands in hers, pressed something hard into my palms. When she released me, I looked down to find a knotted white handkerchief, embroidered with my initials—*JP*—those same curling letters Pere had written—in my hands. I had seen her working on the cloth the day after I posted my letter to Pere, but I had no idea it was for me. I wondered what surprise lay inside, but that steely, knowing look of hers told me to wait until I was alone. I thanked her, placed it in my pocket, then picked up the suitcase and walked out the door, down the lane and through the green gate, its hinges screeching *adéu*. But instead of walking down the cobblestone street towards the Revered and Feared Road, I stopped and turned around. Enriqueta, Dolores and Àvia stood in the doorway watching me. My sisters waved *adéu*, and Àvia gave a nod that said, *Be on your way. All will be well*. I smiled and waved back, then turned on my heel and headed down the street past Casa Soler where Senyora Soler was sweeping dirt out the front door so vigorously it was as though she was ridding her dwelling of voodoo. As soon as she saw me, she hurried down the lane to the street.

‘Best of luck, Pep,’ she said, meaning it; the truth was in her eyes. It was as though she was wishing her own son luck.

‘*Moltes gràcies.*’ I thanked her profusely. I needed every ounce of luck and stored it with everyone else’s well wishes in my heart’s nook for a rainy day.

Then she hugged me. Her embrace was warm like Mare’s yet foreign, for her body, its scent, was different. After releasing me, she held my hands in hers, looked me in the eyes and said, ‘Your *mare* would be proud of you.’

I felt a flush of pride tinged with sadness. I thanked her again, then we bade each other farewell, and I continued down the street towards my *nova vida*. As I got further away from the village, the distance between dwellings increased, and my only company was the stridulating insects. I soon passed the last of the cottages that clung to the hillside. ‘*Adéu, La Vall,*’ I said. Then on I went down the narrow track that merged with the Revered and Feared Road, that lonesome road leading to Llanca and El Port de la Selva and out of the cocoon of La Vall de Santa Creu.

It was a still day, and the air possessed a native freshness found only in early morning, but despite the stillness, I hugged the cobblestone wall in case a squall blew me away. The trek downhill was easy, though sometimes my feet got ahead of my body, forcing me into a horse-like trot that required stomping to slow myself. I wondered if braying mules had the *problema* twice as bad. As I walked, I thought of my family, of Pare and Teodoro labouring in the olive groves, of Enriqueta washing clothes in the communal pool, of Dolores plucking a fowl, of Àvia darning socks. Àvia. I wondered what was inside the handkerchief she had given me, but more than anything I wondered what the world beyond La Vall

de Santa Creu was like. I wondered what Pere would be like—as genial as a gentle breeze or as stern as a storm. With him the eldest and me the youngest, he always felt more like an uncle than a brother. Whatever blood we shared, we were, in a way, strangers, albeit familiar ones. Then I wondered what Girona would be like, what types of jobs existed in that foreign cavern of society. One thing was certain: I would not be a farm labourer. But at the same time, I knew I would never be a clerk.

The sun beat down, and my skin soon glistened with sweat. At the bottom of the hill, I placed the suitcase on the ground, perched on it like a stool and rested a moment before retrieving the knotted handkerchief from my pocket. I untied it and peeled back the corners. *Pesetas* glinted in the sunshine. *My dear Àvia*, I thought. Smiling, I retied the knot, returned the treasure to my pocket and resumed the long journey. Whatever my future held, it suddenly seemed brighter. As bright as mint metal.

It was mid-morning by the time I reached the coast and its welcoming sea breeze. The expedition had taken a couple of hours. Saltwater and the pungent smell of seaweed hung in the balmy air. I rested again. Fishing boats, flecks of bobbing white, dotted the azure Costa Brava. I drank some water, then continued under the sun's buoyant gaze.

As I neared El Port de la Selva, people took on a harried countenance, scurrying from place to place, buildings crowded together, chimneys belched smoke that eddied up towards the handful of cumulus clouds scattered across an otherwise clear sky, and the smell of cooking meat wafted through open windows reminding my stomach to rumble after its *petit* breakfast and long journey downhill.

As I stepped forwards, a cart clanked past, a stray dog barking as it ran alongside the *petit* vehicle, trying to nip its wheels. Transfixed on the canine, I accidentally walked into a *senyor*, my suitcase hitting his knee.

‘Watch out!’ he yelled.

‘*Ai! Perdó.* Oh! I’m sorry.’ Startled and flushing with embarrassment, I jumped aside. No one yelled like that in La Vall de Santa Creu. I had never seen so many people or heard so much noise as I did in that bustling port town.

I spotted a horse-drawn carriage nearby with ‘Girona’ stencilled on its side and signalled to the driver. Having never taken public transport before, I approached nervously.

‘Excuse me, Senyor?’ I said.

The coachman, perched in his seat like a wise owl on a branch, looked down at me. A thick moustache covered his upper lip. ‘*Sí, lad?*’

‘I need to go to Girona.’

‘It’s your lucky day. I’ve one seat left.’

I paid, climbed up into the carriage and installed myself in the seat Fate had reserved for me. My legs welcomed the break, as did my arms. I was tired of carrying the suitcase; it was starting to feel inconvenient, like a fifth limb. An old *senyor* was seated next to me, and opposite was a middle-aged *senyora* whose travelling companion was a big wicker picnic basket. We exchanged brief nods, for we all had our journey in common, then the coachman clicked his tongue twice and the horses trotted off. As we clunked along, the old *senyor’s* nose whistled a sombre tune as he wheezed. At first, it was humorous, but after half an hour of the monotonous tone, I desperately wanted to hand him a handkerchief and say, *Please, do.*

My hopes were raised when a little way into the journey the steady clop of horses' hooves soothed the old *senyor* to sleep, but much to my dismay, instead of becoming silent, he added another uncouth instrument to his melody: snoring. I turned and focussed on the changing countryside, on the contours of that foreign but beautiful undulating landscape. My eyes were admiring a church when out of nowhere a crack followed by a splash rent the air. Yet there was neither rain nor thunder; the sky was blue. It was the middle-aged *senyora*. She was crunching on an apple from her basket, its juices splattering my face as her crooked teeth sank into its hard flesh. I turned away as much as the carriage allowed, which was not far.

I was relieved when our party stopped for lunch at Figueres so the horses could have a spell. The old *senyor* disappeared into a *taverna*, and the middle-aged *senyora* pulled a sandwich out of her travelling pantry and munched away as she walked the streets.

I sat down on a park bench and unwrapped the lunch Dolores had made. It was a *bocadillo*, my favourite. As I sunk my teeth into the baguette, my heart thrummed with warmth and possibility. When there was not a crumb left, I rose and explored the streets, for despite the long trek I had undertaken earlier, my legs welcomed a stretch after being cooped up in the carriage. But I dared not venture far in case the coach departed without me.

I meandered around until the old *senyor* emerged from the *taverna* and ambled back to the carriage. Then I followed suit. Before long, the middle-aged *senyora* returned, and we installed ourselves in the same seats as though our names were stamped on the leather. The old *senyor's* breath smelt like wine. The second leg of the journey was much the same as the first: a monotonous tune followed by the rain of an afternoon apple. I could not wait to arrive.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Arrive in Girona

Girona's heart operated like a machine, every din a clanking cog. My knobby knees bent to the city's rhythm, and I walked along the cobblestone road adjacent to the railway station where the horse-drawn carriage had terminated. The pungent odour of coal mingled with hay-filled horse pats hung in the warm air, and there was noise—a great deal of it. Squawking hawkers replaced cheeky corvids; howling children replaced dogs; and cunning businessmen replaced foxes.

Despite consulting a map, which I had acquired from a beggar for a *petit* fee, I still managed to get lost several times, and I feared I would not find Pere's apartment before the sun closed its eye on the day. Girona had an inconceivable number of roads—especially for a country boy—and I soon became overwhelmed and had to ask several shopkeepers and pedestrians for directions. So, it was after much worry that I arrived at Pere's apartment block with the burning sun low in the pink-orange sky. I opened the main entrance

and scanned the beehive of brass letterboxes, on which the names of tenants were written on pieces of honeyed card inserted in slots, for my brother's. There it was:

Pere Paronella /
Antonia Paronella
2B

It was with anxiety that I walked up the stuffy stairwell down the hall to 2B and knocked on the door. Movement echoed—a clang followed by footsteps—on the other side, then the knob rattled and the door creaked open. I was taken aback to find Antonia, not Pere, standing before me. I had expected my brother to greet me.

Antonia was a beautiful *senyora*, and I thought, *One day, when I have a wife, I want her to be blessed with such a pleasing aesthetic inheritance.* She was slim—her body yet to succumb to the effects of childbirth—with wavy black, almond eyes and arched brows. Beneath these arched brows, her almond eyes studied me, starting at my curly head and moving down to my poorly shod feet. I flushed with embarrassment. My boots were covered in dirt and a few other mysteries I did not care to know the origin of—courtesy of the long journey. Then her eyes crept back up, settling on my face. After an awkward *hola*, she stood aside and invited me in. I brushed past her, my nose catching the scent of soap and lavender, and surveyed the apartment.

The off-white walls were barren; paint peeled and flaked like winter skin; the floors were bitten with dents and scratches from the previous tenants; and hairline cracks scarred the ceiling.

A narrow hallway led to an area that served as both kitchen and dining room, and the second room was a modest bedroom. The apartment was *petit*, so *petit* I wondered where I would fit, *if* I would fit. Although it had two rooms like Casa Paronella, both were smaller. If Pere and I had been better acquainted, I would have described the apartment as intimate. But we were not. As I made these observations, the door slammed shut and Antonia strode purposefully past me. She halted, turned on her heel, looked me squarely in the eyes and said, ‘This way,’ before stalking off—or rather taking two hard strides, owing to the compactness of the place—and opening the door to the second room. I followed.

‘You’ll sleep here.’ She pointed at an old mattress in the corner. Then without another word, she walked out, closing the door behind her.

I was surprised she had closed it so abruptly, and given her cold welcome, I felt the action was completed to aid her privacy, not mine. The result was I felt I could not leave that *petit* room until Pere came home. So, I turned my attention to the mock enclosure. It was furnished with economy in mind. Aside from the mattress, only an old washstand had tenancy. I finally relieved my chafed palm of the suitcase. Realising I was alone and suddenly seized by uncertainty, I unpacked my few possessions, now musty like the case, and nervously arranged them several ways before spitting into a rag and attempting to clean my scaly leather shoes—all to a culinary orchestra of clanging pots and pans: Antonia was making dinner.

Half an hour later, the front door opened, and a man’s voice reverberated throughout the apartment. Pere was home. I opened the door Antonia had closed earlier and greeted him. We exchanged

a brief hug; the hug because we were brothers, the briefness because we were, effectively, strangers, albeit familiar strangers. Of all us Paronella boys, Pere bore the closest resemblance to Pare. It was as though with each son the ink had faded until I, the last carbon copy, came out the least similar. I was of average height with an egg of a head, brown eyes, a nondescript nose and a mouth as wide as a grinning horizontal crescent moon. Framing this face was a shock of curly black hair that could not be tamed, even with Àvia's spit, though not for want of trying. She tried especially hard on church days. Instead, my curls sprang out too far for good style and gave prominence to my ears, which, as Matilde had pointed out when we were children, were too big for my head.

We sat down at the *petit* table wedged in the corner of the room. It was so *petit* I doubted no more than the duo of souls before me had graced its presence at once; and just as well, for Pere and Antonia did not exude the congeniality of entertainers. Antonia served a simple dinner of lightly seasoned chicken and vegetables. I was so famished I ate with gusto. It seemed forever since lunch at Figueres. Just as the apartment was different to the cottage, the meal, too, was different. It was blander and not as fresh as Dolores' cooking because the produce was from the market instead of a home vegetable garden and chicken run. There was no backyard, only building-lined streets as far as the eye could see with the occasional tree breaking the monotony. Stilted conversation accompanied the food; it was polite in a forced, uncomfortable way, limited to basic enquiries and menial expressions. I was getting to know those two strangers seated opposite me, and those two strangers were trying to make an effort to know me.

'How's Pare?' brother asked.

‘Working hard.’

‘Good harvest?’

‘*Sí* and no.’

‘Why?’

‘Industrialisation.’ I used the word Dolores had taught me.

Pere nodded. ‘It’s the future.’

‘Less jobs.’

‘Different jobs.’

‘Like?’

‘Manufacturing.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘*Everything*. Textiles, for instance.’

‘And agriculture’s future?’

‘Change isn’t easy.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

That night, I lay down on the mattress, its material cold and foreign like the city’s noises, and mulled over Pere’s notions. If not for industrialisation, I would have been home in La Vall de Santa Creu working the olive groves like Pare and Teodoro, but instead I was in Girona. It was as though Fate had outstretched her spindly arms, plucked me from the ground and placed me on a different path, a path paved with uncertainty.



Even the sun was different. Girona’s rays were not bright like our hamlet sun but dim from the buildings blocking its beams, and the acoustics of birds and roosters were replaced with the ruckus of Man.

Yawning and stretching, I rose, dressed and joined Antonia and Pere for breakfast and more stilted conversation. But it seemed as soon as I sat down, Pere was saying *adéu. Sí*, he was just like Pare.

‘I’m working on a building on the other side of the city,’ he said. ‘It’s a long commute.’

I nodded and wished him a good day. Pere leant down, kissed Antonia on the cheek, whispered something in her ear, then left. I was sorry to see him go. His departure left Antonia and I together in awkward silence. I sat there trying to conjure up something to say to my sister-in-law, but I needed not bother. Without another word, Antonia got up abruptly and busied herself in the kitchen. I quickly finished my coffee and said *adéu*. Antonia’s reply was curt, and I suddenly felt foolish and out of place, but I did not know how to rectify the social malady.

Relief came when I was outside, alone, away from the awkwardness. I walked along the bustling streets in awe of my new surroundings. Trees and the wildlife they housed were scarce. The only animals roaming the land were stray cats, dogs and feral pigeons foraging for scraps of food.

The city was a hive of activity: entrepreneurs opened shop doors, ready for a day of trade; labourers heaved crates of goods into those shops; tradesmen hammered away at buildings; market men trundled carts along, hawking their stock as the best, the cheapest, the freshest; *senyores* broke into *petit* groups and chatted before buying wares from the merchants; businessmen in suits straightened their ties as they crossed roads to their respective offices; children laughed and skipped their way to school; and street urchins screamed, ran and cackled.

To my dismay, I went to a cobbler, a tailor, a butcher, then another cobbler—and all said, *No, no work*. Spurred on by desperation and anxiety—I could not return to the apartment without a job—I visited the greengrocer's. Outside, a boy, probably the owner's son, touted ripe produce to passers-by.

'Sweet red peppers! Perfect for a tasty *escalivada*! We've got aubergines too!'

He was slim, tanned and well-built from lifting heavy crates and pushing the cart—brimming with fruit and vegetables—through the streets of Girona under the sun's glaring eye. The sun always glares at a working man. Though I doubted the owner had work, something urged me inside.

'Fresh tomatoes! Delicious fresh tomatoes! Get your fresh tomatoes here!' the boy yelled as I entered.

I was instantly transported back to La Vall de Santa Creu that fateful summer's day. I heard the screams, felt the sultry summer air against my sweaty skin, saw the swelling. A *senyor* carrying a basket of fresh produce brushed past, extricating me from my thoughts. The shop smelt sweet and ripe. Produce was arranged neatly on stands. The greengrocer, standing behind a counter, wore an off-white apron that was slightly sullied like the skin of a washed potato.

'*Bon dia*, may I be of assistance?'

'*Bon dia*, Senyor. 'I'm looking for work.'

'Sorry. No work.'

I nodded and thanked him, but as I turned to leave, he shouted:

'You should try the bakeries.'

'The bakeries. I will, Senyor. *Moltes gràcies*.'

I walked to the end of the block and rounded the corner to find a bakery right before me. The sign read:

PUIG
PASTISSER
CORT REIAL 15. GIRONA

As I entered, a voice boomed *bon dia*.

‘*Bon dia*, Senyor.’

The pastry chef had a thick moustache and a dimple on his chin like scored dough. With a hint of curiosity, he tilted his head and hazarded a guess as to his new customer’s situation.

‘Lost?’

‘Today, *sí*.’

‘What are you looking for? The fountain? The cathedral?’

‘Work?’

‘As?’

‘Anything, Senyor.’ I relayed every shop I had been to, told him about the olive groves, about how I was a hard worker.

‘You think you could be a baker?’

My eyes widened. ‘You have work?’

‘We need an apprentice. Ever baked?’

‘Only at home,’ I lied, remembering how I had watched Mare kneading dough in the *petit* kitchen at Casa Paronella, of her kneading dough when I had come in with the basket of eggs that day, of her scooping me up onto her lap and telling me I would soon have a little brother or sister.

‘You start tomorrow.’

‘What time?’ I wanted to jump over the counter and hug him.

‘Before the bread rises.’ He chuckled and slapped the surface. ‘By the way, I’m Emili Puig i Burch.’

‘José Paronella. But everyone calls me Pep.’

‘Pep.’

Senyor Puig extended his hand. I shook it profusely and thanked him excessively. His hand was warm from the oven; the hairs, singed from the flames, were light and prickly; and his skin was peppered with scars—some burns, others cuts—each a different colour: red, white, purple. Again, I was reminded of the night Mare died, of how scars—like blood—show time like a clock. When I could thank him no more, I ordered *coca* bread for Antonia and a curious pastry christened *xuixo de Girona* for myself; rejection is a hungry business.

‘I invented it myself—with a little help from a sweet-toothed Frenchman,’ Senyor Puig said, handing me the treat. ‘Still perfecting it. Let me know what you think.’

I thanked him again, then bade my new employer *adéu*. Outside, my mouth broke into a crescent-moon grin. I was a man. I had a job. Not just a job, a trade. Skill, Pare often said, is worth more than power.

I bit into the deep-fried, sugar-coated cylindrical morsel, the *crema catalana* oozing out of the centre and dancing the *sardana* on my tongue. It was the most delicious thing I had ever eaten. Little did I know Senyor Puig’s creation would go on to make him the greatest pastry chef in Catalonia, maybe even Spain.

CHAPTER SIX

I am Disliked and Receive a Sign from God

During my time in Girona, I discovered two things. Firstly, under the innovative Senyor Puig's wise counsel, I unearthed the secret to making the best—and only—*xuixos* in the world. My hands were no longer calloused from working in the olive groves but peppered with knife cuts and cooking burns. Senyor Ferran Adrià, a staunch—and paunchy—regular, was a testament to my skill. 'You've taught young Pep here masterfully,' he told Senyor Puig one morning. 'A good croissant is a beautiful thing, but *xuixos* are for the Gods. Wait till the world sees your creation!' According to Senyor Puig, Senyor Adrià came in every day year-round save holidays. Senyor Adrià was a well-travelled, jovial man who enjoyed a chat as much as his food. On his most recent adventure, he had admired the Acropolis of Athens and savoured feta as fresh as dawn. I mention Senyor Adrià because he would later feature in a decision that blew my *vida* on a different course.

Secondly, I learnt Antonia disliked me. My sister-in-law possessed the countenance of a Catholic nun—abstained from sororal affection—and the tenacity of an Iberian wolf. The apartment was too *petit* for us both to be cloistered inside it, and so she came to wage a passive-aggressive crusade against me. Her wounding solar glares and silent insults sliced the air like daggers. It was the *petit* things that riled Antonia: where I stood, where I didn't stand, what I said, what I didn't say. In fact, sometimes I suspected her of walking too close on purpose just so she could make a show of how I was in *her* way, taking up space in *her casa*. Nothing I did or didn't do was right. Even gifting her bread and sweet *viennoiserie* pastries failed to placate the bitter situation. Her thanks were curt, curt because my kindnesses were unwanted, like me. She never voiced it, but I felt it in her manner, in the tense silences, in the never-ending pressure. But then, one day, the pressure burst. She spoke the words out loud.

It was a stormy afternoon, so I was returning to the apartment earlier than usual. I had a newspaper over my head in a futile attempt to keep dry. Usually when not working, I would read the paper at a nearby café, then explore the city to keep out of Antonia's way, but that day it was too wet. Thunder clapped and lightning lit up the sky. It was a dark sky, so dark it looked like evening. The foyer and stairwell smelt dank and raindrops from other returning residents had gathered in stagnant pools on the floor. I opened the door to 2B and headed directly to the room I slept in—I never called it my bedroom because it wasn't; it was Antonia's, as was the whole place—but collided with her in the doorway, causing her to drop her neatly folded laundry. First, she huffed, then she snapped:

'You're in my way.'

‘Sorry.’

I flushed with embarrassment. Feeling like an intruder, I moved aside, but she brushed past, then turned on her sharp heel and snarled:

‘Have you nowhere to be except constantly under my feet?’

In that moment, her teeth were like fangs, and I felt as though I was about to be devoured. ‘I do,’ I lied. ‘Just stopped by for something.’

So, my desire to flee was briefly postponed; I needed to complete the lie to save face, or what little remained of it. I hurried to the room I slept in and foolishly rummaged around for a few seconds, pretending to search for an imaginary item, then yelled *adéu* as I walked out the front door. My voice cracked. I was on the verge of tears. On the other side of the door, I stood, heart thumping, trying to collect my thoughts, then I paced down the stairwell with such anxiety I slipped on a puddle of water, nearly missing a step, and for a split second, I feared tumbling to certain injury. My heart was now pounding, and a great oddness suddenly overcame me. My legs felt increasingly light—too light to support my increasingly heavy head. So great was this oddness, it was as though my hands opened the main door without touching the handle. The action was detached, mechanical. I told myself to breathe.

Outside, rain beat down, needling into the ground, into me, each prick like a finger prodding, admonishing. Few people were on the street, such was the weather. Everyone had somewhere to go—except me. I dithered for a moment. Left or right? Any direction, I decided, so long as it was away from Antonia. In that apartment, I felt as out of place as a Dupont’s lark in the Arctic. As my legs set to work, my mind began dwelling on all the other incidents.

One day, I returned home to find Antonia and the *senyora* who lived upstairs gossiping over coffee. Both glanced at me, then gave each other a knowing look. The glint in their beady eyes told me Antonia had been lamenting my existence. She wanted me gone, and I feared she would talk to Pere and conspire to evict me—and eviction would be nothing short of shameful. It would be undignified, and dignity is all a poor man has to lose.

This brooding consumed me, turning my anxiety into vexation and vexation into endless thinking and a quickened pace, and before I realised it, I was at a roundabout several blocks away. I stopped, remembering that as much as I dreaded it, I would have to return to the apartment by nightfall. People from all walks of life hastened towards the circular crossroads, and I wondered if they knew—*really* knew—where they were going other than out of the bad weather. A blinding flash of lightning streaked the street and thunder boomed. I sought shelter in a nearby cathedral, lit a candle for Mare and prayed for guidance, for a sign. Now, God must be a prompt courier, for the sign was delivered on the morrow.



Although the storm had mercifully lifted the tight lid on the city's summer heat, the following day remained hot, and it was uncomfortably so in the toasty patisserie. That morning, I was arranging a tray of *xuixos* when, through the shopfront window, I saw Senyor Adrià, our best customer, crossing the street. He burst through the door red-faced, cheeks puffing like a chimney, and I feared he was going to have a heart attack, collapse, or both. His hand moved towards his vital organ but, thankfully, veered to his pocket,

where he retrieved a handkerchief and dabbed at the beads of sweat dotting his flushed face.

‘*Bon dia*, Senyor Adrià.’

‘*Bon dia*, Pep.’ The greeting was carried out with a wheeze.

Senyor Adrià’s arrival was always a show. In winter, when it was cold, he rubbed his hands together like he was standing by a fire instead of a counter. But no matter the weather, he always came in puffing, the puffing owing to his physique, for Senyor Adrià’s regularity as a customer was evident in the shape of his person. He was a rotund man with full cheeks, risen like yeast, two raisins for eyes, a mound of dough for a stomach, and a mop of hair turning the colour of flour.

He replaced the handkerchief, crossed his thick arms, resting them on his belly as if it were a piece of furniture conveniently positioned on him to aid his comfort, and surveyed the sweets.

‘A baguette and two *xuixos*, *si us plau*.’

‘Coming right up.’

As I got his order, we chatted away as usual; Senyor Adrià always liked a good chat. He was a sociable man, the sort who would take forever to reach his destination, the lag not so much due to his heavy frame and slow gait but to the fact that he said *hola* to everyone he passed. He was a *senyor* who quickly put his company at ease, and owing to this effortlessness, I imagined him to have many friends and never miss an invitation to a party because no gathering would be complete without his presence. Should he be absent from any celebration, the other guests would surely say, ‘But where’s Senyor Adrià? He *is* coming, isn’t he?’

‘Senyor Puig is a culinary genius,’ Senyor Adrià said, nodding at the *xuixos* and rubbing his belly. ‘You want the best *cannoli* in the

world, you go to this little place called Grasso's in Sicily. Mmm.' Eyes heavenward, he patted his stomach. 'And if you want the best *xuixos* in the world, you come here, to Senyor Puig's in Girona.'

'We have the only *xuixos* in the world,' I pointed out.

'That's why they're the best.' A morsel of silence hung in the toasty air; Senyor Adrià was thinking. Then: 'Tell me, have you ever been to the province of Navarre?'

'No. Other than La Vall de Santa Creu, I've only been here.'

'Only here.' Tutting, he shook his head. 'You should go. There'd be lots of work in Pamplona for a good baker like yourself.'

'What's Navarre like?'

'Navarre is as beautiful as a goddess. She has peaks that soar like birds—he gestured with his hands—'lush valleys as deep as the ocean, tranquil pastures and rivers that flow like *cava* during a *fiesta*, and her capital Pamplona quivers and throbs like a great redolent beehive.'

I knew instantly: that was the sign. I would go to Navarre. I would not get evicted. I would preserve my dignity, keeping it locked inside my body—in the bones that held my head up high. But first my dignified bones would carry me home to La Vall de Santa Creu, that place I had missed since leaving. It was not only that I missed it. An inkling told me I needed to return. Something was stirring in the parched air.



A week after God couriered me the sign, I thanked Pere and Antonia for their hospitality and bade farewell to the brother who felt like an uncle, and the sister-in-law who had never warmed to me.

In fact, Senyor Adrià and Senyor Puig had individually expressed more regret at my departure than Antonia. ‘We’ll miss your epicurean expertise,’ Senyor Adrià lamented, patting his paunch as if it were a companion he was speaking on behalf of. As for Senyor Puig, he said he would miss my helping hands—now officially the hands of a baker. I had the scars to prove it. When I told Pere my plans, he seemed somewhat shocked, and from that I deduced Antonia had not conspired with him, only with herself—and her neighbour. A *petit* mercy for my Paronella pride.

Without another word, I picked up Pare’s old suitcase and walked out the door. From the street, I took a final look at the apartment. Antonia’s friend, that garrulous *senyora* who lived on the floor above, was observing me from her window. I knew later that morning she would mosey down the flight of stairs to apartment 2B, and that Antonia would usher her inside and make a pot of coffee, and while they sipped the brew, she would ask where I had gone with that sorry-looking suitcase. I turned my back on her and headed towards the next chapter in my life. Every step brought nothing but relief. A weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I was as light as a feather, free to go wherever the wind carried me.

I boarded a horse-drawn carriage near the railway station, stopped at Figueres for lunch like before, then disembarked at El Port de la Selva. Still too poor for a mule, I trekked along the narrow road up the steep incline to La Vall de Santa Creu. As the track struggled around the curve, a cluster of white cottages greeted me, Casa Paronella nestled among them. Even the warm air—fresh and wild like the scent of a crushed leaf—smelt like home. When the path merged with the cobblestone road, I found the dwellings unchanged, at least not from the exterior.

The beekeeper's widow was outside Casa Soler sweeping dirt out the front door into the warm zephyr. Upon hearing my footsteps, she looked up, broke into a smile and hurried over.

‘*Hola*, Pep. *Ai*, look at you! What a fine young *senyor* you’ve grown into. Your *mare* would be so proud.’

I thanked Senyora Soler but could not help noticing an aura of mystery about her. It was in the glint in her eyes, in her smile—a smile that hid a secret in the same way a picture covers a hole in the wall, or a rug a scratch on the floor. What it concealed I did not know, but I *did* know I would find out soon enough. La Vall de Santa Creu was a *petit* place, and *petit* places leak secrets like summer rain on an ill-mended roof.

I opened the green gate to Casa Paronella, its hinges screeching *hola*, walked up the lane and turned the handle, hot from the afternoon sun. The door creaked open. Inside, I inhaled the familiar scent of home, of old wood, herbs and freshly baked bread. I set down the suitcase and surveyed the room, my eyes meeting Àvia’s. She was installed in her chair, a threaded needle in hand and sewing chores blanketing her lap.

‘Pep! What are you doing here?’ Her dour face glowed like Christmas candles.

Àvia set aside her work, heaved herself up and hobbled over. Her arthritis had worsened. But ailments aside, she had changed little, her features possessing the same severity. Her body, bent like a question mark, wore the same black dress, and her grey hair was fastened in its usual tight bun.

I stepped towards her, helped bridge the distance her weary legs were struggling to close, and we embraced, or rather she fell into me. She squeezed me so tight the air nearly burst out of my

lungs in a great exhalation. Where the strength in her bony fingers had come from, I could not fathom. We stood hugging for what seemed like a minute until she finally released me, and I gasped for air.

‘Pep, why didn’t you write?’ Before I could answer, Àvia was yelling, ‘Dolores! Dolores! Come quickly!’

A slender figure, face creased with worry, burst through the back door like a squall. Only upon seeing me did her expression relax into a smile.

‘Pep!’

Blood smeared Dolores’ apron—evidence of a plucked fowl. Wiping her hands on her skirts, she hurried over and hugged me. Her head was a good foot below mine, and I wondered if she had shrunk or I had grown. The same thought must have crossed her mind because she pushed me to arm’s length and examined me.

‘Look how tall you’ve gotten. Where’d my little brother go?’ She glanced past me at Pare’s old suitcase by the door. ‘Good. We’d thought you’d forgotten us.’

‘Never.’

‘But no letters?’

‘I didn’t know what to say.’

‘You can say it now. I’ll make a pot of coffee.’

So, Àvia and I sat down at the table, its surface still scratched and its legs as rickety as ever, while Dolores put on a brew.

‘How are Enriqueta and Teodoro?’ I asked.

‘They’re good. Busy but good. Fruitos is good too. He sent a letter only the other day.’

I nodded. ‘I have a trade.’

Àvia’s eyes widened. ‘As?’

‘A pastry chef.’

‘Your *pare* will be proud. Won’t he be proud, Dolores?’

‘Very.’ Dolores poured us each a cup of coffee, then placed the pot and a plate of biscuits on the table and sat down.

‘How is Pare?’ I asked.

Dolores tutted. ‘*Ai*, if olives knew the hands that picked them, their oil would turn to tears.’ She smiled sympathetically, then reached across the table and placed a hand on mine. It was warm and familiar. ‘And Pere? He is well?’

‘Very.’ A brief silence hung in the air. ‘And so is Antonia,’ I quickly added.

‘Good, good.’ She released my hand and patted it. Then she picked up a biscuit, baptised it in her steaming coffee and popped it into her mouth.

As we sat there, we talked, sipped and nibbled, then talked some more. I told them everything except, of course, about my quarrels with Antonia.

‘How long are you staying?’ Àvia asked.

‘A couple of days.’

‘Then back to Girona?’

‘No, Pamplona. There’s a lot of work there for a baker.’

‘Well, you *must* write to us this time,’ Dolores implored.

Àvia looked at me thoughtfully. Too thoughtfully.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ I asked.

‘Your *pare* will want to talk to you.’

‘Why?’ My eyes shifted to Dolores, but she said nothing, just looked into her coffee as if it were a well in which she could prophesy the future.

‘He’ll just want to talk to you, that’s all.’

I nodded but could not shake the feeling that Pare's impending words and Senyora Soler's mask-like smile were related.

'I saw Senyora Soler on my way here. How is she?' I ventured.

'Good,' Àvia said. 'Matilde has grown into a fine *senyoreta*. You remember Matilde, Pep?'

'I do.'

Before I could ask another question, she blurted out, 'Arnau is courting your sister.'

'Àvia!' Dolores flushed in disbelief. Her tidings had leaked out, the words dripping like rain from the roof of Àvia's mouth.

'Well, it's true.'

'Which Arnau?' I said, smiling. Arnau was a common name in the village, and a man holding such a name could be found in every profession from teacher to farmer.

'Olive Arnau.'

'And?'

'He's nice.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning he's nice.'

Nice was an empty word, a word that meant boring but dependable, as reliable as the sun rising on the morrow. But I supposed he would make a good, steady companion for her.

'So, no other news?' I asked.

'No. Drink your coffee.' Àvia nodded at the cup. 'It'll go cold.'

I tried to drink it but could not ignore the mystery, or the fact it would be bad: secrets always are. But I would find out soon enough. The secret, as is its prerogative, would surreptitiously blow through the open windows, seep through the cracks in the stonework,

SASHA PACINO

leak through the ill-mended rooves, eddy up out of the chimneys,
and whirl throughout the village on the breath of the wind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Secret Is Revealed on the Breath of the Wind

That evening, over dinner, I sat with tortured patience—my unwanted dinner companion—waiting anxiously for Pare to reveal the secret. It was a long wait, for Pare was a serious *senyor* who believed age made one a timekeeper. The result: he enjoyed his meal, while I was a bundle of nerves.

In the dim light of the oil lamp, I noticed Pare had aged in the years I had been gone. His mop of grey and white hair had turned straw-like; liver spots dappled his skin, mottling the backs of his hands, his forehead and cheeks; and the lines on his weathered face had deepened further.

The observation evoked a sadness in me, a feeling of loss. I understood immediately that no soul can pause mortality's clock or wind it back. I could only be conscious of its unwavering presence.

Between bites, I repeated to Pare, Enriqueta and Teodoro everything I had told Àvia and Dolores earlier.

When I had finished talking about Navarre, Pare suddenly looked at me in profundity, furrowed his brows, swallowed and said: 'I must tell you something.'

Pare, his face more serious than usual, trellised his fingertips together like a tent, and I wondered what that tent housed. To be fair, he was a serious man, but this seriousness was something else, something close to avowal.

'Matilde,' he continued, 'Senyora Soler's daughter, isn't married.'

I nodded; *sí*, she was unmarried.

'She needs a husband, and you, José, will need a wife.'

The jigsaw pieces were falling into place—

What a fine young senyor you've grown into. Your mare would be so proud.

Matilde has grown into a fine senyoreta. You remember Matilde, Pep?

—and the picture they were creating was a matrimonial one.

Àvia cleared her throat and looked at me, her youngest grandchild, her last grandchild, and averred Pare's proclamation. 'It's a good match. Matilde's only a year younger than you, and she comes from a good family.'

'A long engagement,' Pare concluded, 'will get you both used to the idea of each other.'

The secret had been revealed.

Revealed on the breath of the wind.

On the breath of Pare's mouth.

I acquiesced to the proposal. There was nothing else for it. The world was different back then, especially in the cocoon that was La Vall de Santa Creu. Marriage was wed to more than love.

It was about honouring the family name. Love grew over time, just as a Valencia rose, wherever planted, grows up towards the sun, towards light and life. Besides, Pare and Àvia were right. I would need a wife one day, and Matilde Soler was a suitable match. We were bound together in more ways than one. We were around the same age, from the same village, and had suffered the same things: hardship and death, death and hardship.



The following day, we went to Casa Soler to shake on the arrangement. Handshaking is the Catalan way. In Catalonia, deals and arrangements, business and matrimonial alike, have been sealed this way for centuries. To Catalans, the gesture is more binding than legal documents. It represents honour and respect, and Pare always said it was better to die young as an honourable, respectable man than live a long life as a dishonourable, disreputable one.

Once the formalities were taken care of, our families sat down—I next to Matilde—for celebratory refreshments. When she picked up her coffee, her elbow grazed my arm. Her skin was as soft as silk, not dry and rough like mine. Upon this fleeting touch, I looked at her. The suggestion of a smile crossed her lips, but then she turned away, and I feared that slight upwards curve of the mouth was a figment of my imagination, and she was unsure of me and our engagement. But the crossroads of indecision were flooded—it was too late to change direction. Our families had shaken hands; we were bound.

Senyora Soler, a little shadow following her every movement, set down a plate of sweets, then joined the party. The little shadow was Margarita.

She gripped her *mare's* dress with one hand and a raggedy, old doll that had been passed down from sister to sister in the other.

‘*Hola,*’ I said.

She hid behind her *mare* so only a sliver of her face showed like a crescent moon.

‘Don’t you remember Pep?’ Senyora Soler said, nudging her reluctant daughter forwards.

‘You’re walking now,’ I said, thinking of how Matilde had nursed her baby sister like a *mare* that fateful day, the day of the beekeeper’s death. Being the youngest, I had never had to play the role of brotherly *pare*.

‘She certainly is. Rita, walk to Pep. Show him. Go on.’

She took a *petit* step towards me.

‘Come on. Big steps,’ Senyora Soler coaxed.

She took another step, then darted back behind her *mare*.

‘Rita gets shy. Sometimes but not always.’ Smiling, she waggled a finger at her daughter.

We drank our coffee, ate sweets and chatted. By the second cup, Margarita had warmed to me. She toddled over, tapped my forearm, then held out her doll for me to admire. I feigned interest in that way adults indulge children in their whims and fantasies. The doll was sullied and had suffered several trips to the ‘hospital’ for stitches.

‘Does she have a name?’ I asked.

‘*Mercè.*’

‘*Mercè’s* a lovely name.’ I handed her back the doll.

When Matilde and I had drank our coffee to the dregs, I swallowed my inhibitions and asked her if she fancied some fresh air. She looked at me for a moment, and I worried she was

searching for a polite way to decline, but then she smiled shyly and nodded. I excused us both and announced to the table that we were going for a short stroll. Senyora Soler smiled approvingly. As we walked down the lane leading to the cobblestone street, Margarita, clutching Mercè in one hand, chased after us, her short legs struggling to keep up.

‘Wait! Wait!’ she cried.

Senyora Soler promptly called out, ‘Rita, come back. Leave Pep and Tilda be.’

Before the girl could protest, Senyora Soler had scooped her up and was returning to the cottage. Matilde and I continued through the gate and down the street in tacit compliance, the only sounds birdsong, trees rustling in the zephyr, the din of nearby domesticity, and our footsteps, Matilde’s heels unsteady in the ruts. We walked on like that for a few minutes until I cleared my throat.

‘So... it’s good to be home,’ I said foolishly.

‘I imagine it must be.’

As we walked, I made an inventory of her profile: long, wavy black hair, big brown eyes, a slender nose, and lips like a bow on a present waiting to be unwrapped. She glanced at me. Nervous, I suddenly blurted out:

‘I was worried you would not be in agreeance.’

‘I was worried *you* wouldn’t be.’

‘I’d be mad not to.’

‘Many a man is mad.’

‘Except me.’

A brief silence hung in the warm air, then Matilde said, ‘So, you’re leaving tomorrow?’

‘S/. For Pamplona.’

‘And me?’ She made a sad face.

‘I’ll return.’

‘When?’

‘When I’m someone.’

‘You’re someone now, no?’

‘Now, I’m an average man. In the future, I’ll be someone.’

‘And if you don’t?’

‘Be someone?’

‘No, return.’

‘I’d be mad not to.’

‘As I said, many a man is mad.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

I Arrive in the City of Red and White

I arrived in Pamplona with the dying sun, its fast-sinking orange eye taking a final glimpse at the world's northern profile before disappearing with a blink. Under the shadowy filter of dusk, I joined the throngs of Pamplonians pounding the bustling streets.

Navarre's capital was unlike anything I had seen before. Pamplona is a city surrounded by medieval walls, gates and shields of bastions, forts and ravelins, and that afternoon, wrapped inside this Spanish ode, was a tempo—*flamenco* guitars, *bandurrias*, *tamborils* and *castanets*—that trilled a colourful song. It was as though the city was alive, a breathing lady: the stone buildings her bones; the winding streets her veins; the people her flesh and blood; the city centre her beating heart. For the first time in my life, I was in Spain, not Catalonia.

I turned my attention to the task at hand: finding a place to rest my weary head before dark. I enquired about rooms at several boarding houses, but to my dismay, each one told me the

same thing, ‘Sorry. We’re booked out for the *fiesta*.’ It turned out I had unwittingly arrived on the eve of the *Fiesta de San Fermín*, the public celebration that honours Saint Fermín, holy gentleman and martyr, venerated patron saint of Pamplona. So, I said a prayer to Saint Fermín for guidance and protection in the form of shelter.

On I walked, asking repeatedly, but everywhere was booked. Visions of myself sleeping on a park bench swarmed my mind. I started to fret and brood over my future—whether I had a future and what would become of me—if Pamplona failed. Returning to Pere’s or La Vall de Santa Creu was not an option. I had crossed those smouldering bridges. But optimism tapped me on the shoulder, and I reasoned that the future awaiting me had to be better than the past I had left behind. I could not look back, only forward. In fact, I was so focussed on moving forward, I was not paying attention to where I was going, and it took a yell to snap me out of my thoughts.

My brooding and pacing had led me to one of the city’s baser neighbourhoods. Dilapidated buildings cast long, distorted shadows over the street. In a nearby apartment block, two women—heads poked out their windows—argued, the disagreement not even ending when one of them slammed her aperture shut. Defeat not being a word in her vocabulary, the other woman yelled even louder.

The end of the street was not faring any better. Two teenage boys were having their own quarrel, hurling insults like stones, but when the first insulted the other’s family, the second shoved his opponent, and a fight broke out. Over the ruckus, a voice shouted:

‘Looking for somewhere?’

I turned to find a middle-aged woman gawking at me. Her oily, grey-streaked hair was pulled back into a loose bun, and her skin was as creased as her sullied, threadbare dress, which had seams bursting at the waist.

‘I’m fine,’ I said in Spanish.

‘I know a place.’ Her few remaining teeth were black, and her cadence had a slight slur as though she had been drinking.

I declined.

She leant towards me. Her breath confirmed my suspicions. She stank like a *taverna*. ‘It’s good. No trouble.’

I declined again and kept walking.

‘You won’t find anywhere else at this hour. My sister runs it.’

It was painful to admit, but the woman was right. The curtain was closing on the day, and I would struggle to find a place to sleep at such a dishonest time. So, exhausted and having no alternative, I acquiesced. The woman led me to the end of the street, where the boys were still fighting on the other side. Trying to mask nosiness as politeness, she asked a series of questions.

‘You’re not from round here, are you?’

‘No. Catalonia.’

‘You came for the *fiesta*?’

‘For work.’

‘What sort of work?’

‘I’m a baker.’

‘And you’re travelling alone?’

‘I have a fiancée back home.’

At the end of the street, she knocked on a door and yelled, ‘Sancha! Sancha!’ Then she entered as though it was her *casa*, and I wondered why she had bothered knocking at all.

‘What? What?’ an exasperated voice said, its owner soon appearing.

Sancha looked as shabby as her sister, and it was impossible to tell which of the two was younger.

‘This is—’ My anonymous guide faced me. She had asked everything but my name.

‘José Paronella,’ I said, immediately regretting my honesty. I should have given an alias like Mare’s maiden name, Buxeda.

Turning back to her sister, she continued, ‘—Señor Paronella, and he’s looking for a place to rest his handsome head.’ Her lips cracked into an unnatural grin.

‘Certainly,’ Sancha said, mirroring her sister’s wide smile. Her teeth were just as bad. ‘Right this way.’ She never said her surname, and I continued regretting giving mine.

I left my grimy interlocutor behind, followed Sancha up a flight of stairs and down a hallway until she stopped at a door left ajar. A pungent odour of acrid tobacco and stale liquor breathed out its mouth. In the dim moonlight filtering through the window, I saw three masculine bodies lying prostrate on a row of beds, all snoring like freight trains. As I neared the trio, my nose confirmed they were the owners of the uncouth smell. I considered leaving, but I had nowhere to go, *and surely*, I thought, *this squalid place would be safer than the streets*. I lay down on a thin, foul mattress and angled my head away from the men so that I was facing the wall. Fearing robbery, I hugged my suitcase like a pillow. Throughout the night, I awoke to bangs, slamming doors and yelling.



I fled the boarding house at dawn and hurried back towards the city's heart, towards jam-packed streets and the veil of safety crowds afforded. Starving, I entered the first bakery in sight.

'*Buenos días*,' the proprietor said.

'*Buenos días*.'

'What would you like?'

'Food, a job and shelter,' I joked.

'I can help with all three.'

'Really?'

'Maybe. You experienced?'

I told him about Girona and Senyor Puig's *xuiox*s.

'*Xuiox*s. What a curious culinary invention! Well, we do need someone to help, you know, with the upcoming *fiesta*. Every year I hire for it.'

'Really?'

He explained that it was actually a good time to be in Pamplona because the city needed workers to help cater for the hundreds of visitors who had already begun descending upon the bustling streets for the famous event. He finished by saying, 'You start tomorrow.' I thanked him profusely and shook his hand. He introduced himself as Carlos Romero. Senyor Romero had a mop of black hair, shadows under his nut-brown eyes and a thick moustache that looked as if it were smiling independently of his lips.

'Where are you staying?'

'Still looking.' I dared not mention the base neighbourhood of the previous night in case he revoked his offer of employment.

Senyor Romero thought for a moment, then jotted something down on a notepad, ripped off the page and handed it to me. It was an address for a boarding house near the bakery. 'Try here.'

‘Moltes gràcies.’

I bought a breakfast pastry, bade Senyor Romero *adéu*, then devoured the morsel as I navigated the crowds and foreign streets to the address.

The boarding house seemed respectable, and I doubted Senyor Romero would recommend anywhere bad, so I swallowed my fears and knocked on the door. A stern middle-aged *senyora* opened it. The woman had beady eyes and a hook nose that reminded me of a bird’s beak. She looked at me vacantly, and I feared I was either at the wrong address or had interrupted something important.

‘I’m looking for somewhere to stay,’ I said in Spanish. ‘Señor Romero recommended you. I’m a baker by trade, and I’ll be starting work with him tomorrow.’

Upon hearing my employer’s name, she broke into a smile, introduced herself as Senyora Constanza Ramos, then invited me inside.

Sunshine beamed through the window, illuminating the scanty furnished but clean front room. The boarding house looked as respectable as an establishment for the frugal and skint could afford to be. In short, the premises, like their owner, were inexpensive but tidy.

‘This way,’ Senyora Ramos said.

She led me up the staircase and down the hall to a spotless room that smelt of lemons. As soon as she left, exhaustion from the journey and my poor sleep the night before overcame me, and I lay down, falling into a slumber.

Later, I awoke to movement: doors opening and closing, footsteps and people talking. Living with strangers was going to be strange, but I promptly corrected myself; Pere and Antonia

had effectively been strangers—I had never lived with *complete* strangers before. Thinking of Pere made my mind branch down the family tree to Dolores. On the morrow, I resolved to pen her a short letter to inform her I had arrived safely and to give her the address of the boarding house where I was residing so she could write me if needed. I wrote that letter under sufferance. How I loathe writing letters! I have a terrible hand.

Now, I suppose you're wondering how I have written my memoirs down for you. As I mentioned earlier, I am a storyteller, and I have dictated my memoirs to someone, just as Àvia recited fables to me. You'll find out who at the end.



At noon on the sixth of July, Pamplona bubbled over like shaken *cava*. Never had I seen so much effervescence, so much red and white. Everyone was dressed in pearly trousers and snowy shirts adorned with rose *pañuelos* and ruby sashes; the white represented religion, and the red symbolised Saint Fermín's beheading. The crowd, burgeoning with locals and tourists alike, was so large it moved as one like a giant, and I feared being crushed like olives. As the clock tower struck the hour, the mayor, accompanied by other officials, stepped out onto the balcony of the *ayuntamiento*, the town hall, which was festooned for the occasion, and declared the *fiesta* officially open. Then members of the city council paraded from the town hall to the chapel, dedicated to Saint Fermín, to the Austrian Waltz. The Giant moved too. I was a part of him, a *petit* cellular part, and for the first time in my life, I felt not only Catalan but Spanish. Allow me to explain. We Catalans see ourselves as

Catalan's first, Europeans second and Spaniards third. But that day, I felt like all three. Like the Holy Trinity.

As I was relishing this unification, something happened on the last leg of the waltz. A great pain punctured my head. I put a hand to my crown and felt a sticky substance: blood. I was bleeding like Saint Fermín when he was beheaded. I looked at my hand and was surprised to find a cracked egg. A food fight had broken out: wine, bags of saffron, flour, eggs, and other foodstuffs among the arsenal. As people threw fistfuls of their daily bread and splashed liquor at one another, the crowd, now resembling a mob, an angry Giant, surged relentlessly like an enormous swell in the ocean, like a towering wave waiting to crash down, down, down. I wanted to stand back, but there was nowhere to go, no walls to hug or scale, no doors to escape through, only combative limbs that hit, jostled, shoved and trampled me, all the while assaulting me with groceries. Before long, I was covered from head to toe in a meal that made my stomach churn. My clothes were stained with a raw red wine and saffron omelette, and flour coated me like icing sugar on a pastry. In some spots, the flour had mixed with the wet goods to make a glue-like paste. I now smelt like the Giant too. The air was soupy, and breathing in the pungent odour of sweat, old eggs and stale liquor was laborious.

A smash. A liquor bottle shattered next to me. Supplies had dwindled, and people were now hurling dangerous things. I placed my arms over my head for protection. Broken glass littered the streets, embedding itself in many soles. Some shards even collided with faces, causing blood to stream down their hosts' saffron-stained skin. Violent exchanges, exchanges I did not know the cause of, reared their respective heads, and on several occasions, I wondered

if the participants in the fight knew the cause either. As the ruckus unfolded, a reveller on a balcony threw an empty wine bottle. It struck a young man standing next to me in the head, knocking him out cold. He looked so cold I thought he might be dead. I went to help him, but before I could, he was whisked away, no doubt to the hospital. The *Fiesta de San Fermín* had begun, and I wondered if it was a celebration or a minefield.



On the seventh of July, after my shift, I joined the patriotic fervour again, its intensity as strong as the Running of the Bulls that morning. Street entertainers and *peñas*, workers' clubs, marched, sang and danced. Most of the clubs were on *Calle Jarauta*. I was listening to one of the *peñas* when it—the life-changing encounter—happened: I spotted a dazzling *senyoreta*. Her long black hair glimmered in the golden sunshine as she twirled around and around, the flounces of her scarlet skirt flowing like an undulating sea. It was as though she had not a care in the world.

When the song finished, she slowed to a stop, chest heaving, her expressive brown eyes locking with mine. My cheeks flushed and burnt like an inferno was an inch away. I had been ogling like a silly boy. Chiding myself, I immediately averted my gaze, my eyes searching for someone—anyone—to focus on other than her. That someone ended up being the trombonist in the band. The musician's eyes were closed, and the instrument was pressed to his puckered lips. The next song had started. I waited a moment, then turned my head slightly, keeping my face in the direction of the band but stealing a glance at the dazzling *senyoreta*. My heart sank.

She was gone. I craned for her twirling silhouette in the current of people. As I was looking, something hard hit my shoulder, and I feared another food fight had broken out, but when I turned, I found the dazzling *senyoreta* standing before me; she had poked me. Her friend was locked in an embrace with a young man.

‘So, are you going to ask me to dance, or are you just going to stare at me?’ She spoke with a Basque accent.

Her presence made my pulse quicken. My skin tingled as though charged. I was happy, shy and nervous all at once. I cleared my throat and said, ‘May I have this dance?’

‘You may.’ She grabbed my hand, awakening a concupiscence in me, and together we twirled like two seas merging.

‘What’s your name?’ I yelled over the noise.

‘Esperanza.’

‘I’m José. But everyone calls me Pep.’

It was a hot, dry summer’s day—the sort of weather olives grow abundantly in—and several songs later, our faces glistened with sweat.

‘Drink?’ I asked.

She nodded.

We walked to a nearby bar, and after a great deal of jostling—mostly on my part—we found a table, which I left her to guard while I went to the bar to order us drinks, though I usually abstained from alcohol. I was paranoid she would be gone when I returned and kept looking over my shoulder, trying to glimpse her in the crowd, but the bar was overflowing, and I was unable to move without bumping into someone. All sorts of people—young, old, short, tall, skinny, rotund, foreign, local, happy, annoyed—were there; the only thing that had not waltzed up was law and order. Parched customers leant over the wet counter and yelled out requests over the clamour of

music and loud conversations, resulting in the barman serving whoever he heard rather than whoever was next.

‘*Sangria, si us plau... Sangria!*’ I yelled.

I eventually returned with a pitcher of the beverage, pouring us both a glass before sidling up to her.

‘So, you’re from Pamplona?’ I said.

‘*Sí*. I’m Basque. You?’

‘I come from a *petit* village near Girona.’

‘You came for the *fiesta*?’

‘For work—and the *fiesta*.’

‘Your first?’

‘*Sí*.’

‘I go every year. It’s amazing. The rest of the year the city sleeps like a baby.’

‘Sleeps? I find that hard to believe.’

I told her about the sleepy olive-farming village I came from, and she said she had never thought much about olive oil’s origins; her *pare* was a cobbler, and she dreamt of designing shoes. We were so hot and breathless that we guzzled our drinks. I poured us another round. As the celebrations flowed like liquor down a parched man’s throat, the afternoon blurred seamlessly into evening. It was a cool night, but we danced so much neither of us shivered. When we needed a break, we ate and drank. I debated whether we should have *lomo* with our eggs, and I declared that one day I would be rich and dine on *jamón ibérico de bellota*, the King’s ham. By the time the moon was high in the sky, I could not believe there was a time when I had not known Esperanza.



Esperanza became my first lover. Every morning, I went to the bakery borne on the wings of Cupid, grinning and humming *sardanas* as I worked. I saw her every chance I could. Our meetings were like one of Àvia's salves; they soothed my loneliness. On sunny afternoons, we shared pastries I had made at the bakery, then strolled the streets, she playing tour guide, and I playing tourist; and on weekends, we dined and danced. When time permitted, we explored further afield: we lolled in the sunshine on the beach in San Sebastián; journeyed to Zarautz to swim in the sea until dusk; and hiked into the hills near the Monasterio de Leyre in the thinning light. The warmth of her company allayed my fears of being swallowed by that busy, all-consuming city known as Pamplona.

During that time, Matilde Soler was pushed to the back of my mind in the same way that what you cannot see feels banished from existence. Matilde was like air, like a painting covering a hole in the wall. As the beekeeper's widow's daughter was not standing before me, and because I wanted a real, tangible *senyoreta*, not an image of a girl in the deep recesses of my mind, I allowed—even willed—myself to forget her. To want her would be to court an apparition. I was besotted with Esperanza and desired only her. To assuage my guilt, I reasoned that Matilde probably had a handsome young *senyor* to dance with, and how foolish I would be to deny myself fun when she was surely indulging in the same frivolities of youth. But life is an unstable thing, and though I could not feel it at the time—love blinds the senses—something was shifting in the atmosphere.

CHAPTER NINE

I Suffer a Series of Losses

I had led that life of frivolity for about a month when I returned to the boarding house one day to find Senyora Ramos hurrying down the staircase as soon as I opened the front door. Her heels clacked against the wood in a sharp a *staccato*.

Senyora Ramos had an annoying habit of materialising out of nowhere. Throughout my stay, she had proven herself to be a hawk-eyed creature with a neck that could turn as many degrees as a bird. When she hurried down the stairs as she often did—she spent all day, every day chasing morals up and down the stairs, an exercise, I believe, that was a testament to her thin frame—she almost looked as if she were in flight.

‘*Buenas tardes*, Señor Paronella. I trust you’ve had a fine day. Where was it you said you were going? On a picnic?’

‘*Buenas tardes*, Señora Ramos. Yes, we had a lovely picnic.’

‘You *must* meet my niece Camila one day. Such a *lovely* girl. Anyway—’ She was always waylaying me about meeting her niece,

and I always declined politely, fearing there would be too much of Senyora Ramos' avian nature in the girl. Presently, she glided over to the hall table, picked up an envelope resting against a vase and handed it to me. 'This came while you were out.'

As I read the sender's name, I could feel Senyora Ramos' beady eyes on me. I thanked her and retreated to the privacy of my room. The letter was from Dolores. Maybe she was announcing her engagement to Olive Arnau. I sat on the edge of the bed, slit open the envelope and unfolded the paper.

—1913

Dearest Pep,

It is with a heavy heart I write to you with sad news. Pare joined Mare in Heaven this afternoon. He was in the olive groves when, under the gaze of the sun, under God's watchful eye, he fell.

They said it was his heart, and I believe so, for it has been broken ever since our beautiful Mare's passing. I suppose we can take some comfort knowing he is with her now where he belongs.

The burial is the day after tomorrow. Naturally, he will be laid to rest by her side.

My eyes darted to the date at the top of the letter—it was written three days ago. The funeral had already taken place. I had missed it. My throat constricted, and a wave of sadness washed over me. Pare was sixty-five. The last time I had seen him was the morning I left for Navarre. Only the day before, we had been at Casa Soler, celebrating my engagement to Matilde. I read on:

Àvia is beside herself. She considered Pare her son and cannot believe she has outlived them both. She says it's a sin to bury those younger than you.

The Solers have offered their condolences. Senyora Soler has been a rock, and Matilde sends you her sympathy.

We are thinking of you in your sorrow, in our sorrow, so far away from us.

With all our love,

Dolores

I lay down and pressed the letter against my chest, against my beating heart. I was twenty-six years old and an orphan.



A fortnight later, at work, Senyor Romero delivered more bad news. ‘Sorry,’ the baker said, ‘but with the *fiesta* finished, I don’t have enough work for you. Consider this your two weeks’ notice.’ I told him I understood, not to worry, then left—it was the end of my shift—and worried my little heart out, for I had little savings and little time.

I asked a few bakeries if they had work, but they repeated Senyor Romero’s words like an echo. Lost and despondent, I bought a newspaper—I bought one every day; it was a habit I had developed to try to keep out of Antonia’s way—then ordered a coffee at one of the cafés peppering the street and installed myself in a chair by the sidewalk. But instead of devouring my daily

ration of crime, I turned straight to the job listings where a headline caught my eyes:

WORKERS WANTED IN AUSTRALIA
TO LABOUR ON RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION

Migration flew into my mind like a flock of raptors soaring across the Strait of Gibraltar. Although I had thought of moving somewhere else in Spain, leaving my country for a destination so far away had never crossed my mind. I loved Spain, but if I wanted to be a *senyor* of means I needed to move abroad. Spain—Europe in general—offered few opportunities. Even if you had a job, there was no hope of improving your station in *vida* because of rural poverty and urban congestion. I only had to look at Pare for confirmation. And if it was true for him, it was doubly so for me, the youngest son, thanks to Catalan primogeniture.

I had heard of *senyors* who had swallowed their reservations, said *adéu* to their homeland and immigrated to countries like America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Their letters home told of opportunities a man could only dream of in Spain, and the wealth to be made. They sent a portion of this money home to help their families or pay for the passages of relatives. One *senyor* had cut cane and earnt enough money to buy his own farm. I suddenly saw myself sailing the Seven Seas like Cristoforo Colombo and seeing things others could only dream of. To venture beyond Spain's boundaries would be to live, not just breathe. But reality swiftly chastised me. I did not want to build a railway, and I had Esperanza and Matilde to consider. I had momentarily forgotten about the beekeeper's widow's daughter, whose physical distance had led to mental distance.

I finished my coffee, then returned to the boarding house where I was shocked to find Señora Ramos had another letter. It, too, was from Dolores. Àvia had died. I thought of the fairy tales she had told me as a boy, of her herbal remedies, of the monogrammed handkerchief she had given me the day I left home, of the *pesetas* enclosed in it. Like those who had walked before her—like Mare, Pare and Senyor Soler—she had vanished like a ghost, casting no shadow, leaving no trace on earth. At least she had been blessed with the kindness of old age.

The journey of life, however brief or long, would always end; our footprints were destined to be washed away with the rain or the curl of an incoming tide. The earth, the rotted duff, in time, would quietly reclaim us, our withered bodies, our raw bones—quietly, for decay is cellular, as quiet as death, never heard but always smelt, forever reeking. A wallowing circle where life begets death and death begets life.

It dawned on me that to be at peace with the life you had lived, with death, with this reclamation, you must live a long, exciting life like a king; and to be remembered, you must build a thing stronger than the flesh of Man; you must leave a mark of greatness, something as great as a castle.



As the wind blew the calendar's pages forwards, thoughts of migration consumed me. During this period of thought, a colossal, metal-coloured cloud hovered over Europe. Leaders boomed with authority as loud as claps of thunder, the sounds reverberating far across the land and forecasting the possibility of a tempest known

to Man as war. Panic echoed in people's hearts, and lathes spun furiously in armament factories. I had dithered and tarried long enough. I had to decide whether to leave or stay—and quickly. Otherwise, I would be trapped like a bird in a cage. So, I decided: I would go to Australia, cut cane in North Queensland, and earn my fortune. There was a lot of money to be made cutting cane, and farming was in my blood. I was a young, healthy man with nothing to lose and nothing to hold me back.

Except Esperanza.

And Matilde.

I would have to say *adéu* to Esperanza, but that was always going to be the case. We could never truly be together. I was betrothed to Matilde. But Matilde could not come to Australia with me, at least not at first. She would want a home, not a house, a place to raise a family, and I had no money to provide these things. My bank balance was as low as a well in a drought. And though my destination had a name, I was uncertain what the conditions would be like, and depending on the outcome, I might stay and build a life—or earn my fortune and return to Spain. But either way, I would become a man of substance like the *noblesa* in ‘The Water of Life.’



I booked a passage on the *Seydlitz*, a ship that plied the far eastern routes to Oceania; purchased a train ticket to Genoa, Italy, where the vessel was to depart; and cabled Dolores and the Solers explaining I was going to Australia for work and would return in due course.

Next, I headed to the café where I had arranged to meet Esperanza and tell her our relationship was over. We ordered coffees and pastries, then after a few polite trivialities, I manoeuvred the conversation to my plans.

‘I’ve decided to move abroad,’ I said.

‘So that’s it.’

‘What’s it?’

‘I knew something had changed. I thought it was another girl.’

‘Another girl? Never,’ I lied, thinking of Matilde.

‘So, tell me—where?’

‘Australia. I’ve been thinking about it for a while.’

She raised a brow. ‘Have you now?’ Her tone was condescending; she was hurt I had not mentioned it sooner.

‘There’s lots of work there,’ I quickly added.

She laughed. ‘It’s okay. I’ve met someone else.’

Before *I* could raise a brow, she kissed my cheek, got up and strode out the door. It could have gone worse. Shrugging, I finished my coffee and pastry—and hers. Looking back, I now realise Esperanza was never in love with *me*—she was in love with fun, with wining and dining and dancing.

Back at the boarding house, Senyora Ramos used my plans on her brows too. ‘Australia?’ She uttered the word as though I was going to join the circus. Maybe I was crazy. Then I packed Pare’s old suitcase again, its musty breath evoking that same frisson of anxiety and excitement in me.

I was ready to depart for Genova.

CHAPTER TEN

I Begin a Long Journey and Make a New Acquaintance

Genova was a heady flurry of movement, an atmosphere of confliction. Everyone was hauling baggage—trunks, suitcases and satchels. They were hauling their precious lives. Some lives, like mine, were already *petit*, but others had to be halved, condensed, forgotten. That became emotional baggage. With every step, someone or something—an elbow, the edge of a case—collided with me. ‘Excuse me’ and ‘sorry’ replaced ‘*buongiorno*’ and ‘*arrivederci*.’ The reality of my voyage suddenly gripped me.

I smelt the harbour before I saw it. Burnt coal, seaweed and fishy saltwater hung in the warm air. Cawing seagulls circled overhead. Beyond the crowds, in the near distance, I beheld her: the *Seydlitz*. The twin-screw steamer nosed up to the dock, peeking at the passengers about to board her. She had come a long way. Her voyage had started in Bremen, the city that straddles the Weser River in northwestern Germany, but she was going so

much further than Genova. She was going to Sydney, Australia. Seeing the vessel made everything real. I wondered what it would be like aboard her. I had never been on a ship before, let alone for several weeks, and I tried not to think of the *Titanic*, which had sunk the year before.

Workers swarmed the dock, and people continued to knock me with their belongings. Sidestepping the impact was impossible. As I battled the moving wall of trunks, the sad drone of final conversations merged to make one loud collective *adéu*. People cried and flung their arms around one another, holding on tightly, not wanting to let go. There was a looming chance that *adéu*, rushed and inadequate, would be the last for the rest of their natural lives. I moved with the current of people thronging the harbour like flotsam. That current pulled me closer to the ship, where I was swept up in a human pillar jostling up the gangplank. Travellers, mostly men, lined the balconies of every deck, forming a second railing made of flesh and blood. From above, they looked down at their families, waved, blew kisses and yelled ‘I love you’.

A few minutes later, the horn sounded, and I started. It was the loudest thing I had ever heard, louder than the rockets and fireworks at the *Fiesta de San Fermín*, louder than Senyora Soler’s screams that fateful day. As the *Seydlitz* departed, edging her way out of the harbour towards the open seas, crying passengers stood on the docks, still waving *adéu*. No one waved at me, but I waved anyway. The ship coasted along, the bodies gradually blurring into the skyline. With the shore fading, everyone searched for their bunks.

The staircase to steerage was dank and narrow. As I descended, a wave of sour air struck me like a slap, making me gag. Instead of abating, the smell only strengthened with each step. I tried breathing

through my mouth to no avail. An old *senyor* with wild hair was in front of me. Beyond him, I saw only darkness.

The further down we got the more cramped the area became. Men pressed up against me, enclosed me. We were like bulls being corralled into a pen. Amid the chaos, I somehow managed to locate my bunk; it was the bottom one. *Good*, I thought. Climbing a ladder to go to bed for several weeks was an unappealing prospect. I pushed my suitcase underneath. There was no pillow—a lifejacket the only possible substitute—a paper-thin blanket, and at the end of the bed, a set of eating utensils—a fork, large spoon and work-ingman’s tin lunch pail. When the weather got cold, I would have to wear everything I owned, which was little. In saying that, it was hot in steerage with so many bodies heaped into one space. Anywhere between two hundred and four hundred people were crammed in that compartment. Adding to the stuffiness was a miasma of body odour, the stench of sweat and unwashed flesh. How I longed to open a window; how I longed for a window to open.

As everyone moved around, they talked, their voices merging to make one terrible din. Suddenly, a rotund man appeared next to me. He set down his suitcase, then climbed up onto the bunk above mine, his weight sending the nocturnal structure creaking so loudly I feared his bulk would cause it to collapse on me in the night.



That evening, my hunger and I, pail and utensils in hand, departed our berth and headed to the dining room with a sense of relief, for yet another unwanted smell had been added to the suffocating quarters: vomit. Many passengers were already starting to feel queasy

and, regretting their bodies had betrayed them so soon, lay sick and hungry on their bunks. Others, not yet subjected to a full bout of seasickness, ventured onto the decks for fresh air before dinner.

The dining room in steerage was part of a compartment on the first deck, which was below the main deck. It was a simple room, devoid of the luxury and extravagances of first class. Scant lighting created a man-made gloaming, and there were no decorations, just row after row of wooden tables with benches on either side, each seating about ten people. I was disappointed to find the dining room smelt just as bad as the sleeping quarters. I had hoped the aroma of cooking meat would eclipse it.

A disorganised queue wound its way to a serving station where staff donning sullied aprons dealt portions of food from huge kettles into tin pails. I joined the line. The person behind me stood so close their breath brushed the nape of my neck. Slowly, the line shuffled forwards. Twenty minutes later, I was at the front where a plump sour-faced *senyora* sloshed an unappetising helping into my pail. In the bottom section, she poured *sopa*; in the *petit* tin dish that fitted into the top of it, she placed meat and potatoes; and in the cylindrical projection on the lid where there was yet another dish, she scooped stewed fruits.

I sat down at a table skirting the wall. To my left was a man so engaged in conversation with the *senyor* next to him he was oblivious to my presence. At the end of the table sat a drunk man with a ruddy face and rum nose so red it flushed with sin. Baldness had almost completed its job of uncovering a big scar on his head, the origins of which could be inspiration for many a fable. The drunkard picked up a bottle of spirits and took a swig. There were no glasses to drink out of—such luxuries were reserved for first class. I nodded *hola*.

He went to reply, but a wet coughing fit ensued. It went on for so long I feared it would end only in death. I turned my attention to the room. Seats were filling up fast, but there was still a space next to me. Many languages floated around yet somehow everyone understood one another. By now, I was starting to feel queasy. I hoped it was just nerves and not seasickness, for I was hungry and wanted to eat, even if the meal did look unappetising. How I longed for Dolores' cooking, even Antonia's. How I longed for a *xuixo*! Amid the clamour, a young man sat down opposite me and, ignoring the drunkard, who had finally ceased his hacking, introduced himself in Spanish as Salvador Martí from Catalonia. To this day, I have never been so pleased to meet another Catalan.

Salvador was a lithe man, not much older than me, with dark hair and an upper lip that sported a fine moustache I could only dream of. When I introduced myself in Catalan, he grinned, and from then on, we spoke only in our mother tongue. There was something reassuring about meeting Salvador that inaugural night at sea. As we chewed our tough meat and starchy potatoes, Salvador opened a bottle of wine, took a sip, and then offered me some. I accepted, hoping the liquor would help settle my queasy stomach.

'Travelling alone?' Salvador asked.

'Sí. You?'

'Same. A wife is coming later?'

'I have a fiancée in La Vall de Santa Creu. Yourself?'

'No lucky *senyoreta* yet. I'm returning to my cousin in Sydney. We're cobblers. We run a shop together. What do you do?'

'I'm a baker.'

'You'll find every profession aboard this ship.' He made a sweeping gesture around the room.

‘But I’m going to cut cane,’ I added.

‘Cane.’ He nodded, repeating the word as though in deep thought. ‘You know where you should go if you *really* want to make good money?’

‘Where?’

‘West. The Outback.’

‘And what would I do there?’

‘Mining.’ He rubbed his thumb over the tip of his index and middle fingers. ‘There’s *really* good money to be made mining.’

I nodded.

We spoke endlessly about Australia, and Salvador imparted much wisdom about the wild southern frontier. I knew little about the place I was going and was thankful for his knowledge. He said Australia was so big Spain fitted into it fifteen times. He said it boasted nightmarish zoology, that there was something wrong with almost every animal: a king brown snake could murder a man in half an hour; crocodiles could rob you of an arm or a leg—and that was only if Lady Luck was on your side; sharks liked a nibble too; and cassowaries were to be avoided—ornithologists, he believed, would soon crown them the world’s most dangerous bird. He said not even plants were good, that there was one called the suicide plant, and it was christened so because it caused so much pain its victims wanted to kill themselves—the needles, he said, were so fine they could not be plucked out—sticky tree sap was needed—and the pain could be felt for years.

‘Years!’ I shook my head. ‘Maybe I’ll be a baker in the city then.’ Perhaps the headshaking was a mistake, for it seemed to stir my stomach’s contents too.

‘You all right?’ Salvador leant over.

‘I—’

‘For a tanned man, you look awfully pale.’

I leapt up and darted to the nearest washroom, only to halt at the end of a long queue. Time being of the essence, for I did not want to embarrass myself, I hurried to the deck, where my dinner disappeared over the railing. I cleaned up as best I could, then returned to Salvador, who took one look at me and said:

‘Your maiden voyage, I take it.’



‘Out! Out!’

I awoke with a start, my neck and shoulders sore and achy from spending the night kinked up on the lifejacket-pillow. Yawning—sleep had been patchy due to snoring, seasickness and quarrelling passengers—I looked around, searching for the source of the commotion.

‘I said out!’

One of the stewards was yelling at a group of men. He was trying to get them to take their pails out of the berth. The ship, as I had learnt the previous evening, housed only a handful of washrooms, not enough to keep us passengers in hygiene’s good graces. Some travellers had decided to rise early, fill their lunch pails with water in one of the washrooms, and carry them back to the sleeping compartment to wash. I admired their effort. It was hard enough trying to wash the greasy pail, let alone oneself, for the ordinary man does not carry dish soap and tea towels on him. Last night, I had washed my pail with cold saltwater and dried it with the handkerchief Àvia had given me.

‘No,’ the steward said. ‘It is *not* permitted.’

Over the clamour, the breakfast bell rang. I rose, dressed and hurried to the washroom I had never made it to the previous night, only to halt at the tail of another snaking queue. It took some time before I eventually reached the front of the line—so much time that when I finally got to the dining room, breakfast was no longer being served. I confronted a steward.

‘You should have come sooner.’ He spoke curtly. Sweat glistened on his harried face. ‘The bell rang at five minutes to seven. It’s now—’ He looked at the clock. ‘—twenty minutes past.’

I politely suggested that twenty-five minutes was an inadequate timeframe to serve a couple of hundred people. The steward sighed—he said he had heard the complaint more times than his sister wound up her hand-cranked gramophone to play ‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary,’ and he felt he would be hearing that same old tune a whole lot more over the coming weeks—then he gave me some bread.

I sat down and nibbled my meagre ration. Nearby, a group was talking about a *senyor* in steerage who had died in the night. They lamented how unlucky it was to pay for a ticket and not even cross the equator, as though death was tolerable but paying to cross that imaginary line Man had drawn around the Earth and not doing so was unbearable. When someone asked who he was, another replied it was a bald man with a big rum nose and a great scar on his head: the drunkard from dinner. He had died of consumption. And so, in addition to storms, rough seas and drowning, I began to fear illness and dying before I reached my destination.



One week into the long voyage, I was initiated into what Salvador described as the wrathful Neptune-Poseidon Club. As I dressed, my body reeled and stumbled like a drunken miscreant, but my assailant did not breathe air—it blasted it. Throughout the night, my sleep, patchy at best due to noisy passengers, had been punctured with howling winds and eerie creaking as the ship navigated her way through the violent seas. Yawning, I grabbed the nearest thing—the bunk railing—to steady myself and finished fastening my shirt with a level of difficulty I had not experienced since contending with buttons and shoelaces as an infant. The ship went up, one boot went on; then the ship went down, and the other foot missed.

Braving the upper decks was a challenge, much in the same way one struggles to walk on a seesaw. As the *Seydlitz* swayed, my feet performed an uncoordinated dance in a bid to stay upright. The wind whipped my face and spat saltwater spittle. Many steerage passengers had the same idea. They, too, preferred to risk a drenching rather than wallow in the gagging stench of the lower decks, which were quickly becoming known as the bowels of the ship. As the gale blasted, waves lashed the twin-screw steamer, sending her pitching like a pirate walking the plank. Those prone to seasickness had well and truly succumbed to the nautical ailment. I was thankful my stomach had settled since that first night. The remedy: sipping ale and nibbling stale bread.

I was observing the grey horizon when a gust of wind sent the vessel dipping wildly, drowning everybody's balance. It was as though the planks were greased. I seized a railing, but my hand slipped off, and I fell to the deck with a thud. Stale saltwater the colour of mud—from a hundred-odd boots traipsing through

it—soaked my trouser seat. As I righted myself, a big raindrop landed on my nose, then another and another. The downpour was soon needling into me. Wind blasted. I fled to the bowels.



The sun shone as the *Seydlitz* approached Port Said at Egypt's tip. The statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, hewn out of bronze, towered over us, extending a hand in welcome while the breeze played a merry tune, plucking the rigging as wavelets lapped against the hull. We stayed at Port Said overnight while supplies were loaded aboard. During our stay, *petit* boats, captained by businessmen, sailed over to us and created a floating marine marketplace. From the sea below, they peddled their wares, sending the merchandise up to the vessel via a pulley system. Salvador and I bought much-needed soap and cloth to wash and dry our pails with.

The next day, the *Seydlitz* left the Mediterranean Sea behind, journeying down the long arm of the Suez Canal, cutting north-south across the Isthmus of Suez into the Red Sea en route to Asia.



After a month at sea, my tin pail was rusted and hardly fit for eating out of. We were now in the Indian Ocean, only hours from crossing the equator. My seafaring time had been mostly carefree save when the weather turned and we were unwitting members of the wrathful Neptune-Poseidon Club. Every morning, I awoke to an irate steward yelling at the *senyors* to take out their pails; he was as prompt as a Swiss watch. Trying to keep clean had become

a Herculean effort for everyone, and owing to this predicament, hygiene was getting poorer by the day. Salvador and I had spent most of the journey on the upper decks, avoiding steerage, which reeked like a cesspool of body odour and seasickness.

I had never experienced such idleness. I often basked in the sunshine—when it shone—and stared at the vast expanse of sea that somewhere in the distance met the sky and moved—on good days—tranquilly, peaking and troughing as if it were dancing the *sardana*. Only opposing shades of blue separated ocean and atmosphere, the water as deep as sapphire, Earth's ceiling as light as aquamarine. Sometimes I looked at the invisible seam that sewed those contrasting forces into the horizon and wondered when my eyes would see something—the blurred edges of land, the blocks of a metropolitan skyline—again. Salvador and I had many chats while awaiting land's arrival, habitually observing the creatures below between sentences. Turtles and fish—some big with protruding foreheads and long dorsal fins, others *petit* and stippled—often darted through the sea. Sometimes, a pod of dolphins swam past, leaping majestically out of the deep blue water; other times, ominous fins belonging to a shiver of sharks stalked by, and Salvador would always say, 'It's like Atlantis down there.'

As the ship continued scudding towards that invisible equatorial line, a line that could only be felt in the weather, celebrations were finalised. Down in steerage, we heard on the grapevine that the first-class dining room was festooned for the occasion. Steerage was not festooned—so we made our own fun.

Fireworks, lit from a companion boat, marked the official crossing, the colourful explosions popping open in the violet sky like thousands of blossoming flowers. Children looked up in awe,

but some, scared, hid behind their *mares*, and babies cried as though the world was ending.

When the fireworks were finished, the celebrations continued below deck well into the night. Irishmen played the fiddle, Italians the accordion. We danced and laughed and talked about what we would do when we arrived. We wanted to do and be everything. We were young, and the world was ours.

PART TWO

The Eye of the Storm

(1913—1924)

One day the eldest brother,
who had never done anything
but amuse himself from sunrise
to sunset,
said to the rest, 'Let us all work hard,
and perhaps we shall grow rich, and
be able to build ourselves a palace.'

Andrew Lang, 'The Water of Life'

CHAPTER ONE

I Begin Life in the Wild Southern Frontier

My *nova vida* began in earnest on an overcast day in July when, in the fog-veiled distance, I beheld that grand city of the new world: Sydney. As the *Seydlitz* glided through the throat of the bay and entered the harbour's mouth, she grew and took on form. Dim shapes rose from the brume, morphing into buildings and bestowing an ethereal beauty on her—and, indeed, there was something holy and fated about journeying so far to a foreign land.

A terrific splash rent the cool air when the anchor plummeted into the brackish water. Then the droning motor burped and croaked, and a bevy of workers swept the dock. Deckhands scurried, and soot-grimed porters began the arduous task of hefting trunks, suitcases and satchels into teetering piles. The *Seydlitz* had officially arrived at her destination, as had I. We travellers, eager to disembark, jammed the decks, shoving, jostling and craning with infantile impatience. Suitcase in my left hand and my overcoat slung over

my right arm, I stood next to Salvador, basking in the skyline—my right leg jiggling like jelly, my grin twisting into pert anticipation. My feet had been deprived of solid ground for weeks, and the prospect of walking without holding a railing or positioning my legs apart to avoid stumbling and falling was a welcome one.

Our deprived feet soon got moving when the mass exodus commenced. First-class passengers, dressed like lords and ladies, streamed down the gangplank while we, from steerage, clad in ill-patched clothes, waited for direction like servants. Cawing seagulls circled overhead, and water lapped against the hull. My unsettled limb carried on its jittery dance until it was finally steerage's turn to disembark. Salvador and I shuffled down the gangplank, the *senyor* behind me so close his hot breath warmed the nape of my neck. When I finally set foot on solid ground, a chilly breeze cut through the air, making me shiver. The wild southern frontier's heat had failed to match its reputation; winter had snuffed it out like a candle. I threw on my overcoat, pulling it tightly around my person, and then, shoulders rounded against the weather, I took my first step on Australian soil. The ground rose and fell under me. My legs wobbled like a newborn foal. The earth was not as it should be: solid—it moved.

'You're not at sea anymore, Moby Dick,' Salvador said.

I went to speak, but before I could utter a word, the disembarked passengers—moving with the voracity of released zoo animals—swept me up, and I moved like flotsam with the current away from the harbour towards the fog-blanketed city. When the current eased, I said to Salvador:

'I can't believe I'm here.'

'Sorry?' a posh voice replied.

I turned to find an Englishman before me. I searched for Salvador, but he was nowhere to be seen. Panic snapped at me. There was something comforting about having Salvador, a fellow Catalan, by my side. As I got further away from the harbour, the crowd dispersed. I scanned the street and was relieved to spot him standing on the corner.

‘Salva! Salva!’ I yelled, waving.

‘Pep!’ He crossed the road. ‘I thought you’d drowned in that sea of people back there.’

‘Nearly did.’

We walked on chatting.

‘Not what you were expecting, eh?’

‘No.’ Sydney was different: modern—especially compared to Girona and Pamplona.

‘She’s young. A baby.’

After a few blocks, Salvador stopped at an intersection and pointed to the right. ‘Well, I’m this way.’

This was it: *adéu*. He wished me *sort*: luck. ‘You’ll make your fortune here, Pep. Many have and many will.’

‘When I’m rich, I’ll stop by. Get a pair of custom-made shoes.’

‘Do,’ he said, laughing. Then he recommended a boarding house. ‘The landlady’s a bit much—her name’s Immacolata Bianco, which says it all, really—but the price isn’t, and it’s clean. But, *ai*, what isn’t after several weeks at sea?’

We guffawed, then said goodbye. And that was that. We turned our backs on each other. Salvador continued towards the apartment above the shoe repair shop he called home, and I headed in the direction of the boarding house, glancing back every few steps until my friend had disappeared. I never saw Salvador again.

They say people feature in your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Salvador, I think, featured for a reason: guidance. And he was right when he said Sydney was a baby. It was unlike any city I had seen before. It was big and spacious—plenty of room to grow—with roads as wide as fields and colossal parks. And peppered in between Victorian and Edwardian buildings were great empty blocks waiting to be filled with the dreams of new Australians. Thousands of boarding houses dotted the streets, and I longed to stop at one of them, but instead I persevered towards Salvador's recommendation.

His recommendation turned out to be a big three-storey dwelling in a state of decay—or so it appeared from the street—located in the city's heart. The buildings hugging it were no better. But Salvador had said it was clean, and I trusted him. As I approached the door, I suddenly worried about my appearance and whether *I* was clean enough. I had tried freshening up before disembarking, but everybody else had had the same idea, the washroom line as long and confusing as a bowline knot. I straightened my necktie, combed my fingers through my unruly hair, then knocked. Footsteps clacked, then the door creaked open to reveal an Italian woman, arms akimbo.

Senyora Bianco had a demanding face: lips as thin as telegram paper, beady eyes housed under thick, furrowed brows, grey-streaked hair, and a pepper-pot body.

'Yes-a. 'ow can I 'elp you?' She spoke in broken English, and while her mouth was busy moving, her eyes took up the task of inspecting me, just like Antonia's had.

I introduced myself in Spanish and told her a *senyor* by the name of Salvador Martí had recommended her boarding house.

She relaxed upon hearing both a familiar name and romantic tongue.

‘Ah, *sì*. Signore Martí is a good man. A hard worker,’ she said in Italian. ‘You need a room? I have one to let. The others: full.’ She sliced her hand hard across the air on the word *full*.

I told her in Spanish that I would love a room, and from then on that was how we conversed—she in Italian and I in Spanish—as the two Romance languages share Latin roots and many lexical similarities. She ushered me inside, all the while telling me how she always went to Signore Martí to get her shoes mended because he was an ‘*uomo onesto*’—an honest man—which was a rare thing in a world full of dishonest men.

Inside the dimly lit front parlour, Senyora Bianco rattled off a list of rules longer than a giant’s arm: ‘No coming in late; no visitors in the room; the room must be kept clean at all times; you must keep yourself clean too...’ On and on she went. Salvador was right. She was a bit much, but the place was cheap and clean—and cheap was all I could afford and clean all I could hope for. I humbly nodded *sí* to each of her principles, hoping the gesture would be enough to convince her of my rectitude.

After shaking every rule out of herself, Senyora Bianco led me up the staircase and down a long hallway, the floorboards creaking as we walked. She stopped at the last door, removed a set of jangling keys from her pinafore, and unlocked it; then she stood aside and gestured for me to enter. The room was *petit*, dark and musty—desperate for sunshine and a good airing. The window allowed only a sliver of light inside. A single bed was pushed into a corner, and the only other furniture was a chair, an old dresser and a washstand, all of which had seen better days—like my suitcase and its contents.

Senyora Bianco strode over to the window, forcefully opening it with a screech. A puff of air carrying fumes and garbage exhaled through its tiny mouth. I walked over to the bed—the room was so *petit* it took only two steps—and set down the suitcase at its foot. Senyora Bianco headed to the door but stopped short of exiting. She turned on her heel and said dinner was served at six o'clock and breakfast at seven—emphasis on the sharp. Then finally, to my relief, she left.

Outside, through the window's portal, a foreign world thrived. Trams screeched past, horns honked and people shouted. Tired, I lay down on the bed. I planned to rest only a little, but exhaustion sent me into a slumber.

I awoke to a door banging shut. The walls were now grey. I checked the clock: five minutes to six. Remembering Senyora Bianco's words, I hurried to the communal bathroom where I freshened up and changed, then sprinted downstairs to the dining room.

Unremarkable paintings—a bowl of fruit, a few landscapes—hung on the walls. A long wooden table with a white tablecloth stood in the middle of the room; around it sat *senyors* like me. Only one seat remained: I took it.

'New?' the *senyor* on my left asked in Italian, and I knew he meant new to the country, not the boarding house.

'Arrived today from Spain,' I replied in Spanish.

'I'm Stefano Gangi from *Italia*. Most of us here are *Italiani*. I come from Catania in *Sicilia*. Over there is Palermo One and Palermo Two, beside you is *Napoli*, but the man at the end's from Malta.'

'I'm from Catalonia.'

'And what does Signore Catalonia wish to do down here in the wild southern frontier?'

‘Catalonia is unsure—either the mines or cane cutting.’

He nodded. ‘There’s very good money in the mines.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll cut cane up north. The work, I think, is more suited to me.’

We spoke on like that, Stefano in Italian and I in Spanish, until Senyora Bianco entered juggling several dishes of rice and pasta, which she set down effortlessly on the table. A great commotion ensued as everybody scrambled for their favourites. Senyor Malta had a right arm as long and flexible as a snake, and with this serpentine utensil, he swiftly grabbed his food.

After dinner, I retreated to the solace of bed. But despite my exhaustion, sleep was elusive. Thoughts consumed me. I was unsure whether to work in the cane fields, as I had originally intended before meeting Salvador, or the lucrative mines. The fields were calling me, just as they were calling Stefano, but I trusted Salvador’s judgement. It was not only my ticking mind keeping me awake. My ears were as alert as a clock, every sound an alarm preventing sleep. It was strange hearing Sydney’s foreign sounds—strange yet comforting, for I had arrived at last. I also knew less than twenty words in English.



The next morning, I awoke to a door slamming shut instead of an irate steward. Yawning and stretching, I rose to discover my sea legs had healed like a localised malady prescribed a dose of bed-rest, the aquarium of fictitious water seeping out and dissipating into the atmosphere like a storm in the night. I dressed, then went downstairs for breakfast, but found the dining room devoid of both

food and people. I had never overslept before. I was always up at the crack of dawn with the roosters. With no meal before me and nothing to do, I shouldered my overcoat and headed out into the world of Sydney.

A crisp winter breeze blew, the smell of coal and smoke on its breath. As I rounded the corner, a newsagent's came into sight, signs screaming the day's headlines outside the shopfront. I picked up a copy of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, stared at the foreign words for a few seconds, then fished a handful of coins out of my pocket, counted the amount owing, and walked up to the counter to pay. The proprietor wore a white shirt and a pair of trousers the colour of smudged ink, held up by braces. I nodded *hola*, then placed the paper and money on the counter. He said nothing. Maybe my Mediterranean skin was too tanned, and this darkness communicated I was foreign and unable to speak English well or indeed at all—and this was true. I knew only the words and phrases Salvador had taught me.

I walked to a nearby park, sat on a bench in the winter sunshine, and read the paper like an English textbook. I tried to sound out the letters, but it was useless. I understood only three words: *Sydney*, my port of disembarkation; *Friday*—Salvador had taught me the days of the week—and *July*, which is similar to its Catalan cousin, *juliol*, and its Spanish cousin, *julio*. So instead, I studied words accompanied by pictures. A story with a picture of a building alight led page five. I read the caption but recognised only one word—*fire*—comparable to *foc* in Catalan and *fuego* in Spanish. I continued in this manner through the whole newspaper; *fire* was the only new word I learnt. The activity left me daunted. Disillusioned, I tucked the paper under my arm and wandered around the city like the tourist I was.

I walked until I inadvertently joined a long line at the ferry terminal. I craned to glimpse the vessel, but the woman in front wore a bouquet of a hat that stifled all view. As the line shuffled forwards, I mentally rehearsed the phrases Salvador had taught me, but I could not shake the nagging feeling I had forgotten something: words were missing. The line kept moving, and I willed it to slow down; I needed time to remember. But if anything, it moved faster until it was suddenly my turn. Heart pounding, I walked up to the *senyor* at the ticket booth. He had a set of thick, bristly eyebrows, hair the colour of fire—*foc*—and a smattering of copper freckles dappled his fair skin.

‘I go, please.’

But Senyor Fire just furrowed his brows and looked at me askance.

‘I go,’ I repeated.

‘I don’t understand yer.’

My accent was thicker than his brows. As I searched my mind for the right words, and the right way to say them, the woman behind me started huffing and puffing like an old chimney because I was holding up the line and her day’s errands. My stomach twisted and knotted at her reaction. I was too nervous to think, let alone remember. Everything was a blur. Desperate, I pointed at myself, then at the ferry, then I made a sweeping gesture across the water.

‘Oh, right. Return?’

Return? Now, I looked at him askance.

‘Yer comin’ back?’

I had no idea what he was asking, but I nodded. I wanted the conversation to be finished. Dead. *Mort*. I paid, took my ticket, then headed to the ferry. The *senyora* behind me heaved a sigh of relief.

‘They’re im-*possible* to understand,’ she said.

‘Bit hard, madam.’

I remembered that exchange—there is nothing like embarrassment and its cousin shame to hone a lesson—and months later, after my English had improved, I understood what they had said and blushed for my ignorant former self.

I boarded the ferry, joining the woman with the bouquet-like hat. Water lapped against the boat’s hull. The water was not blue like the ocean but a brownish-grey colour, as though taking its cue from the sky, from the rainclouds that threatened to break at any moment. The rude *senyora* boarded, strutting past me with her pinched nose in the air, a few other passengers trailing behind. Then the ferry heaved to life, chugging away from the dock across the harbour. *How ironic*, I thought. I had only just gotten off a vessel, and here I was on another one.

The journey was short, and the ferry soon docked on the other side of the harbour. Everyone disembarked and dispersed towards their respective destinations. Having no destination, I strolled the streets until my stomach rumbled incessantly. I had missed breakfast, and it was now lunchtime, but I was scared to order after what I had privately christened the Ticket Debacle. I entered a public house on the corner of an intersection. Not wanting to embarrass myself again, I studied the menu until I found a familiar word, then ordered.

‘*Sopa*, please.’

The cashier, a middle-aged *senyor* with a white-blond moustache coating his upper lip like milk, looked blankly at me.

‘*Sopa*,’ I repeated.

Sighing in frustration, he thrust a menu across the counter. I scanned it anxiously, then pointed at the word.

‘Oh, *soup*.’

I nodded: *sí, sopa*.

Thus, my first real lesson in *anglès* concluded. I now knew two words: *soup* and *fire*.



The following day passed much the same as the first, and before I knew it, a couple of weeks had gone by. My savings were dwindling, and I needed to find work. I told Senyora Bianco I was leaving, then beneath a cold, overcast sky, I boarded one of the many coastal steamers heading to North Queensland. The steamer, an old tub of a boat, was packed with Italians, mostly from the south of Italy and nearly all going to cut cane. Wafts of smoke curled up towards the clouds where seabirds circled, searching for fish.

As the steamer chugged north away from the city, the sun broke free from the metal-grey clouds, and it felt like summer in Spain. But as we passed the Tropic of Capricorn, the sun strengthened; the dry heat became humid, and the sunlight shone brighter and yellower, casting a buttery filter over everything. The sea, sheltered by the reef, was as flat as glass and morphed from deep blue to light turquoise, sea life occasionally shattering its surface. Schools of infinitesimal silver fish, like clusters of white diamonds, darted in and out of the ocean, and white-bellied sea eagles mined those diamonds, swooping down towards the deep blue sea and snatching the living treasures with their talons.

Then, one day, the steamer docked, and I had to decide.

The mines or cane fields?

CHAPTER TWO

I Fear I Have Made a Mistake

North West Queensland was so dry, remote and mercilessly hot I thought I was in the Sahara, but I was in the Outback—that strange, remote inland region. It was now August, and I had been in Australia for almost a month. My English, though not good—I spoke only in broken English using gestures as a crutch—was slowly improving. Every day I learnt new words, phrases and colloquialisms, but my accent continually betrayed any newly acquired knowledge, frequently drawing one too many scowls.

Settlements were sparse and people to populate them scant. However, it was not the scantness that shocked me—after all, I was a country boy—but the landscape. The terrain was parched like a dehydrated *senyor* lost in the desert for days, and the sun was so relentlessly hot it made a tolerant man irascible. In short, the place was so grave it was as though Man was not meant to live there. I passed through Cloncurry where bivouacking pioneers Burke and

Wills were the first Europeans to traverse the tribal land—a murderous land that killed them—and continued south. The plains were as arid as a bone, the dirt so sun-cooked it cracked like forked lightning: it begged for rain. Sweat dripped from me, and a mirage appeared in the distance. But as I neared the grey smudge, I realised it was not a mirage at all but Selwyn, my destination. A *petit* crowd of dwellings, feeble lean-tos constructed out of whatever materials were available—timeworn tents, discarded wood and corrugated iron, among other things—drunkenly leant east and west of their true gravity, and huddled close together as though trying not to fall down or blow away, though there was a slim chance of the latter. It was uncomfortably still; not a puff of breeze spoke, not even a whisper. So, it was with disdain I arrived in that smudge of a shanty settlement masquerading as a town.

The land surrounding Selwyn was no better. It was as flat and barren as a blank piece of paper, as though a botanist had sat down, started to draw something, but, finding that inspiration had eluded him, decided to wait patiently for it to strike like a flash of bright light from the sky. Little to no vegetation dotted the red-orange soil save a bit of spinifex and warped shrubs that seemed confused as to which direction to grow in. The only variation in the flat landscape was the ancient, rugged granite hills of the Selwyn Range, perched in the distance like a row of ungainly birds on a gnarled branch. The range was a stark contrast to the snow-capped Pyrenees of my youth. Here, snow was a foreign concept.

About a thousand people—mostly men in want of money, like me, plus a score of hard-drinking prospectors and their customary disciples—made up the scant population. Only a handful of women, usually the wives of workers, lived there. The *senyores* spent their days

doing hard chores made harder by the environment. Everything suddenly clicked like a gun on a red stag hunt. *This* was why mining paid well, why people preferred to live in the few cities and settlements hugging the coastline; they were trying to cling to civilisation and keep some semblance of the life they had once known.

What the place lacked, it made up for in industry and industrious spirit: work was abundant. But as is always the case with money, evil surrounded it. Bombs and gunshots echoed in the distance; war was coming. As a result of the impending conflict, the demand for copper was skyrocketing—the mineral required for, among other things, shell casings.

I had to ask only one man—he introduced himself as Choppers, then shocked me when he removed his teeth, crafted from tin—before being referred to the mining boss. His name was Paddy Kelly, and his accent was thick enough to spread on soda bread. He was a rough-looking Irishman with a dirty, buckled hat, a brown beard and skin too fair for the punch of the hot southern sun. He hired me on the spot.

So, I would help make the casings that would kill the enemy. I would become a copper soldier.

‘This way, Spain,’ Paddy said.

I followed him to the accommodation for single men. The dilapidated, makeshift building—if one could call crowded tents such an ambitious structure—looked as if it were about to collapse with a gust of wind—if air ever moved in Selwyn.

While families lived in shacks, single men resided in hideous tents. The families made me think of Matilde, made me wonder what she, at that very moment, was doing. Then I looked at the conditions and wondered how she would have coped if I had

brought her. Life in La Vall de Santa Creu was hard, but life in Selwyn was harder.

Much harder.

‘Not what you were expectin’, eh?’ Paddy said.

‘Bit different from home.’

He laughed. Bit different was an understatement.

The tent was filthy and lacerated like a punished man. Slits clawed at its sides. The air inside was as dense as *sopa* and concocted of a pungent miasma—sweat, dirt, smoke and stale liquor among the ingredients. But, worst of all, there was no ground sheet to prevent unwanted guests like snakes and vermin from entering. Salvador’s words echoed in my mind. King brown snakes, he had said, could kill a *senyor* with only one bite. I thought of the thousands of bees it had taken to kill Senyor Soler, then I longed for civilisation, for buildings that sat side by side like well-mannered gentlemen. *The venom of one snake, I thought, equals the dosage of tens of thousands of bee barbs.*



On my first day as a copper soldier, the temperature soared to forty-two degrees Celsius. *Forget snakes*, I thought. *The sun’s rays are venom enough to kill a man.* I spent every waking minute either mopping sweat from my face or gulping water and wishing I was one of those infinitesimal silver fish swimming in the sea to the east.

‘It’s really hot,’ I said foolishly. I was accustomed to soporific heat, but not such a soaring level of intensity—and without a breeze.

‘This is nothing,’ Choppers replied.

‘Nope,’ Baldy said.

Baldy was a hair-challenged man with a beard—grown, I supposed, to compensate for his bare head—which he scratched constantly, probably due to the filthy conditions.

‘Usually, it’s on the other side of forty-five.’

‘*Over* forty-five?’ *Unbelievable*, I thought. I definitely wished to be a fish.

Bluey, a red-headed man, piped up. He had so many freckles they merged to form one big freckle. ‘Yeah. This is nothin’. Apparently, back in ’89, it reached fifty-one—in the shade!’

I was gobsmacked.

‘Welcome to the Outback,’ Choppers said.

‘Nah, welcome to Australia.’ Baldy removed his hat and poured his canvas water bag over his shiny head, the beads of water dripping off his beard.

The sauna-like heat made the air unbearably thick and heavy. I struggled to breathe. Sweat drenched me. My clothes stuck to my body like glue. I was trapped. Stifled. I longed for relief, for the ocean’s cool breath. I longed for a Catalan winter. And the flies—they were everywhere. But what could I do? Kill one and a dozen come to its funeral.

Night was no better. The overcrowded tent reeked of working men partial to too many drinks and cigarettes. The stale liquor and palls of smoke, curling as it exited their mouths, only added to the smell and created a haziness like fog that made my eyes water and challenged my lungs. I feared the men, in their paralytic state, would pass out, drop a cigarette, send the flimsy cloth alight, and kill us all. Unless a king brown snake slid in.



The outback heat blurred days into weeks and weeks into months, until one sweltering afternoon everything came to a head. It was midday, the time of day when the sun is at its most blistering, and I felt as ill as that old widower with the fever, but Àvia was not there to help. My body was on fire. I drank a river of water, but nothing extinguished the blaze within. My head throbbed, my lower extremities struggled to keep balance, muscle cramps stabbed my abdomen, and I was nauseous, weak, breathless and disorientated. Every direction—up, down, left, right, backwards, forwards—blended together, the colours mixing to make one: black. I felt the blackness before I saw it and desperately tried to steady myself, but the effort was in vain. I fell to the ground with a thud.

A dose of tepid water splashed in the face brought me around. When I came to, Paddy, Choppers, Baldy, Bluey and a few other men, their breath putrid with stale whisky, were hovering over me like a cloud of flies, and for a moment I feared I was dead—*mort*—and they were the dozen at my funeral. Paddy and Choppers helped me up, and with their guidance I stumbled back to the tent and, dazed and confused, lay down on the camp bed, wheezing in the heavy air until I fell into a coma of sleep.

Later, I awoke in a sweat, my wet clothes glued to my body. I wiped away the beads of moisture, grabbed the canvas water bag, and gulped mouthfuls of tepid liquid; then splashed some on my face—wetting my shirt and bedclothes—before lying back down. A hot zephyr breathed through the tent's open mouth, providing a little respite, especially when it blew against my wet skin. Through this gap, I spied men rushing past, kicking up dirt and yelling out to one another. I could not understand complete

sentences, only the occasional word: *mate*, *billy*, *arvo*; slang I had learnt with difficulty. Buzzing flies landed on strips of my vacant skin, but shooing them away was in vain.

The desolate place made me feel like an intruder hit over the head, and there is only one course of action for intruders: flee before being apprehended. I needed to return to the coast, to Australia's Costa Brava.

Despite the vastness of the outback, Selwyn's lack of sea and sea breeze was claustrophobic—stifling. The heavy air suffocated me, making my sluggish body crawl like a snail. I admonished myself for listening to Salvador instead of following my intuition and cutting cane. I had been foolish to think a man could retire rich from mining; a man would be lucky to survive long enough to make his fortune, let alone retire and enjoy the fruits of his labour. The band of Englishmen and Irishmen already had a foot in the grave, their skin singed and their thirst for whisky only second to their pounding greed for the sterling.

I spent the remaining afternoon in that hideous tent thinking and dozing. Come evening, I approached Paddy. He was seated by the campfire, a flask of whisky in his hand.

'A'right?' he said in his Irish brogue. I had known him long enough to know he meant, 'How are you?'

'Better,' I said.

'Well, I gather you're not here for me good company.' He swigged his whisky. 'Out with it.'

I told him I was leaving for the cane fields.

Paddy nodded, a half-formed smirk wrinkling his freckled face. 'That's okay, Spain. Where you headed?'

'Innisfail.'

AFTER THE TEMPEST

‘Ah, the Place of Destiny, named after the Irish *Inis Fáil*,
meaning Island of Destiny.’

Destiny—how I loved the sound of that solitary word.

CHAPTER THREE

I Follow My Destiny and Suffer

Just as I had arrived in Pamplona with the *Fiesta de San Fermín*, I arrived in Innisfail with the monsoon and New Year. It was now 1914, and no one could have foreseen the events this new year would herald. I made enquiries but was repeatedly told:

‘You’re late.’

‘Cutting’s over.’

‘The season’s finished.’

My mining money soon dwindled, but one day, Fate and Destiny conspired to help me, and I ran into Stefano—from Senyora Bianco’s boarding house in Sydney—in the main street of town.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said in Italian. ‘The slack’ll soon be over.’

‘And for now?’

‘I know a farmer who needs a hand.’



My *casa nova* was not a classic recipe of bricks and mortar, but it was not a Selwyn concoction either. Home was now an old farm shed north of Basilisk, a *petit* town—or the beginnings of one—nestled among rainforests older than the Amazon. The town's name conjured images of that mythological reptile, that reputed king of serpents: the *basilisk*. The creature could kill Man with one look, and I wondered if the place was christened so because of the king brown snakes that could kill Man with one bite.

A river divided Basilisk into north and south, a railway bridge the only thing unifying the two cardinal points. Not even a foot-bridge for pedestrians had been built, and Stefano regaled me with stories of people falling while attempting to cross the railway bridge; many were injured—some fatally.

It was thanks to one Mr Henry Augustine Noone that a settlement even started. He had emigrated from Ireland and earned his fortune as a timber-getter. Then, after obtaining a lease from the government, he established a camp at the top of the falls. For two years he lived there, felling cedar and hauling it out from the tropical bush. He often brought his family, who resided in Innisfail, to the spot for a picnic and a swim.

The more time the Noones spent at the camp, the more they fell in love with the area and wanted to buy land. But he knew the government would be uninterested in only a couple of blocks, especially with the survey costs involved. So, with his experience—he happened to be a trained surveyor—he completed the basic work himself, spoke to several men in the district about it, then finally communicated his assessment to the government, assuring them that if the whole area was divided into forty blocks—each block about one hundred and sixty acres—then he already had applicants.

The officials were convinced; surveys were soon completed, and a settlement scheme proclaimed.

Basilisk was a hive of activity. People from all walks of life, attracted to its fertile soil, rich timbers and abundant stands of millable red cedar, came with nothing but a suitcase packed with ambition. If mining was fruitful, so was felling timber and selling it to the mills. Word soon spread, and before long men had settled in to earn their fortune. Rough camps, housing masculine drive, dotted the verdant land. But wealth brought risk. Lame men, crippled from falling trees, limped up and down the town's streets, their legs replaced with wooden walking sticks cruelly fashioned from the timber they had felled.

Sewn among the camps was a patchwork of farms, dark red muddy tracks leading to gardens tangled with bougainvillea and rows of tropical fruits. I spent the days labouring for one William Jones, a banana farmer.

Mr Jones was a short, stout man with a florid face. He enjoyed the magical qualities of amber ale every afternoon—the magic, he said, was that after only one glass, one felt better about one's situation in life. It was his own situation that had made him more compassionate towards Southern Europeans. His poor English father had battled for everything, and his even poorer Irish mother had battled to exist.

Rain poured as I worked, needling into the ground and drenching me. Rivulets of water formed at the roadside and bubbled away youthfully as the downpour added to their growth, sending them to join their parent streams. Never had I seen such a deluge. It was as though the sky had broken, spilling its contents like an upended glass. The relentless deluge also turned the red-brown

soil to mud, and that wet, sticky earth pasted itself to everything it touched—especially my boots, which I had to clean daily. But despite the monsoonal rain, heat and humidity, the climate was a reprieve from Selwyn. If anything, the arid outback had made the tropics tolerable.

At night, I lay on an old camp bed, wedged in the corner of the shed, listening to the rain pound the corrugated iron roof. The tin made it sound twice as loud. Some nights I struggled to hear myself think over the din. It was my first tropical summer, and I will always remember it as a fecund one that smelt like petrichor.

When not working, I explored Basilisk and its surrounding areas. One Sunday afternoon, I discovered the most beautiful patch of land I had ever seen. Bubbling falls like white feathers cascaded over rocks; green umbrella-like trees dangled overhead; vibrant blue Ulysses butterflies fluttered from boulder to boulder like *petit* angels; and from the crest of the falls, lush tropical rainforest spread out as far as the eye could see. It had a name: Stewart Creek.

Stewart Creek rises in the mountains at the southern end of the Francis Range, drops unexpectedly from the high country, then meanders through the rainforest before making its grand descent over the falls to the waterhole below where it comes to a rest.

Maybe it was the heat, maybe the sheer majesty of the hidden oasis, but as I looked at that parcel of land, I beheld a distant mirage. A Catalan castle like the one Àvia had described in ‘The Water of Life’ when I was a boy sprouted like a tree from the lush soil. The castle was perched at the top of the cliff, in the realm of birds, overlooking the falls, overlooking life. At that moment, Matilde and Dolores, both so far away, floated into my mind. *If only they could see this oasis*, I thought. I was not to know it

then, but many years later that majestic land would feature prominently in my life.

In fact, it would define it.



Stefano was right. The slack drizzled away with the monsoon season, and I found a place in a cane gang. Six men made up our team: Stefano and I; a seasoned Spanish cutter Antoni Mollà, who dreamt of owning a farm; a married Sicilian from Catania called Gaetano Russo, whose wife would be our cook; and good friends Johnny Rizzo and Patrick ‘Pat’ McGuinness, both first-generation Australians with Irish and Sicilian ancestry, who—like Antoni—were saving for a farm. We were to do everything together: live together, eat together, work together. I hoped we would all get along.

The barracks was a long building roughly constructed out of corrugated iron. It was elevated from the ground on stumps, reached by five steps, with a verandah that hugged the front. On the verandah was a set of laundry tubs and a shower recess; the rest of the bathroom—a *petit* outhouse, a pit-type earth closet—was located at the back of the property. Six doors led from the verandah to the bedrooms, each room housing two men.

Stefano and I were given the last room. I unpacked my meagre possessions. The room—the whole inside of the barracks—had no internal linings. In lieu of windows, the occupants before us had propped up hinged sheets of corrugated iron to let much-needed fresh air and daylight into the dim, fusty dwelling. Although isolated and primitive, I had to concede the conditions were tolerable, especially when compared to that ghastly Selwyn tent.

My inaugural night at the barracks was an education, to say the least. Unfortunately for me, I continued my unwanted habit of learning through error and embarrassment. It was after dinner, and we were sitting around the table discussing World War I and the local Germans recently frogmarched to internment camps. Kerosene lamps dangled from the ceiling, the lights acting like beacons, inviting anything that buzzed into our conversation.

Antoni and I were explaining how Spain was neutral when Rizzo excused himself to visit the outhouse. We continued talking, but when Rizzo returned, he brought with him an unwanted guest. I immediately gasped, for the guest was a Herculean moth. It was not dainty like its Spanish cousins but the size of my hand; if the insect possessed a beak, it would have looked like a bird. I do not know how, but up until then I had managed to avoid encountering these bird-like moths, probably because I was always asleep before dark.

Mesmerised by the light, it fluttered directly to the kerosene lamp dangling above *my* head—no one else's, *mine*—and danced around me as if it were at a *fiesta*. I tried shooping it away, but it refused to be intimidated, so I picked up the *Johnstone River Advocate*—the local weekly newspaper that I bought to aid my self-taught *anglès* lessons—rolled it into a baton and went to swat it, but as I made to complete the movement, everyone yelled out:

‘Wait!’

‘Nooooo!’

‘Stop!’

‘Don’t’

But it was too late. The moth, dead—*mort*—fell to the ground. Everyone looked at me.

Confused, I shrugged. 'It's only a moth, no?'

'They stink,' Rizzo said.

'Stink?'

They nodded and murmured confirmation.

I soon understood. On the breath of an evening draft, I caught a whiff of the moth's macabre odour. It was making me, the perpetrator, pay for its murder. I blushed the colour of foolishness: pink. There was so much to learn. Too much to learn. But I was learning—and as I said before, there is nothing like public embarrassment to hone the lesson. Before I could dispose of the moth's body, of my crime, an Italian *senyora*, waving her hand back and forth past her nose in disgust, entered and stacked the dirty plates so high I feared they would topple.

Her name was Melina.

Melina was a slender woman with razor-sharp cheekbones that gave her a perpetually gaunt, malnourished look. She was married to Gaetano and would be cooking three meals a day for us, plus morning tea and afternoon tea. Melina, like her husband, was Sicilian. Both possessed the same dark brown hair, nut-brown eyes and olive skin. The only difference was Melina's skin was pale from working inside and peppered with cooking scars, while Gaetano's was tanned like coffee from labouring outside. Melina's paleness only added to her malnourished appearance.

Once the table was cleared, Melina returned with a plate of tropical fruit for dessert. I wished to smell the mango and pineapple, but I smelt only the dead moth.



The next day, I awoke at dawn to roosters crowing, the provincial sound as comforting as Mare's homemade bread. Over the cockcrow, boots stomped and doors creaked open. I glanced at Stefano's bunk and found it empty; everyone was already up. I rose quickly and dressed in brown trousers—Stefano had extolled the benefits of trousers over shorts in the fields, explaining that they provided better protection against Hairy Mary, a plant infamous for its tangled hair-like bristles and painful rashes—and a white shirt; then I picked up a wide-brimmed hat and a strip of towel to wrap around my neck, and headed to the dining room.

The smell of cooking eggs and meat, along with the lingering odour of the dead moth, greeted me. Only one seat—between Stefano and Antoni—remained. I installed myself there, hoping no one would mention the late insect's smell.

'Sleep well, Pep?' Stefano asked.

'Good,' I lied. I had spent the whole night thinking about the impending day, not to mention the rustling wildlife that had kept me awake.

Footsteps echoed over the din of voices, then Melina, arms cradling several plates of food, walked briskly into the room. She managed to set them down on the table with a little manoeuvring; then, to my horror, everyone scrambled to heap great amounts of eggs, bacon and bread onto their plates. Never in Spain had I eaten such a heavy meal so early in the day. This horror must have been written on my face—I have been told I have an expressive face—for Pat, eyeing me curiously, said, 'Tuck in.'

I spooned a *petit* helping onto my plate.

'That won't get ya far.'

I spooned on a bit more.

Pat shrugged, speared a rasher of bacon, and shovelled it into his mouth.

Between bites, everyone talked, mainly about the war. I understood most of the conversation, even conversed a little. After our hot breakfast, we ate some fruit—*more food*, I thought—then headed to the cane fields.

Dew cast a veil over the land, making the green-yellow cane glisten in the gossamer-thin light of early morning. The rising sun was like a yolk in the cloudless sky, a sky so pure it was hard to imagine that a couple of months ago it had cried a monsoon.

The first task was to set the rails. It was an arduous job, and it took almost three hours to finish. By then, the sun had burnt off the morning dew, and my stomach roared with hunger. I was regretting not having eaten more breakfast when Pat yelled out:

‘Smoko!’

I knew the word *smoke*. I had seen it placed in the same sentence as *fire*—one of the first words I had learnt—in the newspaper along with a photograph of a building engulfed by flames many times. Alarmed, I anxiously scanned the land—I looked north, south, east and west—but found no flames. Pat laughed at my concern. It was a big laugh, the kind that comes from deep within your stomach.

‘A break, Pep. A break.’

‘A break?’

‘Morning tea.’

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment—yet again. Sure enough, in the distance, past Pat’s wry smile, I saw Melina marching across the field with a picnic basket.

‘Meliiiiina!’ Rizzo said. He liked to add vowels to people’s names.

Melina smiled, removed the cloth from the basket's mouth, and distributed several rounds of sandwiches, which we took greedily, before sitting down next to her husband and eating one herself. Then she poured us beverages too hot for the weather.

Rizzo shook a cigarette out of his packet, stuck it between his thin lips, then held the box out to me and said, 'Smoke?'

I shook my head. 'Don't smoke.'

Rizzo shrugged, then struck a match and puffed away. Pat and Gaetano smoked too. It suddenly clicked: *smoko*—a cigarette break. Stefano and Antoni lay down, placing their hats over their faces to shield their eyes from the sun's glare. I did the same.

After smoko, Melina picked up the empty basket and departed for the barracks where she would start preparing the day's next meal (lunch), and we men, our energy restored—and our spirit to succeed having never left us—returned to the cane. It was time for the real work: cutting.

The cut was on contract, and time being money, we laboured with an economy of motion. The work was difficult—not only the physical act of cutting but the precision required. Stalks had to be cut close to ground level to harvest the maximum amount of cane; then they were piled up in between the rows and topped with a straight cane knife. It took dexterity to cut the cane at the right level, top and bottom, to satisfy both the farmer, who wanted to take the maximum amount of cane to the sugar mill, and the sugar mill owner, who rejected the sugarless cane tops. Stefano and Gaetano crooned Sicilian songs while we cut, their rich timbres soft in the heavy air. Clicking cicadas assumed the role of percussion, and I came to think of the insects as the sound of heat.

Sweat poured out of me, but despite every effort, my toil lacked the currency of the more adept men in the gang. I attempted to keep up, but my limbs became numb, like dead weights dangling from my person. I stopped cutting and brought the canvas water bag, hot from the sun, to my parched mouth. Pat eyed me; he was always eyeing me. I lowered the water bag and wiped away the tepid liquid dribbling out of the corners of my mouth with the back of my hand.

‘You’re a bit of a weed, aren’t ya?’ Pat said.

Rizzo sniggered.

A bad herb? I thought. Confused, I looked at him askance. ‘Weed?’ I asked. It was another foreign idiom, but I, being an intuitive man, had an inkling—owing to Pat’s tone and Rizzo’s attitude—that being a weed was a bad thing, and I had, in fact, received an insult.

‘Yeah,’ Pat said.

Though the answer confirmed my inkling, it failed to give the new terminology a definition. ‘Meaning?’ I probed.

A smirking Rizzo watched on. The other men continued cutting, and for that I was thankful. I did not need an audience for my ongoing comedy. It seemed I was doing encore after encore.

‘Meanin’ you’re not pullin’ ya weight.’

Mules pulled weight. Was I a mule? Again, I looked at him askance.

‘You’re slow,’ Rizzo added.

Slow. I knew that word. Colour rose in my cheeks, and I feared they were burning enough to light a candle. I wanted to tell him I was working as hard as I could, that I knew how to bake, how to work an olive grove, but I said nothing. Stung, I turned around and persevered with the cutting, my failure consuming my thoughts.

Weed. The word left me piqued and anxious to prove myself the opposite. I tried to cut faster, but my body struggled to move with the same efficiency as everybody else. My *petit*, sinewy physique was against me. And it was only day one. I feared I should have stayed in Spain and wondered how I would survive the coming days, let alone weeks and months. The crunch of boots on grass roused me from my thoughts. Antoni was approaching. I stopped and mopped the sweat from my face.

‘Pep, grab two, three stalks chest-high, level with your heart,’ Antoni said. As he spoke, all I thought about was how he had heard the exchange. Embarrassed, I felt my cheeks flush yet again. ‘Then,’ he continued, ‘with a razor-sharp knife, slash them with one smooth movement just above ground level, and throw them forwards in line, ready for gathering into bundles.’

I nodded. It sounded simple enough, though I failed to understand how it could make much difference. But I had nothing to lose, so I followed Antoni’s advice. It took a while to get into the rhythm, but, surprisingly, it made the work easier. From then on, *weed, weed, weed* was replaced with a new mantra: *hold it, cut it, pile it, hold it, cut it, pile it*.

As the day progressed, estuaries of sweat ran down my cheeks. I no longer wiped it away, instead letting it drip onto the loam. Even my eyelids sweated, the salty liquid trickling from the creases as I squinted. Although tall, the cane offered no shade, no solace from the broiling heat that relentlessly beat down on our backs—every ray a thump. If anything, its density acted as a wall, blocking any breeze. As I worked, I thought of home: of the hot, dry summers devoid of such humidity, and of the opposing cold, wet winters. To sweat in Catalonia meant something entirely different.

My hands were tender too. The knife chafed my skin, and the whorls on the pads of my fingertips puffed with fluid begging to burst. Then I felt something on me: a leech. I dropped the knife, slid a fingernail under the vampire-like worm, and flicked it away.

Perhaps now is a good time to mention the cane hosted—and veiled—a menagerie of creatures best avoided. Bees, the insects that had killed Senyor Soler, buzzed past me, as did hornets and wasps; and march flies and mosquitoes bit us while we worked. We were a smorgasbord to feast on. The latter, though *petit*, could infect you with fatal viruses as they sucked the blood your overworked heart pumped through your veins. There were other diseases as well: malaria, scrub typhus, and various strains of Asian flu. I came to fear illness. Some men recovered, but many crossed that one-way Bridge of Death.

Reptiles and vermin also reared their heads. Sometimes a venomous snake was beheaded with the knife, and occasionally a rat scurried out of the sugar cane.

Then and there I realised why cutting—like mining and felling trees—paid well; it was full of risks. At least it paid well for us Europeans.

Many sugar plantations also employed South Sea Islanders. The locals called them Kanakas—still do—a Hawaiian word meaning person, man, or human being. But the Kanakas were not treated like human beings. They were unable to earn a white man's wage and were slaves to the sugar in a way we were not. A distinct hierarchy was emerging: Englishmen, then the Celts, next us wogs, followed by the natives—the Aboriginal and South Sea Islander people. The new world, I learnt, had as many prejudices as the old world; the settlers had packed them in their suitcases.

Exhausted, I stopped for a drink—again. I must have drunk gallons of water. Rizzo and Pat shucked off their shirts, threw them on the ground, then poured the tepid liquid over their heads and continued cutting.

Lunch was served back at the barracks. The only thing that kept me putting one foot in front of the other as we walked across the field under the sun's scorching eye was knowing I could soon sit down. When we arrived, Melina already had lunch—large bowls of rice, pasta, meat and fruit—spread out on the table. Exhausted, I sat slumped in the chair, then winced as I picked up the utensils.

‘How are your hands?’ Stefano asked.

‘Seen better days.’

‘Nothing some methylated spirits won’t fix. There’s a bottle in the first shower cabinet.’

I thanked him.

After lunch, Melina collected the plates. Sated, I longed for a *siesta*, but only more cane to cut and bundle was within reach. That was why meals were so big: to replenish our lost energy. We walked back to the fields in the thick afternoon heat where we continued toiling until Melina appeared again, basket in hand. It was mid-afternoon and time for another smoko.

Melina was soon gone, and we were loading the rails ready for the following day—a day I dreaded to think of. Upon touching the metal, my hand recoiled in pain. The rails were as hot as an oven from sitting in the burning sun all day. They were so hot that if their surface was flat, you could cook a *tortilla española* on it. That unconventional oven pained the blisters dotting my hands. I searched for something to use as a glove. Nothing but leaves littered the ground, so I picked up a bunch of the flattened

plants and fashioned them into a makeshift covering. It worked, dulling the heat.

By six o'clock that evening, I was dying. My entire body screamed with pain—even my eyelids resented blinking—but my hands were the worst. The skin bubbled with dozens of blisters from the friction of the knife, and a white blister from where the rails had burnt me had erupted. I could not recall a time when I had felt so raw and exhausted. I was filthy too; a coat of dirt dressed my body. All I wanted was respite: a cold shower, a meal—though chewing would be an effort—and to sleep before I had to get up and repeat the drudgery.

Back at the barracks, I went directly to the verandah where the shower was and undressed. A blister popped every time I undid a button. I shouldered off my shirt, the material sticking to the fluid from the weeping sores, peeling away skin, making me wince. Once undressed, I turned on the tap, my hands recoiling at the motion. At first nothing came out, and I feared I would be stuck in that filthy state, but then came a great screech and tepid water jetted through the spouts, sluicing my raw skin and aching muscles. I grimaced with agony, imploring God to abate the pain. I stood for a moment, water cascading down my body and forming a brown puddle at my feet that slowly disappeared down the drain. The soap stung my sores, and I was relieved when the puddle was clear. I turned off the tap and dabbed myself dry, all the while flinching. Then I dressed carefully in clean clothes and retrieved the bottle of methylated spirits Stefano had mentioned at lunch from the cabinet. I sat down on the verandah where I doused the liquid on my hands, rubbing it into the wounds, praying it would ease the pain by morning, all the while gasping and clenching at the stinging, the

movement making me acutely aware of the soreness nagging my muscles. My body was one big hobbling bruise.

I walked my hobbling bruise to the dining room and joined the others. Rizzo and Pat were as brown as coffee from working shirtless. Melina set down an assortment of dishes: steak, chicken, pasta, *risotto* and corned beef hash. Famished, we heaped food onto our plates and devoured it. I held the utensils oddly and tried not to wince when I had to firmly hold the knife to cut the meat. My aching jaw chewed, and food slid down my gullet, but I tasted nothing; even my taste buds were exhausted. I wanted only to rest my head on the plate like a pillow and fall asleep right there, and if Antoni had not spoken, I might have.

‘You heard about Mr Covacevich?’ he said.

Everyone nodded except me; the man was another stranger in this strange land.

‘Bought a farm at Basilisk for four thousand pounds.’

I knew Basilisk; it was the town near the tropical oasis I had discovered.

‘Says he’ll sell it for double in four years.’

Murmurs of felicitations holding hope they, too, would become farm owners one day echoed around the room.

‘No?’

‘Really?’

‘Old Covacevich, eh? Finally got a place.’

All immigrants aspired to own a farm, but it was difficult to achieve. Money was not the only requirement; one also needed to satisfy land ownership laws. I had heard of men purchasing farms in partnership with someone who qualified to circumvent regulations.

Melina collected our plates, brought out a platter of tropical fruit for dessert, then returned to the kitchen. After dinner, everyone dispersed. Some retired, while others drank, smoked and chatted. I decided to sit on the verandah; the meal had revived me a little. A full moon hung like a lantern in the night sky, and a warm zephyr carrying the smell of plants caressed my face. Insects and Herculean moths fluttered around the light of the kerosene lamps, but I dared not lift a finger or a rolled-up *Johnstone River Advocate*. It was a beautiful evening, and as I sat there, I thought of Matilde and my family back in Spain. I thought, thought, thought...

Somewhere between gazing at the luminous moon and twinkling stars, somewhere between the endless thinking, ten o'clock arrived. *Only two hours until tomorrow*, I thought. *Soon I would have to rise at dawn and live another agonising day*. I had not intended to stay up so late. I leant forwards in the chair, readying myself to stand, but the second movement—that of rising—failed to follow. Again, I tried, but my bones were as stiff as the wood the timber-getters felled. One by one I unwound my worn-out muscles, releasing the restriction but not the aches and pains. As I did so, my body shook like a *petit* earthquake, my joints cracking like snapping twigs. Once standing, I hobbled along the verandah to my room. Inside, Stefano was snoring like a freight train, his nose whistling as he breathed. I eased myself into the bunk, its frame creaking as I lay down, but Stefano did not stir.

Sleep came quickly at first, but an hour later, my thrashing, twitching body awoke with a start. Seeking comfort, I shifted in the bunk, but my limbs screamed. I rolled over, nodded off again, but awoke to a possum scampering across the roof. Then a *senyora's* screams rent the air. I thought instantly of Senyora Soler and jumped

AFTER THE TEMPEST

out of bed, cursing the pain only to learn it was a wailing curlew. I dozed again but roused to find myself clawing at several mosquito bites. I scratched so hard my skin bled.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Suffering Lingers

I awoke at cockcrow. Two hours of sleep, three at most, behind me. Stefano's bunk was empty. I peeled back the sheets, my hobbling bruise of a body protesting all movement, and examined my hands. Pieces of skin dangled from them. The methylated spirits, the pain, the stinging, had been in vain. Sighing, I dressed and went to the dining room. Breakfast lay spread across the table.

'Sleep well?' Pat asked.

'Not bad.' I was becoming a good liar.

That morning, knowing the workload to come, I heaped food onto my plate and, holding the utensils oddly again, ate with gusto. As I was trying to cut a rasher of bacon with my knife, Antoni, watching my clumsy movements, said:

'Urine.'

Incredulous—and unsure I had heard correctly—I blurted out, 'What?'

'Urine will fix it.'

‘Fix what?’

‘Those mitts of yours. Urinate on a strip of cloth and wrap it around your hand.’

If Antoni had not been so helpful the day before, I would have thought he was, as they say, having a go. What would Àvia, with her ancient herbal remedies, think of such an uncivilised treatment? I nodded but privately dismissed the idea, as any sane *senyor* would.

After breakfast, we walked to the cane fields and started the day with what I came to consider the worst part of the job: loading the wagons. Following smoko, we started cutting. Stefano and Gaetano were crooning a song when a guttural cry rent the air—Stefano dropped to his knees. A river of blood spurted out of his leg, gushing down his calf onto the ground. His cane knife had hit a vine, flown back like a boomerang and wounded him. But he was lucky. It had just missed his artery. Being closest, I ripped off my shirt and wrapped it around the wound. I understood then and there that in those fields the cane could stand longer than Man come sunset.

Gaetano and Antoni, one on either side of him, helped Stefano back to the barracks where Melina would clean and dress the wound; she was the closest thing we had to a *mare* or *àvia* and we relied on her to heal us.

After lunch, another cry rent the air. This time it was Rizzo. A swarm of wasps had stung his hand. Within minutes, it swelled as red as a tomato. I thought of the beekeeper—his disfigured body slumped in the chair, the screams and agonising groans. But Rizzo dismissed our suggestions that he return to the barracks. He persevered, kept cutting. He was a strong, stalwart man.

Not a weed.

By sunset that second day, I was suffering badly from prickly heat, and *petit*, red blister-like lumps dappled my armpits, back, chest and waist, as well as my groin and the creases of my elbows and knees. As for my hands, they were beyond sore and blistered.

After showering, I stole away and, with great reluctance, disgust and embarrassment, tried the method Antoni had suggested that morning. I urinated into an empty milk bottle, my nose scrunching up at the stench, then sat down, rubbed the pungent liquid on my hands and waited a few minutes before gladly washing it off. Task complete, I went to the dining room where Melina served dinner. We must have looked a sorry bunch. Stefano sat with his injured leg, swathed in bandages, sticking out while Rizzo attempted to eat and drink with one hand, spilling more food and liquid on the table and floor than he managed to swallow.



The weekend came like chocolate after Lent. I was free from the cane fields for two whole days. The roosters, oblivious to whether it was Monday or Saturday, still woke me at cockcrow, but I rolled over and closed my weary eyes.

My hands were beyond sore. Antoni's uncouth remedy had not worked, but that was a relief. The thought of using my own urine every day was an unpleasant one. Alleviation, I realised, would come only when the blisters hardened into calluses as hard as the stones we Catalans make into bread.

After breakfast, Stefano and I washed our clothes in the laundry tubs on the verandah, an arduous task, especially for Stefano who had only one working leg. Trouser knees were caked brown with dirt,

as were trouser seats from sitting on the ground at smoko; slashes from the cane knife needed mending; and blobs of blood—from those same blades—stained the material, making the items look like evidence in a Mafia trial. Then we scrubbed the tropical mould, which grew rapidly on everything, off our footwear.

When our boots were clean, we went to Innisfail to run errands. We both needed haircuts. I also needed a new shirt, and Stefano needed a new pair of trousers to replace the ones he was wearing when he had wounded himself; the gaping slash was unmendable. Stefano said we would find these things at See Poy & Sons, the largest department store in North Queensland. It had everything. The Chinaman made sure of it.



Innisfail was a madding crowd of people. The town was alive in a way it was not during the week. Slim cane cutters with fat wallets strolled the streets. Italians, freshly shaven at the barber's, crooned and whistled as they strutted along. Irishmen, high-spirited and maudlin alike, sang ballads with melancholy stories, while Australians sang bush songs like 'Waltzing Matilda,' reminding me of Matilde back in Spain.

But many men confused errands and cravings. They intended to buy that much-needed thing for their *casa*, their long-suffering wives and their children, but thought no harm of popping into one of the many public houses peppering the streets on their way to the store. It was the popping out part they struggled with.

Hotels, havens from the humid heat, brimmed with boozy men eagerly awaiting horse racing reports from Brisbane. Many drank

to a stupor, the liquor fuelling fights and forcing barmen to evict the troublemakers. Paralytic men passed out in the gutters or on the pavement, forcing pedestrians to sidestep them. Like corpses, many remained at the awkward angle at which they landed. Come the holy day, the unholy men would need to be manhandled into a truck or the back of a ute and delivered to their barracks or angry wives like postage-paid mail, so they were ready to rise for work at dawn and begin the cycle again.

I felt embarrassed just looking at them. I did not see *senyors* having a good time. I saw fools wasting their hard-earnt money. A week of labour bet on a losing horse could be gone in minutes. The loss of money angered wives so much they voiced their grievances to their maudlin husbands; these harsh truths only added to the already charged atmosphere the *casa* failed to contain, and domestic violence ensued. But if a woman had a black eye, you spoke to her as if there was no darkness, no drunken miscreant casting a shadow over her.

Stefano and I were on the way to the barber when we side-stepped such a miscreant. He looked like he needed a haircut, too, but had already spent his pounds on liquor. As we walked on, someone yelled out:

‘Pep!’

‘Stefaaano!’

We turned around to find Pat and Rizzo, the domineering duo, as I had come to think of them. Pat had a smart mouth, but there was something about Rizzo I could not put my finger on. He had an undeniable presence. Both men and women looked at him when he entered a room. It was a confidence that bordered on cheekiness and something more sinister. Before we could even

say *hola*, Rizzo was telling us about a racehorse, his eyes sparkling as he relayed the odds, the jockey and the trainer.

‘It’s a sure thing. What d’ya say?’

‘*Sì*,’ Stefano said.

I fished a few pounds out of my pocket and studied the notes, all the while thinking about how I had slaved and suffered to earn them—and how the chance of a horse winning was not a sure thing but an uncertain one. Everything in life is uncertain. As unstable as the atmosphere.

‘No,’ I said.

‘No?’ Rizzo raised an eyebrow.

‘I earn it, I keep it.’

Rizzo shrugged and, whistling a merry tune, headed towards the public house, towards the drunk we had just sidestepped, along with Pat and Stefano.

As I went to enter the barber’s, a muffled bang followed by smashing glass made me start. Turning around, I saw—just as Rizzo, Pat and Stefano were about to set foot in the hotel—two Italians burst through the doors onto the pavement, yelling at each other in loud, guttural voices. Rizzo, Pat and Stefano, indifferent to the fight, walked around the brawling pair and entered the hotel as though they had seen nothing. Pedestrians and shopkeepers observed the Roman gladiators, but no one dared intervene. Violence was—still is—a part of everyday life. It was as though the men had packed it in their suitcases and smuggled it across the Seven Seas. One of the Italians was as burly as a boxer, but the other was lithe, and I could tell by his tanned physique he was a cane cutter.

The two men continued yelling indecipherable insults at each other. They were quarrelling in dialect, their speech slurred from

the publican's wares, and their glasses smashed on the pavement. As they yelled and fought, they reeled and staggered down the footpath towards me. I, along with several others, crossed the street. Shopkeepers locked their doors and turned signs from open to closed. Only a few bystanders remained. The burly Italian went to punch the lithe Italian, but he, nimble on his feet, ducked and smote him with the palm of his hand, which was as hard as steel from cutting cane. With that sole move he bested his opponent, thrusting him into his place—the ground. He fell backwards, smacking his head. As I heard the man's body collide with the hard surface, I winced on his behalf. The noise had transformed the drama and its characters into a harsh reality that illustrated the terrible truth of the town and its inhabitants: everyone drank too much, gambled too much and fought too much.

I prayed to avoid such men.



It took a month for my body to adjust to the labour, but I eventually earned my calluses—plus a few scars, including one on my forehead. My hands, once the doughy mitts of a baker, were now rough and leathery. Acclimatisation was difficult, though being Mediterranean—and having endured the outback—I adapted better than my fair-skinned contemporaries who burnt instead of tanning. Scores walked the streets with skin as red as a cooked lobster. My skin was no longer as pale as the flour I once used to bake pastries but as brown as the coffee that energised me. I also discovered my sinewy physique was a strength that provided agility and dexterity. I wielded the cane knife with deadly precision, as many snakes found out.

I adapted the original knife—a flat, broad-faced tool with a hook—using fire by placing a heavy boot on the heated steel and bending it to the required shape. Having a bent tool allowed for faster work and less hunching over. The blade's edge, thinner than a machete, sliced through the cane better than a thick one as we slashed it at an angle. Sharpness was also vital, and I regularly whetted the knife on the file until it cut through the stalks—and snakes—without resistance. Most cutters handled five or six tons of cane a day; the exceptional dealt with up to eight tons. I handled seven.

At the nearby mill, the harvest became sugar, and as I stirred the sweet granules into my coffee every day, steam and smoke wafted out of the refinery's chimneys towards the clouds. The saccharine smell of the crop being processed initially made me want to retch, but I soon grew accustomed to the odour, just as my hands adjusted to the cane knife.

Some days, rain teemed down as we slaved in the fields, but we were thankful; it broke the heat's power and washed the dirt and sweat from our bodies. We would tilt back our heads, open our mouths and let the water fall in like a well. On such days, we ate our sandwiches with more gusto than usual before the bread turned to mush like the soil.

I came to find the regularity of the sweeping knife—the repeated, methodical pivoting of my body and the steady advance towards completion—somewhat therapeutic in its monotony. It helped me bury bad thoughts—things like the illness and injury that surrounded me daily, and the violence of the Black Hand, the Mafia's cousin.

Work also helped me forget my engagement to Matilde and the fact I had not written her one letter since leaving La Vall de Santa Creu for Pamplona. My only communication with her had

been a brief telegram informing her I was departing for Australia. I had not even written to Dolores. And neither of them could write to me, for my location was a mystery. But my silence was not for want of thinking of them. On the contrary, I thought of them constantly: as I cut cane, I wondered what they were doing; when I ate, I wondered what they were eating; and when I lay in bed at night, I wondered what they were dreaming. I simply did not know what to say.

Whenever I sat down to write, I found everything I wanted to say had dripped out of me in the cane fields and seeped into the ground. Other times, the paper's blankness erased my thoughts. But what could I write? That the west, copper's birthplace, could kill Man; that the east, where the sweetest thing grew, could be bitter and dangerous; that we decapitated the world's deadliest snakes along with the cane; that the same sharp blade also cut us, causing blood to paint the stalks; that young men, lamed by lumber, limped the streets using walking sticks made from the timber they had felled; that it was unbearably hot, but you could not swim in the ocean because it was the deadliest shade of blue, its hue hiding murderers, and there were rivers just as dangerous, rivers that to swim across would be an act of suicide in God's eyes; that the Black Hand ruled the north with an iron fist, and you did not have to be shady to stand in their shadows—you needed only to exist, to breathe.

A generation of Italians had emigrated from Italy to Australia for a better life, but some had fallen into the archaic ways of their homeland. It was a bottomless pit, and if you fell into it, no one had an arm long enough to help you out. Men, young and old alike, were shot in cold blood in the streets—not the streets

of cities like Sydney and Melbourne, but in country towns like Ingham and Halifax. One man even had his ears lopped.

Every day I worried that illness or injury, or both acting as accomplices, would creep up behind me while I had my back hunched over cutting cane. Men were constantly falling ill, falling down or falling over.

All these things, I could not write about. Of course, I knew I could write about something else, something vague, polite and untrue—I attempted to several times. I would sit down and scrawl, *To my dearest Matilde*, with the ink pen, but then, embarrassed at my writing, at my lack of education, I would cross out the words, scrunch up the paper and throw it in the bin. I was not to know it then, but my not writing would have terrible consequences for me and Matilde—or maybe Fate and Destiny were conspiring again.

They certainly conspired for Stefano.

CHAPTER FIVE

Darkness Descends

One rainy day, in the early afternoon, Stefano became so unwell he had to return to the barracks. We watched his figure recede across the fields.

‘You don’t look good,’ I had told him at morning tea.

‘I fine,’ he replied. ‘Just a summer niggles.’

His mood had changed over the preceding days from jovial to surly and aloof, but I put that down to exhaustion or bad news from home.

That evening, we returned to the barracks to find a pot of *sopa* about to boil over, Melina nowhere to be seen. I quickly removed it.

‘Melina? Melina?’ we called.

There was no answer, so we searched the barracks. We found her sitting by Stefano’s bed, trying to spoon some of the *sopa* into his mouth. But Stefano, lips pressed, shook his head.

Sighing, Melina placed the bowl on the bedside table. ‘He has a fever.’ She pressed a hand to his forehead. ‘*Mamma mia!*’

He's burning like that forsaken southern sun!' She nodded at the open window.

A delirious Stefano confirmed her statement with groans and mumbled complaints about the aches and pains nagging his joints. Melina pulled the folded blanket from the foot of the bed and drew it firmly over him to sweat the fever out, then picked up the *sopa* and persevered. The little he consumed came right back up, sullyng the sheets and dribbling down his chin. The odious smell hung in the thick air. Melina fetched a damp rag and dabbed at the mess.

Later that night, when I went to bed, Stefano lay comatose. But at midnight, he awoke with a polar ague, teeth chattering. By dawn, the southern sun had returned, and he sweated profusely. His pallid skin and bloodshot eyes confirmed our fears. He was gravely ill. As I was leaving for breakfast, Melina entered with a slice of dry toast, but lips pursed, Stefano shook his head. In the dining room, I sat down next to Gaetano.

'How is he?' he asked.

'The same.'

'But no worse?'

'No worse,' I said, though I knew it was serious.

Unable to help, we left for the cane fields. As I worked, it suddenly occurred to me how *petit* the room we shared was, and I feared whatever he had was catching.



Stefano's strange flu passed after a week, and he returned to the cane fields. But he was altered. The mystery illness had sapped his energy,

and he struggled to keep up. He tried to hide his exhaustion, the effort it took to stand, to swing the knife, but could not. 'Sit. Rest,' we urged. And he did. The old Stefano would have balked at such a suggestion. That was when we knew he was still unwell.

By the following week, Stefano's condition had worsened, and he needed to rest more frequently and for longer periods. Then one afternoon, after smoko—during which he had picked at his food like a sparrow—he got up, knife in hand, and moved as if drunk. He staggered and reeled as though exiting a closing public house before violently falling on a tussock of earth with a thud. Being insensible, he was unable to cushion the fall with his arms and faceplanted. He lay motionless, surrounded by sugar cane, the sun blazing down on his back. Fearing he had impaled himself with the knife when he fell, I hurried over. A foot from his person, the metal blade glinted in the sun. I heaved a sigh of relief. As Gaetano and I helped him up, we exchanged looks of disbelief. He was feather-light, as if his bones had hollowed. He had always been lean—we all were from labouring—but the illness had caused him to shed weight he did not have to lose. Dirt covered his face, sweat gluing the soil to his skin—and as he mumbled a few inaudible words, he ate some of the muck. With Gaetano on one side and me on the other, we escorted him back to the barracks. It reminded me of the past, of Senyor Soler, and of Mare. As we approached the building, Melina, seeing us through the window, ran across the yard and examined Stefano's face. His skin was yellow, sallow and blotchy and stretched across his bones like hide on a tambourine.

'What happened?' she asked.

'He collapsed,' I said.

Gaetano nodded. 'Nearly landed on his knife.'

Melina shook her head and murmured a prayer.

Stefano mumbled something inaudible.

We exchanged looks. A brief silence hung in the air while Melina checked his eyes. His sclerae were not white, as God intended, but yellow and streaked with estuaries of blood. The sight was unnerving.

‘He needs to go to *ospedale*.’

‘N-no.’ Stefano shook his head, then with great effort slurred, ‘Aii juust need reest.’

Melina persisted, telling him he was unwell—that a healthy man would not be yellow, underweight and in need of human crutches—but he merely shook his head: he would not go to hospital. None of us blamed Stefano for refusing to go. Medical help was a foreign concept. We peasants had grown up without doctors, nurses or hospitals, and the few men we knew of who had sought treatment had died—not a good advertisement.

Over the following days, we took turns checking on Stefano, but those visits did nothing to assuage our fears. They increased them. His condition worsened with every turn of the clock. Then one day, a Saturday, he stopped speaking coherently—it was then we took matters into our own hands.

‘We’re taking him to *ospedale*,’ Melina said. Then, to Stefano: ‘You’re going to *ospedale*.’

Her firmness reminded me of Àvia.

‘I’ll get the cart.’ Gaetano went outside; Pat and Rizzo were in town.

Antoni and I tried to help Stefano sit upright in bed, but he was weak and slumped forwards like an ungainly baby. Upon hearing the wagon rattle to a stop, we supported him outside

and lifted him bodily into the back. Antoni climbed in next to Gaetano, and I sat in the back with Stefano. Melina bade her husband *adéu*, then Gaetano clicked his tongue, and the horse—formerly a brumby called Ferrari; the *senyor* who had broken him in was a blacksmith and farrier—took off, his chestnut coat glimmering in the sunshine.

It was a bumpy ride, and as the cart jerked over the rutted road, Stefano groaned. I cradled his head to try to cushion his fragile body against the hard surface.

Throughout the journey, Stefano drifted in and out of consciousness, babbling in a confused mixture of Sicilian, Italian and broken English. Worried he was closer to the churchyard than the hospital, Gaetano whipped Ferrari. But as we approached Innisfail, the main road came to a standstill. Traffic congested every thoroughfare.

‘Emergency! *Emergency!*’ we yelled.

Cars, pedestrians and horse-drawn carts and wagons slowly parted to allow our mock ambulance through. Onlookers stared at Stefano, trepidation etched on their faces.

Only when the hospital was in sight did he stop babbling. He just lay there, resting his head against me. His silence amid the town’s clamour was eerie.

A few minutes later, he was frothing at the mouth. I wiped the foam away with my shirtsleeve. Then his body, without protest or convulsion, suddenly relaxed as though it was releasing his soul, and his deep brown eyes stared heavenwards.

‘Stefano!’ I cried. My heart pounded like a trip hammer.

Upon hearing me, Antoni and Gaetano glanced back, then the latter whipped Ferrari again.

When the cart drew up at the hospital, a white-rendered building on ground level with a fence of palm trees surrounding it, Gaetano pulled the reins and yelled:

‘Whoa!’

Ferrari, due for a spell, trotted to a stop and neighed. Antoni and Gaetano leapt down and rushed to the back where Stefano, unresponsive, lay by my side.

Two nurses, witnessing our panic through the window, hurried outside. Dressed from head to toe in white, they looked like angels released from Heaven to save the soul of mortal Man. They floated around the cart, examining Stefano as we anxiously watched on.

‘No pulse,’ one of them said.

‘No. No pulse,’ the other confirmed.

The first nurse hurried inside, returning with a doctor. Upon examining Stefano, the doctor announced nothing could be done.

Stefano was dead.

Mort.

Judging by his appearance—a skeletal figure, sallow skin, and yellow, blood-streaked eyes—the doctor correctly assumed his occupation to be that of a cane cutter and deduced he had died of Weil’s disease: *leptospirosis*. He died of a long word.

‘The hospital’s received over seventy cases this month,’ he said, ‘and the number’s growing as quickly as the cane in the fields.’

The doctor explained it was not contagious and that he had probably been infected through one of the many *petit* cuts and sores on his hands coming into contact with water tainted by rat urine. I thought of the rain, of the vermin scurrying out as we cut the cane, and I understood then and there that it could have been me—any one of us—lying dead in the back of that cart.

While Stefano's death was our tragedy, to others he was merely another statistic, a casualty of money in a new world—a world where, as cash lined pockets, disease gained currency.

That night, as I lay in bed, Stefano's premature death consumed my mind. He had been cut down in his prime, cut down like the cane that had killed him.



Stefano's death caused a great uprising in the community and, try as they might, both the law and landowners could not cure the germ of rebellion. Cane cutters declared a strike. Some strikers had known him, while others had known only *of* him and his plight, but everyone knew someone who had died of the disease. They all had one thing in common: they wanted to earn a living—and live.

To us strikers, the stands of perennial grass now resembled prison bars, trapping us in a hostile place. Fire, we believed, was the only escape. We wanted the sugar cane burnt to cleanse the crop and make conditions safer before harvesting, but farmers believed burning damaged the crop, thus burning a hole in their hip pockets. The community was divided.

But tragedy spawns dogged persistence, and one afternoon in town, I witnessed a group of disgruntled cane cutters stumble out of one of the many public houses and wander the streets, lamenting their fate if change did not come. As they wandered, other cutters joined the cause until the group became a mob. That mob wound its way through town towards the gates of the sugar mill, where it surrounded an approaching truck loaded with cane and prevented it from entering. The mob forcibly removed the driver,

dragging him from the cab and roughing him up to the point of unconsciousness.

The violence only fanned the flames of the fiery mob. Moving as one—like the angry Giant at the *Fiesta de San Fermín*—they overturned the truck, the vehicle crashing onto its side.



Come November, the cut-out—the celebration that marked the end of the cane harvest—was marred by tragedy. Then December arrived with the slack, which would stay until June. Although it started out as a friend, a holiday, it soon overstayed its welcome. Work was scarce during the slack, and money earned throughout the cutting season quickly dwindled. There was no dole to support workers, but some greengrocers allowed families to buy food on credit, payable when the season recommenced. Being alone, it was easy for me to live frugally, but I still needed money, so I returned to William Jones' farm and resumed doing odd jobs.

When the cutting did start, the gang would be different. Last season's crew had dissolved. Antoni had bought a farm, and Rizzo and Pat had purchased one together. Gaetano, like me, was the only cutter returning to the fields, and Melina would be the cook again. Sometimes I saw our old crew in town on weekends.

Although I looked forward to the beginning of the cutting season and earning good money, Stefano's passing was stamped on my mind like ink on a death certificate, and my mortal worry only increased. Cutting cane was not a long-term occupation—it was a young, fit man's game, and one many young, fit men lost at that—and like the sun after a storm, it suddenly dawned on me that I

needed to save as much money as I could as quickly as possible and escape. Otherwise, I would end up ill, injured or, worse, dead. But I did not need to worry.

Fate and Destiny conspired again.



One Saturday morning, in the Town of Destiny, I was leaving the barber's when a *senyor* yelled out:

‘Hey! It’s the Spanish baker!’

The *senyor* was lithe and tanned—a cane cutter—and spoke with an Australian accent. Two *senyors*—also lithe, tanned cane cutters—stood on either side of him.

I had been referred to as the Spanish baker on several occasions. It was as though my place of origin was my Christian name and my former occupation my surname.

‘Sí,’ I said, approaching the trio. ‘It is I, the Spanish baker.’

‘We need a cook for the cutting season.’

‘But a baker is not a cook.’

‘Close enough, no?’

I pondered the proposition.

‘Listen, all ya have to do is not serve us goanna-chicken soup.’

My eyebrows shot up at the mention of the ghastly recipe title.

‘It wasn’t on purpose.’

‘We hope,’ the *senyor* to his right said.

‘The last cook had a goanna fall into the chicken soup. She tried to warn her husband, but he was too busy chattin’ to us. So, we ate it. Anyway, one night, when we were havin’ a few drinks, she told us. Thought it was hilarious. I said, “Love, we’ll find it

hilarious too—in ten bloody years.” They guffawed. ‘So, what d’ya say?’

‘Sì. Close enough. I cook. I join you.’

We talked some more—his name was Gino Mammino; he was Australian with Sicilian parents—and then shook hands on the agreement before parting ways. Elated, I strutted down the street grinning. There would be no more cane cutting, no direct exposure to injury or illness, yet I would still earn an equal share of the money. The only downside was that occasionally—during busy periods—I would still be required to help load the stalks and assist with moving the rails, my least favourite tasks. But I would be a cook first and foremost, like Melina. So, I returned to William Jones’ farm and awaited the forthcoming harvest in June with relief instead of trepidation. I just had to get through the stormy monsoon season first.

CHAPTER SIX

Something Lurks in the March Air

Early one Sabbath morn in March, a refreshing breeze blew through the open window, providing a little respite from the heat. It was too early for birdsong, and as I lay in bed, listening to the swaying trees and rustling leaves, I fell back asleep. I had nowhere to be for a few hours. Antoni had arranged to pick me up; he wanted to introduce me to a Catalan *senyor* I ‘simply *must* meet’.

By mid-morning, as I sat outside the shed waiting for Antoni, the wind was rattling the lean-to fittings and thrashing the trees, throwing weak branches to the ground with a thud. The windmill and weathervane spun anxiously, scraping shrilly against their rusted moorings.

The bad weather’s origins was a mystery. The day before, birds had warbled and cows had chewed their cud in the lush paddocks under the sun’s golden eye. But that Sunday was different. A strange, almost superhuman feeling hung in the air, and the sky was low,

almost as if a dome had been placed over the town. As the trees danced wildly, a car horn beeped.

‘*Hola*, Pep. Bit wild, eh?’

‘She’s howling like an Iberian wolf,’ I said, getting into the Buick.

On the open road, the car swayed in the wind. As Antoni navigated the bluster, we talked. Antoni vowed that on his farm the cane would be burnt, and I spoke of how I would be a cook next season and make anything but goanna-chicken *sopa*.

We arrived at his friend’s *casa* half an hour later, the wind still relentless. The *senyor’s* name was Joe Donatiu, and I immediately liked him. Joe made a pot of coffee, which we sipped while chatting about work, family and the strange weather. Then we followed Joe to his shed, where he showed us his Buick, which needed Antoni’s golden touch.

It took a couple of hours to fix—it had a stuck valve—and while we were walking back to the *casa*, we were surprised at how much strength the wind had gained. Joe suggested we wait until it eased before leaving. Antoni agreed, and I was relieved. If the wind had nearly blown us off the road coming in, it certainly would on the way home. Cloistered in the *casa*, we busied ourselves with Sunday activities of the less saintly: drinking too much coffee, playing *siete y media*, and talking about home. At lunchtime, Joe made *bocadillos*, which we ate against a backdrop of howling wind.

‘You think it’s a cyclone?’ Antoni said, taking a bite of his sandwich.

I looked out the window. The sky was now the colour of tarnished pewter. ‘It’s certainly acting that way.’

‘No warning’s been issued,’ Joe said.

‘No. No warning.’ Antoni licked his lips. ‘I’m sure they would’ve said something if a cyclone was coming.’

We nodded in agreement.

Sated, we resumed our game, the entertainment carrying on well into the afternoon. The weather, however, rebuffed our lunchtime forecast. The sky was so dark it looked like evening. Eddies of gusts blasted from the east, the winds only increasing in violence by the hour. The warbling birds had disappeared, and the cattle had an unusually cowed appearance.

When the sky broke, and gusts of wind shot rain like arrows into the earth, we abandoned our game and hurried to the windows. The downpour hit the glass so hard it was a blur. We caught glimpses of the tempest only when the wind changed direction.

‘My goodness!’ Antoni said.

Joe watched the downpour. ‘It’s really coming down.’

‘It’s cyclonic,’ I murmured.

Cyclonic. A pregnant silence hung in the air. They feared I was right—I feared I was right—that it really was a cyclone. Joe lit candles and a kerosene lamp in preparation, and then we continued playing cards, glancing out the window between hands. There was nothing to do but wait.

By late afternoon, the wind was gale-force, howling as it whipped around trees and houses, its strength making us quiver. Stacked china on a nearby cabinet clattered like a scared man’s teeth. One plate, precariously placed on the bench edge, fell and smashed on the floor, making us start. Worried about how—*if*—I would get home, I excused myself and went to the front door to investigate. But as I turned the brass knob, the heavy wood swung back on its hinges, nearly striking my head. Leaves blew into the *casa*, rustling as they

whirled crazily down the hallway. Antoni and Joe came hurrying. Shocked, we stood gaping at the weather's fury as gusts of eerily cold wind roared past, sending rain flying into our mouths.

'By God, we're in for it.' Joe shook his head in disbelief.

'We're certainly in for *something*,' I agreed.

'We'll find out soon enough.' As Antoni spoke, a branch rolled past.

It was worsening. I shut the door with a gust of wind, causing it to slam. We shuddered. Having nothing else to do, we returned to the lounge room and passed the time in much the same manner as before, except whisky had replaced coffee and all conversation centred on the weather.

In the final hours before evening, while we watched the wind strip leaves and branches off tree limbs, we witnessed the outhouse tumble over like a crashing wave. We dropped our cards and ran to the window. A fresh gust of wind seized the chicken coop, throwing it into the air like a plaything and tearing it to pieces.

Another gust: part of the neighbour's outhouse flew by.

And another: part of a dwelling shot past.

'I think we should check upstairs,' Joe said.

Antoni and I agreed. Joe grabbed the kerosene lamp, and then we disappeared up the dark, narrow staircase. The *casa* creaked and howled. Upstairs, an eerie pressure jerked the roof, making the walls bulge like a bloated stomach. The second level was no longer safe—and I feared neither was the first.

'I think we need to move to a smaller room,' Joe said.

'Me too,' Antoni and I echoed in unison.

Chastened by the raging tempest, which was only increasing in power, we headed downstairs to the smallest room in the *casa*,

bringing the cards and liquor with us. We set up camp on the floor, staring at the kerosene lamp in the middle of the room like a fortune-teller looking into a crystal ball, but it told us nothing. Then the front door suddenly flew open. The knob hit the wall with an ear-splitting bang before crashing back and forth on screeching hinges and striking the wall repeatedly like an advancing army. We rushed to close it, but the wind was too strong. While we struggled, a cacophony of sounds reverberated from upstairs. We looked at one another, then at the stairs, and then continued to push wood against wind. It was element against element. Man against Mother Nature. Finally, we forced it shut.

‘Three *senyors* to close a door,’ I said.

‘And all of ’em cane cutters,’ Antoni added.

‘Incredible.’ Joe shook his head in disbelief. ‘This is *some* storm.’

As Joe spoke, a great bang blasted above. Our eyes darted to the ceiling.

‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ Joe said.

‘Me neither,’ Antoni and I echoed. Having witnessed two out-houses, a chicken coop and part of a dwelling fly by, we feared what was happening upstairs.

‘We need to leave.’

But Antoni was unsure. ‘And go where?’

‘Anywhere but here.’ A brief silence hung in the air. ‘There’s a school nearby.’

We looked at him askance.

‘It’s bigger and stronger.’

We agreed—we had no choice. Antoni grabbed the kerosene lamp, and Joe put on an oilskin raincoat. I had not thought to bring one—neither had Antoni—though the effort seemed futile.

We hurried to open the door but struggled. The wind had changed direction, imprisoning us in the *casa*. It took all three of us to open it, and when we did, we saw utter turmoil. Anxiety seized me. An unusually chilly blast of wind struck me like a slap in the face as I stepped outside and stumbled down the steps into the tempest. The howling gale thrust us forward. No moon hung in the sky, not even a star; our only beacon was the kerosene lamp in Antoni's hand. Time no longer existed in a mechanical sense.

Spines rounded against the needling rain, we hurried to the school, which was located on the opposite side of the road past a vacant block of land. The gale whipped our backs, and Joe's raincoat flapped like a ragged flag begging surrender. Several times the gale nearly blew us over, so we huddled together to stay upright. As we rushed across the wet grass, Joe's raincoat ripped, tearing like a piece of paper from collar to hem. Another gust of wind whipped us, knocking Antoni to the ground. The lamp smashed and extinguished.

'Antoni?' I yelled.

'You all right?' Joe helped him up.

'Sí. But the lamp isn't.'

The tempest's commotion was so loud that if Antoni had not been in front, we would not have noticed he had fallen. We continued blindly. In the distance, I saw a speck of light: a *casa*.

'Should we go there?' I yelled.

'The school's closer,' Antoni replied.

On we went until Joe halted. 'We're here.'

We followed the fence. It seemed to go on forever.

'Where's the entrance?' Antoni asked.

'Don't know,' Joe said.

‘Let’s split up and look for it.’

We agreed.

I was running frantically along the school boundary searching for the gate when, in the darkness, my scotopic eyes spotted a latch.

‘It’s here!’ I yelled.

But no one answered.

‘It’s over here!’

Still no answer.

I ran back to where we had dispersed, yelling, ‘I’ve found it! I’ve found it!’ But they were gone, blown away with the wind. Distraught, I returned to the gate and tried to open it, but it refused to budge. Seized by a paroxysm of rage, of sheer desperation, I wrenched the thing off its rusted hinges and ran towards the school, but when I saw the building, my heart sank. The wind had knocked it off its concrete blocks. Panicked, I ran alongside the walls, yelling out to the others in vain. For the first time in my life, I truly feared being alone. We were foolish to split up, and I was angry Antoni had suggested it, and I had agreed to it.

As these thoughts reeled in my mind, something—or someone—told me to look up. I did. The sight was frightening. A piece of roof from a nearby *casa* was hurtling towards me. I dived sideways, my chest skidding along the wet grass, the clattering, zooming debris only just missing me. I needed to find shelter—fast! I searched desperately. At the corner of the infants’ play area, I spied a *petit* stand, low to the ground, with an overflowing tank still standing on it. I ran over, got down on my haunches and crawled underneath. The cold water gushing down its sides drenched my body, giving me goosebumps. I wriggled around, changing position to try to get comfortable, but relief was a foolish notion.

As I twisted and turned, a great squawking sound made me start. Alarmed, I craned my neck to find a dozen-odd sodden birds behind me. The birds were so drenched they looked disfigured. Unidentifiable. Their feathers were matted together in spikes, which made their bodies appear a size smaller. But the fact they had chosen the tank for shelter made me feel safer, even if only a little. Does nature not have a sixth sense?

I turned away from the birds and peeked through the gap between the tank and the ground. The downpour and incessant winds were relentless, pelting the earth like arrows. It was as though a piece of sky had been upended to challenge us questioning mortals. My muscles, folded awkwardly, soon became stiff and cramped. I stretched and changed position, the rain drenching me even more, the movement sending the birds squawking. As I lay there shivering, I wondered where Antoni and Joe were, and if they were safe. With nothing to do but pray, I did just that, and then crossed myself, the gesture conducted in my mind because the tank offered no space for sanctity. As I said ‘Amen,’ the tempest grew madder, as though questioning my beliefs. It was almost as if my prayer had antagonised it like a taunted beast. Its roar became thunderous and the wind howled like a banshee. It was then and there I understood that if you do not fear God, you can fear him through the elements.

From beneath that lonesome tank, I witnessed trees fly past; parts of buildings become airborne; pieces of corrugated iron, resembling mangled knives, stab the air; furniture—tables, chairs, beds and cabinets—hurl past; and a tank—like the one I was under—soar away. I covered my ears, closed my eyes and hummed. *I will live, I will live, I will live*, I told myself. *I will survive, I will survive, I will survive.*

Then, without warning, a great howl—a dying man's final gasp—exhaled on the breath of a gale, and the wind ceased, an eerie silence hanging in the cool air.

I dithered over whether to stay or leave. The birds, sodden and dazed, remained fixed. I wondered if it was a sign, if I should stay too. Fate and Destiny soon made the decision for me. Across the drowned land, the silence shattered:

‘Cooee! Cooee!’

Thankful to hear another person, I crawled out from under the tank, my knees sliding across the mud. I went to stand, but my numb, cramped legs struggled to rise. Slowly, I stretched them.

‘Cooee! Cooee!’ the voice called out.

‘Cooee! Cooee!’ I answered.

‘Cooee! Cooee!’ the voice replied.

I followed the sound across the drowned land, my feet squelching through the mud, sinking into it like quicksand. Puddles of water pooled together, forming murky lakes. A few crocodiles had probably been washed from their estuaries into the tarnished waters, maybe even sharks. Every few steps, I side-stepped an obstacle—tree limbs, broken furniture, wooden beams that once held up houses, even dead animals—but I trudged on through the muck and mire. The shout led me to the school shed. Antoni and Joe were standing outside.

‘Pep, where’d you go?’ Antoni asked as he and Joe rushed forward.

‘Where’d *I* go?’ The words came out more accusatory than intended. I told them how I had found the gate, how the school had been knocked off its blocks and how I had hidden under a tank.

‘I know,’ Joe said. ‘I can’t believe the school didn’t hold.’

‘Crazy,’ Antoni shook his head.

‘Where *were* you two?’ I asked.

Joe led me inside. ‘We hunkered down over there.’ He pointed to a corner. They had been in greater danger than I had. ‘Look at that post.’ A sheet of galvanised iron had struck the timber, wrapping its pliable body around its man-made victim only a few feet from where they had sat.

Antoni cleared his throat. ‘It’s a cyclone all right, but this is only the eye. We need to find proper shelter before it returns. This shed’—he looked around, shaking his head again—‘it isn’t going to hold. Not with the wind blowing in the opposite direction.’

‘We’ll check the *casa*. Maybe it held,’ Joe said.

‘Worth a try,’ Antoni agreed.

Biting my lip, I nodded. It was an optimistic thought. If the school had failed to stand, his home had no chance. But I said nothing. I desperately wanted to share their hope. So, without another word, we left the school grounds, sloshed across the field—now a lake—and headed back to the *casa* we had fled earlier.



Joe cursed. We stood, stupefied, on the roadside gaping at Casa Donatiu—or what remained of it. Every window was smashed. Upstairs, only a section of the floor remained, and downstairs, parts of the *casa* slumped over a barrier of furniture. Antoni’s Buick was gone, but he dared not mention it while standing in front of Joe’s half-demolished home.

‘Good thing we left,’ Joe said.

Antoni nodded. ‘Where to now?’

‘What about that light I saw earlier? The *casa*?’ I suggested.

‘The one past the school?’ Antoni asked. Joe was still in shock. ‘*Sí*.’

‘Worth a try.’ Antoni turned to Joe. ‘We’d better go. Time’s of the essence.’

Joe snapped back to reality, and we squelched through the mud, bypassing the debris, towards the house. The atmosphere was palpable. No one spoke. We were worried that dwelling was gone too.

Our concerns evaporated upon seeing several dots of light in the distance. The lights belonged to men, kerosene lamps in hand, surveying the damage thus far. Spurred on by fear, by the chain of beacons, we quickened our pace. The *casa* soon appeared. As we got closer, the men, bemoaning their domestic horrors, became clearer. One of them gave us a knowing nod; we nodded back.

Thirteen Sugar Road was almost whole; only the roof was partly damaged. We squelched through the gate, or where it once stood, and knocked on the door. A ghostly-white *senyora* opened it. Upon seeing the cold, sodden group before her, she introduced herself as Mrs Robinson and ushered us inside. The house, dank from leaks and reeking of mud from boots trudging in and out, was full of refugees like us. *Mares* bobbed crying babies up and down; children, calmed by the lull’s false sense of security, sat cross-legged on the floor near their parents, playing with one another; and a group of men sat around a game of cards, just as we had earlier. Meanwhile, curious souls peeked through windows, and a brave few remained outside.

A *senyor* nearby picked up one of the many buckets overflowing with murky rainwater from the leaking roof, took it outside, and

emptied it onto the drenched lawn before returning it to its post for the next lashing. Then he picked up another bucket and repeated the process. The clock on the wall read half past eight. It was strange hearing the clock tick. The gale had blown away all sense of time.

‘This’ll warm you up,’ said a woman’s voice.

I turned around to find Mrs Robinson before me, a bottle of wine in one hand and a full glass in the other. I eagerly accepted, hoping my cold, numb body would not drop it. She poured drinks for Antoni and Joe as well. Then, we joined the group of refugees and sat down. Sip by sip, the wine revived me, circulation slowly returning to my limbs, and though my clothes were drenched, I felt a little warmer. I had almost regained control of my senses when a wail rent the stuffy air. Our heads turned.

A keening woman limped through the front door with a man, his burly arm acting as a crutch to keep her body upright and propel her forwards. Her dress was sullied with mud and blood, the former caked to her knees. The man, in his forties, was just as dirty, though not bloodstained. He whispered something in the woman’s ear, but she was too distraught to listen. He left her for a moment and walked over to Mrs Robinson. The two of them exchanged words, Mrs Robinson nodding at everything he said. From the way they interacted, I deduced he was her husband. Mrs Robinson approached the woman, placed an arm around her shoulder, and guided her to the kitchen. A moment later, Mr Robinson, carrying a stiff drink, came over, took a swill and said:

‘Did you hear?’

We shook our heads.

‘Poor old Arthur: dead.’

Tuts of shock echoed.

‘A piece of timber flew through the air.’

Heads shook in disbelief.

‘He was trying to find shelter, see if the neighbour’s house was faring better.’

We nodded; we knew. Seeking shelter was how we had all ended up at thirteen Sugar Road.

‘His wife found him,’ he whispered, a hand cupped to his mouth, nodding at the muddy, bloodstained woman, now seated in the corner with Mrs Robinson. ‘Poor dear.’

More tuts.

‘Found her kneeling beside him.’

Murmurs of sympathy.

‘She’d broken her ankle.’

More shaking.

But before any condolences could be offered, gale-force winds blasted the *casa*. Everyone’s eyes shot to the windows. The cyclone had returned, but in the opposite direction. The front door suddenly swung open, and several men burst through it, the last two slamming it shut with difficulty.

‘Here we go again,’ Mr Robinson said.

Wind howled like a wolf, rain pounded the earth, and droplets plipped through holes in the roof into the buckets. Water even dripped through the biggest cavity despite several bags stuffed into it. The noise drowned the clock’s ticking, but its face told me only thirty minutes had passed since we fled the school.

The Robinsons’ house had survived the first half of the cyclone better than any in the neighbourhood, which was why so many people had sought shelter there. However, it was more exposed in the second phase, and we worried it would not hold.

No one spoke directly of that fear, at least not until the house started swaying.

‘What’s that?’ Mrs Robinson quavered.

‘The house,’ her husband said. ‘It’s moving.’

Antoni, Joe and I leapt up and helped Mr Robinson and a few other men move the furniture up against the walls. Then we held it in place, praying the barricade, coupled with our strength, would be enough to support the swaying fort. Rain dripped through the holes onto my face. I wondered how long we would have to stand there.



Time travelled in a slow, strange burst. We stood for an age holding the furniture up against the oscillating walls. Craning my neck, I glimpsed the clock in the dim lamplight: midnight. As a new day dawned, yesterday—waking up at the farm—seemed like a lifetime ago. The wine I had consumed earlier was flushed from my system, and I shivered despite tensely holding the furniture in place. My clothes and boots had dried a little but remained uncomfortably damp and muddy.

At three o’clock in the morning, the cyclone finally retreated like an enemy declaring victory, and our grip on the furniture loosened. The gale gradually eased to a breeze that rattled the debris, and the rain, though not heavy, continued to fall steadily. We stepped outside into the apocalypse. Somewhere up there, behind the grey blur, the sun was waiting to shine.

We squelched across the drenched lawn, through the missing gate and surveyed the neighbourhood—or what remained of it.

A neighbourhood requires houses and inhabitants, and before us was a mess of mangled fences, uprooted trees and debris from demolished abodes. Leaving our hosts to survey thirteen Sugar Road, we followed Joe back to his *casa* to find out what state it was in, or if it even existed.

Some areas were flooded. Our boots sank past our ankles, fetid brown muck oozing over the top. We passed more uprooted trees, pieces of rooves and furniture—a mud-stained armchair, legless tables and spineless chairs. Many houses were blown clear of their allotments and were probably residing in the next neighbourhood, just as the previous neighbourhood was probably in this one.

Casa Donatiu was basically a block of land—the dwelling virtually gone. Downstairs, the walls were smashed flat on the verandah; upstairs, the bedroom floor, despite being in one piece, was severely misplaced: it was overturned on the neighbour's rose garden.

'By God, and to think this started on a Sunday too,' said Antoni.

Joe cursed again.

'Cooee! Cooee!'

The call was coming from the direction of the Robinsons'. We turned on our heels and squelched back to number thirteen Sugar Road in silence. The walk was as sombre as a funeral procession, and indeed we were in mourning. Joe's home was deceased, as was Antoni's Buick.

'Tea?' Mrs Robinson asked as we approached the door.

We nodded. Tea was a welcome—albeit momentary—distraction. One by one she poured cups of the boiling brew and handed them to us. Then we reunited with the other refugees.

‘Hot toddy?’ Mr Robinson pulled out a flask and poured a splash of whisky into his tea.

We held out our cups. The brew warmed our cold, damp bodies—it felt as though I had been soaked for days—and as we sipped the beverage, we exchanged stories of damage. There was camaraderie in surviving something of such magnitude.

‘My wife’s organ’s on the neighbour’s roof,’ one man lamented.

‘Bet his roof’s A-flat,’ a second chimed in.

We guffawed.

‘That’s nothing. My armchair’s on a Buick,’ a third said.

‘Ain’t no comfort in that,’ a fourth commiserated.

‘Hope it’s not my Buick,’ Antoni jested.

Joe interjected, ‘Well, my bedroom floor’s on a bed of roses.’



At noon, we trekked to Innisfail to see how the Town of Destiny had fared. What we witnessed made us realise we had survived something truly dangerous. We were not only lucky to be alive but lucky to be uninjured—whole.

Innisfail stank of death and wounds. The bloated river was level with the wharves. Another downpour and it would burst its banks. The disturbed sediment, mixed with waste, had a putrid odour that curled our noses. Our legs were soon covered in the smelly muck. Debris—timber, people’s possessions—littered the streets. The destruction was so bad it was a relief to see the big wooden shire hall still standing.

‘It’s a bombardment,’ a voice said. We turned to find a man staring at the structure with us. ‘An absolute bombardment.

Never—*never*—have I witnessed such destruction—and I fought in France. You know, that hall was crowded with four hundred refugees. I was one of 'em. But that wind'—he shook his head in disbelief—'it started shiftin' off the back blocks. It was only the weight of its contained humanity that saved it from topplin' over.' Before we could say anything, he gave his head a final shake, then turned and walked away.

Even God's *casa*, the Roman Catholic convent and environs, had not withstood the tempest's wrath.

'Just as well we didn't go to Mass,' Antoni joked.

We crossed ourselves. The church's collapse was an omen, a sign of what we were yet to witness. We walked on. The damage was so extensive I was able to count the number of buildings still standing on my fingers. Those buildings, though made of concrete, had not survived without scars. Some were roofless, others windowless, many both. With no destination in mind, our legs followed our curious eyes to Chinatown.

The oriental district was a chaos of iron, timber, mud and water. Almost all the stores, including See Poy & Sons, were demolished. Men, forced to scratch out a living like animals, hunched over piles of debris, trying to salvage pieces of their former lives. But telling exactly who the men were was another matter. While some were store owners, others were looters cashing in on the catastrophe. It was a dirty, hopeless task, but the men's desperation knew no bounds; they clung to hope. One man's hand was red with blood—cuts from broken glass and pieces of tin—but he persevered, sorting through the objects. Salvageable items he placed to one side; junk he chucked to the other. With nothing but endless destruction to witness, we turned our backs on the demolished town.

Rain continued to batter the land, and through its blur everybody returned to their respective houses to survey the damage and commence repairs. Back at the farm, I was surprised to find the shed still standing. Like all structures, it needed fixing—but it stood. Jones lamented the loss of his crop, but he was happy his house had not been demolished. He was one of the lucky ones.



The aftermath heralded a strange time, a time when the improbable became probable, and during this time, no one could communicate with one another. Morse code was the system used, but with poles and wires blown down, everybody was unreachable and isolated. One brave man rode on horseback from Innisfail to Basilisk where, with the assistance of engineers, he connected a transmitter to the mill's generator and sent out a message for help. Miraculously, it was received, and the government dispatched a passenger boat to Mourilyan Harbour—about eight kilometres south of Innisfail—to ship anyone wanting to leave south to Townsville; a tramline from Basilisk provided transport to the harbour. Some left, never to return. Others, like Joe, Antoni and I, stayed.

Food and water were a *problema* too. Dwindling goods were rationed until a boat with provisions arrived from Townsville. Meanwhile, the only comestibles that could be procured were tinned meat and packets of biscuits, and many a man tried to cadge food. As for water, all the tank supply—the only available source—had turned bad, so reserves had to be collected from the continuing rainfall.

As everyone scrambled for sustenance, reports emerged that the barograph pointer at the post office had fallen off the chart at

calamity point, and the barometer at Mourilyan Mill had shown the second lowest reading ever known. It was no tempest. It was a severe tropical cyclone that had crossed directly over Innisfail. There was no official warning. The only notice a few received of the looming disaster was a message from the Commonwealth Meteorological Bureau in Brisbane, which cautioned of a ‘disturbance’ approaching the coast between Cooktown and Bowen that ‘appeared to be dangerous’. Forestry officials examined trees in the rainforest and reported that there had not been winds of such force in the district for four centuries, a time before European settlement.

Many people perished. It took a while—too long for decency—for the hundred-odd names of those who had died to become known. Some were Aboriginal people who had resided at the Hull River Mission. As I read the figures in the newspaper, I thought, *My name could be here*. With the population of Innisfail only a few thousand, it seemed as though everyone knew someone who had been injured or killed. The cyclone held no prejudice against class, age, gender or race. Men and women died. Adults and children died. Lawyers and labourers: dead. *Mort*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Mysterious Illness Rears Its Malevolent Head

It was a tumultuous year, the year of the cyclone, and as World War I came to a bloody end and obelisks to commemorate the fallen were planned across the nation, a strange, unrelenting disease emerged. Some newspapers called it a pneumonic plague, others the Spanish flu—a name that greatly aggrieved me—but all reported it was a pandemic. News of this pandemic was buried, like the bodies it claimed, deep at the back of the papers. By the time its coverage arrived on our shores, the disease had already migrated all over Europe like a fugitive.

In Madrid, as telegraph offices and theatres closed, doctors and nurses treating patients fell ill. In Vienna, the supply of coffins ran out, and bodies had to be packed on ice for several weeks before being placed in paper sacks. Both medical scientists and theologians—opposing pillars of society—were kept equally busy.

The pestilential virus soon stowed away to the Americas, then to Africa. Arrivals were quarantined; passengers and crew with the

disease were isolated and their quarters disinfected; ships flew yellow flags, signalling sickness aboard, from their mastheads; and smoking saloons and cabins morphed into makeshift hospitals. Sometimes ships at sea were so ravaged with the virus that travellers, usually women, had to replace stewards incapable of work. As the crew shared messing and accommodation, a single case frequently multiplied within days.

We prayed Australia's isolation, the land girt by sea, would protect us. But—alas!—despite all the disinfecting, fumigating and quarantining, the plague soon arrived on our coastline, the route of vessels the veins carrying it. Before long, the country's roots as a federation—only twenty years young and composed of disparate colonies welded together like steel—were apparent: it was every state for itself.

Queensland closed its borders, enforced strict quarantine procedures and distributed pamphlets about the disease's symptoms. On the front was a picture of a family—a *mare*, *pare* and child—in their house with a nurse. The *pare* was trying to close the door to prevent a ghoulish intruder—the virus—from entering. At the bottom were the words, 'Wear a Mask, Save Your Life.' Inside, the symptoms listed were: headaches, sometimes severe; giddiness, nausea and vomiting; body aches and muscular soreness; a high fever and chills; a sore throat; a loss of appetite; fatigue and lethargy; a dry, hacking cough; a runny nose; and even the loss of hearing, sight and smell. The rich sought the best doctors money could buy, and the poor boiled eucalyptus leaves to create inhalant vapours. I thought of my family back home.

The disease travelled north, initially by sea to major ports scattered between Brisbane and Cape York, the northernmost

point of the mainland. As there was no rail connection to the state's far north and the roads were not designed for heavy traffic, coastal shipping on the eastern seaboard became the preferred method for transporting goods. However, a maritime strike was placed precariously on top of the pandemic's weight, reducing much of Central, North, and Far North Queensland to subsistence. The Commonwealth chose not to flex its muscles, and for a good portion of the population, slow starvation was suddenly a possibility. The shortage of food and other provisions enraged locals. Some of that rage was directed at me.

It was an unfortunate name, Spanish flu. Unfortunate for two reasons: firstly, there was no evidence it had originated in Spain; and secondly, I was Spanish, so people blamed me. They labelled me a contagious disease. They feared I would inadvertently kill them. They cared not that the flu got its name because Spain was neutral during World War I and, unencumbered by censorship, reported accurately on the emerging disease—partly because King Alfonso XIII and his ministers were paid a visit by the Spanish lady—leading to the false perception it had originated in my homeland. The word *Spanish* before *flu* only added to the racism I, as a Southern European, already experienced. I was a walking, job-stealing disease, a *senyor* to avoid at all costs. One incident in particular comes to mind...

I was walking down the main street of Innisfail when an old woman passing by saw my tanned skin and yelled out: 'Go home!' She was wizened but not wise and had aged with obstinacy.

I turned to her and politely said, 'I *am* home.'

But she ignored me and continued yelling: 'Go back to where you came from!'

My heart sank. I had worked harder than a packhorse, and her words were like punches to the stomach. Then something within me shifted, something rose up: anger. I wanted to tell her the same thing. Unless one is Aboriginal, one is not in one's 'correct' country. But I did not utter a word; I kept myself in check and walked on to my Southern European barber.

I, living in virtual isolation on Jones' farm with a vegetable patch, hoped to avoid the pandemic, but hope is as fickle as the atmosphere.



I was dying; I had to be. Never had I felt so ill. My head pounded as though a hammer were striking my skull; the pain was so intense I became dizzy and nauseous. Jones was ill too. The Spanish lady had paid us a visit. We now had white handkerchiefs tied to our doors to alert visitors to our malady. When Àvia had given me that monogrammed square of fabric the day I left home, I knew she would shudder to learn of its current use. If she were here, she would be sourcing sage remedies to cure the ailment. I wondered if we had caught it while standing in line for the free vaccine, which suddenly did not seem free anymore, only costly.

The government developed a pneumonic influenza vaccine. It was produced in two doses: the A, or first dose, and the B, or second dose. Both were administered but a week apart to allow one's body to become accustomed to the weaker variety before the stronger dose. However, officials eschewed claims of prevention, saying it could only help decrease the disease's severity. After the first vaccine, I felt tired, but after the second one, I had a fever and chills for twenty-four hours.

At that moment, I had a lot more than a fever and chills; I was dying. Retching, I grabbed the bucket by the bed, vomited up my soul, then rested for a moment before collapsing on the mattress and falling into a stupor of fitful sleep. I did not wake until a knock on the door sometime later. I was in such a fog of illness I barely heard it. I tried to speak, but no words came out, only a dry, hacking cough.

The door opened and a blurry figure entered. I could tell by the height it was a schoolboy bearing aid. The Red Cross and Women's Emergency League had set up kitchens to supply food—broth, beef tea, groats, eggs and jellies—to the sick. Starvation had only narrowly been avoided when the government finally chartered ships to transport the necessary provisions to keep citizens alive.

I nodded my thanks and tried to eat a little broth, but vomited it up. I drifted back to sleep.



The next thing I remember was waking up with a gasp to find myself sitting upright, tied by means of a pillow under my knees to the back of a bed. I panicked. I was in a straitjacket in prison. My blurry eyes surveyed the room. No. I was in a converted *casa*; there were not enough hospitals to house the sick. Beds filled with ill *senyors* like me lined the room. A *senyoreta*, dressed from head to toe in white with a mask shielding her face, entered and approached my bed. Her hair was as bright as spun gold, and she had piercing blue eyes. She leant over and untied me, then checked my temperature.

‘It’s easing,’ she said.

‘Are you an angel?’ I mumbled.

‘No,’ she laughed.

She gave me a couple of aspirins and a glass of water, then continued her rounds.

The following day, the angelic *senyoreta* gave me an inhalation sprayer with zinc and sulphate. It banished the ghostly scourge from my lungs.



The Spanish flu stayed, becoming as much a part of our lives as the venomous snakes and fatal diseases lurking in the cane. But not everyone survived the Spanish lady. Joe avoided it, but Antoni and Jones died. Both had developed pneumonia; their lungs were not as strong as their muscles, which had once wielded the cane knife with dexterity. And so, on a warm winter’s day in June, I packed my suitcase yet again, said *adéu* to Jones’ farm, which he had bequeathed to his son, and moved into my *nova casa* where I would work as a cook.

The barracks was similar in design to where I had resided last season. The kitchen was separate, located at the back of the building, its smokestack the only brick part of the quarters. A basic wooden stove sat in the corner; an old wooden door set on trestles acted as a table; an air-cooled safe, suspended on chains from the ceiling, stored our perishables; and a drawer contained basic cooking utensils. It was nothing like the patisseries I had worked in back in Girona and Pamplona, yet in that kitchen I was to prepare three hearty meals plus morning tea and afternoon tea every day.

On top of that, I was to cut wood for the stove, carry water to the barracks and maintain the building in general. Farmers resented paying money to uphold the barracks, so it was up to us to make any necessary repairs to keep the quarters liveable.

An army of ants marched up the walls and up the legs of the makeshift table—rain was coming—again. There was no running water—like back in La Vall de Santa Creu—but at least the tanks would always be full.



On my first day as a cook, I awoke long before the men to have breakfast ready. In the remaining shadow of night, I lit a kerosene lamp, set the table and prepared a feast of eggs, rashers of bacon, buttery toast and tropical fruits to keep them fuelled until morning tea. As soon as I set down the dishes, the roosters crowed *bon dia*, and the men, dressed in their cutting garb, entered one by one, sat down and heaped generous helpings onto their plates.

‘Not bloody bad,’ Gino said.

‘*Mm*,’ another agreed.

After breakfast, the day passed quickly. As soon as one meal was over, it was time to prepare the next one: morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner... I infused Catalan life into the food with herbs and spices. I vowed to be the best cook. I would work hard, save, and own the land Pare always wanted.

I would build a castle!

Live like a king!

Of that period in my life, nothing more can be said other than it was pleasant, mostly because I was liberated from cutting cane.

I had many, many girlfriends, and we often went to dances, but Matilde always had my heart. Always.

But the thing about life is it comes in cycles. Just as good follows bad, bad follows good.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One Success and Many Challenges

Now, I do not want to alarm you, but I must begin this chapter by disclosing that I almost died—again. Here's what happened...

After a season of cooking, I had saved enough money to buy a sprawling parcel of land in the sugar town of Mourilyan. I had achieved Pare's dream, and it pained me he could not share my happiness. Of course, the land needed backbreaking work to become a cane farm, but there was no other way. Established farms were too expensive; buying raw land, clearing and cultivating it myself was all I could afford.

First, I built a humpy to live in while I constructed a Queenslander; then I began grubbing. The virgin rainforest was overgrown with vines, their limb-like stems hugging the trees tightly like a child does its *mare*. Although timber-getters had slaughtered much of the rainforest last century, the vegetation had closed over its wounds like healed skin, and removing the

flora was difficult. Dense, impenetrable scrub acted as a fence, blocking my entry. It was tough land, land demanding ardour; but it was mine. As I worked, I imagined cane gangs sitting down to dinner and saying, ‘Did you hear? José Paronella bought a farm.’ *In time*, I thought, *people will work for me*.

The vines, which consumed every space and entwined their countless snake-like arms around everything, had to be cleared first. But as I hacked them away, their jagged claws bit me. One plant hid Hairy Mary. The plant is so infamous it is also known as lawyer cane or lawyer vine—it sinks its teeth into you like a lawyer—and as wait-a-while—you cannot remove the thorns straightaway; instead, you must wait a while before pulling them out from the same direction in which they had pierced you. Over the years, I have heard agonising tales about the plant. Last century, an Aboriginal man apparently used it to lasso a bushman, whom he killed and ate. I have even heard of it being used to punish wayward children! I downed tools and returned to the *casa* where I waited some time before removing the thorns with a pair of tweezers. Then I laboured until sunset.

Every day I cleared the land, cutting vines and felling trees, the sap-green armies venturing forth, thrusting swords and poking out tongues in derision at my efforts. But I persevered, slashing through them with a machete. I then used a brush hook, axe and handsaw to remove the saplings and thinner trees. It was hard work made harder by the heat, and I liked it when it rained, just as I had as a cane cutter. The drops cooled my hot body and washed away the dirt and sweat. Once the *petit* trees were felled, I turned my attention to the larger ones. Large trees were dangerous, and I feared being lamed like the timber-getters in town—or killed. One day, I had a particularly bad scare...

It was mid-morning when an eerie creaking noise groaned over the rustling leaves. Then a split-second later, the Herculean tree fell, a great whoosh of breeze fanning my face as it passed me. It hit the ground with a thud, making the land vibrate like a *petit* earthquake.

It landed only a few inches from my boots. Shocked, I stared at the trunk. Beneath its long, thick torso and spindly limbs I saw an imaginary outline of my body. The tree had disobeyed my command, broken at its weakest point and fallen dangerously close to me. Looking up at the grey sky—its contents ready to burst at any time—I crossed myself. *Rainforests*, I thought, *are more alive than Man and, like cyclones, they have a mind of their own.*

An enormous pile of tree trunks soon littered the land. I borrowed draught horses from a neighbour—it was customary for old settlers to help new settlers—to drag the thick stems away. But despite the towering trees' absence, their stubborn stumps remained, so I burnt them and left the charred roots to rot. Silky oaks were the most stubborn and needed to be blown up with dynamite. It was dirty work as everything was blackened from fire, and I soon resembled a chimney sweep.

Eventually, the land was ready for cultivation, but roots and dogged stumps still blocked the way, so I had to work with a hoe. When the hoeing was finished, I made mattock holes in the ground and planted young sugar cane. An advantage of my toil was that fertiliser was unnecessary. The combination of ash, virgin soil and high rainfall had created perfect growing conditions.



Several months later, sugar cane stood tall, its fat-jointed stems reaching for the sun. After a hard day's work, I would bask in the colours that morphed from pea-green to biscuit-brown. I was a farmer—well, almost. The crop was yet to be harvested, and everything from locusts to tempests could destroy a farm. Successful farms needed both grit and luck—*sort*—and it was the luck element that worried me, for luck is not a poor man's friend. It turned out I was right to be worried, and so I came to fear not only mosquitoes, march flies, leeches, bees, hornets, wasps, rats, snakes, cyclones and disease, but a seemingly innocent perpetrator, its innocence making it even more sinister.

The mind-consuming critter was the cane beetle and its root-eating grubs. The beetles ate the leaves, and the larvae, which hatched underground, devoured the roots, effectively stunting the plant's growth. They stole nutrients from both the sugar cane and the rich red-brown soil, causing devastation across the region. The beetles robbed us farmers while we slept, pilfering even the well-earnt peace of night. They threatened not only my livelihood but also the entire industry. The beetles were the worst at Christmastime, an unwanted gift. Millions emerged from the ground, from Hell's depths like the Devil's flunkies, and plagued the area, settling in trees and feasting ravenously on crops across the land.

Patience soon snapped like a brittle tendril, and a meeting was held at the local community hall. Attempts had already been made to control the critter. The Indian Mynah had been introduced as a potential predator but failed, and the Basilisk Range had been cleared in vain. But now, they were suggesting something new: beetling. The *senyor* who suggested it assured us it involved neither eyebrows nor

rocks nor hills, but children. Children would collect the beetles in syrup tins and bottles; then the Colonial Sugar Refinery would pay a bounty of one shilling per container. It was an ingenious idea—if it worked.



The children, carrying syrup tins and bed linen, arrived at the farm in the moonlight and headed straight for the trees. Beneath them they placed a sheet, then they climbed to the top and shook the branches, causing hundreds of clicking beetles to rain down onto the cloth. Laughing and chatting, they quickly climbed down before the beetles escaped and bored into the ground. Next, the children scooped up the critters, their prickly legs sending shrieks through the warm air, and placed them in tins and bottles. It was a fun, novel way to earn pocket money. The children preferred the large greybacks because they filled their containers more quickly. One girl, Mollie, saved seventy-seven pounds and bought a piano.

Beetling helped but only to a degree, so in addition, I lit fires along the fields and suspended lanterns over tubs of water topped with kerosene. The beetles, attracted to the light, bumped against the glass and fell into the container, where they drowned.

There were other methods too. One Sicilian farmer tamed a colony of ibises to follow him as he ploughed and eat the larvae, and a Chinese farmer planted mothballs under the cane sheaves to help control the pest.

But ravenous beetles turned out to be one of many *problem*es.



The weather that muggy season, my first as a farmer, lacked the compassion of its predecessor, and a succession of storms battered the land, one as sly as a snake.

It was late afternoon, and while I was labouring in the fields, a blinding flash of forked lightning struck the ground—a clap of thunder on its heels. My booted feet felt its vibrations. I had been so preoccupied with work I was oblivious to the summer storm hatching in the nest of clouds above me. I discarded the tools and hurried back to the *casa*. Another strike of lightning bleached the land, thunder on its heel. I broke into a jog. The storm stalked across the sky with a gust of wind, rumbling and snarling above scudding clouds. Now I was sprinting. The *casa* was in sight. A large raindrop hit my nose, then another and another. Soon it was needling into the ground. I bounded up the back steps as the wind picked up force, sending trees oscillating wildly.

Inside, rain shot like arrows through the open windows, wetting the floorboards, and gusts of wind sent the curtains flapping like the wings of a frightened bird, blowing over unlit candelabras. I ran around the *casa*, nearly slipping on a puddle, trying to close the windows before the downpour saturated everything. Then I lit a kerosene lamp, sat down at the dining-room table and watched the storm through the glass.

It was no cyclone, of that I was certain. After all, I had witnessed one firsthand from underneath a water tank stand. But that offered little comfort. Although not a cyclone, tempests could carry cyclonic winds—damaging winds.

Flashes of lightning bleached the *casa* for an instant before returning it to darkness. As I listened to the thunder, to the rain pounding the roof like an angry fist, I worried about the sugar cane.

The brighter the flashes, the louder the bangs and drumming, the more my alarm increased. It expelled from my body as desperate pacing. Back and forth I went, frequently stopping to peer through the window, then leaping back at the sight of a big flash of lightning. The rain on the tin roof was so loud I could hardly hear myself think.

Then a clatter like rocks being thrown travelled over everything: hail. The icy stones blanketed the land, making it look like nature had confused hemispheres and snowed in the tropics. Then it happened. I was in the peering stage of my ritual when I saw the most blinding flash of lightning I have ever witnessed, followed by a deafening bang. I leapt back. Then, heart thumping wildly, I cautiously approached the window. A gum tree was alight. Despite the white blur of rain, flames licked the cool air.

The storm fizzled an hour later. I had spent its duration pacing, peering and praying—praying the damage would not be as severe as I feared. Anxious yet curious, I ventured outside. Petrichor hung in the fresh air. I sloshed through the red-brown mud, past the dead tree, blackened and halved in size, to the fields. A good portion of the usually tall sugar cane was flattened like a piece of paper, and I felt equally pushed down.

I knew from experience that flatness made cutting difficult, allowing cutters to charge farmers more for their labour. Concern riddled me. Although I finally owned a property, I was by no means wealthy. But it turned out I *was* lucky—comparatively speaking. Stories soon emerged. On one farm, a cow under a tree had been struck dead by lightning, and on another, lightning had struck the ground at the bottom end of a field and snaked its way through several acres. In the following days, locals-cum-tourists

went to see that curious big black letter S that ironically stood for storm. A storm as sly as a snake.



Three years to the day, another storm hit. But it behaved differently. It seemed to cleanse the earth and blow away the Spanish flu, for afterward the disease vanished as stealthily as it had arrived. By then, the farm was making a profit, so I sold it for a tidy sum. With that tidy sum, I bought a new parcel of land, cleared it the same way, planted cane and watched it grow. Sometimes, with twin workings of rain and humidity, I swore I saw it grow a millimetre a minute. Once that farm started making a profit, I sold it too. I repeated this process—purchasing, improving and reselling—until I amassed a fortune.

I gained a reputation as a shrewd businessman. Many of the farms I purchased were for sale because the owners were cash-poor due to overreaching, and my biggest drawcard as a buyer was that I paid in cash. I did everything in cash. Cash and a handshake, the Catalan way. Many of the cash-poor owners were Englishmen and Irishmen, *senyors* accustomed to cold, rainy days and overcast skies. This, coupled with their desire to escape the heat and their unconditional love of whisky, saw them seek refuge in the many public houses. The liquor ravaged their bodies, and banks retracted their heavily mortgaged farms and resold them, often to Southern Europeans like me.

The selling of farms to my kind created distrust and annoyance among the community—the same annoyance that had, during the Spanish flu, caused that *senyora* in the street to yell at me.

According to the outdated thoughts shipped out on the First Fleet, any property owned by my kind was cause for concern. ‘They’re buying up our land,’ the English and Irish Australians would say. We Southern Europeans were accepted only as cheap labourers, not as landowners. Too many of us owning properties was considered un-Australian—and one of us was always buying land.

Always.

Their way of thinking aggrieved me. I could hardly be blamed if certain men struggled to cope with the work and weather, just as it was not my fault they spent their pennies on liquor and losing horses in public houses where they lamented the harsh land and complained of how they missed the old country—of how they longed for an overcast day, the gentle fall of rain instead of a needling downpour and the chilly bite of frost, not the punch of relentless heat. They forgot such memories were hyperbolic. Nostalgia is always dressed up well; it wears a bow tie and top hat. They merely missed the *idea* of the old country. After all, the old country had outdated ways of thinking that prevented a poor man from rising, and prevention was the reason they—like me—had left. How could I be blamed for rising to a challenge, for abstaining from liquor and working hard? How could I be blamed for making something of myself?

Favouring estate agents over bankers, I invested my money in an open-cut mine, which I christened Prosper Ridge, at Mount Garnet—and I made sure the barracks was better than that Selwyn slum I had been forced to reside in. Prosper Ridge lived up to its name, and I soon bought another mine at Innot Hot Springs, christening it Leisure Ridge, which, unfortunately, did not live up to its name—it proved anything but leisurely...

One day, while I was riding my bicycle from the farm to the mine, I hit a rock and fell off in the middle of nowhere. Luckily one Mr McAlister, a local businessman, was heading west and gave me a lift. After that, I bought a Buick. I nicknamed her Bonica because she was beautiful. Bonica was my first car, and I will never forget the way her Brewster green paint glinted in the sunshine.

Bonica enabled me to expand business and establish myself as a moneylender, loaning cash to Southern Europeans who loathed the rigid structure of banks. No signatures were required, just a handshake. As expected, by doing business this way I acquired a lot of cash. Sharing my clientele's distrust of banks, I hid my bounty throughout the *casa*: in the kitchen, I placed money in an empty wine bottle and a coffee tin as well as inside an envelope, which I taped under a shelf; in the lounge room, I hid some in an envelope and taped it behind the back of a painting; in the bedroom, I hid some inside an old sock in the bottom drawer of the dresser and in the pocket of a threadbare shirt in the wardrobe; and outside, I put a wad of money in a jar and buried it next to the tree by the bedroom window.

My empire took in the citadels of industry and colonies of commerce in the tropics. My ever-active right hand held the reins of the land, while my left pulled at the strings of finances. For protection, I bought a rifle—a .44 Winchester—from a travelling man. Such wealth made me feel I was, at last, Australian. Through the cane, I had thwacked out a life for myself, yet I remained an alien on paper. I had now called the country home for just over a decade and constantly pondered becoming a naturalised citizen. As they say, *Ubi bene, ibi patria*. Where it goes well with me, there is my fatherland. And everything was going swimmingly well.

So, I enlisted the services of one Mr Norman R Mighell, a solicitor in Innisfail, to help me navigate the bureaucracy. Mr Mighell was educated at St Joseph's College and had served as an officer in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in World War I. As I sat in his office, I thought, *When I have a son, he will be educated at St Joseph's College too.* Mr Mighell assured me he would sort all the red tape. But months passed, and I feared a terrible case of unrequited love.

Little did I know, with a fortune of money hidden around the *casa*, I had so much more to fear.

PART THREE

The Eyewall

(1924—1926)

Al mal tiempo, buena cara.

To bad weather, put on a good face.

Spanish proverb

CHAPTER ONE

I Receive a Threat

Crime was rife in the north. This was especially true of Ingham, where I had a couple of cane farms. Gunshots from the Black Hand regularly shattered the muggy air, death or injury following the bullet's trajectory. The most terrifying thing was that anyone could be a Black Hand: the barber holding a razor to your throat; the greengrocer handling the blood-red tomatoes you buy to make *romesco* sauce; the baker kneading the dough that makes the bread you dip in the sauce. When it came to the hierarchy of sin, the devil's forked tail did not seem to prick their Catholic flesh. And though I knew the world was a dangerous place, I never thought it would be dangerous in that way for me.

One afternoon, after a trip to Innisfail, I returned home grinning like a Cheshire cat—Mr Mighell had received word of my acceptance as an Australian citizen—to find an envelope on the floor. Someone had slid it under the door. I approached cautiously. Although paper, to my knowledge, has never exploded

and killed a man, sometimes its contents are explosive. I picked up the envelope and examined it. Only my name was typed on the front. No address. It had been delivered personally, but by whom? I looked at the back: nothing.

Curious, I went to the kitchen, slit it open with a knife and read the letter with bated breath. Then—bang! A fictitious explosion rent the air. My heart nearly burst out of my chest. *Surely*, I thought, *there has been a grave mistake*. I was reading a joke, yet it was not April Fool's Day. This is what the letter said:

Dear Mista Paronella,

You put five hundred pounds in cash in the bin by the side of the pub at ten o'clock on Saturday night-a. If you no put in five hundred pounds, you no live no more because the Black Hand will kill you.

So, you put the money in an envelope, write on the envelope the Black Hand and-a put it in the bin in the laneway by the side of the pub-a. If you no put it in-a, you no live. Your business will get blown up-a. You will get blown up-a.

Thanking you in-a anticipation-a,

Your friends-a,

The Black Hand

A handprint, the black ink thick like a bad tattoo, stained the foot of the poison-pen letter. Fear gripped me. I darted to the kitchen window, which overlooked the cane fields, and surveyed the land.

Though I saw no one, I felt watched. Stalked. It suddenly dawned on me—the most disturbing detail was that those men had been observing me and studying my movements, my comings and goings. I shuddered to think what they knew, how much they knew. They were obviously aware of my businesses—farming, mining, money-lending—and that I conducted my dealings in cash and therefore had great wads of it in the *casa*. I thought of the money I had fastidiously hidden and wondered if they knew its location.

A shiver crawled up and down my spine like a deadly spider. My hair stood on edge. I paced back and forth, stopping every few feet to look out the window. My heart pounded against my ribcage, and my usually steady hands shook like a *petit* earthquake. Paranoia gripped me—and rage. I was being robbed of more than money. They were robbing me of my right to live.

I thought endlessly about the Faceless Men behind the letter. A vision came to me of a scribe seated at an old typewriter, a glass of whisky to his right, a gun to his left, typing what the leader dictated as his lackeys listened on. The men wore white shirts and dark trousers, but their faces remained a blur, an underworld secret hidden behind a veil of cigar smoke.

As I stood inert, holding the page, a paroxysm of fury seized me. Words left me, and a strange sound escaped my mouth. Before I realised it, I had scrunched up the letter and was yelling and banging my fists on the table like a baboon. I grabbed a box of matches, lit one, brought it to the corner of the crumpled ball and watched it burn. Before the heat scorched my fingers, I dropped the remnants, ash falling to the ground. Then I stomped on it, and when I could kill the inanimate object no more, I walked over to the decanter on the sideboard and shakily poured two fingers of

whisky—medicinal, of course—into a tumbler, then gulped the amber liquid as I searched the fields from the window with a detective’s gaze. The whole thing was so surreal I felt removed from the situation. This terrible thing was not happening to me. It was happening to *another* man. I was merely trapped in his body.

Thoughts clawed the far recesses of my mind. Not only was I angry at the Faceless Men who had delivered the letter, I was angry at myself for being so foolish. I had been naïve to think the Black Hand—*La Mano Nera*—would not target a Spaniard. Although they usually targeted their own kind—the region had the largest and wealthiest colony of Italians in the country (still does)—they were not averse to zeroing in on anyone with money, especially Southern Europeans. I was merely another unexhausted pay cheque. How I cursed my Catalan ways—avoiding banks, operating in cash, and sealing deals with a handshake!

I was born a peasant, and the allure of wealth had consumed me since I was a boy. Money solved almost all of life’s problems. It put food on the table, bought clothes without holes, and provided shelter that did not leak in wet weather. I had thought only of the positives. I never anticipated the hidden cost: dangerous, potentially fatal, attention. The Black Hand’s shadow had crept up behind me while my back was hunched over labouring in the fields.

I tried to collect my thoughts—place them in order. First and foremost, I needed to protect myself until I worked out a plan. With fumbling hands, I locked every door and window, drawing the curtains as I went, then pushing furniture up against each entry point. Next, I found every knife I owned and judiciously hid them: I hid one in the stove; one in my left boot by the door; and one under the mattress in the bedroom. Then I found a big carving knife and

put it in the top drawer of the bedside table. After that, I loaded my .44 Winchester and marched the perimeter of the *casa* like a guard. All was well on the northern, eastern, southern and western fronts.

For now.



There could be no doubt: I was in a quandary of epic proportions. I had two choices, as different as Heaven and Hell: pay or refuse. I will tell you this: the Black Hand is an organisation to fear more than venomous king brown snakes. It has connections to both the *Camorra* in Naples and *La Cosa Nostra* in Sicily, and earns its money from old-fashioned mob enterprises like prostitution, blackmail and, of course, extortion.

Back then, from what I understood, the Black Hand's main hubs were in Ingham and Innisfail, and two men were regarded as leaders. I did not know their identities, but I did know they, like all mob leaders, used diplomacy when needed and force when necessary—and according to the newspapers, a great deal of force was necessary in their occupation. To them, the heavy-handed way was the fast way, and the fast way was the preferred way. Over the years, the Black Hand has committed countless brutal crimes: murder, kidnapping, poisoning, arson, bombing and mutilation, to name a few—all apparently necessary. I wondered if I would need some of this necessity.

I had immigrated to Australia—a country where, at first, I could not speak the language, where I was resented for 'stealing' jobs from British-Australians and was, in many ways, treated like a third-class citizen—for a better life, and the threats went against

every reason I had left my homeland. If I gave the Black Hand my money, everything I had been through—the pain, scars and emotional wounds—would be for nothing.

But what, I asked myself, is the point of a man with money if he is dead—*mort*? I had heard of murdered *senyors* who had woken up one morning, kissed their beloved wives *adéu*, and never returned home. Their names, reduced to foreign, misspelt smudges, frequented the newspapers with the regularity of the horse races. The Black Hand ruled the region with merciless impunity, and those who retaliated received the ultimate punishment of their natural lives. Businessmen had their shops blown up; farmers had their crops set alight and livestock killed under the veil of darkness while their weary bodies slept; and family men had their houses bombed—I once even read about a wife and child murdered in cold blood. The consequences of not paying were not only devastating but potentially fatal, expediency justifying severity. For the organisation to function, brutality and its enabler, callousness, were essential. If the Black Hand was not heavy-handed in its punishment, people—victims—would not pay, and the organisation would become redundant.

No one went to the police. The police were as foreign as the Orient. Besides, the authorities did nothing to quell the violence. If anything, they tolerated the brotherhood's crimes in the same way parents endure inadvertently raising a criminal son. Some tolerated them out of fear, others because they were paid bribes. Then there was the *problema* that witnesses refused to testify, and if there was any risk of disclosure, they disappeared. The Black Hand was so callous it had even intimidated juries and distinguished judges. *Justice*, I thought, *is for the afterlife. Law—and what a fickle thing!—is for natural life.*

So, not a soul uttered a word. The *senyor* you passed on the street, whom you wished *bon dia*, could be suffering an extortion threat and you would never know—not until his name appeared in the paper because he refused to pay and was murdered. I was alone in an invisible crowd. *Omertà*—that formidable code of silence—had built a fortress around the Black Hand.

The curtain soon closed on the day's drama. I had spent the afternoon in a frenzy of anxiety, fear and rage. Although my stomach was knotted with nerves, I maintained normality and made something to eat. If I ate normally, everything else would be normal too—or such was my hopeful thinking. Not in the mood to cook, I settled on a *bocadillo*. I went to the utensil drawer only to find it devoid of knives. It was then I remembered I had hidden them. Sighing, I retrieved the knife concealed in the stove, then cut the baguette, sliced the tomatoes and added the *jamón*.

But before sitting down, I peeked behind the kitchen curtain. A crescent moon grinned wryly at the land. If someone was lurking in the cane fields, I would be none the wiser until they were murderously close. I nibbled half the *bocadillo* but left the rest. Then I went to the bedroom, leant the .44 Winchester against the bedside table, undressed, lay down and closed my eyes.

Sleep evaded me for hours, and when it did arrive, it came only in snatches. A sound as innocent as a possum scurrying across the tin roof awoke me with a start, my hand seizing the rifle. Next came nightmares of suited men chasing me, peppering me with bullets, throwing bombs at my *casa*—startling me awake to find the sheets drenched in nervous sweat. It was hot, but my anger and fear only added to the heat, as did the closed windows—windows that would normally be open.

As I lay there under the cover of darkness, a knife under the mattress, a carving knife in the top drawer of the bedside table and a loaded rifle by the bedside, I thought long and hard about what to do and speculated about what would happen to me if I refused to pay. I had one week to decide.

Some men took precautions against the Black Hand's threats: they built high fences around their properties to prevent bombs from being thrown in; they kept watchdogs like German shepherds, Dobermanns and Rottweilers to alert them to intruders; and they installed bells and alarms on doors and windows to warn of forced entry. Many houses, constructed and owned by Italians, pre-empted trouble with purpose-built turrets so the occupants could keep a lookout for unwanted guests. I wished for a sky-high fence, a pack of dogs, bells on every architectural orifice and looming turrets.

Five hundred pounds was a lot of money—money I had slaved to earn. My calloused hands and endless scars from poorly sutured wounds clawing my body were all official stamps of my drudgery. *What should I do?* I thought. *Pay and live; don't pay and die; don't pay and see what happens; don't pay and flee.* Hands pressed together, eyes closed, I said a prayer, then crossed myself. Upon finishing my soliloquy, I realised I had known the answer all along. I was just reluctant to acknowledge it.



The subsequent days, hours, minutes and seconds passed in great trepidation. I feared the repercussions when the Black Hand realised I was not going to pay a penny. Night haunted me like a ghost. Nightmares as varied as the tales literature tells stabbed my mind: in

one, I was shot dead execution-style in the main street of town; in another, I returned home to find a *petit* box on the front step, only to be blown up along with everything I had worked so hard to obtain—sometimes the mine exploded in flames, other times the farm, the saccharine smell of burnt sugar cane suffocating the muggy air. My dreams were so vivid I could smell the smoke as I breathed. In yet another nightmare, I was buried alive in the fields—that one saw me jerk awake with the rifle already in my sweaty hand, having seized it unconsciously. I feared one day I would use it—and I did.

It was midweek, and the night in question was a hot, steamy one. In a rare moment of mental mercy, my body had permitted sleep. But despite my consciousness being somewhat surrendered, nightmares boomed and flashed in my mind like a tempest. I was in the throes of one of those nightmares when I awoke to find the shadow of a man hovering at the foot of my bed. I had not heard the bells ring—I had installed them on all entry points to the *casa* the day after receiving the letter—unless I was so exhausted I had slept through the alarm. My heart raced. I was going to die of shock, die before the intruder had a chance to maim or murder me. The thought that *that* moment, those few seconds, could be the last of my natural life sent a crippling terror through me, nearly paralysing me from head to toe. Nearly, but it did not. Survival instincts kicked in. I grabbed the .44 Winchester and fired it. The shot rent the muggy air.

Heart racing, staring straight ahead at the bullet's trajectory in the dim shadows, I leant forwards. The intruder was gone. Probably prostrate on the bedroom floor in a pool of blood. Exasperated, unable to steady my breathing—the rifle still clenched in my clammy hand, ready to fire again—I edged out of

bed and tiptoed over to where the intruder had stood a moment ago. The closer I got, the more my heart banged and thrashed against my ribs like a frightened bird in a cage wishing to escape. I feared the man was still alive, that he could still harm me. But then, given the silence, maybe he was dead—*mort*. Maybe I really had murdered him. A sliver of moonlight shone through the gap in the curtain, creating a line on the floor. But that line did not cut through a body.

The intruder had disappeared.

Crawled away.

Escaped.

A dark, ghost-like figure whooshed past the wall. I gasped, readying my fingers to fire again. But the intruder was neither real nor an apparition. It was merely the shadow of the tree by the window, moving in the warm zephyr, its gangly branches like the limbs of Man. The moonlight and my panicked mind had conjured up the image. Rattled, I set down the rifle, threw on my trousers—nearly missing a leg—then slung the weapon over my arm, fumbled in the bedside drawer for a match and, with a hand shaking uncontrollably, finally lit the kerosene lamp. Then, light in hand, I surveyed the *casa* like a guard. I neither saw nor heard anything but rustling trees.

I was alone.

Alone in an invisible crowd.

I returned to the bedroom and lay down on the mattress, the rifle beside me. Despite the tension, I was relieved to find my fears unrealised—for now.



Sunshine bathed the room, illuminating the gunshot bite in the wall. Through the window, the offending tree stood, its limbs motionless. It was a still morning, the beginnings of another sweltering day. I dressed and made a breakfast of coffee and bread but was too distressed to eat.

I patched the hole in the wall, then cut down the offending tree by the window to avoid any future night visitors. By the time I had finished, it was midday. I ate half a *bocadillo* for lunch—such were my nerves—then gulped down another coffee, the caffeine only making me more jittery. I spent the afternoon working on the farm. With everything that had happened, farm work had been pushed to the back of my mind.

When evening approached, I realised my feeling of security had merely been the false sense of safety that daylight afforded. As soon as the sun sank in the streaky blood-orange sky, my stomach sank too, fear returning with the moon. I wanted to howl my distress like a wolf. I resolved to make further preparations.



The next day, I drove home with a large, slobbering head in the passenger seat: I had bought a dog. He was a burly German shepherd, and I christened him Titus, Latin for ‘title of honour’ or ‘defender.’ The seller had assured me the canine was a pedigree watchdog. He said the dam barked at anything sinister, and the sire had once bitten an intruder so badly he needed several stitches—the postman even ceased delivery. Titus, he concluded, possessed all the makings of a good watchdog: moderately aggressive, alert, intelligent, loyal and dominant.

SASHA PACINO

With Titus by my side, I started work on a sky-high barbed-wire fence. No bombs would be detonated at Casa Paronella.

I hoped.

Prayed.

CHAPTER TWO

Eve of Payment

Time disappeared through the hourglass, and Saturday—the Eve of Payment—arrived like a robber: quick and stealthy. The hot, heavy air of mid-morning only added to the tension. It was unbearably still, even for the unrelenting tropics. It was the sort of stillness that presages a dream-destroying tempest, yet I begged for one. If there was a bad storm, maybe the Black Hand would stay away. I had never felt so fearful in my life, not even during World War I. War is loud and targets a collective, but organised crime is as silent as a dead man and targets an individual. I had spent the week in a frenzy of activity: eating little, drinking too much coffee, and barely getting a lick of sleep—napping in fits, passing each night in a state of hypervigilance. In short, I suffered.

That Saturday, as the deadline loomed, I spent the day finishing the last section of the barbed-wire fence. Sweat cried a river from me, and Titus, my defender, shadowed me everywhere.

The fence was finished as dusk arrived. I stood back and examined my handiwork. It was no fortress, but it would have to do. Titus, the fence, the bells on every orifice of the *casa* was all I could manage. We headed back to the house, Titus looking up at me every few metres in case of a change in command. Sugar cane rustled in the wind. *A man*, I thought, *could be hiding among the tall sheaves, and I would not know*. Spooked, I paced up the back stairs, took a final searching look at the never-ending fields, then sought refuge inside.

The air was soupy; the *casa* had been locked for the best part of a week. I bolted the door, pushed a cabinet behind it, then went to the kitchen. It was dark with everything closed, so I lit a kerosene lamp, then fed Titus his dinner. He wolfed it down and curled up on the floorboards. I made a *bocadillo*, sat down at the table, the rifle where a utensil should be, and tried to eat, but anxiety had devoured my appetite. I scraped the half-eaten sandwich into Titus' bowl. Not believing his luck, he dashed over and gobbled his second meal. Rifle in hand, I installed myself in the lounge-room armchair where I had the best vantage point—I could see through the main window without being seen—and waited impatiently for ten o'clock.



The grandfather clock struck ten—but such was my mental state, it could have been heralding a thirteenth hour. I was not in bed—the place I would have normally been a week ago, pre-extortion letter, at such a dishonest hour. Instead, I was installed in the armchair in the lounge room, with a loaded rifle beside me. I had no idea how long I had been sitting there. Time had lost all reality,

and I had spent those misplaced hours staring into space, lost in undulating valleys of thoughts. Titus was asleep in the corner when he suddenly leapt up and started barking wildly. I started, grabbed the rifle and jumped out of the chair.

‘What is it, boy?’

The bark became a growl, his long canines glimmering in the dull lamplight. I extinguished the kerosene lamp so no one could see me, then—rifle in hand—stalked over to the window and peered out into the night. The land was robbed of colour. Under the dim scythe of the moon, a figure skulked across the cane fields towards the *casa*. Any distinguishing features were indiscernible from such a distance. All I knew was the gait and silhouette were distinctly masculine. It was a man from the Black Hand. It had to be.

I rushed to the back door, pushed the barricade away, unlocked it—mouth ajar—and shoved the rifle barrel through the crack. As the intruder got closer, the crunch of dead leaves and twigs beneath his feet became louder. He was close. Too close. Heart pounding, hands shaking uncontrollably, I aimed at the figure and fired, the gunshot breaking the still night. Titus barked and growled manically, baring his battalion of teeth.

‘You come back here, you die!’ I yelled.

The figure fled, scurrying away like a diseased rat into the towering cane fields. I had not killed him, and I am ashamed to admit I did not know whether to be relieved or dismayed. I fired another shot, yelled again:

‘You hear? You come back, you *die*!’ I opened the door further, then turned to Titus:

‘Go get ’em, boy.’

Titus, barking wildly, squeezed through the gap, bolted down the stairs, and disappeared into the tall perennial grass that had earned me my fortune the Black Hand wanted to steal. I locked the door, pushed the cabinet back up against it, then returned to my post in the lounge room and peeked out the window. I wondered where Titus was—if he had caught up with the Black Hand, or if the Black Hand had caught up with him.

My brain was in overdrive. I had no idea what to do. All I knew was I could not stay in the *casa*, region, state, or country. The only age-related disease *mafiosi* suffer from is Italian Alzheimer's; they forget everything but their enemies. And I was an enemy. I had not paid, and I had shot at them. To stay would be like playing a variation of Russian roulette. There was only one option: flee until everything cooled down. I needed to get as far away as possible, and the furthest place I knew was Spain. I had been contemplating returning for some time. I was now someone, a man of affluence—so much affluence I had garnered their black attention—and I had promised Matilde I would return for her when my ambition was realised. I would surprise her with a beautiful diamond ring worthy of King Alfonso XIII's consort. We could honeymoon in Europe while the heat died down, then return to Australia.

That night, sleep remained a stranger, and amid the lonely, dangerous darkness, these thoughts were *petit* beacons of hope. The hours preceding dawn were spent plotting my escape. I threw Pare's old suitcase on the bed and packed in a frenzy, randomly chucking things in. Then I grabbed a holdall and began retrieving all the money I had hidden around the *casa*. I was like a pirate discovering lost treasure. With each find, the bag's weight increased pleasurably, until there was only one hiding place left: outside.

At dawn, I retrieved a shovel from the shed and dug frantically near the stump of the intruder-like tree that I had lopped days ago. As I dug, I constantly looked over my shoulder. Titus still had not returned, and I wondered where he was, or if he was even alive. As the mound of dirt increased, the broad blade scraped against a flat surface: a box. I threw the shovel aside, got on my haunches, and pawed until the box was visible. Then, I lifted it out, brushed away the dirt, and checked inside: all there. I upended the money into the holdall. Leaping up, I took a final sweeping look at the cane fields, yelling:

‘Titus! Titus!’

No reply.

‘Titus!’

It was then that I saw him, a speck in the distance, bounding across the field. He soon arrived at my side, panting and drooling.

‘Did you get him, boy?’

He barked once; a *sí*, I hoped.

I did not refill the hole. I just slung the holdall over my shoulder, hastened up the back steps—Titus by my side—through the door and returned the cabinet to its place. An odour of dirt and sweat hung in the stuffy air: me. I washed and changed into clean clothes. When I looked as respectable as a fugitive can, I moved the furniture from the front door, grabbed the holdall and suitcase, and darted to Bonica. The sun’s gaze assaulted my tired, gritty eyes. Every time I blinked it felt like a finger pushing a bruise.

I opened the back door, threw in my two possessions, then turned to Titus. ‘In, boy.’

He jumped in, and we flew down the driveway like a falcon in a cloud of dust. My destination, my refuge: Casa Donatíu.

Joe had moved since the cyclone of 1918, and he had also become my closest friend. As I turned into his driveway, I pressed the brake as if it would slow my anxiety down too. *Inhale, exhale*, I told myself. *Inhale, exhale*. I cut the engine and sat for a moment, collecting my thoughts, deciding what I would and would not divulge to Joe. As I sat there, the front door flew open and Joe emerged.

‘*Hola*, Pep.’

‘*Hola*.’ I got out and opened the back door. Titus bound over to Joe.

‘Hey, boy.’ He gave him a pat. ‘So, to what do I owe the pleasure?’

‘I’m returning to Spain,’ I said, omitting my quandary.

‘To La Vall de Santa Creu?’

I nodded. ‘I’m going to marry Matilde.’

‘About time, that’s all I can say. I plan to return and marry Maria soon.’

Maria was Joe’s fiancée. By all accounts, she was as beautiful as a dark-haired Helen of Troy.

Joe made coffee, which we drank on the verandah while discussing my impending journey. Would Joe check on Casa Paronella? *Sí*, he would check on it. Would he look after Titus? *Sí*, he loved dogs. Would he look after Bonica too? *Sí*, he would gladly make use of that Brewster green Buick. And would he be so kind as to drop me at the railway station? *Sí*, he was a kind man. We shook hands, sealed the deal the Catalan way. Joe asked no questions about my seemingly impulsive decision to return to Spain after so long, so I told him no lies.

‘But,’ I said, taking a sip of coffee, ‘there’s something I must do before I go.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Go to the bank.’

Joe laughed. It was a big, hearty laugh that spilled up from his belly. ‘You? The bank?’

‘Ha ha!’ I said sarcastically.

‘First thing tomorrow, we’ll go.’

I leant forwards. ‘Not today?’

‘Today’s Sunday.’

‘*Al!*’ Sunday. I had been so busy plotting my escape, I had forgotten what day it was.

Joe eyed me, and I feared he was going to ask questions, but instead he said, ‘Your head *must* be in the clouds because look’—he pointed at a feminine figure in the sky—‘there’s one the shape of a *senyoreta*.’

I laughed as though I was, indeed, thinking about my beautiful Matilde, not ugly criminals.

‘You’ve waited *this* long,’ he said. ‘Stay the night. We’ll go to town in the morning.’

I acquiesced. At least I was not at home. I would be safe—or safer. Unless someone had followed me.



The next morning, I was already dressed and seated at the dining-room table when Joe awoke. I had managed only a little sleep. After breakfast, we went to Innisfail, Bonica pulling up outside a grand, officious-looking building: the bank.

‘Back soon.’ I slung the holdall of money over my shoulder. I held it the way a *mare* shields her newborn: close, secure, protective.

Joe nodded.

I scanned the street for ill-reputed men as though they wore a uniform, then entered. The building reeked of expensive wood, dictatorial paper and educated *senyors*.

‘Next,’ a teller said.

‘I would like to, er, open a bank account,’ I bumbled.

‘Of course, Mr?’

‘Paronella.’

‘Right this way,’ the teller said, gesturing towards an office.

I could not be sure, but I thought he gave me a funny look. *Sí*, I wanted to say, I’m a Southern European who wants to open a bank account. I followed the teller to an office that confirmed my nose’s earlier suspicions. Inside, the bank manager, an old man dressed in a tailored suit, sat at a commanding wooden desk. When the manager heard I wanted to open a bank account, he, too, eyed me. I unzipped the holdall and removed the money, bundle after bundle, placing it on the desk in front of him until the surface was covered with a tablecloth of notes: now, it really was an expensive wooden desk. The manager sat there, mouth agape, eyebrows shot heavenwards. I do not believe he had ever seen someone deposit so much money at once in his life. Sitting on that desk was nearly every penny I had earned over the years, save the sum I had set aside for my impending journey.

We exchanged a few bureaucratic words, then the manager gave me a passbook. I was stunned. After handing over *all* that money, *all* I got in return was a *petit*, flimsy rectangular book. I thrust it into my pocket, shoved the crumpled holdall—now unnervingly light—under my arm, and left. I could not help but worry my fortune was lost instead of in a safe place.

Outside, I found Joe, arms crossed, leaning against the car door, chatting with a stranger. The stranger was a squat, balding man—and he was speaking Italian. Fear pumped through my veins. But then Joe, spotting me, said *adéu* to the man. I got in the Buick. I was being paranoid.

‘Never thought I’d see the day,’ Joe said, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘José Paronella with a bank account.’

‘Believe me when I say I’m just as shocked. I gave them *all* my money and *all* they gave me was this.’ I showed him the insulting passbook.

‘Ha ha!’

‘It’s not funny.’

I started the engine and drove to Innisfail Railway Station. We filled the silence with Catalan nostalgia: the elegance of our mother tongue; sun as sweet as honey; falling snow as gentle as a white dove’s feather; groves abundant with olives; and the aroma of *fuet* and *botifarra* wafting out of the mouths of cottages and through the cobblestone streets.

At the station, I threw Joe the keys over the bonnet. He caught them with one hand, looked at his winnings, and smiled.

‘Look after Bonica,’ I said.

‘I will.’

I removed Pare’s old suitcase from the trunk, leaving behind the empty holdall, and said *adéu* to Joe. Then I went to the ticket booth.

‘One-way ticket to Townsville,’ I said. From there, I planned to book a passage on the next ship to Spain.

The cashier nodded. Ticket in hand, I walked over to the platform and sat down on a bench. An old lady with a handbag on her lap sat at the other end, sucking on a sweet, but her presence did

nothing to comfort me. For a split second, I thought, *She's a spy. No one would suspect a little old sweet-sucking lady.* I wondered what Pare would think—his son fleeing the Black Hand.

Nearby, Bonica started up; there was no mistaking the leonine roar of her engine. Footsteps echoed over her fading din, and my neck pivoted like a bird. A man of Italian appearance strolled onto the platform. Stifling a gasp, I shot him a sidelong glance. He was alone. My right leg jiggled up and down. It seemed like the train would never arrive, and the Faceless Men would find me before I could escape.

As various scenarios played out in my mind, a deafening *toooooot, toooooot* rent the air. I leapt up. The old lady looked at me. The train chugged into the station and slowed to a stop. As the doors opened, throngs of passengers exited, crowding the *petit* platform. Despite the influx of people, I managed to keep an eye on the suspicious man. Relief only came when he embraced a *senyoreta* who stepped off the train.

I boarded and chose a window seat where I had a good view of the door, and then shoved the suitcase under my feet like a footrest. The whistle blew and the train departed, slowly gaining speed. *Before long*, I thought, *I will be out on open waters where the Black Hand can't touch me.*

The hard seats soon became disagreeable, and I constantly shifted in search of fleeting comfort. I must have dozed off for a while because I awoke with a start to a man coughing. My pulse took a moment to steady.

Every time the train stopped and passengers exited and boarded, I studied the men, their attire and mannerisms, wondering if they were criminals masquerading as ordinary travellers.

This routine of dozing and waking with a start continued until Paranoia—my unwanted travel companion—and I finally disembarked at Townsville. We searched for the nearest boarding house. I read the street signs while Paranoia constantly looked over my shoulder, glancing at the footpath on the opposite side of the road.

It was hot and humid, and the sea breeze was a welcome greeting. Palm trees swayed and seagulls cawed. I would be fine. Everything would be fine.

Starving, I stopped at a bakery. A woman, baking herself, served me. Her face glistened with sweat. I must have had a confused, vacant look because she took one glance at me and said:

‘Lost?’

I nodded. ‘Do you know of a good boarding house?’

‘Next street.’

I thanked her, ordered a pastry and ate it as I walked. Sure enough, a modest boarding house stood on the corner. It was not genteel, but it was not uncouth either. Although I could afford better accommodation, I did not want to waste my hard-earned money; I would need it for the ship passage and in Spain. Besides, if the Black Hand had followed me, perhaps they would check luxury hotels first.

One Miss Tawdry answered my knock. She was a thin woman, the thinness owing to anything from genetics to hard work or too many sherries of an evening. In fact, everything about her was thin: a dash for lips, fine mousy hair fastened into a *petit* bun, and a forehead aged with lines like cobwebs. She was a woman who had time only for convenience, not for rouge and rattling pearls. I enquired about a room.

‘Come in. I think—’ she began, but a squawking Cockney brogue interrupted her:

‘Lizzie! Lizzie!’

A frail old woman, probably her *mare* judging by the physical similarities—thin lips, thin hair, thin frame—sat slumped in a wheelchair in the corner of the room.

They exchanged a few words, the *mare’s* thick accent exacerbated by missing teeth and the daughter’s slang a minefield; I struggled to understand them.

An unspoken full stop hung in the air, then the daughter headed to the staircase, paused, looked at me and said:

‘Well? Yer comin’? Thought yer wanted a room.’

Paranoia and I followed her, suitcase in tow.

The room was simple and not nearly as clean as good house-keeping required. The washstand was desirous of a wash itself; the floorboards begged for a broom’s caress; and the window beseeched to be opened to exhale the room’s stale breath. But such neglect put me at ease. Miss Tawdry did not have hawk eyes and would not discover my secret—that I was on the run from the Black Hand. She had probably housed men like me before, men content to stay anywhere but where the real trouble resided, men who skipped town on the first available ship.

The old woman squawked something else, and Miss Tawdry hurried downstairs. Exhausted after the long journey, Paranoia and I lay down for a rest before freshening up and going downstairs to dinner. As expected, it was a terribly bland affair, eaten in virtual silence on my part. Yet the same could not be said for the other men—they acted like old chums. I was glad; I wanted to stick to myself.

After dinner, I went to my room, pushed a set of drawers up against the door, and hid my money under the pillow. Though modest in value compared to my overall wealth, it was a *petit* fortune to many a man, especially the light-fingered, and I feared such nimble fingers resided at Miss Tawdry's boarding house.



The next morning, I booked a first-class passage on the *Tanda*. The fare was expensive, but I could not suffer steerage again. She was scheduled to leave Townsville the following week. I would disembark in Barcelona. Then I bought a newspaper, cheese, and a loaf of bread and returned to the boarding house. I spent the whole day hiding in that suffocating room—Paranoia by my side—with the door locked and a set of drawers pushed up against it. The confinement nearly drove me mad, and I was surprisingly relieved when it was time to go downstairs for dinner.

That night, over a meal that rivalled the previous one for blandness, the men chatted about a mutual acquaintance who was trying to avoid the Australian Taxation Office. Upon hearing the word 'tax,' my ears pricked up like a scared dog's.

'They arrested him,' one man said.

He had sandy hair, skin tanned to dark mahogany, and piercing cobalt eyes. As he spoke, he juggled a toothpick around his mouth with circus-like dexterity.

'Arrested?' another asked. 'But how?'

'The shipping list.'

'And?'

'He paid. He *paid* all right.'

A thought suddenly punched me in the stomach. Just as I had refused to pay the Black Hand, I had also refused to pay taxes. But I was no criminal, liar or fraudster. I simply saw no reason why my hard-earnt money should go to the government, which, as far as I was concerned, was merely another organisation full of greedy Faceless Men.

Besides, paying taxes in Spain—like Italy—was unheard of, so I, like many Southern Europeans, refused to pay taxes in Australia. To circumvent authority, many *senyors* submitted false tax returns. But the tax office was starting to target men like me, men who operated in a cash economy, sealed deals with a handshake and owed large sums of money in back payments. They were the men who, when it came to the crunch, fled the country to keep the legal thieves away from their hard-earnt money.

There was only one thing to do: check the shipping list.

CHAPTER THREE

The Shipping List

My index finger moved down the list. I prayed my name would not be there. Down it went, past Pacini, Pacino, Panopoulos, Pardo, Park and Parker...

But there it was: Paronella, José, bound for Barcelona. I now had two reasons to leave: the Black Hand and the tax office. I would not pay. If I paid the government, I might as well have paid those extortionists. My calloused hands and scars were stamps of my labour, not the labour of suited men with soft, clean hands in offices with water views, or of the felons who ruled the region with a vice-like grip. What I needed was a plan that would simultaneously release me from the fire of the Black Hand and the bars of the tax office.

That night, Paranoia and I lay awake in bed, our thoughts tripping over one another for a solution. Boarding the *Tanda* was now out of the question—but so was staying in the country.



Paranoia and I risked a walk after breakfast. I needed to clear my cloudy head, and Paranoia had plenty of pent-up energy to expel. A humid, overcast sky covered the city like a blanket. We headed towards the harbour. A block from the docks, a decrepit homeless man was begging silently—silently for his head was slumped against a brick wall. A dirty, misshapen hat sat upturned in front of him, and his clothes were patched and stained; his long grey hair was as greasy as olive oil, unkempt and filled with crawlers; his pock-marked face had not seen a razor for months, resulting in a beard that concealed his chin and jowls; and his protruding nose was covered in an arabesque of port-wine stains. In short, he needed a good delousing. I threw a few pence in the hat, the change clanging as it hit the buckled crown, rousing the homeless man from his morning kip. He looked up and muttered:

‘Thah-thah-thahnk yer, and Goh-Gohd bless yer.’

I doffed my fedora and was continuing along the footpath when an idea popped into my head: disguise. I would turn myself into a destitute man fallen on hard times who was using the last of his money to return home to his family. As I walked, my pace quickened, and Paranoia gave the idea momentum. No more shaving; I needed a beard. I would grow my hair long, too, and not wash it until oil shone in the sunshine, and I would dress in raggedy old clothes. But most importantly, I required a new name.

Back at the boarding house, I told Miss Tawdry I was leaving for Brisbane the following day. Once in the city, I would book into another boarding house and wait for my new look to take effect.



Several weeks later, I stood before a chipped, smudged mirror in the communal bathroom of a city boarding house. The musty stench of pipes and drains dating back to the turn of the century hung in the air. I wiped the smudges with my cuffs, then inspected my reflection with a policeman's gaze. A beard, peppered with breakfast crumbs, sprouted from my face like common weeds, making me look like a Spanish Ned Kelly; my mop of curly hair had grown, too, and was now so dirty and oily I was constantly scratching my scalp like a flea-ridden stray; and shabby hand-me-downs had replaced my gentlemanly clothes. I looked like a man fallen on hard times, a man with nothing but a fare home and the clothes on his back. The landlady—one Mrs Crawley, a widow—probably thought me a drunkard, gambler or crazy. Maybe I was crazy. I was certainly desperate, and desperation makes people do crazy things. A knock on the door and a gruff voice roused me from my reflection:

‘You finished?’

I opened it to find one of the boarders before me. He was a burly man who always smelt of liquor. My tentative new confidence and I left our interlocutor—and Paranoia—behind and walked to the nearest post office, where I applied for a passport under the alias José Buxeda; Buxeda was Mare's maiden name. When I said the foreign surname, the officials, bamboozled, spelt it Buseda, even Bucher. Such errors, I hoped, would only help cloak my identity and send the taxman and the Black Hand in the wrong direction.

That afternoon, José Buxeda booked a passage in steerage on the *Tango Maru*, scheduled to depart the Port of Brisbane at the end of April 1925. Although a wealthy man, I would sail as a poor one. Again. Buxeda could not afford a first-class ticket. The whole thing

was so amusing I did not know whether to laugh or cry. But I would be able to afford a mule. The *Tango Maru* would travel to Asia, then Europe. Like before, I would disembark in Barcelona.

If my plan failed, the police would probably arrest me and force me to pay—or worse. Maybe I would be jailed or exiled—and that was if the Black Hand did not catch me first.

Back at the boarding house, I repacked Pare's old suitcase, carefully hiding that cheeky Senyor José Paronella's passport in the lining of an old jacket and placing it at the bottom of the case. I yearned to see Matilde, and my mind constantly played out different scenarios of our meeting. I had neither seen nor heard from her or my family in over a decade.

CHAPTER FOUR

Matilde

The mule rounded the corner, and a cluster of cottages obediently clinging to the hillside came into sight. La Vall de Santa Creu's geography was a bubble where time was illusory. I drank in the same old olive groves, the white-stuccoed cottages topped with terracotta-tiled rooves, and the mountains rising from the earth.

The meandering journey up the steep hill towards the village was familiar, but in the way one knows an acquaintance, not a close friend. For many years, I had considered the quaint village home and had longed for it on countless occasions. But being there made me realise it was merely the place I was born. My home, the life I had created, was in Australia.

The thump of footsteps roused me from my reverie. It was a *senyora*—familiar in appearance—strolling past, pushing a pram in which a toddler, dressed in blue, was installed. I dismounted the mule and, snared like a rabbit, stood and stared. The *senyora*

was as mesmerising as a raven-haired Aphrodite. Waves of black locks fell past her shoulders; an ebony dress flirted with her knees like a coquettish actress, swishing as she walked; and despite the child, she sported a willowy figure with slender legs and a narrow waist.

A scream suddenly pierced the air: the toddler. His chubby legs kicked the air, and his arms waved as if he were trying to grab something imaginary in front of him. The *senyora*, trying to ease the tantrum, picked him up, his tomato-red face scrunched like a fist, and cradled him, making soothing sounds as she patted his back. The motion of her hand in the sunlight made something sparkle: a ring. It was wrapped around her finger like a bow on a present. As she rocked the child, she turned slightly, revealing her face. I stifled a gasp. It was one of Matilde's sisters. Margarita, maybe. I should have known. All three Soler girls had the same hallmark wavy black hair.

I felt a flush of love for Matilde. Soon we would be together. I was about to say *hola* when a man approached and kissed her cheek—her husband. He had slicked-back black hair and dark rings under his eyes. How I longed to see Matilde! With a spring in my step, I led the mule past Casa Soler—wondering what the beekeeper's widow would say when she saw me—to Casa Paronella.

The cottage looked the same aside from a layer of weariness. I opened the green gate, eaten with rot, its hinges screeching like an old, raspy voice welcoming me home, then walked up the lane, tethered the mule, freed it of my possessions and knocked on the door. No answer. I turned the doorknob: unlocked, as always. Inside, I inhaled the homely aroma of wood, freshly baked bread and herbs. The cottage even smelt the same.

‘*Hola?*’

Still no answer.

‘*Hola?* Anybody home?’

I put the suitcase down and searched the rooms: empty. I went outside, but finding the garden deserted, I returned to the cottage and stood reminiscing. I thought of Pare walking through the door after a long day’s work in the olive groves, of Mare kneading dough in the kitchen, of Dolores basting a fowl, of sitting on Àvia’s lap as she told me ‘The Water of Life,’ and of closing my eyes and dreaming of building a castle for us. A wave of nostalgia tinged with sorrow and regret washed over me.

Not wanting to be alone, I went next door to Casa Soler and knocked on the door, all the while wondering who would answer it. *Senyora Soler? Matilde? And what would they say when they saw me?* Movement echoed on the other side. I took a breath so deep it drove to the pit of my stomach. The doorknob rattled open to reveal an old *senyora*, somewhat taken aback. Buried beneath wrinkles as deep as crevices and skin so weathered with work it sagged like clothes on a line, I saw her, Senyora Soler, the beekeeper’s widow. Her once dark hair—her daughters’ inheritance—had turned grey and straw-like, and her homely body had shrunk with age.

‘Senyora Soler?’ I spoke more in question than greeting.

She nodded, but her face remained blank.

‘It’s José. José Paronella.’

The vacancy instantly left, and she gaped at me with stupefaction, a trace of regret etched in her eyes and downcast mouth. ‘Come in, come in,’ she said, quickly recovering herself and ushering me inside.

The cottage was the same but, like its inhabitants, older and dustier. Age—and its ailments—had slowed the once fastidious Senyora Soler and blinded her eyes to dirt.

‘I’m sorry.’ She looked at the ground in regret, gathered her thoughts, then faced me. ‘Matilde is married. Has been for three years. She has a son. He’s’—she thought for a moment—‘two.’

I nodded, and as I processed the news, it suddenly dawned on me: I had not seen one of Matilde’s sisters—I had seen Matilde. I tried to keep my disappointment in check.

‘She waited, but...’

I nodded again. ‘I should have written.’

It was now Senyora Soler’s turn to nod.

‘I’m not good at letters,’ I said foolishly.

Guilty her daughter had not waited long enough—that she had not made her wait—her face drooped even more. But I, too, was steeped in guilt for not penning a single word. I had intended to write many a time but never did, though it was not for want of thoughtfulness. On the contrary, I thought of Matilde often. It was just that whenever I sat down, sat still, my words dissipated into the atmosphere.

‘Please, sit. I’ll make a pot of coffee.’

I told her coffee—that social beverage that fixes all qualms—sounded great, though I really wanted to crawl into a hole. I sat down on a rickety chair and, staring at the scratched tabletop, thought of the new furniture I had bought back in Australia. Despite the matrimonial calamity that had just befallen me, this *petit* thing—furnishings—made me proud.

Senyora Soler placed the coffee pot and a plate of sweets on the table, then joined me, sighing wearily as she sat. It reminded me

of how Àvia used to shuffle about the *casa* with a hand on her back lamenting her arthritis.

‘So, tell me, what have you been doing with yourself all these years?’

I told her about Australia, about my farms and mines, and as we sipped our coffee, the awkwardness eased. I had forgotten how agreeable it was to speak in my mother tongue. Although I spoke Catalan to other men from Catalonia like Joe, there were more Spaniards than Catalans, so we usually ended up conversing in Spanish. Over our chatter, the gate screeched open, and heels clacked up the lane. We both looked expectantly at the door. Senyora Soler seemed just as surprised; she was not expecting another visitor. There was no knock. The door just swung open to reveal a *senyoreta*, suitcase in hand.

‘Margarita!’ the beekeeper’s widow cried, jumping to her feet with an unusual paroxysm of energy for someone so frail. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I’m on holidays,’ she said, her voice young and honeyed. ‘Thought I’d visit home.’

Someone else who had not written. I felt better, albeit only slightly, for I doubted Margarita had allowed the amount of time I had to elapse before visiting. And how she had changed! The last time I had seen her, she was a dirty, shabby child covered in cuts and bruises, wanting me—I was almost fifteen years her senior—to look at her doll. But Margarita was a far cry from that scruffy girl of yesteryear. She had grown into a stunning young lady. She wore a black tunic dress, and a pearl necklace hung around her slender neck.

Margarita put down her suitcase, then *mare* and daughter embraced. Over Senyora Soler’s shoulder, she finally noticed me,

a strange man she could not place, seated at the table. She studied me, just as I had studied her. As Senyora Soler released her, I stood and introduced myself. Senyora Soler was so enraptured by her daughter's arrival she had forgotten my presence.

‘*Hola*. Remember me?’ I said.

Margarita shook her head.

I beamed.

‘This,’ Senyora Soler said, ‘is José Paronella.’

Smiling, she nodded shyly. It was a warm smile, like spring. Then we shook hands.

‘Come, Rita. Sit.’ Senyora Soler gestured to a chair.

Margarita obeyed, and Senyora Soler poured another cup of coffee. At first, the conversation was stilted, but Senyora Soler acted as a buffer. She smiled at me and said, ‘Margarita works as a furrier in Paris.’ Then she smiled at her daughter and told her, ‘José is a very successful businessman in Australia.’

That night, after dinner with Dolores—she had been in town when I had arrived and nearly fainted at the sight of me—I got an oil lamp, walked to the graveyard in the moonlight and found Mare’s grave. I knelt down and kissed the cool stone, then moved along the row, kissing Pare’s grave, and finally Àvia’s. It was the first time I had seen where Pare and Àvia had been laid to rest.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Receive a Proposition

Someone was frantically rapping on the door of the cottage. It was the morning after my return. Everyone was out, so I went to answer it, wondering who could need to see a Paronella so urgently. Upon opening the door, I was surprised to find Senyora Soler standing before me with flushed cheeks and a glint of excitement in her eyes. There could be no doubt: something curious was brewing, but I would soon find out on the breath of the La Vall de Santa Creu wind. I invited her inside and made coffee. After we exchanged a few pleasantries—

‘Dolores must be thrilled to have you home, Pep.’

‘And Margarita must be glad to see her *mare*.’

—Senyora Soler turned the conversation to how, at that very moment, Margarita was visiting her nephew, Matilde’s son, before eloquently manoeuvring the subject to me.

‘I have a solution,’ she said feverishly.

‘To what?’

‘Our *problema*.’

Brows furrowed, I looked at her askance.

‘Margarita.’

‘Margarita?’

‘Sí. She will marry you.’

My mind conjured up an image of her from yesteryear: a shabby girl with a doll. Then I thought of her now, of her beauty.

‘She is willing?’ I asked.

‘Sí.’

That morning, Senyora Soler and I spoke at great lengths about her proposal. Margarita, she said, would cable work in Paris and inform them of her resignation, then cable her boarding house and have the rest of her possessions sent on.

‘You know I’m returning to Australia.’ I felt strange saying the words. What I really meant was you know I am never returning to Spain, and if I marry your youngest daughter, she will never return either.

‘Of course.’

‘And she knows?’

‘She does.’

I nodded.

And so, on the breath of the La Vall de Santa Creu wind, it was decided upon. Instead of marrying Matilde Soler, I would wed her younger sister, Margarita. It seemed strange that until yesterday we had not seen each other since childhood, yet we would know each other for the rest of our natural lives.

‘Tonight,’ Senyora Soler said, rising from her chair, ‘you all must come to dinner.’

‘I wouldn’t miss your cooking for the world.’

After Senyora Soler departed, I sat in the sun and realised a new *problema* had presented itself. Having left in a rushed flurry of fear, I had failed to calculate my expenses accurately. After all, I had ended up purchasing *two* ship passages—one of which was first class—and a new passport. With the upcoming wedding, there would be a lot of expenses—shoes, a suit... and a honeymoon. So, I decided to go to town, telegram Joe back in Australia and ask him to transfer some money. The correspondence went as follows:

Me (to Joe):

Cable me five hundred pounds from my bank account.

Pep de La Vall

Joe (to me):

Slight delay. Bank manager suspicious.

Me (to myself):

I knew banks couldn't be trusted.

Joe (to me):

Told manager Pep and José are short for Josep. Money on way.

Me (to myself):

Finally.

The money arrived just in time. I visited the town's only tailor to get fitted for a suit.



On the sixteenth of September 1925, Margarita and I married at the registry office in town. Then, as Catalan custom dictated, we returned to our respective homes and married in a traditional church ceremony three days later. I wore a white shirt with a matching bow tie, grey slacks and a grey morning coat. It was the most dapper outfit I had ever owned, and I arrived at the church—a place I had not set foot in since a boy—a debonair *senyor* with a boyish grin. Everyone was there, even Pere and Antonia. I understood then that I did not really know my family; I knew them only as names. We had drifted apart across the Seven Seas and changed more than the tides.

A bridal chorus soothed the warm air, and as I turned from the altar, Margarita appeared in the church doorway. She looked like a princess in a long snow-white dress with short sleeves and tiny buttons running down the bodice's front. The dress flowed like an ivory sea as she walked. A hairpiece decorated with three rows of pearls held the veil in place—the three rows reminding me of the Trinity of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—and she held a bouquet with sprigs of myrtle, representing luck and fidelity, in her hands.

After the ceremony, as we walked out the church doors, the vestry clock struck twelve, the bells echoing throughout the village. Everyone went to Restaurant La Vall, the only place to eat in town, to drink to our health, wealth and happiness. Red and white chequered tablecloths adorned the *al fresco* tables, and above us a trellis of greenery shielded us from the sun's gaze.

A waiter was pouring me a celebratory glass of *cava* when Matilde approached me. My heart skipped a beat. The waiter set down the drink, then hurried off to serve someone else, and suddenly it was just the two of us alone in a crowd.

‘Congratulations,’ she said.

‘*Gràcies*,’ was all I could manage, and I wished I knew what to say to an ex-fiancée who married another *senyor* because you did not write a single letter in nigh on a decade.

Behind her a man neared. She turned to him, then back to me. ‘This is my husband, Ramon.’

It was the man with the slicked-back black hair and dark rings under his eyes from the day I arrived. I studied his physiognomy up close. Ramon had a broad forehead—made broader by a balding hairline—with creases that suggested a habit of pensiveness. In his youth, he would have looked boyish and muscular; now, he appeared spent and betrayed by life. Matilde glanced at the ground, her eyes escaping the unspoken void. In that moment, I wondered if she was happy or whether she wished she had waited for me.

Ramon and I talked about trivial things, while Matilde listened. No one mentioned our dissolved engagement. It was as though it had never happened. Ramon was very interested in Australia and had many questions about the wild southern frontier, and I was only too happy to fill the awkward silence with talk of farming and mining and brown snakes that rivalled the mythical *basilisk*.

‘Well, it sounds like you’re doing well,’ he said.

‘I am.’ I smiled.



Margarita and I began our honeymoon in Girona. It was the first moment we had to ourselves. We looked forward to getting to know each other—and to exploring the world. I wanted to see and study everything! I must say, I was surprised to find *xuixos* everywhere.

I took Margarita to Cort Reial fifteen and introduced her to Senyor Puig—he still worked there—and after telling him about Australia, I bought us two of the now-famous pastries.

In Barcelona, we strolled the holm-oak-lined streets, and I examined the great Gaudí's works meticulously, paying special attention to his impressive debut: Casa Vicens. The building rose magically from the ground like a castle in a fable from *The Arabian Nights*, the story beginning at ground level in Spain and becoming increasingly Arabic as it developed, each level a chapter. We saw Bellesguard, Casa Batlló, Casa Calvet, Casa Milà, Col·legi de les Teresianes, Güell Palace and Güell Park. But the most intriguing of Gaudí's designs was the unfinished one: the Sagrada Família. The spires were like fingers grasping for the Heavens. I stored Gaudí's expertise in a pocket of my savant's memory, and I never wavered in my dogged quest for knowledge. I saw as many villa gardens as humanly possible. My legs pounded the streets—Margarita's too, at least at first. The spring in her step waned as the days passed and our tally of miles increased. One afternoon, she fell further behind than usual, and we had our first tiff.

Margarita stopped and dabbed the sweat from her face with a handkerchief. 'Do we *have* to see this garden?'

'We do.'

'But it's so far away.'

She sounded like a petulant child, so I said nothing, gave her a vexed look, then walked on. Silence reigned for a few seconds, then her heels clacked against the cobblestones.

'And it's getting late,' she meekly added.

I forged ahead to the garden. 'We *must* see it.'

And see it we did.

The garden was peaceful and colourful, and I found great inspiration in its design. In the eighth century, when the Moors invaded and occupied Spain, they brought not only their political ideology and religious beliefs; they also brought their ability to create heavenly gardens and parks that always contained quiet, secluded places for meditation. A principle of their designs was that Man's creations should complement, not dominate, Mother Nature like a marriage union. As a result, designs drew on asymmetries. Sprinkled throughout were fountains, streams and waterfalls, alongside *gloriettes* and arbours draped with creepers. The inspiration left me feverish with a renaissance of ideas...

In Madrid, we had an especially pleasant day exploring the Royal Botanical Gardens and sipping coffee at the café by the water.

In Seville, we saw the Royal Alcázar and its gardens.

Then we left Spain and travelled throughout Europe, beginning in France where Margarita showed me the place she had worked as a furrier. Next, we went to Italy, then Switzerland and Germany. We went everywhere, and I continued my habit of studying everything with a savant's hungry eyes. I studied buildings, gardens, theatres, ballrooms and cafés—even the various hydroelectric schemes...



Before I knew it, my curiosity had graduated to knowledge. Our honeymoon was over, and we were back in La Vall de Santa Creu. The following week, I booked two first-class tickets home to Australia aboard the *Aki Maru*, a Japanese ship. Margarita would not suffer in steerage—and neither would I. Twice is more than a *senyor* can bear. We were to embark from Barcelona in January 1926.

The interim we spent with family and friends. It would be the last time we would be together in this natural life. I could not envisage us returning to Spain. Passages were expensive, the journey long and taxing. I also had neglected businesses to run, a wife to settle into a new country, a castle to build for us—and before long, I hoped, children.



I soon got a second marital degree when Margarita and I graduated from tiff to quarrel while packing. I had just returned from a stroll in the village to find Margarita in the second room of Casa Soler with an open trunk at the foot of the bed. Everything to go in it was strewn on top of the threadbare bedspread like a patchwork quilt. The afternoon sun shone through the window, bathing the room in shades of yellow and illuminating her glossy black hair. She picked up a silk dress, folded it and placed it inside, then she picked up a fur coat and began to carefully wrap it in tissue paper. She had worn it a few times on our honeymoon, mostly in the evenings when it was cool. Its maroon body floated past her knees, and its cuffs and plunging neckline were trimmed with fur. Once it was secured, she went to place it in the trunk, but before it touched the bottom, I interrupted her.

‘You won’t need that in Australia.’ I nodded at the package.

‘But it’s my fur coat.’

‘S¿, but why take it to Australia?’

‘To wear.’

‘When?’

‘In winter.’

‘It’s hot. Sweltering.’

‘I can wear it now and again. In winter.’

‘No, you don’t understand. You have no idea what the climate’s like. The tropics aren’t acquainted with the seasons like Spain. There’s neither winter nor autumn but two more springs.’

‘And spring itself?’

‘Another summer.’

‘But I made it.’ She looked at the wrapped coat in her hands.

‘So?’ I shrugged. ‘Give it to Matilde.’

‘No, I can’t.’

‘At least she’ll have use for it.’

‘But I want it with me.’

‘You won’t be able to fit all *this* in *that*.’ I waved my hands about like a wild man. ‘You need to be selective.’

‘Then I’ll take a couple of trunks.’

‘Leave it. I left with nothing—nothing!’ Cheeks flushing with rage, I took two hard strides towards her, wrested the package from her hands—ripping the tissue paper in the process—and hurled it across the room. Margarita sobbed into her hands. I stormed out.

That was our first fight; it would not be our last.

CHAPTER SIX

I Begin a New Life

In January 1926, Margarita and I boarded the *Aki Maru* in Barcelona—I with Pare’s suitcase—and she with one trunk. It was a seven-week journey via the Americas, and it would be like a second honeymoon. We had a *petit* but comfortable cabin to ourselves, and I was astounded at the polarity between it and steerage. The cabin was a floating hotel room, perfect for human cargo. Margarita opened the cupboards and commented happily on everything.

When it was almost time for our first dinner at sea, Margarita opened her trunk and freshened up. It was devoid of the fur coat, and I felt rueful about it. Margarita had cried when she said *adéu* to her family, and it was then I realised that it was not the fur coat she wanted, but what it represented: memories, nostalgia.

We looped arms and headed to the dining room. It was furnished like a French restaurant. There was even a smoking parlour for men to retire to after dinner, and it was so grand that for a

moment I regretted not having taken up the habit of cigars in my youth. A waiter led us to a big round table in the corner of the room at which two couples were already seated. We introduced ourselves. One couple was Spanish, the other Italian. Like Margarita, the *senyores* had never been to Australia, but the men, like me, had earnt a fortune and returned home to marry their fiancées. However, not all men returned home to marry. Margarita commented on an entire table of ladies. I explained how many women, married by proxy, were travelling alone aboard the ship and would meet their husbands in Australia. ‘How lonely,’ she said.

Serving staff bustled hither and thither balancing crowded trays between tables, and an aromatic dinner of meat and pasta and all sorts of delicacies was soon served. I warned Margarita to eat only a little, to wait and see how her stomach reacted to being at sea. She obeyed, eating like a sparrow as we chatted.

Not being a tobacco man, I declined the invitation to join the *senyors* in the smoking parlour after dinner. Instead, Margarita and I returned to the cabin for an early night.



The next morning, Margarita awoke in good spirits. ‘I must have a sailor’s stomach,’ she declared. After breakfast, we sat on the deck in the sunshine, and I regaled her with stories about her new homeland. It was the first chance we had had to really talk about us and our future; our honeymoon had been filled with sightseeing, art, music, architecture and cuisine.

‘Where will we live?’ Margarita asked, smiling.

‘At first, a cane farm. Then I’ll build us a castle.’

‘A castle?’ She looked at me in disbelief.

‘Sí. A Catalan castle.’ It was the first time I had voiced my dream out loud, but she did not balk at the idea, and for that I was thankful. Instead, she gazed at me and said, ‘For us?’

‘For everyone.’ I suddenly grew animated. I jumped up, as I often did when excited or anxious, and paced back and forth, explaining my idea while gesticulating passionately. ‘Great towers will overlook a majestic waterfall, and verdant gardens will stretch as far as the eye can see.’ Margarita’s eyes followed my body and studied my hands, which were doing a demonstration of sorts as they moved up and down. ‘It’ll have grand balconies, turrets, a wishing well, a fountain, a ballroom, a—’

‘A ballroom? For us to dance in?’

‘For everyone to dance in. Of course, we’ll christen it with the first dance. It’ll be so grand people from across the land will come to bask in its glory.’

I returned to her side, and we sat in silence listening to the ocean lapping against the hull until Margarita asked, ‘What’s the climate like?’

I thought of her fur coat but dared not mention it. ‘Hot and humid.’

‘And the countryside?’

‘Where we’re going it’s vast and extremely green.’ I looked out at the expanse of undulating sea. ‘Australia is enormous. The sun shines almost every day, hills go on forever, just as this ocean goes on forever. Paddocks stretch to the horizon. And the sky! On a clear day it’s a vibrant blue, but when it rains, it disappears. The rain falls so heavily you can’t hear a thing but it battering the tin roof.’

‘*Tin* roof?’

‘There aren’t many tiled rooves in Australia. Men make rooves out of corrugated iron, but they call it tin.’

‘Tell me more.’ She leant forwards like a child engrossed in a story.

‘Sometimes it rains for weeks, sometimes it rains so much it floods, and the floods are so strong and deep they steal whole logs.’

She looked at me in disbelief.

‘It’s true. A man I know felled logs at a beautiful place called Mena Creek—it has a waterfall—I’ll show you one day—but then a flash flood came and carried them away. Anyway, years later, he was picnicking with his wife and children on the nearby Barnard Islands, and do you know what he found?’

‘What?’

‘The logs partially covered in sand.’

‘No?’

‘It’s true.’

‘But how did he know they were his logs?’

‘His brand was stamped on them.’

Her eyes widened, but whether in interest or concern was debatable. In case it was the latter, I decided not to mention the tempests and cyclones—at least not yet.

‘Tell me more.’

‘Well, once, in a flood, a farmer I know was worried about his hens—they call them chooks—so he put them on a raft made from a few planks of wood nailed together, and guess what he found floating downstream the next day?’

‘The hens? I mean, *chukes*.’

‘It’s *chooks*—and *sí*, they were found safe and sound.’

She laughed. ‘What do you like most about Australia?’

‘The friendship, but they call it mateship.’

‘*Maite-sheep*.’ She slowly sounded out the word.

‘*Mateship*.’

‘*Mate-ship*.’

‘*Sí*.’

‘Meaning?’

‘You always help another man if he has a *problema*, and he always helps you, even if you don’t know each other.’

She nodded.

‘There’s this man—Senyor Noone, an Irishman—and he had a camp, just a slab hut with a dirt floor, near Mena Creek. That’s the place with the waterfall—it’s named after his daughter.’

She nodded again.

‘Well, for a stove, he used a couple of rocks with old railway lines placed over them. Anyway, one day a police sergeant came by. He’d been out in the saddle all day looking for blacks who’d attacked a settler.’

Margarita grimaced.

‘The sergeant was famished and wet through from the rains by the time he reached Noone’s camp, so Noone invited him inside and, while he dried off, prepared him damper on the fire.’

‘*Dampa*?’

‘*Damper*. A big English scone but cooked on a campfire.’

‘A scone?’

‘You’ll try one in Australia.’

She nodded.

‘The sergeant ended up having it with a dozen eggs. He said it was the best meal he’d ever eaten.’

‘What did you eat when cutting cane?’

‘Everything. Great amounts of meat, vegetables, bread, pasta, rice, fruit—’

‘But you haven’t put on any weight.’

I laughed. ‘Hard work. A lot of hard work.’

‘Who cooked for you?’

‘Every team has a cook, usually one of the men. I worked as a cook too.’

‘Really?’

‘*Sí*. But if one of the men is married, then his wife usually cooks. *Ai*, I have a story—and it’s worth telling because it might happen to you.’

‘To me?’

‘*Sí*. One of the women was cooking her famous chicken *sopa* for her husband and the men in his gang—they were extremely fond of the dish—and on this particular day, she had a large pot bubbling away on the open fire when suddenly there was a splash. She looked around, checked the broth—no soot or anything—and seeing nothing amiss, continued working.

‘Later on, the men returned for lunch. Hearing them chattering and washing on the verandah, she gave the *sopa* a final stir only to find half a head—and leathery skin!—of a goanna.’

‘*Go Ana?*’

‘*Goanna*. A large lizard.’

‘No,’ she gasped, putting a hand to her mouth.

‘*Sí*. It turned out a goanna had fallen down the chimney into the pot. She desperately fished around with her spoon, removing any scaly bits, but most of the reptile had already been cooked into it.’

Margarita grimaced again.

‘With several famished men to feed, she had no choice but to serve the chicken-goanna *sopa*. As her husband came in, she tried to warn him not to eat it, but he was busy chatting and didn’t hear her. So, they sat down and ate. “Delicious,” one of them said.’

‘How horrible.’

‘I know.’

Given her reaction to a goanna, I dared not mention the king brown snakes. We sat silently for a moment, the sun shining on our faces and albatrosses flying past. Then she turned to me:

‘And the birds? Do they sing beautifully?’

‘Sí, but do you know what my favourite sound is?’

‘What?’

‘The Italians singing while they work in the fields.’

‘They sing in Italian?’

‘Sí—and Sicilian.’

‘And English? I know no English. Catalan, obviously; Spanish, *sí*; French, *sí*; but English, no.’

‘I’ll teach you.’ I looked out at sea. ‘After all, we have seven weeks. In fact, why don’t we start now?’

Margarita beamed. I started with numbers just as a woman approached.

‘Forgive me,’ the woman said in Spanish. ‘I couldn’t help over-hearing.’ She gave Margarita an English phrase book.

‘*Moltes gràcies*,’ we chorused.

And so, we began Margarita’s English education—she repeating phrases from the book, and I correcting her.



The *Aki Maru* went on to stop at New York City, Hong Kong, Nagasaki, Yokohama, Manila, and Thursday Island...

Wild weather imprisoned us in our cabin for several days, and I was thankful Margarita did not have to experience such a nautical sentence in steerage. But the most exciting part of the journey was crossing the equator, especially for Margarita. The milestone was celebrated just as fervently as on my previous trips—only in first class, the food and entertainment were excellent. Margarita's big brown eyes were stunned by the fireworks in the violet sky, the faux stars raining down towards the black sea. In that moment, I could see she felt like her new life had truly begun.

Margarita continued her English lessons under my increasingly frustrated tutelage. It baffled me that, in addition to Catalan, she could speak Spanish and French, yet English seemed to evade her. My concern only grew as the weeks slipped by. She knew only a few key phrases, and her accent was strong. Mine was a bit thick, but hers was like tar. We were running out of time.

As the weather got warmer, the sea moved lethargically, lapping instead of hitting the hull, as though exhausted by the heat like its passengers. While we sweated, preparations were made for the *Aki Maru's* arrival in Brisbane. We stood at the rail and watched the approaching coastline—familiar to me, foreign to her. Time had passed surprisingly quickly.

Within days, the *Aki Maru* entered the harbour. A handful of boats chugged across the water to greet our ship. Then one by one a host of immigration officials boarded. Not long after the last official had stepped on deck, an announcement came over the loudspeaker:

‘Mr José Paronella, you are required in the purser's office immediately.’

But I was busy basking in the skyline and oblivious to the message until Margarita, having heard our surname, nudged me.

‘Repeating: Mr José Paronella, you are required in the purser’s office immediately.’

I froze. My heart thumped wildly, and I only just managed to conceal my shock from Margarita.

‘What’s happening?’ she asked.

I wondered that myself, but knowing nothing—and everything: the Black Hand’s threats, the gunshots I had fired that fateful night, the unpaid taxes—I shrugged nonchalantly and walked gingerly to the purser’s office.

Margarita followed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Purser's Office

The walk to the purser's office was short, yet it felt terribly long. Dark theories about my impending fate tormented me the whole way. At the end of the corridor, a brass plaque confirmed I had arrived. I raised my clammy hand and knocked on the door.

‘Enter,’ a man’s voice boomed.

I obeyed, Margarita a foot behind me. The office was furnished with a few photographs of ships, a maroon rug, and a big wooden desk at which the official sat reading a document—one I feared concerned me. After a few seconds, he looked up. A pair of round spectacles framed his beady eyes; a moustache sheltered his dour lips; and he had black hair parted to the side.

The official cleared his throat. ‘Mr Paronella, I’m afraid we cannot allow you and your wife to enter the country.’

Petrified, I stood as still as a statue, but my body betrayed me with a gulp of fear.

Margarita, hearing the words *cannot* and *wife*—for a moment I regretted teaching them to her—sensed the seriousness of the situation and failed to stifle a gasp. I felt her eyes on me, probing for an explanation, but I could not give one.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. *Everything will work itself out*, I reasoned. *It always does. Besides, they must let me in. I'm an Australian now. I renounced my allegiance to the King of Spain. Surely they can't revoke my citizenship and send me, wife in tow, on the next ship back to Europe. Can they?...* And so went my internal monologue.

'It's all right, Rita,' I said stolidly in Catalan, putting an arm around her. 'Go back to the cabin while I sort out this *petit* misunderstanding.'

As I spoke, the official studied me. He had no idea what I was saying, but he was examining my body language for clues.

Margarita nodded and went to leave, but stopped at the door and looked back at me, her face uncertain, worried and questioning.

'It's okay. Go,' I said.

She left, walking down the corridor back to the cabin. When she had gone, I turned to find the official staring at me with the hint of a smirk on his face.

'It's about tax, no?' I asked. If it was about the gunshots, police would be present.

The official nodded.

As I stood there in the stillness heavy with heat and tension, I wondered what—and how much—he knew that made him the wiser party. Desperate to fill the silence, I continued, 'You think I owe the tax department money.' Then I smiled. Perhaps the smile was a mistake.

‘Well,’ the official said, also smiling, ‘as a matter of fact, you no longer owe us a dime, Mr Paronella.’

His baritone voice was lighter and smugger for having shared this fact. He was a wily man. It was as though he, in his fancy suit, had lost sympathy for his cousin, Common Man. Then, with a level of arrogance reserved for the educated, he lent back in his chair, its legs creaking under his weight, and fingered the ends of his moustache as he awaited my reaction like an audience at a play. I looked at the official in surprise. If I owed nothing, why was I barred from entering the country? Upon thinking this, a greater fear struck me like a punch in the stomach: was I mistaken? Did it have something to do with the Black Hand, with the gunshots I had fired that fateful night before fleeing? I went to speak, but the official got in first—and just as well because I had no idea what I was going to say.

‘Mr Paronella,’ he continued, ‘while you were abroad, we took the liberty of withdrawing a thousand pounds from your personal bank account.’

My smile stiffened into a rictus. Shocked, chagrined, and speechless, I stood for a moment, wondering how those government officials had accessed my bank account, how the law had permitted them to steal from me—a hardworking man—like criminals, like the Black Hand. Within seconds, a paroxysm of rage seized me, and it took every fibre of my being to maintain a poker face and control myself before that conceited man.

The official cleared his throat, leant forwards in the chair, its legs creaking again, and rested his elbows on the desk, the pointed fingers of each hand forming a tent. ‘I think that makes us even, don’t you, Mr Paronella?’

Even. I wanted to scream but kept my anger in check and managed a nod. While my body language showed comprehension, I still did not understand. If I owed nothing, why was I summoned to the purser's office and told we were prohibited from entering the country? So, I said as much:

'If I owe nothing, why can't I return? After all, I *am* an Australian citizen, no?'

The official's beady eyes narrowed and focussed on mine. 'Well, Mr Paronella, it's simple, really. How do we know you won't try to swindle us again? How can we be sure you'll be an honest citizen, *hmm?*' He arched an eyebrow as though the line of hair was a question mark.

Understanding that, as much as I hated to, I needed to verbally bow to that belittling man, I chose my words carefully. 'There must be some way I can convince you, sir. I only want to return home and work hard for my wife and, hopefully, my children. You can ask anybody in the area. They'll tell you. I'm a serious man. Very serious. I don't make the same mistake twice.'

The official considered my rebuttal. 'Is there a particular person who'll go guarantor for your projected *good* behaviour?' On the second last word, his eyebrow shot up again.

An uncomfortable silence—uncomfortable for me, entertaining for him—hung in the air while I scanned my mind for the right person. I knew many men, but I needed to pick the *right* one. My future depended on it—so did Margarita's. One *senyor*, as always, stood out.

'Yes,' I said. 'His name's Joe Donatui.'

Joe had always helped me when I needed it most. He was a solid *senyor*—as solid as the ground Man walks on.

‘Very well. Contact him. See if he’ll vouch for your good behaviour.’ He spoke dismissively, then returned to his paperwork.

I thanked him. But unsure of whether the conversation was finished, I stood there foolishly.

‘Mr Paronella,’ the official said, glancing over the rims of his glasses, ‘You may go now.’

I returned to the cabin like a scolded boy, fretting about what to tell Margarita—certainly not the truth. As I opened the door, she leapt from the foot of the bed where she had been waiting for me and hurried over.

‘Well?’ she asked.

‘*Petit problema*,’ I said. ‘Paperwork. This country, it likes its paperwork.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Amor Meu

The Buick travelled up the long driveway, a cloud of dust in its wake. Upon our return, we had taken a taxi to Joe's, where I introduced him to Margarita. I had explained that I married her instead of Matilda when I asked him to go guarantor for us. We collected both Titus and Bonica and thanked him for looking after everything with Catalan sweets. After that, I found us a house to rent while I sold the old property—despite my time away, I still feared the Black Hand—and purchased a new one. It was this new house that was growing bigger and bigger as we sped up the driveway.

I cut the engine and opened Margarita's door, then trilled:

‘Welcome home.’

As I let Titus out and retrieved our luggage from the boot, Margarita stepped towards Casa Paronella and eyed it curiously. It was nothing like the crudely built cottages of our childhood back in La Vall de Santa Creu.

‘It’s so... so big,’ she said. ‘And different.’

‘It’s built for the climate, *amor meu*,’ I explained. ‘Everything here’s built for the climate.’ The *casa*, I told her, was positioned on timber stumps to help it withstand floods and support airflow, and the timber-clad walls and corrugated iron roof were easily replaced after a severe storm or cyclone.

Upon hearing the word *cyclone*, Margarita looked at me askance. Perhaps I should have mentioned them earlier.

‘Tropical towns,’ I said, ‘are always under threat. Monsoon season arrives every summer, cyclones frequently develop in the Coral Sea, and this combination causes severe floods.’

‘Like in the stories with the logs and the *chukes*?’

‘*Si*—and it’s *chooks*.’

Margarita nodded.

The slatted wooden blinds, I continued, were outside the west-facing windows to shield the hot afternoon sun’s glare, and underneath the *casa* was a storage area. ‘Come on. I’ll give you the grand tour!’

We looped arms and walked up the stairs, through the front door, and into our *nova vida*.



Life soon returned to normal—or as normal as it could be. The government had siphoned a large sum of money from my bank account, and I had to start paying taxes. Still fearing the Black Hand, I bought another dog; she was as black as night, and I named her Blackie. I also had a wife to settle into a new country. There would be teething *problemes*, I just wondered what the *problemes*

would be: crocodiles, spiders, snakes, the climate, English, everything? I soon found out, and they became known as the Seven Culture Clashes, one for every day of the week.

Food caused the First Culture Clash when we visited our new neighbours, the O'Neills, and Margarita begrudgingly drank Mrs O'Neill's murky tea and even more begrudgingly ate one of her grainy lamingtons.

'It wasn't *that* bad, *amor meu*,' I said on the way home.

'It feels like I have sand in my mouth.'

An amphibian caused the Second Culture Clash.

'Pep! Pep!' Margarita yelled one day. 'There's a giant green frog on the *lavabo*.'

'It's only a frog, *amor meu*.'

'Trust me. *This* is no ordinary frog. It's *extremely* giant and *extremely* green.' She spoke as though size and colour indicated severity, all the while illustrating its dimensions with her hands.

I relocated the offending amphibian.

Arachnids caused the Third Culture Clash. Spiders invaded the *casa* daily. Margarita beat away the cobwebs every morning, but they returned with the moon. Shaking her head in disbelief as much as annoyance, she viciously battered them away. But no amount of effort deterred them.

'Just leave it, *amor meu*.'

'Leave it! "Leave it," he says. If a spider has a cobweb, it has a house. No house, no spider.'

Reptiles caused the Fourth Culture Clash. One afternoon, Margarita ran into the *casa* screaming, 'Pep! Pep! You won't believe what I just saw!'

I asked her what.

‘A swarm of flies.’

‘Only flies?’

She explained that she thought something had died, so she went to investigate and found an *extremely* big, *extremely* black python shedding its skin. According to Margarita’s fear scale, the extremity of the adjectives meant the serpent was perilous. She tried to illustrate its size with her arms, but they were two metres too short.

‘It gave a final wriggle, then slithered off. It was less than a foot—a foot!—from my feet. I could’ve died.’ She crossed herself.

‘Black-headed pythons won’t kill you, *amor meu*.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive. So, what did you do?’

‘What I just did now: I crossed myself, left the flies to their feast and ran here.’

Giant moths caused the Fifth Culture Clash. One evening, Margarita pointed at a moth hovering around the kerosene lamp and said, ‘Wha—what is *that*?’

‘A moth.’

‘That is *not* a moth.’

‘It is. Here, moths aren’t dainty like in Spain.’

Dumbfounded, she looked from me to the moth and back again. I laughed and told her about the time I had swatted one of the insects, only to have my fellow boarders admonish me about the smell, but she did not find it funny.

‘You mean I can’t even *kill* this thing?’

‘Afraid so, *amor meu*.’

‘Everything here is alive.’

The weather caused the Sixth Culture Clash. Margarita had not experienced tempests or cyclones—yet—but frequent rain

and high humidity produced vast amounts of moisture, the main prerequisite for mould growth. Mould spores reproduced as quickly as fungi after a downpour. One evening—a Friday—the Mould Incident occurred.

‘*Amor meu*, shall we go dancing?’ I asked.

Her face lit up. ‘I would *love* to.’ She disappeared down the hallway to the bedroom. The wardrobe door opened, then a wail rent the muggy air. ‘Pep! Pep! My handbag!’

‘What? What’s wrong with it?’

‘*Ai*, “What’s wrong with it?” he says. I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it: it’s ruined.’

‘It can’t be that bad.’

She marched over to me and shoved her handbag, bought in Paris on our honeymoon—she was wearing her fur coat at the time—under my nose. It was covered with so much mould it was impossible to discern if the bag had started its life as black, tan or brown. I conceded: it was ruined. As an afterthought, I went to the bedroom and checked my good leather shoes, the ones I had bought for our wedding. They were not good anymore.

‘It’s my fault.’ I had forgotten to warn her about the mould. From that day on, Margarita aired our clothes and shoes in the sun weekly.

But the Seventh Culture Clash was the most significant: speaking English. There were no schools to learn the language and certainly none to master the Australian accent. I had learnt it in everyday life when I left the *casa*—or barracks, as it was in the early days—over the course of a decade. Every second of every day was mandatory English practice: working with Australian farmers, going to the greengrocer’s and buying the newspaper. The paper was

particularly helpful. I read the articles and classifieds daily—and in the early days, the cartoons too—and occasionally wrote notices to put in the paper regarding farming. Such immersion meant I soon became fluent in English, though my accent, a mark of my origins, often got in the way of communication—still does.

Margarita needed to do the same and learn English through everyday life. Admittedly, it was harder for her. She was housebound, unable to venture out into the world and interact with people every day as I had done. Her time was spent cooking, cleaning and washing. Of course, there was the phrase book the woman had given us aboard the *Aki Maru*, but reading it alone was different to having someone explain how things are pronounced in person, and she taught herself words incorrectly.

I tried to help, but I left the *casa* early and returned late, exhausted from a hard day's work, too exhausted to tutor, wanting only a meal and sleep. As a result, dinner was served with a side of comedy. Two meals stand out in particular.

‘How was your day?’ Margarita asked.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘And you?’

She put down her utensils and looked at me. ‘*Pie* Day? What is this *Pie* Day? Does everyone eat *pies* on this day? And when is this *Pie* Day? Do I need to bake a *pie* for this day?’

I laughed involuntarily.

Stiffening, she flushed with embarrassment, and I immediately regretted my reaction. ‘No,’ I said softly, reaching for her hand. ‘It’s *pay* day, the day everyone gets paid.’

‘*Ai*.’ She shook her head.

A week after the Pie Incident, another comedic exchange accompanied dinner.

‘Today,’ she said, ‘Enzo told me, “Old Mick’s up the creek without a paddle.” But he wasn’t. He was in the paddock. I saw him with my own eyes.’ (Enzo and Mick were my labourers.)

‘It’s a saying, *amor meu*. It means a hopeless situation.’

‘Well, it’s a hopeless saying.’



I hammered in the last nail. Margarita’s housewarming surprise was complete. I walked up behind her—she was in the kitchen making *botifarra*—and went to cover her eyes with my white handkerchief—Àvia would approve of its use this time—but she gasped.

‘It’s only me.’

She turned around. ‘Pep! You nearly gave me a heart attack.’

‘Close your eyes and follow me.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll see.’

Margarita washed her hands and removed her apron, then I blindfolded her. We looped arms, and I escorted her through the *casa*, out the back door, down the stairs to her surprise.

‘Okay. We’re here.’ I untied the handkerchief.

‘*Ai*, Pep! I can’t believe my eyes. A set of wash troughs, a copper—’

‘A laundry, so you don’t have to fetch buckets of water like the other *senyores*.’

‘There’s even a mangle!’

‘There’s also a clothesline under the *casa* to dry clothes on rainy days, so you don’t have to experience what Joe’s *mare* did.’

Margarita’s eyes darted to mine. ‘What happened to her?’

‘Dolores was washing clothes at the creek when she noticed leaves raining down on her, yet curiously there was no breeze. She looked up only to find a dozen or more snakes staring right at her.’

‘*Ai, amor meu*, I’m so grateful—especially with all the nappies I’ll soon be washing.’

‘You mean you’re...’

She nodded.

And that was how I found out I was going to be a *pare*. I grabbed her hand, waltzed her outside, and twirled her around and around under the poinsettia tree, all the while singing, ‘A ba-*by*! A ba-*by*! Our ve-ry own ba-*by*!’ After I calmed down, Margarita made coffee, and we sipped it on the verandah in the heavy air.

‘I can’t believe our child will be born in Australia,’ I said.

‘I know.’

‘He—’

‘Or she.’

‘—will speak English because our baby’s future is here—in Australia—but he—or she—will also speak Catalan and Spanish because our roots are in Catalonia.’

‘What about Teresa for a girl and Joseph for a boy?’

‘Perfect.’

CHAPTER NINE

The Veil of Luck

The nine months passed quickly. Margarita, her stomach bloated with life, continued working while awaiting the birth. The relentless heat and humidity took their toll on her, and she often sat on the verandah in the warm zephyr, a wet cloth draped around her neck and her swollen feet resting on a chair, reading newspaper comic strips to help improve her English.

Sometimes I sat with her. Whenever the baby kicked, she would place my hand on her stomach, and I would feel ripples under her skin like when the wind blows the stream. Then memories of Mare would flood my mind, and I would start worrying.

Then one day, Margarita doubled over in pain, clutching her stomach. It was as though an invisible person—a ghost—were kneeling on her backbone, trying to snap it in two.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, concealing my panic—or so I thought at the time, though I was later told otherwise.

‘It be-*giiins*!’ The words burst out with a scream.

I escorted her to the bedroom and helped her lie down. Then I grabbed the car keys, ran outside, and scanned the cane fields, locking eyes with Enzo; Mick was up the proverbial creek.

‘Enzo!’ I yelled. ‘Go to town. Get the midwife.’

He downed tools and hurried over. I tossed him the keys.

Back inside, I seized a hand towel from the linen press so abruptly that Margarita’s folded pile toppled to the floor. I ran it under cold water, hurried back and dabbed her sweaty face—like Àvia had done for Mare—before folding the cloth and placing it on her forehead. Unable to sit still, I leapt up and paced back and forth past the window, all the while muttering, ‘Where’s Enzo and the midwife? They should be back by now.’

‘Pep, *please*, sit.’ Margarita patted the bed.

She exuded a calmness, a maternal intuition. I obeyed, but my leg protested, jiggling madly. As soon as I heard Bonica’s *putt-putt*, I darted to the window to find a blur of moving dust.

Next, the midwife appeared in the doorway. Dressed from head to toe in white, the woman cut a stern, matronly figure that echoed Àvia. Her skin, lined like a map, comforted me. She was well-travelled, experienced. Her hooded eyes, set below heavy eyebrows, studied Margarita, then her thin lips opened.

‘I’ll take it from here, Mr Paronella,’ she said, shooing me away like a gnat.

I acquiesced. Childbirth was women’s business. I went to the kitchen and continued worrying. So much could go wrong: the baby could be stillborn or—worse—Margarita could die giving birth.

She screamed out in pain.



Almost eight hours after Margarita's contractions had started, the midwife appeared before me. I was sitting at the table, my hands clamped around a cup of coffee to keep them from shaking.

'It's coming,' she said, disappearing back into the bedroom.

I leapt up and followed.

The baby came into the world red-faced, crying and blinking in utter confusion. It was a fine spring day. No tempests or squalls. The forecast of a calm life. As the midwife glanced at our newborn, her eyes widened.

'What's wrong?' I asked. 'What is it? Tell me.'

'It's a girl,' she muttered. 'And an ugly one at that.'

Alarmed, I promptly looked at my daughter, but there was nothing ugly about her; she merely wore a caul. Her *vida* would be veiled with luck. I was so smitten with the new life before me that I gave no rebuttal to the insult.

'A caul, *amor meu*. She has a caul.'

Margarita smiled. 'How lucky.'

I was pleased. Those born en caul can never drown and are destined for greatness. She would have a great, calm life.

The midwife cleaned baby Teresa Dolores Maria Paronella, swaddled her in a blanket, and then handed her to a beaming Margarita and disappeared.

'My lucky little girl,' Margarita cooed. 'Here, Pep, come hold your daughter.'

I scooped her up. She was fractious, in want of her *mare*, and wriggled like a worm, but I was besotted.

'We'll save the caul and dry it out. It will be her good luck charm.'

'Everyone needs good luck.' *Especially poor men*, I thought.

As I handed baby Teresa back to Margarita, the midwife entered. Margarita looked from Teresa to the woman, then asked in broken English, 'Where is caul?'

'The caul? It's been disposed of.'

'You dispose of baby girl luck?' Margarita tutted and shook her head. I would have too, but I was too smitten—and the midwife scared me.

'Humph!' Flabbergasted, the midwife stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER TEN

Three Celebrations,

(Almost) a Funeral, and an Epiphany

The wind blew the calendar's pages forward. Teresa grew as quickly as the flora in the rainforest, and it was soon time for Margarita's first cane cut-out. We had many Spanish friends in the community—the Donatius, of course, plus the Gils and Salleras brothers—but more non-Spanish friends. The Spanish community of thirty-odd families was no match for the Italian one, but it only made us closer. Get-togethers took place at one of our farms. Tables, set up outside under shady trees, were adorned with an assortment of homemade food—generous dishes of pasta, *paella*, *risotto*, salads and fruit platters—and drinks, including Abbott's lager, Bols Gin in stone bottles, and of course Spanish and Italian wine. We raised our glasses of wine and toasted to a successful season.

More wind blew, and next the holy season was upon us, bringing with it the unwanted gift of unbearable heat, humidity

and monsoonal rain. When the sky broke, steam rose from the hot ground like smoke from the sugar mill chimney, and the wet cloth returned to Margarita's neck.

Weeks before Margarita's first Australian Christmas, our neighbours, the O'Neills, stopped by with a festive fruitcake. After they left, while I was sitting in the armchair with the newspaper, Margarita appeared before me with the cake and started poking it.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'This,' she said, 'is *not* a Christmas cake. This is a brick! I want a Catalan cake, a wonderful light *pastís* with liquor and cream. We can't eat *this*.' She shook her head. 'Give it to Enzo and that Mick who's always up the creek. I'll make us a *proper* cake.'

My temperature rose. 'We *will* eat it, and you'll tell the O'Neills how much we appreciated their gift. It's an Australian Christmas cake—and *you* are Australian.'

Weeping with consternation, Margarita returned to the safety of the kitchen. It may sound harsh, but upset was a necessary evil. Change, as I had learnt, is seldom easy but always inevitable. Change is growth. Sugar cane changes, transforming from seeds to sheaves: it gets cut, piled and made into the sweet granules people stir into their coffee and beat into their puddings. As far as I was concerned, the past was a foreign country, a place where things were done differently, and we no longer lived in that country.

In the end, Margarita got her light *pastís* with liquor and cream. She baked it for our Christmas gathering at Casa Paronella. Our Spanish friends came, and we roasted a pig on the spit, this time raising our glasses to health, wealth and happiness.

Next, the wind ferried us to New Year's Eve. Monsoonal rain continued to drench the land, but our spirits were not dampened.

We celebrated with our usual vigour. Fireworks bloomed in the violet sky like floral auras, and we gazed up in awe, toasting to resolutions of new opportunities.

Such prospects called me back to Prosper Ridge at Mount Garnet. Margarita loathed it when I went to the mine as much as she loathed Mrs O'Neill's food, extremely green frogs, immortal cobwebs, slithering reptiles, Herculean moths, ubiquitous mould and tackling English. The result: she fretted until I returned, just as she fretted when I went to town, when Teresa refused to eat or when her nose became red and runny.

'*Ai, amor meu*, always with the worrying. All will be fine.'

'The cars, they crash; the snakes, they bite; the people, they fight; the—'

'Okay, okay.' I held up a hand.

To Margarita, everything was a source of worry: the weather—to be fair, that fickle atmosphere worried everyone; Bonica and her ability to function as a car should—again, to be fair, she was prone to breakdowns; and the town with its boozing, gambling and brothel-frequenting men—also relatively true.

Many men drank Banyan rum, a potent concoction of methylated spirits, Condyl's crystals, and boot polish. Those who drank it croaked like frogs. Though I refused to touch a drop of the voice-stripping brew, Margarita still worried about the rowdy men who did. They picked fights over nothing: a wrong step, a misheard word or a spilt drink.

Margarita's worry—endearing but suffocating—had spawned a ritual goodbye conversation that surely looked comedic to outsiders. That day when I left for the mine was no different. We were standing on the verandah. Rain battered the tin roof, making it hard to hear.

‘Drive carefully, Pep.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Drive carefully.’

‘I will.’

‘And you’ll be home before dark?’

‘Pardon?’

‘You’ll be home before dark?’

‘I will.’

‘Okay.’ Then, again: ‘Drive carefully.’

I nodded, kissed her *adéu*, and started up Bonica. There was no cloud of dust as I chugged down the long driveway; the rain had transformed the dirt to mud. At the end, I turned and began the arduous journey to Mount Garnet.

Way up the mineral belt, I reached a road infamous for its treachery. It was narrow and winding with poor camber and three-foot-high posts separating lanes on corners, making it difficult to get around without hitting the barrier. Adding to the danger, edges of the road frequently fell away, especially in wild weather like I was experiencing that day. As Bonica twisted around corners, rain needled the land, blurring the windscreen.

Suddenly, a gust of wind assailed me, and a sickening sound came from underneath her. I lost control. Any efforts to correct Bonica were in vain. She had a mind of her own, and I loathed the decisions she was making. Bonica aquaplaned. Two choices were before me: one, risk running over the edge into a steep gorge; two, have a head-on tussle with a eucalyptus tree. I chose the second. It was a terrifying few seconds knowing I was destined to collide with that gum. I braced for impact. A terrific bang rent the air.

Then blackness.

Next, I saw a bright celestial light that spoke in a familiar yet foreign voice. It sounded like Mare, Pare and Àvia merged into one. The voice said: ‘You must go back, back to the oasis. The mirage shall be realised.’



Darkness had descended by the time the taxi pulled up at Casa Paronella, and I was in agony. Bonica was dead, a write-off. I had spent half an hour trapped in the wreck before a grey figure approached, freed, then transported me to the nearest ambulance centre.

‘Home sweet home,’ the taxi driver said, cutting the engine.

A livid Margarita, spotting the lights, hurried outside. I paid, then hobbled up the stairs.

“‘Home before dark,” he said.’ She threw up her arms. ‘Where have you been? I’ve been worried *sick*. I was about to ask Senyor O’Neill to take me to the police station.’

It was only when we were inside, in the light of the kerosene lamp, that her interrogation stopped, her eyes moving to the bandage swathed around my arm.

‘*Ai*, what have you done to yourself?’

‘Car accident.’

‘I *knew* it.’ Tutting and shaking her head in admonishment, she crossed herself. ‘Come, sit.’ She gestured to the lounge.

I obeyed.

Margarita fussed. She served up a generous dinner before sitting down opposite me. ‘I knew it,’ she repeated, shaking her head again. ‘I could *feel* it.’

‘It’s time.’

She glanced at the clock. 'For what?'

'The castle.'

'It will come,' she soothed.

'It *is* coming. Tomorrow.'

'But, Pep—'

'Tomorrow,' I said, raising my voice, 'I start.'



The next morning, sunshine poured through the window. My bruised body shifted in bed. The other side was cold; Margarita was already up. Sounds echoed from the kitchen. A cupboard banged shut, a saucepan clanked. Wincing, I rose and dressed. I had not experienced such agony since my inaugural cane-cutting days.

'What are you doing up?' Margarita said. 'I was going to make you breakfast in bed.'

'I'm fine.' I sat down, but my physical reaction did not match my words: I winced again.

'No, you're not. Fine men don't have stitches,' she said, wagging her finger.

'You're exaggerating.'

'Exaggerating?' She set down a plate of *esmorzar de forquilla*.

I devoured my hearty fork breakfast of eggs and meat. But when finished, I winced yet again as I stood.

'Pep?'

'Sí.'

'Where are you going?'

'For a walk.'

'Why?'

‘Fresh air.’

‘Rest.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Just for today.’

‘I can’t.’

‘At least be careful.’

‘I will.’

‘And you *will* be home before dark.’

‘I hope so.’

She raised her brows.

‘Don’t worry. The worst is over.’

She nodded but repeated, as though I were a child, ‘Be careful.’

‘I will.’

‘And watch out for snakes.’

I kissed her *adéu*, walked down the steps, down the long driveway, and began the fourteen-mile journey from Mourilyan to the falls at Basilisk where, back in 1914, I had discovered that unspoiled parcel of land perfect for a Catalan castle. Upon reflection, I can understand how the idea to build a castle would seem like a whim, though it was anything but sudden. I had been thinking about castles since I was a boy—since Àvia told me ‘The Water of Life’—and I had been thinking about building one for nigh on a decade.

As I walked on, the sun baking my aching body, I wondered what to say when I arrived. The falls were no longer called Stuart Creek, as too much mail was misdirected to Stuart Creek in Townsville; they had been rechristened Mena Creek after Mr Noone’s daughter, Philomena. He owned the southern side of the land. Another man, Mr August Frederik Koppen, owned the northern bank with the falls

I wanted to buy. Before visiting Mr Koppen, I observed Mr Noone's parcel of acreage; he lived on portion fifty-six. From a distance, it appeared barren, but as I got closer, I realised he had started clearing land for his planned hotel.

Next, I went to the northern side to examine Mr Koppen's parcel. He was using only half for cane because the terrain was too rough. By the time I knocked on the door of Casa Koppen, my clothes were soaked with sweat. As I pulled the shirt's chest in and out to fan myself, the door creaked open.

'Mista Koppen?' I asked.

'Yes?'

Mr Koppen had thinning hair the colour of sand and eyes as blue as a shallow sea.

'I'm José Paronella, and I'd like to buy a patch of your land.'

'Well, in that case, you'd better come in.'

The house smelt of freshly baked sweets. Mr Koppen showed me to the lounge room. His wife, seeing they had company, made tea. Within minutes, Mrs Koppen—a strongly built, homely woman who rivalled her husband in the height department—placed a tray with a teapot, two cups, and a plate of scones with jam and cream on the coffee table. As we exchanged pleasantries about the weather and this season's crop, I politely sipped the tea, wishing it were one of Margarita's coffees. Then the conversation turned to business.

'So, Mr Paronella, how may I help you?'

'Mista Koppen, there's an area of land you do not—and can never—use: the southwest corner. It's too rough. All gullies and falls. You can never grow cane on it.'

Mr Koppen nodded, then raised a brow. 'And?'

‘Will you sell me that piece of land?’ A brief silence hung in the heavy air. ‘I can pay cash,’ I added quickly. ‘Then you’d have money to help develop the usable parts of your property.’

‘But Mr Paronella, as you said, the land is unusable, so why do you want it?’

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘Beautiful but unusable.’

‘I don’t want to work the land. I want to live on it. I want to build a home—a castle.’

Mr Koppen laughed. ‘Right you are. A man’s home is his castle—and what a beautiful place for a house at that.’

I omitted the fact I really did want to build a castle—he would think me crazy. So, I just sat there awaiting his decision. Mr Koppen stroked his chin. The silence was unsettling, and I willed my leg not to jiggle. Then he nodded, though I was unsure if he was agreeing with my proposition or his private thoughts. Finally, he spoke:

‘I’ll sell you twelve acres, two roods and twenty-nine perches for one hundred and twenty pounds.’

I sipped my tea and pretended to think it over, then, smiling, said, ‘It’s a deal.’ We shook hands on the agreement.

When tea was finished, Mr Koppen escorted me to the front door and down the steps where we said *adéu*. Elation seized me. I could scarcely believe the falls were mine after so long. Grinning, I ambled back to Mena Creek and studied the land. Suddenly, the trees disappeared and a Catalan castle sprouted from the loam.

Wanting to cool off, I clambered down to the lower area where the creek pooled. I pulled my sweat-sodden shirt over my head, clenching at the pain, shucked off my shoes and trousers, and unwound the bandage, then waded through the water until it reached my chest.

The water was cool from the shade of the parasol-like trees. Fish and turtles swam around my submerged body as though my presence in their environment were as natural as a rock or a piece of driftwood. I rolled over, floated on my back and observed the majesty: overhanging trees, warbling birds perched on branches, and Ulysses butterflies fluttering from boulder to boulder. Then I swam over to the falls, under the shower of spray and behind the curtain of water. The falls dropped over a receding slab of rock like a grotto, and I found myself in a cavern, water dripping from the fern- and lichen-covered roof, creating a lacy torrent that veiled the sun's golden rays. I had never seen anything like it. The place was a hidden tropical paradise. And it was mine.

It was almost dark when I returned to Casa Paronella, and a concerned Margarita was standing on the verandah, looking through the binoculars I used for birdwatching.

'Where have you been?' she said, brandishing the optics at me. 'I've been worried *sick*. I thought you'd had another accident.'

'You'll never guess what I've just bought.'

'Another car?'

'No.'

'Another farm?'

'No.'

'Another mine?'

'No.'

'What then?'

'Land. For a castle.'

'No?'

PART FOUR

Alchemy

(1926—1939)

All men dream: but not equally.
Those who dream by night
in the dusty recesses of their minds
wake in the day to find that it was
vanity:
but the dreamers of the day are dan-
gerous men,
for they may act their dreams with
open eyes, to make it possible.

TE Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

CHAPTER ONE

The Story of the Alchemist

A story within a story.

Now, let me tell you a tale... Long, long ago, a Catalan peasant boy lived in a mud hut on the lowest hill in the Land of Mountains. On the highest hill in this mountainous land, a lonesome castle reached for the Heavens, its towers lost in the cumulus clouds. Inside this castle lived the king, the ruler of the Land of Mountains, and this king dined on the labour of the peasants who ploughed the fields.

Every night, when the peasant boy returned from the fields, lay down on his humble straw mattress, and closed his weary eyes, he had a recurring dream. He dreamt *he* was king of the castle. He had endured these tormenting dreams since he was a mewling baby, but with age, they had become more vivid.

One night, the dream became too vivid to bear, so the next day he consulted a soothsayer in the village. The old *senyora* clasped

his hands, beheld his palms, and gasped. Upon seeing her reaction, he feared death was written in the lines, but she did not utter the morbid word. Instead, she looked up, her piercing eyes reaching into his soul. The seconds felt like an eternity. Then she spoke: 'In many, many moons, you shall become a king. But not of this land. Child, there is alchemy within you.' With that, she released his hand and departed in the direction of the bazaar.

That day, when the boy returned home, he heard bees buzzing. As he walked up the lane to the mud hut, he saw a wild hive fixed to the door. The boy gasped, for when he had been old enough to understand, his *àvia* told him that bees bridge the Natural World to the Underworld. Upon learning this, he had grown to fear the harrowing insects. But his fears were justified. In the distance, he saw the ghostly souls of his family—his *mare*, *pare* and *àvia*—float across the Bridge of Death to the Underworld. When the Queen Bee beheld him, he ran as fast as his short legs would carry him. He ran straight into a merchant.

El Merchant was a brawny, tanned man with the look of a sailor about him. His pitch-black eyes possessed a mystifying glint, and his mouth was a slit, as though cut with a knife. The peasant boy thought it strange that a mariner should be in the mountains.

Sensing the boy's fear, El Merchant told him there was no need to be afraid and asked what ailed him, for distress reflected in his glassy eyes. The boy said the scourge of hardship had murdered his family, and he was an orphan with nowhere to go. El Merchant offered the peasant boy a job aboard his ship, the *Odyssey*, and promised to pay him in gold when she reached her destination.

'Where is her destination?' the boy asked.

'A foreign land known as the Wild Frontier.'

Remembering the soothsayer's words, the boy agreed. El Merchant led him down the mountainous land to the harbour. Aboard the *Odyssey*, the boy was surprised to find many orphans like him. Their presence calmed him; he was not alone. So, the peasant boy sailed the Seven Seas warring with Titan's Tempests to the Wild Frontier of the New World.

After several crescent moons at sea, they finally arrived. But as soon as the boy set foot on solid ground, El Merchant's disposition darkened. He became cruel and refused to pay the gold promised, instead making him a slave. His job was to harvest the bright yellow metal that grew on the Golden Trees.

One day, when El Merchant's back was turned, the peasant boy escaped. He went without food and water for several days and nights, and he came to fear the sting of death. But it was not his time.

Amid the heat of the Wilds, he discovered a hidden oasis brimming with fresh water and succulent berries. The oasis was so beautiful he thought he had stumbled across Heaven. Only angels were missing, though they were probably looking down from the feathery clouds above. Burbling falls majestically cascaded over a grotto into a peridot creek. Tall umbrella-like trees shadowed the water, and birds, perched on the branches, sang merrily. Even the spiders were tolerable, spinning webs of gold as delicate as skeins of silk.

But while the peasant boy had his back turned, admiring the oasis, two of El Merchant's henchmen captured him. The boy tried to put up a fight, but he was no match for the burly men. They delivered him to El Merchant, who sentenced him to even harsher slavery under the watchful eye of an overseer.

The peasant boy laboured and toiled for nigh on a decade until, one day, the orphans beseeched the Goddess of Justice for help, sparking an uprising that rattled the land. The Goddess, hearing their forlorn cries, released a giant golden Basilisk. El Merchant was so mesmerised by the creature that he stared at it. The serpent killed him with a single glance before evaporating with the cunning sailor's weasel-like odour. Everyone rejoiced. The slaves were freed and paid the gold El Merchant had promised them, the gold they had laboured to grow. The peasant boy was now a wealthy young man.

The wealthy young man, having nowhere to go, trekked across the Wilds to the hidden oasis he had discovered ten years earlier. But upon arriving, he was shocked to find a man there.

'My name is Koppen, and this is my land,' the *senyor* declared.

'I'll give you a mountain of gold in exchange for it,' he said.

'How do I know you're not lying?'

'Look into my eyes.'

The *senyor* looked into the man's eyes. Upon seeing a golden glint and no trace of betrayal, he agreed, and the man could not believe the hidden oasis was his.

The next day, the wealthy man began work on an extraordinary alchemy. He summoned the five elements—fire, earth, metal, water and wood—and tried to conjure them into the dreams of his youth. But he had trouble mastering them. He could summon fire, heat the metal and morph it, but there it ended. The fire burnt the wood, then the water extinguished the fire and flooded the earth.

So, the man pilgrimaged the Wild Frontier, seeking five alchemists: a Fire Alchemist, an Earth Alchemist, a Metal Alchemist, a Water Alchemist and a Wood Alchemist. He showed them his

dream using an enchanted stick. As the stick touched the soil, his vision rose up like an apparition. First, he drew a castle perched on a rocky plateau in the realm of birds, then he drew a grand staircase that wound its way down to the burbling falls where tea gardens sprouted like fairy mushrooms by the peridot pool.

Under the tutelage of the sage alchemists, the wealthy young man mastered the elements and built his dream. He even harnessed the element of water, morphing it into light so the sun shone in the castle at night.

The peasant boy was now a king.

And his name was Paronella.

King Paronella.

CHAPTER TWO

The Reality of the Alchemist

That was the fairy tale I planned on telling my grandchildren: *The Story of the Alchemist*. In truth, I almost died building the castle. Reality has a way of chastising a dreamer, of thrusting him into his place. Now, bear with me for a moment, and I will get to the part where I almost die—yet again. I remember the timeline of events leading up to that near-fatal catastrophe as clear as day...

The year: 1929. I purchase land, but red-tape legalities ensue, so—with Mr Koppen's approval—I start clearing it while waiting for that officious tape to be cut.



Fast-forward: 1931. Snip go the scissors. The sale is finalised on the twenty-first of July, and I officially start building. I build a staircase first to transport materials—like sand and gravel—from the lower

level to the upper level. I christen it the Grand Staircase, as it is a grand feat to walk up and down its forty-seven steps repeatedly.

Next, I import cement in huge casks from Germany as none is produced locally, but it absorbs moisture on the voyage. I will have to make a *strong* mixture. To reinforce the structures I will build, I track down a supply of metal. There is an abundant graveyard of discarded rails—bent, buckled and rusted—in the cane fields. Then I pilfer timber from abandoned houses, sourcing most of the framework from old Casa Bianchi, the place where the first church service in the area was held—a sign from God! With these materials, I build a European-style cottage with four rooms, an entrance hall, a bathroom, an attic, and a laundry at the rear. We move in on Christmas Eve. *Bon Nadal*, Rita.

I find clay to stucco the cottage and other buildings I will construct at the base of a ridge that crosses the land. A *petit* spring-fed waterfall lies on the other side. I christen it Teresa Falls. I utilize this spring and, with a ram pump, install running water in the cottage. We have the first indoor plumbing in the region.



Now, building a castle is no easy feat. Manpower is needed, so I hire an army of workers. I find my *amic*, Maltese Joe—a *senyor* from Malta—at Noone's hotel.

'Looking for work?' I ask.

'Always.'

'I need a hand—several actually—building a castle.'

He looks at me strangely. *A castle*, he is thinking. I know he thinks this because everyone does.

Then he nods and says, ‘If my nephew can come and work too—and if we’re paid in cash.’

I nod. Cash it is. Southern Europeans!

But I need more than two workers, so I hop in my new Buick, Bonica II, and venture to the edge of town where a makeshift camp, filled with unemployed men, has been set up. They are unemployed because of the Great Depression, which was caused by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and bank failures. What did I tell you! Banks cannot be trusted! I offer the men food and shelter in exchange for labour. A few say I’m taking advantage, but many come.

Every morning, I draw that particular day’s design using an Egyptian method: a stick instead of a pen, and a shallow tray of smooth, damp sand instead of paper. Confusion arises. I work in the metric system, which Spain adopted in 1849, not the imperial system. ‘A metre,’ I croak, hands gesticulating wildly, ‘is *this* big.’



Next, the Palaver Incident follows. Palaver: Part One. I borrow a grader and horses to haul it from a neighbouring *senyor* called Pedro to save money. But when I unhitch the horses, the grader breaks free, lurches forward, and rolls over a water-filled crater. Bang! We gape. I drop a weighted line. No luck: it does not reach the bottom.

Palaver: Part Two. I drive to Pedro’s to explain how the crater stole the grader.

Me: ‘Pedro, *petit problema*.’

Pedro: ‘What sort of *problema*?’

Me: ‘I lost your grader.’

Pedro: ‘How? A grader is big, no? Not a thing easily misplaced.’

Me: 'No, not easy. But trust me, it can be—has been—done.'

I compensate Pedro, much to my annoyance. 'I may as well have bought my own grader and horses,' I tell Margarita that evening. She pats my arm, tells me everything will be okay.

Indeed, it will. We've made great progress. It's now my turn to tell Margarita something: she needs help, a girl to live in.

She protests.

I protest: 'Soon you'll run a *whole* park, not just a house.'

She acquiesces.



I ask my *amics*, the Salleras brothers, Salvio and Benito, if they know of a girl. They are similar yet different, and always finish each other's sentences like fraternal twins.

Salvio: 'Sí, we know of someone.'

Benito: 'A young Spanish girl.'

Salvio: 'Montserrat Gabasa.'

Benito: 'But everyone calls her Monnie.'

Salvio: 'She comes from a good family.'

I visit Casa Gabasa—the house is clean, a good advertisement—and explain Casa Paronella's perks: a laundry and indoor plumbing.

Monnie's eyes widen, as do her *mare's*. She arrives the next day. Monnie shares a room with Teresa.

She seems too good to be true. This is when the False-Disappointment Incident occurs. One day, I spy Monnie with a young *senyor* in my *casa*. They are overly familiar with each other. Enraged, I approach.

Monnie: '*Bona tarda*, Senyor Paronella. May I introduce you to my brother, Richard.'

I flush red. 'Your *brother*?'

He steps forwards: 'Richard Gabasa. Pleased to meet you.'

We shake hands. I offer him a job. He accepts.

That night, as we lie in bed, Margarita says, 'It's just like you to recruit another worker.'

I nod; it is just like me.

Richard arrives the following day. He sleeps in the shed near the chicken run.

This brings us to the Intruder Incident: Part One. Midnight. Margarita wakes me. A great ruckus is travelling across the land to our bedroom: robbers. I load the rifle and stalk outside. A cacophony of sounds pierces the air: bangs, barking dogs and clucking, flapping hens. Guided only by moonlight and my knowledge of the land, the noises lead me through the rainforest to the chicken run.

Intruder: Part Two. Ten minutes past midnight. I spy a man, kerosene lamp in hand, about to steal my plump hens. He turns, the light revealing his face.

Me: 'Richard?'

Richard: 'Snakes!'

Venomous snakes coil, readying to strike. He could die.

'Use the cane knife,' I yell; I keep one in the run for such reasons.

Richard slays. I shoot.

Following the Intruder Incident, I begin work on the Café by the Pool. Curious local children hurry over and chorus, 'What're you building now?'

Me: 'A cafeteria.'

Them: ‘Can we eat there?’

Me: ‘If you’ll let me finish it.’

Like Gaudí, I am unconcerned with purity of style. Without making exact imitations, I draw inspiration from buildings of the past. I respect Gaudí’s ability to blend Man’s architecture into Mother Nature. Bricks become trunks, windows water, rooves canopies...

When the Café by the Pool is finished, I take Margarita on a tour. As we admire the rooftop, Margarita turns to me and says, ‘I’m pregnant.’

Smiling, I grab her hand, and we waltz around. That evening, we dine on the balcony.

‘Our children will go to good schools, Pep,’ she says, spearing a piece of chicken. ‘Not work on farms or walk barefoot. You know, the other day I heard of a girl, eighteen, who’s *never* worn shoes. Things should be different here. Otherwise, why leave Spain?’

Exhaustion has made me cranky. ‘*You* lived like that as a child,’ I snap. ‘One minute you want Catalan ways, the next Australia to be different.’

We finish dinner in silence.



My man-made jungle is coming along, but I need to work on Mother Nature’s jungle. After laying paths, I am ready to plant trees. I contact the Forestry Department and am told they will give me plants on one condition: I am never to fell them. My eyes roll. Why would I plant them only to fell them? We end up with more than seven thousand plants—both native and exotic—including kauris, which line the path that becomes Kauri Avenue.

Trees are predominantly green, so colour is now needed to break this endless green sea. I ask around.

‘Look, I’ll be frank,’ one old farmer says. ‘You’re wastin’ yer time. The soil’s too poor.’

‘Well, you be *Frank*, and I’ll be José,’ I quip.

I ask nurseries and the local botanical gardens. The latter supply us with fifty varieties of maidenhair ferns, and we suddenly go from no plants to plants left, right and centre. One day, I come home to find Margarita lost in a kitchen brimming with foliage.

‘*Ai*, Pep, how am I meant to make dinner? I look for a knife, I find a thorn; I look for a plate, I find a leaf; I look for a fork, I find a twig.’

I build a fernery the next day.



July 1932. I apply for a wine-seller’s licence. *Cava* all round!

Fast-forward: August 1932. Margarita gives birth to a boy at Innisfail Hospital. He is not born with a caul, so I will advise him not to pick the occupation of fisherman. The night of his birth, the moon wanes crescent, and I know he will grow into a wise *senyor*, the sort of man everyone asks for guidance. We christen him Joseph Peter Antone Paronella and ask Joe to be both Teresa and Joseph’s godfather.

Fast-forward again: October 1932. My wine-seller’s licence is rejected. No *cava*.



Now: 1933. A wet, indoorsy year. With so much time to think, I devise an idea for a hydroelectric plant. Mark my words. The sun will shine in my *casa* at night.



Next: 1934. One Mr Thomas Edward Alford, Chief Inspector of Machinery, Scaffolding, Weights and Measures, arrives on time like a Swiss watch. He has come to see if the hydroelectric plant I have created is sound. He approves. I grab his hand and swing him into an impromptu dance. He is bewildered. The sun *is* going to shine in my *casa* at night.

The light gives me energy. I build tennis courts, a pavilion, bathrooms and twenty changing cubicles—I will not only charge people for a picnic and a swim; I will also charge them to change in and out of their swimsuits. The children ask what, when, where, why and how? I clear a patch of land near the creek for them to play on. I call it the Meadows.



Richard, Maltese Joe, Maltese Joe's nephew, and I start turning the ridge, where I found clay to stucco the buildings, into a tunnel. We cannot reinforce it with timber and cement yet, so we implore God to make it stay up. There is no end to the burrowing. The ridge goes on and on—for forty-two metres.

We use a pickaxe to loosen the clay, then shovel it into a wheelbarrow and trundle it out. Every time we enter, we pray it will not collapse and entomb us, and every time we exit, we thank

God and cross ourselves. We name it the Tunnel of Love, and we name the lane leading to it Lovers Lane.



Finally, I build my *piece de resistance*: a castle with a grand hall. Many mock, goad and lambast my ideas, but their criticism only spurs me on. I stucco the outside. As I apply the mixture, it leaves my hand-print, a laborious seal of approval. Here come the children:

‘What’s that stuff, Mr Paronella?’

Me: ‘A type of plaster to stucco the outside.’

Them: ‘What’s that mean?’

Me: ‘I’m making it look nice.’

Them: ‘My dad says you’re crazy.’

Me: ‘Maybe I am.’

Them: ‘Can we help?’

Me: ‘No.’

Them: ‘Why?’

Me: ‘Because.’

Because... Then, I almost die.

CHAPTER THREE

The Catastrophe

I was on the ladder stuccoing the outside of the castle when vertigo seized me like lightning: sudden and quick. Blackness rushed forth. My grip loosened, and my foot slipped off the rung. Heart pounding, I tried to gain traction repeatedly but failed. My foot kept slipping, and my hands only ran through the concrete they had just poured. I fell backwards, arms wind-milling, the ladder legs wobbling. My body, wailing and flailing, smacked the ground with a terrific thud. I landed awkwardly, my left leg twisted at an unnatural angle. I tried to get up but yelped. Lifting my head, I saw a deep gash, the blood gathering in a pool. The injury was serious.

‘*Ajudi'm!* Help!’ I yelled.

As I lay there, my *piece de resistance* framing my wounded body, I wondered how long it would take for someone to find me. Margarita and Monnie were in the cottage; Richard was tending to the hens; I had dismissed my workforce, for everything was complete save the

stuccoing; and I had sent away the curious local children, as their constant questions were interfering with progress.

‘Ajudi’m! Help!’

Footsteps clacked down the path.

‘Pep! Pep!’

Margarita, brows knitted in concern, hovered over me. Upon seeing the blood, she crossed herself and said a prayer. *‘Ai, what have you done to yourself?’*

‘It’s not as bad as it looks,’ I lied. My leg felt numb and unattached.

It took all Margarita’s strength to heave me up and help me back to the cottage, where she tended to the gaping wound, bathing and bandaging it, the dressing soaking red in minutes. I lay in bed dazed and shaken... My head throbbed... I drifted off...

‘Ai, Pep! Your leg!’ Margarita cried.

I roused from my slumber.

‘What?’

‘Your leg! Look at your leg!’ Margarita crossed herself again.

As I shifted in bed, my bruised body reprimanded me. Teeth clenched, I peered down and glimpsed my injured limb. It was swollen beyond recognition, swollen like the beekeeper that fateful day.

‘You need to go to hospital.’

Hospital. The word hung in the air. I had not been to a hospital since Stefano’s death. *‘No,’* I said. *‘It’ll heal.’*

‘You’re going,’ Margarita was adamant.

‘And how will we get there? You can’t drive—and I can’t drive, not like this.’

‘We’ll get there.’

Too exhausted to argue, I acquiesced. Margarita hurried from the room. She had never learnt to drive—there was no need; I drove everywhere—so when she said we would go to the hospital, it was, I thought, with false certainty. I imagined her in the garage, staring at Bonica, wondering what to do with that strange masculine machine. My speculations were soon answered when, several minutes later, I heard muffled voices and footsteps—the *staccato* of a woman's heels clacking on the floorboards and the heavy gait of a man's boots. Margarita and Mr Noone appeared in the doorway.

‘Goodness! Look at what yer’ve done to yerself,’ the Irishman said in his thick brogue.

Margarita and Mr Noone helped me to Bonica. Next, we were on the road.

It was a long trip, especially for an injured man. I was installed awkwardly in the back seat, my wounded leg propped up on a cushion, and Margarita, worried, kept turning around and asking, ‘Are you okay?’ to which I lied, ‘Fine.’ Sensing urgency, Mr Noone drove too fast—Bonica reached the suicidal speed of fifty miles per hour—and this only added to Margarita's anxieties, her glance then alternating from the road to Mr Noone to me. Had I been driving, she would have scolded me, but she could not scold Mr Noone. He was doing us a favour.

At the hospital, Margarita and Mr Noone helped me to reception where a nurse, upon witnessing my injury, leapt from her station. Triage saw me promptly installed in a bed while I waited for a doctor. Margarita sat in the visitor's chair, and Mr Noone, feeling intrusive, told us he would wait outside.

The single bed was hard and uncomfortable, the sheets as stiff as a board, and a miasma of clinical smells—medicines, bleach and

disinfectant—hung in the air, making me agitated. The place was too officious, too oppressive.

Footsteps belonging to a well-shod man echoed down the corridor. I stared at the doorway. A doctor, clipboard in hand, strode into the room. A stethoscope was draped around his neck like a pope's pectoral cross. He had the wrinkles of a fifty-odd-year-old man. *Good*, I thought, *experience is wedged between those crevices.*

'Good afternoon, Mr'—he looked at his notes—'Paroh-*nella*. I'm Dr Foster. Now, do you mind telling me what happened?'

'Fell off a ladder.' I also wanted to add, 'and it's Pah-roh-nell-ah,' but I was too distraught to quibble.

Dr Foster nodded. 'And what were you doing when you fell?'

'Finishing my castle.'

'Your *castle*?' His eyebrows shot up.

'Stuccoing a building,' I quickly said.

Dr Foster examined me, then removed a pen from his coat pocket and jotted something down on a clipboard. The rasp of pen against paper made me nervous. Margarita and I studied his countenance for clues, but he was impassive. Once finished, he looked up and said:

'Mr Paroh-*nella*, we'll need to admit you for the night so we can do more tests.'

The words vexed Margarita as much as me.

'In the meantime,' he continued, 'I'll give you something for the pain.'

Dr Foster left, and a nurse entered to administer the drugs. It was a dull pain; shock is nature's ultimate relief. After the nurse was gone, Margarita placed a hand on my forehead and asked how I felt.

‘I’m fine, Rita. Go home.’

‘No.’

‘There’s nothing you can do, *amor meu*. Go back to the *casa*, to Teresa and little Joe. Besides, Senyor Noone probably wants to get back.’

‘*Ai*, I forgot about him.’ She put a hand to her cheek.

We said *adéu*. Margarita turned to leave but hesitated.

‘Don’t worry. Everything will be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

She acquiesced. The drugs soon took effect, and I fell into a groggy sleep.



‘Pep! Pep!’ Margarita cried.

I opened my bleary eyes. ‘Rita,’ I croaked. Sleep had been a fleeting visitor. I was unaccustomed to the strange drug-induced dreams and the hospital’s foreign sounds: the cries of delirious patients, the hurried footsteps of nurses.

Margarita perched on the bedside, her back to the door, and smoothed the stiff, crinkled sheets. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Okay,’ I lied. ‘Where’s Senyor Noone?’

‘Outside.’

I nodded feebly.

‘How’s your leg?’

Before I could answer, Dr Foster entered.

‘Good morning, Mr and Mrs Paroh-*nella*.’

‘How his leg?’ Margarita’s voice was abrupt and interrogative. Her English had improved, but her accent remained as thick as tar.

‘I’m afraid it’s not good.’

‘No *goot*?’

Dr Foster, lips pursed, shook his head.

‘What you mean no *goot*?’

‘I’m afraid we must amputate.’

‘Am-*pu*-tate? What is this am-*pu*-tate?’

Dr Foster explained. Margarita’s face contorted in shock, and my heart nearly leapt out of my chest. I thought of the lamed timber-getters who limped the streets with walking sticks cruelly made from the timber they had felled, and I feared I would need one of those cumbersome aids.

‘No! *No, no, no!*’ Margarita yelled, shaking her head and gesticulating wildly. ‘No leg? *Ai*, how he *walk*? How he *work*?’

‘Your husband’s leg is poisoned, Mrs Paroh-*nella*, and—?’

‘Tell me. How he *work*?’

‘—and the poison is passing into the rest of his body.’

His leg, his body. I wanted to scream, *I’m right here!*

‘No.’ Margarita sliced the air with her forearm. ‘This is a hospital, no? You fix?’

‘I’m afraid amputation is the only option.’

I struggled to comprehend what was happening. All I thought was, *Remove my leg? Rita is right. How will I work? If I can’t walk, I can’t work. And the castle, what will become of it?* Maybe I had been a fool to think I could build a castle.

‘No. You *no* take his leg.’

‘But Mrs Pa—’

‘No. I take him home. I fix. You wait. You wait a minute.’ Margarita showed Dr Foster the assertive side of her index finger, then stomped down the corridor, her heels clacking on the linoleum.

Dr Foster was piqued and perplexed. ‘It’s the only option,’ he said to me—I finally existed—reiterating about the poison, but before he could finish his spiel, Margarita appeared in the doorway with a bewildered Mr Noone. Then I was suddenly scooped up, Margarita on one side and Mr Noone on the other, and transported down the corridor as Dr Foster yelled out, ‘Mrs Paroh-*nella*! Mrs Paroh-*nella*!’

All that studying and the educated *senyor* still did not know how to read a woman like Margarita and understand her idea of medicine.

The next thing I knew, I was in the marital bed at Casa Paronella with Margarita seated beside me, a ceramic bowl on her lap. She removed the swathes of bandages around my leg, revealing a hideous swollen gash, then dabbed fresh poultice on the festering wound. It was hot like summer. After treating the injury, she dressed it, drew the curtains, and urged me to rest before leaving. But rest was a lost word. Nightmarish hallucinations plagued me: in one, my leg was gangrenous; in another, it was gone—amputated—and I awoke screaming, gasping for air, only to have Margarita calm me down. I fell back asleep...

When I roused again, Margarita was putting another poultice on the wound. It was cold like winter. I had no idea what time of day it was. My mind was too foggy and my mouth too dry to ask. I had only hints: the walls changing from yellow to grey; bird-song—the rooster’s crow, the curlew’s wail; the smells of different foods—the breath of a morning brew, midday’s lick of sustenance, and the day’s last supper.



‘It’s easing.’

The voice was so angelic I feared I had died and gone to Heaven. I opened my eyes to find Margarita hunched over the wound.

‘You’re going to be fine, *amor meu*. Absolutely fine.’

I sighed in relief. I would not be like the lamed timber-getters.

‘And to think that doctor wanted to am-*pu*-tate your working leg.’ Tutting, she shook her head. ‘What diag-*nonsense*. He studied hard, no? Was taught by professors, no? *Useless*.’ She spat the word. ‘He should’ve grown up in La Vall de Santa Creu. We *senyores* could teach him a thing or two.’

‘What day is it?’

‘Friday. You’ve been in here almost a week.’

‘A week!’ I jerked forwards to get up but winced.

‘No, no, no.’ Margarita wagged her finger at me. ‘You’re not better yet. Listen to Dr Paronella.’ She smiled. ‘The swelling has eased, but it’s not gone.’

I obeyed, easing my body back down. ‘What did you do?’

‘Fresh poultices. Hot and cold. Every hour. Day and night.’

‘Like Àvia.’

‘*Sí*, like your *àvia*. Now, rest. I’ll bring you some *escudella i carn d’olla*. You must build up your strength.’



Margarita’s Catalan and Valencian *sopas* and stews healed me. Soon, I was back finishing the castle, albeit slowly and with a lopsided gait. I had lost my equilibrium. But without her perseverance, I would be a man without a left leg—one for whom the adjectives *active* and *handsome* were compromised.

At the end of each day, I limped up the castle's stairs, flight after flight, gripping the railing for support, to the top of the tower where I admired my kingdom before sitting down on my colonial-style throne with my bad leg propped up on a stool to rest. But these daily walks failed to provide the complete rehabilitation I had hoped for. My bad leg also changed with the weather. It especially ached and swelled when rain was coming, and I came to dread the monsoon season.

'You need help,' Margarita said one morning over coffee.

I protested.

'You can't run a whole park by yourself.'

I acquiesced. It was painful to admit but true.

I found help in two Aboriginal youths: Albie Queensland—who shared his surname with the state—and Jackie Cook. Both had been assigned to one of my cane farms, but I decided to bring them to Paronella Park. They were given quarters at the back of the garage.

Albie's parents belonged to a mob, but because they were unmarried, baby Albie was forced to spend the first few years of his life in a special institution established for Aboriginal women and their children born out of wedlock. When he was five years old, he was taken from his *mare* and sent to live in a boys' dormitory on Palm Island—the 1918 cyclone, which I survived, had been the beginning of the community plan for the Aboriginal people on the island.

When he came of age, he was sent to work on one of my cane farms under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*. Although I paid Albie a wage, he was forbidden to receive it directly. Policy dictated his wages had to be given to

the police, and so visiting the local station was the only way he could access his hard-earnt money.

As for Jackie, his Aboriginal *mare* died of a fever when he was around three, and his European *pare* worked as a miner in Mount Garnet, the place where I had my mine, Prosper Ridge. While such relations were not unusual, it spawned a *problema* for the offspring: they were neither black nor white. Clueless about what to do with the strange boy, Jackie's *pare* sent him to the Cook family, who lived in Nerada, and it was there in that grass country he was raised. He attended the Innisfail Rural School for a year, where he learnt woodwork and metalwork. Then, once old enough, he was fostered to me and worked on one of my cane farms like Albie. Also like Albie, he had to visit the local police station to access his wages.

Albie and Jackie both had short, curly black hair, full lips and big brown eyes. But in personality, they were opposites. Albie's lips rarely moved; his eyes always had a serious, faraway look—as though he were searching for something on the horizon; and his body was as sturdy as a rock. In contrast, Jackie's lips were always grinning, his eyes had a cheeky glint, and he stood a foot taller than Albie and me.

I insisted Albie and Jackie both eat at the table with us. I did not—do not—believe in segregation, in otherness, in the British class system, a system born out of feudalism. But I must concede—Albie ate some weird things like anchovies on toast dunked in tea. When Margarita saw the gastronomic affront, she gasped.

'I admit I don't know much about bush food,' she said, 'but I know about cooking, and *that*'—she nodded at the toast—'is a culinary sin.'

Everyone burst into laughter.

I often worried about Albie and Jackie—especially when they went to town. I echoed Margarita's fears about the Banyan rum-drinking men. I, too, feared they would drink too much, get into fights, and end up arrested.

But for Jackie, it was his own kind he had to fear. One day, I sent him to town to run a few errands, but he returned without his shirt. Margarita and I took one look at him and asked, 'What happened?'

Poor Jackie did not know where to begin.

'We buy you *goot* clothes,' Margarita said, 'and you lose them.'

'Ya don' undastand,' Jackie said.

'I understand. Shirt here'—she clicked her fingers—'shirt gone.'

'They said what they always do, that I'm not a real black fella 'cause I don' share me things with 'em.' He was referring to the Aboriginal youths in town.

'Well,' Margarita said, defeated and apologetic. 'We'll get you a new one.'

I grabbed the keys to the Buick and drove to See Poy & Sons, long since rebuilt after the cyclone of 1918.

It was thanks to Albie and Jackie that the mirage tormenting my mind was finally realised.

CHAPTER FOUR

Absolute Reality

I remember it like yesterday, beholding my dream with elation. A horseshoe-shaped sign—crafted by my *amic* Pablo—spells Paronella Park in cursive letters that twine like vines, and beyond it, Paronella Castle rises like a tropical oasis. I take Margarita's hand, and together we—King and Queen—explore our kingdom...

Ethereal staircases climb from floor to floor towards the Heavens. The middle level houses a museum of curiosities—old firearms, seashells, coins and rare stones—for visitors to admire as they gradually ascend to the pinnacle. From the top of the tower, the land unfurls like a Joaquim Vayreda landscape: the burbling falls, the swimming hole, and the tropical rainforest—a work of art stretching as far as the eye can see.

Now, down we go, down the Grand Staircase to the Café by the Pool. Elegant Spanish-style pillars stand like ancient carved trees, coloured lights sparkle like stars, and overlooking the tables—adorned in red-and-white chequered cloths—pictures of *senyoretas*

dressed in traditional costume hang like portals into another world. One *senyoreta* dances, another fans herself with an *abanico*, and a third wears a grand *mantilla*—she looks straight at you, into your soul. Here, we leave the *senyoretas* and progress to a rooftop garden that defies nature. At the back of this garden, up an external flight of stairs, lies a *petit* room with a rooftop balcony above it. A mini Vayreda unfurls.

Down we go again. We leave the canopy and head to the forest floor. Aquatic motifs, sprinkled throughout the grounds, accentuate the tranquillity. Mena Creek Falls is the centrepiece—an opening fanfare for a journey that continues throughout the grounds with narrow creeks and the artesian spring, Teresa Falls.

Quaint bridges cross streams invitingly. Sometimes these bridges have no purpose other than the holy pleasure of walking across water. Only one bridge is practical. It provides access from the picnic area to a sandy mass in the middle of Mena Creek dubbed Rest Rock Island.

Sí, I remember it like yesterday. The year was 1935—the same year they introduced the cane toad to eat the cane beetle—and Paronella Park was officially ready for its grand opening.



The night of the grand opening coincided with the school holidays. We had spent the day transforming the castle hall into a picture theatre—the first in the area—for the big unveiling. I had even rented a special new release from a film distributor.

Everyone was excited, especially the children. That morning, en route to the hall, we had passed the local boys at the top of the falls.

‘Good morning, Mr Paronella,’ they had chorused, their cheeky grins smeared across their faces like chocolate during Lent.

Evening soon arrived. Dressed in my best suit, I assumed the kingly position of proprietor at the hall entrance, welcoming guests, smiling and shaking many clammy hands. Carloads of visitors arrived—more people than we had anticipated—and nerves suddenly seized us.

Margarita—I had hired several girls to help her—worried there would not be enough food; Jackie worried he would make a mistake with the film projection equipment—I had spent the weeks leading up to the grand opening training him to use it; and I worried about everything.

While we worried, trouser seats from across the district installed themselves in rows of canvas-slung chairs. Fans whirled away in every corner to circulate the heavy air and provide respite from the stifling weather. When the hall was full, I limped to the front, welcomed everyone, and introduced the hired orchestra who played a rendition of the national anthem.

Then the crimson stage curtain rose, concluding the final strains of the patriotic British air in the room—God Save the King—and the chairman of the local council, one Mr Page—a man impeccably dressed with a spine as straight as a scholar’s—officially opened the castle with a speech. The crowd applauded, then the orchestra struck up a waltz, and Mr Page danced with Margarita.

Before my accident, I could outdance that chairman. But not with a limp. I was now the not-so-proud owner of two left legs.

Prior to the feature, Jackie played a homemade preview of the castle and pleasure grounds. When it finished, more applause echoed. Then *Anne of Green Gables*, starring Anne Shirley, filled the screen.

Chatter faded and spines reclined in chairs. I sat down next to Margarita a few rows from the front. We were watching the spirited Anne arrive at Green Gables when a scream rent the muggy air.

Then another.

And another.

But it was not the actors.

Startled spectators jumped up onto their chairs. I gestured to Jackie to keep the reel going, then limped to the front to investigate the commotion, Margarita behind me. In the dim light of the film, a den of snakes slithered around. Margarita gasped and brought a hand to her mouth.

I gestured to Jackie to stop rolling, then turned to Margarita and said: 'I'll get the rifle.'

She nodded. 'I'll turn the lights on.'

I returned promptly and shot the snakes, the bangs reverberating around the hall. The audience erupted in cheers at the unexpected excitement. Albie helped me pick up the writhing dead reptiles and hurl them outside. Once the last serpent was gone, Margarita turned off the lights and Jackie resumed the film.

Spirited Anne was becoming acquainted with a teasing Gilbert Blythe when the screen went black, plummeting the hall into darkness and disarray. People turned to their neighbours and whispered in speculation.

'What now?' Margarita asked.

'Turn the lights on again.'

She nodded.

I limped to the front, willing my bad leg not to stumble in the dark, then waited—but nothing happened. Margarita returned.

'Lights?' I croaked.

‘*Petit problema*. They’re not working.’

Sighing, I thought for a moment. ‘I’ll call an intermission. Rita, make sure you and Monnie are ready to serve the ice cream; Richard, you and Teresa light the kerosene lamps; and Albie, get Jackie, then meet me out back.’

Everyone dispersed. I looked out into the black sea of faces and apologised, ‘My sincerest regrets, but we seem to be experiencing a *petit* technical *problema*. In the interim, please treat yourself to a complimentary snack.’

The audience, murmuring to one another, nodded. I prayed the *problema* was *petit* and fixable. If not, I was like old Mick: up the creek.

Outside, Albie, Jackie and I—kerosene lamps in hand—went to investigate. A full moon glowed in the night sky. Despite the sun’s absence, the air remained heavy. A warm zephyr sent the trees swishing—the rainforest was breathing.

We walked towards the hydroelectric plant, the source of all power. Nocturnal creatures scurried upon hearing our gait. We descended the steep, narrow staircase that led to the plant tower in a single file. A mystery object—sucked in like flotsam in a whirlpool—was jammed in the turbine. I stepped forwards to investigate but grimaced. My bad leg.

‘Albie, go have a look.’

Albie got on his haunches and examined it. His silence was unnerving—he mostly communicated like a mime, with his eyes and gestures.

‘What is it?’ I asked impatiently.

‘Something trapped.’

Jackie sighed in relief. It was not his fault.

Albie removed the offending object with Jackie's help.

'Well?' I prompted.

'Ants' nest.'

It was then I remembered the boys at the top of the falls that morning—remembered their cheeky grins. What *had* they been up to? I vowed to find out, but first, I had to get through the movie.

Back at the hall, everyone resumed their infatuation with Anne and Gilbert.

After the credits rolled, I sought out the boys, only to find their tongues wrapped around scoops of Margarita's homemade ice cream.

'Oi!' I yelled.

They froze like the dessert in their hands.

'Come with me.'

'But—'

'No buts.'

They all came but one. I frogmarched him away.

'Explain,' I said.

The boys were silent.

'Come on. I know all about the ants' nest.'

They gulped.

'We dug it up,' one boy cried.

'Then rolled it over the edge,' another said.

'We wanted to see if it would go over the falls.'

'We didn't know it would block th-th-the power thing.'

The boys got the cuts.



Despite initial teething *problem*es, the opening was a success, and thereafter throngs of curious guests flowed through the gates, eager to see the ambition that had caused me to limp the streets. *Senyoretes* went to the creek and placed their feet in the bubbling water at the base of the hydroelectric plant as though it were a spa, and *senyors* dived off rocks in a bid to get the *senyoretes*' attention. Beneath the water, fish, turtles and other creatures swam. One day, a swarm of eels cascaded over the top of the waterfall, sending shrieking swimmers scrambling to the bank.

The guests were as abundant and diverse as the rainforest fauna. There were the Governor of Queensland, Sir Leslie Orme Wilson, and his wife, Lady Wilson; cyclist Sir Hubert Ferdinand 'Oppy' Opperman and Nicholas the Aspro man; a jovial priest and three equally jovial nuns who, after a picnic lunch, rolled down the slopes like playful children, their habits flapping like birds' wings; and *Sunday Mail* reporter, one Mr HJ Summers, who wrote a story on the park.

'So, Mr Paronella, why *do* you do it? That's what the people want to know,' Mr Summers asked.

'Because I wish to do *something*,' I said. 'I've travelled the world and never have I seen anything as beautiful as the places you have in Queensland. People smile and say, "Paronella, he is mad! Stupid! To work so hard and spend so much money this way! Why does he not sit down and rest?" But no, that's not my way.'

PART FIVE

A Depression

(1939—1948)

‘He’s got a wonderful will to live,
hasn’t he?’

‘Would you put it like that? I should
say a great fear of death.’

Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*

‘...fear is sharp-sighted, and can see
things underground...’

Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

CHAPTER ONE

Two Deaths and a Will to Live

Two *senyors* died at the park, and a depression set in. One Sunday, when the tea gardens were overflowing with visitors picnicking and swimming in the pool, screams cut through the muggy air—the cries as piercing as Senyora Soler’s all those years ago. From a turret, I spotted a crowd forming by the creek bank. Something bad had happened. I hurried down the Grand Staircase as fast as my bung leg allowed and limped over to a group of bystanders.

‘What’s happened?’ I panted.

‘A man’s missing,’ one *senyor* replied.

‘He tried to save his sister,’ another added.

‘She rowed out to Rest Rock Island.’

‘But met with trouble.’

‘He couldn’t swim.’

‘Someone rescued her.’

‘But they couldn’t find—’

Just then, two *senyors* fished a man's lifeless body out of the water. As they eased him down on the bank, a *senyoreta* started keening: his sister. She was inconsolable. Her brother was Allen E Minkin. He was thirty-one years old and worked as a solicitor in Innisfail.

Piercing cries also signalled the second *senyor's* premature death. Again, a crowd gathered on the bank. A man had fallen in. It took ten minutes for swimmers to find his body. A good Samaritan tried to revive him, but there was no response. When the ambulance arrived, the officers took over. They transferred him to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead on arrival. His name was Thomas William Brown. He was a soldier and also unable to swim. He was only twenty-five years old.



The depression precipitated a great struggle. Despite the castle's positive reception, of all my businesses—mining, moneylending and farming (to add to matters, the cane toad had found the cane beetle unappetising, and the critter was as rampant as ever)—it proved the least profitable, yet it remained my favourite child.

Two clouds hovered over it: firstly, the local tourism industry was in its infancy; and secondly, I had overlooked the cost of upkeep. Repairs were as constant as rain in the monsoon season; periodic floods washed away balustrades and picnic tables in the tea gardens; armies of rainforest creepers continually threatened to invade buildings and needed regular pruning; and as soon as building exteriors were cleaned, the concrete showed signs of mould and mildew and needed cleaning again. Having the park on two levels only amplified the workload; it was especially labour-intensive with a limp.

I soon understood two things: firstly, profits from my other businesses would need to support the castle like pillars; and secondly, the castle would need to diversify. The latter was easier said than done. Ideas swarmed my mind: install a cable car—that did not eventuate; grow and sell plants and vegetables—I got this idea while watching Teresa eat a banana—that also did not eventuate; install a couple of petrol bowsers, operated manually by pumps, to service the growing number of motor cars coming to the district as well as local farmers who needed petrol for machinery—this idea came to fruition and proved quite profitable. Another idea I had was to oppose Mr Noone's lease on the hotel when it came up for renewal. My wine-seller's licence had been struck out, and I failed to see why he should have one when I did not. So: I opposed it. Mr Noone was hurt, but it was merely business. We were in competition, and I was desperate, and desperation makes a man do crazy things—like pretending to be a homeless man. Although I was unsuccessful, our friendship remained fractured.

Teresa and Joseph, I had not taken the high road like Àvia said I should, and I will always regret it. Make sure you take the high road. When you reach the end of life's journey, you will question the directions you travelled. There are times when the wind will push you and times when you will propel yourself.



One direction we travelled in was south—literally. We needed a holiday. Margarita had worked hard since arriving in Australia, and she deserved a break. She was in the laundry when I suggested it.

‘Rita, let's go away.’

‘Where to?’

‘Melbourne. What do you think? I’ve never been.’

‘I think *sz*.’

I took her hand and we waltzed among the washing.

The next day, I organised for our friends, the Gils, to manage the castle while we were away, then I booked our tickets and Margarita packed our suitcases; I still had Pare’s.

We visited the Public Library of Victoria, the Shrine of Remembrance and the Queen Victoria Gardens, where we sat in the rotunda and admired the water nymph in the pond.

Melbourne was cold, and Margarita eyed the fur coats in the shop windows.

I said nothing.

Neither did Margarita.



We returned home—but not quickly enough for the Gils’ liking. As soon as we departed, the projector in the picture theatre broke, and there was a snake incident. Young Frank Gil, who shared a room with his baby brother, awoke screaming one night. A venomous snake, attracted to the warm milk in the baby’s bottle, was slithering across the floor.



After unpacking, Margarita and I gathered in the lounge room to listen to a serial—I was quite fond of *The Fourth Form at St Percy’s*—that Rupert Bottomly!—on the radio. It was a large floor-standing

console that I had purchased from See Poy & Sons. The volume was often up high, as the presenters were competing with the burbling falls and buzzing hydroelectric plant.

That day, a booming voice interrupted the serial to broadcast breaking news: the Spanish Civil War. I turned the volume up even louder. Gaping at one another, we listened, hanging on the announcer's every word. Once exhausted of new information, he repeated everything again, and I turned the volume down.

'War, Pep. Our country's at war with itself.' Margarita crossed herself.

Teresa had a thousand questions; Joseph was too young. I tried my best to explain, but every answer seemed inadequate.

That night, as we lay in bed, Margarita turned to me. 'Pep, I can't stop thinking about our family.'

'Me too. We must do something—like a fundraiser.'

'I know! A ball!'

'Like the one we host for the children each year!' (Every year, Margarita and I hosted a ball to raise money for the local school.)

'We can have a parade—and a Spanish Queen Competition!'



So, as rebel forces under fascist leader Francisco Franco launched brutal attacks on civilians, a parade of floats representing the provinces of Spain travelled down the spectator-lined road towards Paronella Park, among them the flags of Girona and Navarre. On one of the floats, Lily Garcia, a local seventeen-year-old Spanish girl, stood in an open-top car, her dark curls blowing in the wind. Lily won both the beauty contest and the Queen of Fundraising

Award; she raised one hundred and seventy-nine pounds. The cause was close to her heart; her *pare* had left Australia for Spain to fight with one of the International Brigades against Franco. After the parade, Lily posed for a photo with the Spanish Civil War Relief president, Margarita and me. Then it was time for the ball in the castle hall.

The mirror ball, hanging from the ceiling, dappled frocks with colours like a kaleidoscope, illuminating fine materials of satin, silk, taffeta and velvet. As the band played, figures pirouetted, bounced and twisted. Familiar couples waltzed up and down the dance floor, while the shyer hugged the walls and moved awkwardly. My two left feet even danced with Margarita. Strains of music echoed all the way to the moonlit gardens.

After the ball, everyone read the casualty lists, praying not to see Senyor Garcia's name. Other than that, life largely continued in ignorance of the battle occurring on the other side of the world, albeit with a string of unfortunate events.



The string began unspooling one winter's day in 1938. Albie and I were returning home from Prosper Ridge—I had been checking the mine's performance; the castle depended on it—when my bad leg started giving me grief. I shifted in the seat but, in doing so, lost control of the truck. I hit the brakes. The vehicle somersaulted through the air, landing with a bang. My throat rested between the steering wheel's two spokes. I glanced at the passenger seat.

'Albie?' I croaked.

A strange sound escaped his mouth.

I moved. Pain gripped me. Next: shock. There was nothing to do but wait for help. We were on the Palmerston Highway near the Beatrice River. *Highways have high traffic*, I thought. *Someone will stop soon*. So, as people settled into their armchairs for afternoon tea, I prayed for a good Samaritan. Minutes felt like hours. Margarita would be livid—again. I must have drifted into unconsciousness because the next thing I knew, a hand was on my shoulder, rousing me awake.

‘Hello?’ a *senyor* said. ‘Can you hear me?’

I went to speak but groaned.

The good Samaritan took us to the nearest ambulance centre where we were given attention and conveyed to a doctor in Innisfail. I had a fractured right arm. Albie, though rattled, was uninjured.

Several hours later, we were released from hospital, my arm in a plaster cast. My first port of call was not a taxi home but a newsagent’s. I needed luck.

That evening, as the taxi pulled up at the cottage, Margarita ran out the door. ‘Where have you been?’ she said. Her eyes moved to the cast. ‘*Ai*, what have you done to yourself now?’

‘Car accident.’

‘Again?’ She looked heavenwards and crossed herself. ‘You must be made of leather.’

Upon seeing Albie behind me, she hurried over and inspected him, lifting up his arms, cupping his face in her hands, looking at his left eye, then his right.

‘I’m fine, Missus Paronella.’

‘He’s not hurt,’ I told her.

She tutted.

‘Here.’ I held up the lottery ticket. ‘Kiss this for luck.’

‘It’s that *car* of yours.’

‘It’s the roads,’ I protested.

To be honest, it turned out a wheel had collapsed, and as soon as it gave way, we went flying like fledglings in a gale. But I was sure if the roads were gentler, it would not have happened. Though as they say, bad roads mean good sugar land!

It seemed the screech of the truck’s brakes and the eventuating bang had travelled with the breeze to the big, pointed ears of the local reporter, for the following day a *senyor* from the newspaper was rapping on the front door.

‘It’s a miracle you survived,’ he said. ‘And to rejoice, I hear you bought a lottery ticket?’

‘I needed a little luck,’ I said, trying to ignore the uncomfortable cast. I longed to scratch my hot, sweaty and itchy skin.

‘And did you get it?’

‘Enough for another ticket, though I will need a new car.’

‘Perhaps the luck’s in being here, talking to me.’

The following day, after reading the reporter’s story in the *Johnstone River Advocate*—the newspaper that had taught me English—I found a letter to the editor rejecting my castle. It said the land should be a public utility. The string was unspooling further. I wrote a letter back saying the council would do better focussing on improving the roads in the region to reduce the rising number of car accidents.

CHAPTER TWO

A New War

In April 1939, the Spanish Civil War ended. Lily's *pare* returned home, and everyone crossed themselves. Though his skin was unscarred, war's agony was deep in his bones. Soon after his return, those weary bones walked Lily down the aisle; she had met the groom at the ball. Margarita went to See Poy & Sons and bought the newlyweds a water jug with six glasses made from pale green frosted glass with bunches of grapes etched on the sides. For a moment, we forgot about death and turmoil and toasted to life and peace.

But peace is a fickle thing, taking flight as quickly as a frightened dove, and the spectre of war soon loomed again. On the first of spring that same year, we gathered around the radio only to hear another war had hatched in Europe—the third war I would live through. As the string unspooled further, more fundraising committees formed, and send-offs for local enlisted boys were held. I was glad Joseph was far too young to enlist, just as Margarita was glad I was too old.



Just over a year later, in May 1940, as the inventions of summer and heated gunfire plagued the northern hemisphere, autumn took its final bated breath in the southern half of the world. It was a warm, earthy breath, and it caressed my face as I drove home from the mine in my new Buick, Bonica III. I was about a mile on the Innisfail side of the McHugh Bridge on the Palmerston Highway when I came around a sharp bend and another car appeared out of nowhere.

I braked. Tried to swerve. Next: bang! A head-on collision. The crash jolted my body, pinning me underneath the steering wheel. I yelped. My head hurt. My ribs hurt. It hurt to breathe, let alone move. I cried for help. But no one heard. So, I waited for another good Samaritan. Like before, minutes felt like hours. Eventually, a passing motorist stopped, and I was transported to hospital. Both motor cars were damaged. Everyone was injured. I had several broken ribs. It turned out the axle had smashed into a rock and snapped. The string was almost entirely unravelled now. When I eventually returned home, Margarita was livid—yet again.

‘That car of yours.’ She shook her head in admonishment.

‘The car’s innocent. It’s the rocky road that’s guilty.’

My ribs took six weeks to heal. I tried to do light work, but Margarita refused. ‘If you injure yourself further, you’ll be bedridden even longer.’



World War II was now in full swing. We listened intently to developing events on the wireless. The radio became the heart-beat of the cottage. One day, in December 1941, breaking news

interrupted the airwaves: Hong Kong had fallen. News headlines around the country screamed:

HE'S COMING SOUTH

The country stank of fear.
Putrid fear.



On a rainy day in February 1942, the first group of internees left Innisfail. The majority were Italian, a handful German—but all were considered enemy aliens, saboteurs and spies.

It was a scary time. An ominous list appeared every Friday, then the police located the people whose names were on it, handcuffed them and took them to the police station where they were registered as aliens and issued with a certificate. After that, they were marched through the streets to the railway station. From there, they were transported by train to the town centre where they were held at the showgrounds until it was time for them to be delivered, again by train, to their respective internment camps, usually in Townsville or places further south. What made it extra scary was that no one knew when or if they would return.

The departure of the Italians and Germans caused tremendous upheaval in the community. They had grown into the marrow of everyday life, and everyone felt the loss of their presence. Among them was a *senyor* called Giuseppe Grasso of Grasso's Convenience Store—Teresa and Joseph, the Grassos rented the shop from your godfather, Joe.

In a bid to escape incarceration, some non-naturalised immigrants joined the Civil Alien Corps—British subjects joined the Civil Constructional Corps—where they built roads and drove piles for new bridges.

That same month, while Singapore was hunched over defending itself against attacks from the sea, Japanese forces seized it, effectively opening up Southern Asia to attack: Australia was exposed. We feared He really *was* coming. In response, the government recalled its troops from Europe and the Middle East.

Then, on the nineteenth of February, Japanese fighters and bombers attacked Darwin, destroying ships and aircraft, and killing over two hundred people.

By early March, the Japanese occupied Rabaul, Lae and Salamaua in New Guinea. America, having lost its bases in the Philippines, decided to regroup its air force in Australia. So, in April, American General Douglas MacArthur arrived to conduct operations in the region.

General MacArthur was a clean-shaven man with serious eyes and hickory-brown hair adorned with an extravagant hat. The head covering was khaki with a black brim and gold embroidery. He wore aviator sunglasses, and behind those shields no one knew exactly what he was looking at—and he was never without a Missouri-made corncob pipe sticking out of his mouth. The pipe was as much a part of his person as his uniform.

Upon General MacArthur's arrival, North Queensland became a hive of military activity. The Americans and Australians were like fraternal twins: similar yet different. Both nations were enamoured with each other's foreign quirks, attitudes and appearances. It was around this time that the government urged us to evacuate.

‘What will we do?’ Margarita cried.

‘Stay,’ I said. ‘This,’ I made a sweeping gesture, ‘is our home.’
Evacuation, I thought, *is a draconian measure*.

Margarita nodded, but fear was written in her eyes.

‘Everything will be fine, Rita. You’ll see.’

Though I spoke the words, I did not entirely believe them, so I set about building an air-raid shelter underneath a shed, which I had erected long ago, in the car park. I dug a deep trench and timbered the sides to stop the red clay from falling in; then I attached shelves to the walls to store provisions like tinned food, candles, lamps, blankets and anything else we might need; and lastly, at the far end, I placed a can for a toilet, which was screened by a hessian cover for modesty. The shelter was reached via a trapdoor. Once it was finished, I told Margarita. She was hunched over a sewing machine at the dining-room table making camouflage capes out of old sugar bags for Teresa and Joseph.

‘Follow me,’ I said, opening the hatch and descending. She followed. Sunlight beamed through the hole. ‘What do you think?’

Margarita’s face was impassive as she looked around the bunker. She did not smile like when I had shown her the laundry, cottage and castle. Then a flicker of concern crossed her face, and I knew she was imagining us cooped up in the corner while bombs rained down.

‘It’s just a precaution. We’ll never have to use it,’ I said, and as soon as I spoke the words, I prayed they would be true.



By December 1943, half a million troops were stationed in the South West Pacific Area. We still had not used the air-raid shelter, but the potential need to use it remained a very real, very terrifying possibility. But through that stormy spectre of war, a sliver of light emerged. The Americans proved to be a silver lining for the struggling castle. Army vehicles filled the car park, especially on Sundays when the seventy-odd Americans, who resided at a camp near Gordonvale, journeyed to the castle. As the area was under military rule, the soldiers were only allowed to travel within an approved radius, and the castle was within that vicinity. Troops brought their girlfriends to picnic by the falls, swim in the creek and stroll down Lovers Lane towards the Tunnel of Love, some even proposing there.

Interstate Australian servicemen visited too. Many were stationed in Cairns, which was dubbed the ‘Sheridan Swamp’ because it was a muddy, mangrove-filled swamp first surveyed by Police Magistrate Brinsley G Sheridan back in 1876. On days off, they took the ‘Tin Hare’ train to Innisfail. The train was a CPH—meaning composite (accommodation), powered, handbrake (guard’s compartment), rail motor—but it was nicknamed the ‘Tin Hare’ because its introduction in the early 1920s coincided with the mechanical lures used in greyhound racing, and both were fast and self-propelled. From there, they hitched a ride to the castle. It was a strange time, and the warm air buzzed with change.

The Americans intrigued the Australians, and the Australians equally intrigued the Americans. Sometimes the Americans hurled a baseball into the creek, and local kids dived in and fished it out. The finder of the treasure was rewarded with a handful of coins. But instead of baseball fishing, Jackie earnt his money by laughing like a kookaburra. The Americans loved his laugh so

much they followed him like he was the Pied Piper of Hamelin, paying him five shillings to hear it.

Margarita defied food rationing—we had a vegetable garden and chicken run, though Monnie detested plucking the dead fowls—and prepared a meal of the day, usually huge trays of *paella* or pasta, for everyone to eat. Most of the time, things ran smoothly, but occasionally stress gave way to a *problema* or two. One day, an American airman scraped a final bite of dinner from his plate, then put down his utensils with a clang. Rubbing his stomach, he turned to his neighbour and expostulated about the meal.

‘Not as good as home. Not like me Ma’s.’ He spoke in a southern drawl that carried over every other voice in the room.

Incensed, I limped over, grabbed the airman’s arm and marched him to the kitchen. He had no idea what was happening. Neither did his friends. At the stove, Margarita slaved over a pot of sauce. Upon hearing the stomp of boots, she swung around, confusion creasing her sweaty face.

‘See!’ I said to the airman, pointing at the sprigs of freshly picked herbs and homegrown vegetables on the bench before making a sweeping gesture to the pot that Margarita, now stunned, had ceased stirring. ‘*That’s* what goes into the sauce: *fresh* tomatoes, *fresh* basil, *fresh* oregano, *fresh* garlic.’

The airman nodded sheepishly.

‘What *more* do you want?’

‘I-I’m sorry. I guess I was just yearnin’ for me Ma’s cookin’ back home.’

I released the airman’s arm, and he retreated to his comrades.

‘Pep?’ Margarita said, brows arched.

‘It’s fine, Rita. Everything’s *fine*.’

After meals, Teresa's slender fingers chased the ivory keys up and down the piano, playing everything from jazz to classical. Despite the midwife's remarks all those years ago, she had grown into a beautiful *senyoreta*. In fact, it vexed me when ineligible bachelors—and they were all ineligible!—ogled her. At the end of the concert, the troops always tried to tip Teresa, but she refused, telling them, 'No, my father's the owner. You're our guests.' Whenever she spoke, I was in awe of her cute Australian accent. So, in lieu of tips, soldiers passed around an upturned hat in which they put money for her to buy new songs to entertain them with the following week.

Some evenings, there was dancing or a film, and as on opening night, every now and then a den of snakes came in, and I had to get the rifle and shoot them—if the Americans had not already done so. The entertainment was so good everyone stayed until the early hours of the morning.

The castle was far from the only business doing a roaring trade. Innisfail became a mecca for lovelorn servicemen desiring the most romance their pennies could afford. Some described the troops as deprived, others as depraved. Brothels were in such high demand that queues lined the streets like rows of cars. Many Australian men short of beer money joined the queues, later selling their spots to Americans before heading to the nearest public house. Generally, Australian-American relations were good, but occasionally fights broke out, usually over a *senyoreta*. Many Australian girls were infatuated with the Americans' accents and uniforms. But all things considered, the Americans brought with them more than their accents and uniforms. They brought money.

Our business trebled.

CHAPTER THREE

A Senyor Called Aldo

The day Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley announced over the radio that the Japanese had surrendered, and urged us to offer thanks to God, everyone, even the non-believers, crossed themselves. The country no longer stank of fear; it was redolent with victory. As American troops stationed in the area departed for home—many with an Australian wife—local troops and interned men returned and tried to pick up where they had left off.

As far as the castle was concerned, peace reigned with a lull, and a monetary winter enveloped us. The whole town suffered. The number of people relocating from the region exceeded that of returning soldiers and internees. Machinery had stolen jobs, replacing manpower, brush hooks, axes and horses. The wartime labour shortage had forced farmers and other businesses to mechanise, leaving men with fewer opportunities.

I worried about the future, not only for myself but for Margarita, Teresa and Joseph. Teresa was now a *senyoreta*—and

she had a boyfriend, a Spaniard called Aldo. Needless to say, I disapproved. He was one of many ineligible suitors. Aldo's main fault was his enrapturement with America—and the fact that, as a result, Teresa became enraptured too.

'Aldo? Who is this *Aldo*?' I asked her one evening.

'Your *pare's* right,' Margarita said. 'We must meet him. Invite him to dinner.'

And invite him she did. Aldo turned up on our doorstep the following week. He had a mop of jet-black hair, brown eyes framed by thick eyelashes and a tanned, muscular physique.

The young lovers were smitten with each other, stealing glances across the table. All Aldo spoke about was America. America *this*, America *that*. After dinner, Teresa kept making excuses to try to sneak off for a stroll around the grounds, and I feared she was going to the Tunnel of Love.

Later that night, as Margarita and I lay in bed listening to the burbling falls and buzzing hydroelectric plant, I conferred with her.

'He's not right for her, Rita. All he talks about is America and the American lifestyle.'

'I know, Pep.'

'And now Teresa is talking about it too.'

'It will pass.'

'When?'

'In time. She's young.'

'And if it doesn't?'

'It will.'

But I was not so sure.



One evening, a month later, things came to a head when Teresa's talk of America graduated to departure. It was just the three of us—Margarita, Teresa and me—at the table. Joseph was at boarding school in the city—the same one Mr Mighell had gone to—and Monnie, Richard, Albie and Jackie were out.

'Aldo and I are going to America before the end of the year,' Teresa said. She announced it as casually as if she were just popping out to buy milk.

'You'll do no such thing,' I told her.

'I will.'

'You don't know anyone in America.'

'Aldo does.'

'Who?'

'Americans he met during the war.'

'Mere strangers.'

'His brother's already over there, in California.'

'I don't care about Aldo or his brother. You're not going.'

'You travelled.'

'I wasn't a *senyoreta*.'

'Mare travelled.'

'That's different.'

'How?'

'Your *mare* was with me.'

'I'll be with Aldo.'

'We were married.'

'I'll marry Aldo.'

'You'll do no such thing. You're not going.'

'Only for a little while. I want to experience the American lifestyle.'

‘What about the Australian lifestyle?’

‘I want to see films.’

‘You see films here every week. Who else has a picture theatre at home?’

‘It’s not the same.’

I turned to Margarita. ‘*Ai*, Rita, the *senyoreta* says she wants to see *proper* films.’ Then I looked at my daughter, suddenly so grown up. ‘Tell me, Teresa, where was the first feature-length film made?’

She stared at me.

‘Well?’

‘America.’

‘No.’

‘England.’

‘No. Australia. By the Tait brothers. Perhaps next time the film man’s in town I’ll buy *The Story of the Kelly Gang*.’

‘I’m going with Aldo.’

‘You most certainly are *not*.’

‘Mare?’

‘Listen to your *pare*.’

‘But *you* went.’

‘Don’t speak to your *mare* like that—*Ai!*’ I put a hand to my stomach.

Margarita got up. ‘Pep, what’s wrong?’

I gestured for her to sit back down, but she refused, hurrying to my side.

‘It’s nothing, Rita. Just indigestion.’

‘It’s not fair!’ Teresa blurted out.

‘Fair,’ I croaked. ‘You don’t know the meaning of the word.’

‘Humph!’ She stormed out, the front door slamming shut.

‘Teresa! Teresa!’ Margarita yelled. ‘He’s not right for you!’

‘Leave her. Believe me when I say that girl is going nowhere.’



‘Pep! Pep!’ Margarita yelled. ‘Teresa’s gone!’

‘Gone?’ I burst out of the cottage and scoured the grounds.

She had returned late in the night. Margarita and I were wide awake in bed. Upon hearing the door, I had gone to rise but Margarita dissuaded me: ‘Leave her, Pep. Sleep on it. You’ll only say something you’ll regret.’ I now feared she had returned only to pack a bag and run away with Aldo.

I searched the fernery, the creek—even the Tunnel of Love. At the end of the tunnel, I heaved a sigh of relief when I found her sitting by Teresa Falls, staring into space. I had no idea what to say to her, or rather how to word it, but I, like all *pares*, looked to my past for guidance.

I sat down next to her, a hand on my stomach—it had been paining me of late with worry over Teresa and the castle’s future—and told her about her Aunt Matilde and how I had not taken her to Australia. I finished by telling her that she would meet someone else too. A different *senyor*. A better *senyor*. *The Zerlottis*, I thought, *are a good family, and Pino is a fine young senyor. Italian, not Catlan or Spanish, but a good match, nonetheless, for Teresa loves music and so does he.*

‘But—’

‘No buts. Just, *please*, wait. See how he gets on. It’s all I ask.’

‘For how long?’

‘A year.’

She thought for a moment, lips bunched like a plum. 'Aldo will be gone by then.'

'If it's meant to be, he'll come back for you.'

CHAPTER FOUR

I Suffer

Teresa mourned Aldo's departure, and Paronella Park plodded along like a cortège. One rainy evening, while Margarita was adding the sea component to a *mar i muntanya* dish, I reviewed the accounts—I kept two books—at the dining-room table.

‘Rita, I think we should be able to keep the castle running.’

‘I knew it, Pep.’

She plated up a feast of prawns and chicken, and I closed the books.

‘Dinner!’ Margarita yelled.

Footsteps echoed. Teresa, Monnie, Richard, Albie and Jackie entered. As we ate, I explained to concerned faces that the castle would continue but made it clear its prime saviour was my other businesses. When everyone had nearly finished their meals, I was only halfway through mine.

‘You’re slow tonight, Pare,’ Teresa said.

‘You’re too fast,’ I lied.

I struggled to chew. My body was weary. The stress of three wars, of caring for everyone and worrying about the castle’s finances had finally pushed me to exhaustion. I forced a piece of chicken down, then another and another. It took a while, but I eventually finished. I rose, but as soon as I stood, a great queasiness came over me, and every mouthful I had laboured to digest came up.

‘Pare?’

‘Pep?’

‘Mista Paronella?’

‘Senyor Paronella?’



The symptoms of my complaint soon became too great to ignore or hide. Heartburn and indigestion ailed me, and after every meal, I sat at the table with a hand on my chest. Even Margarita’s sage Catalan remedies failed to work. Her broths and teas struggled to stay down. After a particularly bad day, when even a sip of water sent me heaving, Margarita took matters into her own hands.

‘You’re going to the doctor.’

I protested.

‘You must. It’s been weeks, and you’re still not better.’

I recalled how the last doctor had wanted to amputate my leg. Margarita, sensing this, said, ‘We’ll just see what he says.’

Sighing, I acquiesced.

I was soon in my new Buick, Bonica IV. Richard drove; relations with the Noones had continued to sour since I had opposed his wine-seller’s licence. Then I was in Dr Galvani’s examination room.

Dr Galvani had salt-and-pepper hair combed to the side, a round face with jowls that had started to become a little too generous in size, pensive eyes, a pair of short, thick eyebrows and a Roman nose. However, being Italian-Australian, he actually pronounced my surname correctly. Dr Galvani conducted several tests but told us we would have to wait a few days for the results. So, Margarita and I returned home none the wiser but all the more worried.

That agonising wait ended in frustration when we returned to the clinic only to learn Dr Galvani's findings were inconclusive.

'Mr Paronella, you must see a specialist in Brisbane.'

'Brisbane?' I croaked.

'Bris-bane? Why in Bris-bane?' Margarita said.

'Mrs Paronella, your husband must have more tests done.'

'More tests? Why you no do tests here?'

'It's beyond our capabilities. A specialist is needed.'

'No,' I said, shaking my head. 'I have businesses to run.' Visiting the doctor in town was one thing, but travelling over nine hundred and thirty miles to the city was another matter entirely.

'Mr Paronella, you *must* see a specialist as soon as possible.'

'I fix,' Margarita said. 'I fix before. I fix again.'

Dr Galvani made no reply. He just scribbled on a prescription pad, tore off the piece of paper and handed it to me. 'In the meantime, this should help with the pain.'

I nodded, heaved myself up and went to the waiting room. Upon seeing us, Richard jumped to his feet.

'We need to stop by the pharmacy,' I said.

'Of course, Senyor Paronella.'

We drove home under bruised summer clouds in strained silence, broken only by claps of thunder. The sky burst as soon as we

walked through the door. I sank into my armchair. Rain needled into the windows with such force that the outside world was as blurry as my internal world.

Under Margarita's watchful eye, I swallowed the medicine, then dozed, not waking until the smell of cooking meat wafted throughout the *casa*. I roused myself. My body was weak and exhausted, even though I had done nothing but sleep. Footsteps. Margarita entered, a bowl of broth cupped in her hands. Groggy, I shook my head.

'Only a little,' she said. 'You need to keep up your strength. If you don't eat, how will you get better?'



Joseph returned home from boarding school for the summer holidays. I was surprised at how much he had grown. He echoed my long-lost youth. An incipient fuzz had sprouted from his upper lip, and his voice had deepened to a bass.

Margarita told the children I had a 'touch of something' and just needed rest to recover. That summer, instead of swimming and fishing for sooty grunter and jungle perch, Joseph helped Albie, Jackie and Richard maintain the grounds. I was doing the work of half a man. Pain relief proved a false positive; I took it, felt better and worked hard, only to feel worse the next day.

Christmas that year was strange. Margarita made traditional Catalan food, and I, optimistic about a miracle from Providence, ate a little. I chewed like a centenarian, praying the morsels would not betray me. But it was useless; betrayal rose in my throat.



February arrived with the beginning of the school year, and Joseph packed his suitcase, ready to return to St Joseph's Nudgee College in Brisbane. I had errands to run in the city and decided to accompany him, much to Margarita's dismay.

'You're *sure* you're well enough?'

'For the umpteenth time, *sí*.'

Richard drove us to the railway station. We bought our tickets and sat on the same bench I had occupied all those years ago while waiting to flee the country and escape the remorseless clutches of the Black Hand. I shuddered at the thought. I looked at Joseph and wondered what he would do if confronted with the Black Hand. Would he pay? His nature was so different from mine. Both he and Teresa were contradictions. Joseph looked like me but had Margarita's calm temperament, and Teresa looked like her *mare* but possessed my temperament, or perhaps I should say temper.

The train steamed into the station. Once the travellers had dispersed, we went to our sleeper. It was oppressively hot. The breeze blowing through the window was minimal because the train moved too slowly—not to mention, it sent the sooty air inside, making the stuffiness worse. Sometimes it stopped when there was no town, and through the window, we saw cattle mooching on the tracks, oblivious to the fact a locomotive had nearly butchered them. The driver blew the whistle, but only some moved; others remained, chewing their cud, tails swishing away the flies.

The further south we journeyed, the more the weather lost the fog of tropical humidity. Finally, buildings rose and huddled closer together. Suddenly, the train screeched to a stop, jolting us forwards, then backwards. My weak body struggled to steady itself. We disembarked and navigated the throngs, eventually emerging on the street.

‘I’ll check the bus timetable,’ Joseph said.

‘No. We’ll get a taxi.’ I was in no state to manage a crowded bus. My bad leg was already struggling to support my fragile frame.

Joseph nodded.

We walked to the rank and found a ride. The vehicle wound its way through the city and pulled up outside a grand building reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance. Established in 1891, St Joseph’s Nudgee College was considered by many who ought to know the jewel in the crown of Catholic schools in the state. The fact I could afford my son such an education made me feel I had at least accomplished something.

The driver removed Joseph’s trunk from the boot. I thanked the man, asked him to wait a moment, then walked Joseph to the entrance where we said *adéu*. As I watched his figure recede, I thought about the young *senyor* he was becoming.

‘Brisbane City Hall, please.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As the taxi navigated traffic and pedestrians, a strange feeling washed over me, and I found myself wondering if I would ever see Joseph again. The vehicle soon braked in front of the hall at King George Square, snapping me out of my dark thoughts. I paid, then got out—cars speeding past me. The clock tower looked like a finger pointing up at the sky. It reminded me of the *petit* church in La Vall de Santa Creu. God owns time, it said. God and no one else.

I limped through the main entrance into the foyer, my boots echoing as I crossed the mosaic floor. It had a grand central geometric pattern bordered by a meander that evoked the Meander River of ancient Greece. I plodded up the stairs, stopping every few steps to catch my breath. By the time I reached the top, I wanted

to lie down, which was unusual for me. I sat down in the reception area and waited for my breathing to steady. My bad leg throbbed to the tick of the clock. My back ached, and my stomach was sore and tight. No matter how I sat, the pain only nagged more. Time passed slowly. I tutted and shook my head in annoyance like the old man I had seemingly grown into overnight. The *senyoreta* looked at me.

‘Shouldn’t be too long, sir,’ she said.

I nodded.

Five minutes later, the clerk finally appeared and ushered me into his office where the paperwork was at long last completed. Then I limped back down the stairs, gripping the railing for support.

Outside, back in the heat, I headed to the train station. Although it was neither as hot nor as humid as the tropics, the burning sun still beat down. Its glare, reflecting off the white and grey concrete jungle, soon became too much for my eyes. It hurt to blink. The light was blinding. Suddenly, an overwhelming feeling of dizziness hit me, pushing me down.

Then there was nothing but blackness...



When I came to, two figures were hovering over me, repeating my name, ‘Pep? Pep?’ Blinking my vision into focus, I recognised our old neighbours, the O’Neills.

‘You all right, mate?’ Mr O’Neill asked.

Mrs O’Neill looked into my eyes. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘W-what are you doing here?’ I bumbled, forgetting to ask myself why I was lying on the city pavement as cars and pedestrians rushed by.

‘Business,’ Mr O’Neill said. ‘We saw you collapse.’

‘And hurried over,’ Mrs O’Neill added.

I tried to rise but struggled. They helped me up. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment. I felt like a fallen child being picked up by his parents.

Mrs O’Neill examined my face. ‘You look awfully pale.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘I think we should take you to the hospital.’

‘No, no.’

‘It’s no trouble, none at all.’

I shook my head. It might have been no trouble for them, but it was trouble for me. I could not stay in Brisbane. I had to get back to the castle, to Margarita and Teresa.

‘It’s just yer don’t look too flash, mate.’

‘I’ll be fine in a minute.’

‘We’ll wait with you.’ Mrs O’Neill put a hand on my arm.

‘That’s not necessary.’

‘We can’t leave you here. Not like this. What would Margarita say? At least let us walk you to the train station.’

‘My wife’s right, mate—well, on *this* occasion.’ Mr O’Neill chuckled.

I acquiesced.



In the corner of the sleeper, I glanced over the metro newspaper I had bought while waiting for the train, or rather Mr O’Neill had bought it because Mrs O’Neill would neither allow me to venture away nor leave her side until I was safely installed on the locomotive.

As the train rattled north, the sun blinked between the gaps in the trees, and I glimpsed my reflection. My hair was no longer black like Arbequina olives but the colour of salt and pepper, and my forehead was wrinkled like a coastal shelf. I was old, and if I had felt old before, I certainly did after my fall. Sighing, I folded up the paper, leant back and rested. All I could think about was my health, the future and whether I had one. Such a track led me to Margarita, Teresa and Joseph, and to the castle, their inheritance. The feeling that a bad thing was coming gnawed at me. It was in the muggy air, building up like a tempest. As I thought, my eyelids grew heavy...

Toooooot, toooooot! I awoke with a jerk, then winced. My neck was sore from napping at an odd angle, and my stomach was tender. As I stretched the kink out, cane fields flew past the window. I was almost home. A burst of warmth flowed through me.

Upon disembarking, I passed a newsstand, took one glance at the afternoon newspaper—its headline screaming that a tropical cyclone had formed in the Coral Sea—and bought it. A cyclone was the last thing I needed. Overhead, blustery winds ferried clouds across the overcast sky with ferocity. Time was moving too fast. I begged it to slow down, just for a moment, so my body could catch up. My heart was like an antique clock in need of winding, and time was a swinging pendulum, sneaking up behind me like a robber in the night, waiting to knock me off my feet. My gaze returned to reality. A figure appeared: Richard. He had come to collect me. Back at home, Margarita asked about the journey.

‘Good,’ I lied, omitting my episode in the street. Mentioning it would cause domestic upset, and Margarita fussed enough already.

‘And Joe?’

‘The journey was good, Joe is good, everything is good.’

She nodded, knowing to ask no more questions.

Feeling bad for snapping, I said, ‘Guess who I saw in King George Square.’

‘Who?’

‘The O’Neills.’

‘It’s a *petit* world. Now, sit and rest. You’ve had a big journey. I’ll get dinner ready.’

I sank into my armchair and read the article on the cyclone. The aroma of cooking meat wafted throughout the cottage. My shrunken stomach roared, but only thought it was hungry. One bite and it would be full—if the food stayed down. Half an hour later, Teresa poked her head into the lounge room.

‘Pare, dinner’s ready.’

‘Okay. Coming.’

I discarded the newspaper and headed to the dining room with dread, for I had to try to eat with everyone watching me. Erring on the side of caution, I chewed my food a comical number of times, then swallowed. So far, so good. I took another bite. No luck. I jumped up and hurriedly limped outside, voices yelling out behind me:

‘Pep!’

‘Pare!’

‘Mista Paronella!’

‘Senyor Paronella!’

There was soon nothing more to eject, but my dubious body kept trying, the strain making the blood vessels around my eyes pop. Exhausted, I collapsed in bed.



On the morrow, I found yesterday's sky had not lied. Something was brewing. Despite Margarita's protests to rest, I spent the day preparing the grounds—with the help of Richard, Albie and Jackie—as best I could for the impending blast. The work made me realise I was no longer the robust man I once was. Plagued by arthritis, I limped pitifully around. My back ached, my ears rang like a bell, and my eyes took on a blurred, cobwebbed appearance. The boys ran circles around me. After securing loose objects and taping windows, we were finished—or as finished as we could be. Only so much could be done to curb disaster.

Providence would decide the rest.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Experience Mother Nature's Wrath—Again

Winds collected moisture, ferrying it to the coast, and an intense rain depression drenched the region. I was unable to work, and tourists were unable to visit. The castle had no income—again. With nothing else to do, I installed my weary body in the lounge-room armchair and dwelt on the past. That iniquitous time before the present was like a melancholy film on repeat, the rain pelting the windows a torrent of tears. I replayed saying *adéu* to Joseph; my brusque interaction with the clerk at the city hall; my conversation with the O'Neills—had I been rude? And Margarita—did she know more than she was letting on?

Pare, Pare, a voice echoed in my mind.

Was the look she had given me when I mentioned seeing the O'Neills normal or questioning?

Pare, Pare, the voice got louder.

Suddenly, Teresa burst into the room, evaporating my regret, and bounded over to the rain-blurred window. 'Pare, someone's here.'

I had not been hearing voices; it was Teresa calling me.

'I thought you said we wouldn't have any visitors today.' She pressed her button nose against the glass, trying to make out the silhouette.

'Who is it?' I sighed, beginning the arduous task of getting up. Weak from a lack of food and arthritic limbs, I heaved to catapult my body upright, a move my bad leg immediately complained about.

She shrugged. 'Some man in a truck.'

'Teresa!' I croaked.

But her nose remained fixed to the glass.

'*Teresa!*'

'*Sí.*'

'Stick.'

'Stick?'

'My *walking* stick!' I said, gruffer than intended. I had finally succumbed to one of the cumbersome things.

Teresa promptly returned with it, and I hobbled over to join her. But through the pane, I saw only rain.

'What man?'

'There, Pare.' She pointed to a vehicle.

A man and a truck were only just visible.

'See?'

'*Sí*, I see. I'm not blind!'

A visitor in such weather could only be the bearer of bad news. I shuffled to the front door, opened it and waited. Petrichor emanated from muddy pools. Squinting, I recognised the truck of a local farmer called Herbert 'Herbie' Dunn. He lived nearby, but not close enough to drive all the way to Casa Paronella in such a deluge. I knew the route. He would have braved terribly flooded roads.

The truck door opened and slammed shut. Herbie's drenched figure, dressed in a raincoat and gumboots, sloshed through the mud, sludge splashing his legs as he headed to the cottage. I ushered him inside. Before I could utter a word, Herbie panted, 'Terrible news.' Brown water dripped from his raincoat, forming a moat around him.

'What is it?' I asked, wondering what could be worse than a cyclone.

'Danger,' Herbie said, looking out the window at the falls. 'Upstream,' he continued, turning back to me. 'Loggers were workin', tryin' to cut the last of the cedars in the creek's catchment area. A heap of felled trees, trimmed 'n' ready for the mill, was piled up on the ground near the creek, but the risin' floodwaters have lifted some of the logs into the stream, and they're headin' for the railway bridge.'

My face contorted with fear. Floodwaters carrying even the odd uprooted tree could axe man-made structures in half like firewood. As I thought this, something eerie happened. The volume of water cascading down the falls eased. Our heads turned simultaneously to the waterfall with a mixture of anxiety and curiosity, then we exchanged a knowing look.

'You think it's the—' I began.

'Logs? I do.'

Within minutes, the water slowed to a trickle. The lights flickered, then died, leaving nothing but silence and blackness.

'Pep! The power?' Margarita hurried in with a kerosene lamp, Teresa and Monnie on her heels.

When they saw what we were looking at—no waterfall—they gasped.

‘Well, hate to do the verbal hit ’n’ run, but I better go,’ Herbie said. Then, after looking down at the floor, he added, ‘Sorry ’bout the mess, Mrs P.’

‘No worry.’ Margarita waved her hand.

I thanked Herbie for coming.

‘Wouldn’t’ve dreamt of not comin’.’

Herbie hugged his raincoat around him, then rushed back to the truck, his gumboots sloshing in the mud.

‘What did he say?’ Margarita asked, brows furrowed.

Sighing, I said, ‘Logs are heading—have headed—towards the bridge.’

‘Meaning?’

‘No waterfall, no power—and a dam that could flood us.’

‘Floods have intruded before, and we’ve been fine.’

‘Not like this, Rita. This is bad. Really, really bad.’

‘What can we do?’

‘All we can do is wait and see.’



The usually burbling Mena Creek Falls remained silent for an hour. An unsettling, graveyard-like atmosphere filled the *casa*. I spent the time shuffling back and forth, peering out the window, checking on the water. Margarita, Teresa and Monnie tried to busy themselves in the kitchen, but curiosity and worry consumed them, and they ventured over to the glass to see what was happening. Richard, Jackie and Albie were in the shed.

The water rose gradually.

Teresa and Monnie gasped.

‘Pep, it’s going up,’ Margarita cried.

‘I know.’ Cursing, I looked at the clock: eleven in the morning.

As minutes ticked on, we remained transfixed by the falls. Before long, the water had risen over three feet. I checked again; only a quarter of an hour had passed.

Margarita gaped at it. ‘What can we do?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘We can’t do a thing.’

It was certain: the logs Herbie had spoken of had jammed against the railway bridge, creating a dam that would burst like the bloated sky. Within the hour, a monstrous lake had formed.

‘Pep, it’s getting bigger. Do something!’

‘Rita, we can’t *do* anything.’

Suddenly, a cracking roar echoed nauseatingly across the grounds. My stomach churned. Margarita’s face was ghostly white. Teresa and Monnie stared out the window in disbelief.

‘What’s *that*?’ Margarita asked.

‘The bridge. It’s collapsing.’

I could envisage what had happened. The rising floodwaters had collected more and more logs and debris, adding to the pressure on the bridge until it could no longer hold. There could be no doubt: a wall of water, carrying huge cedar logs, was heading for us.

‘Pep, there must be *something* we can do!’

Margarita was right. I threw on my raincoat and gumboots, told everyone to stay put, discarded my walking stick and limped outside into the wall of rain. The creek, now fourteen feet high, raged. The front garden had been washed away, and the road was submerged, cutting off traffic. As I stared, several neighbours approached.

‘Need a hand?’ one said.

‘Several. And a new leg,’ I quipped.

The men helped me drag logs from the water in a bid to divert them from heading straight for the castle and surrounding buildings. Once the immediate path was clear, they returned to their respective properties. But I was unsatisfied. There had to be something else I could do. I racked my brain. Then it dawned on me.

‘Teresa! *Teresa!*’ I yelled.

‘*Sí*, Pare?’

‘Come here. I need your help.’

She bounded out the front door and followed me to the castle, her body thriving on a mixture of fear, curiosity and excitement.

‘Here.’ I handed her a hammer; I brandished an axe.

‘What’s this for?’

‘To smash holes in the walls.’

‘*Smash* the walls?’ She looked at me as if I were crazy.

‘We have to, so the floodwaters can pass through.’

She hesitated.

I swung the axe, its sharp edge ploughing into the plaster. ‘Quick!’ I said. ‘Hurry!’

She awkwardly raised the hammer and brought it down as hard as she could, creating a *petit* crack in the wall. She repeated the movement until a sizeable hole emerged.

We bashed the walls until the sound of roaring floodwaters ground our swinging arms to a halt. The roar sounded close. Too close. Then the destruction began. A fifty-foot torrent carrying cedar battering-rams besieged my dream. It picked up concrete balustrades and hurled them into the air. It uprooted masonry tables like trees. It forced open doors. It drowned the café and

pavilion. It collected logs and smashed windows and furniture, including Teresa's piano. But the most heartbreaking thing was that I could do nothing.

'Quick, Teresa! We've got to get back to the cottage.'

'How?'

I turned around. How indeed? It was too late to return. We were stuck. In the distance, Titus and Blackie barked manically.

'Come on,' I said.

Worried, Teresa looked at me askance.

'Now!'

I turned, starting back towards the *casa*. Teresa followed. But my limp and her slender frame were no match for Mother Nature. A scream cut through the air: Teresa. Raging floodwaters were pulling on her dress, dragging her away. I grabbed her arm. She clung to me, holding on for dear life. The torrent swirled around us like a whirlpool, waiting to suck us in, swallow us, drown us. My heart pounded. Using each other for support, we persevered ahead, praying we would make it home. Finally, the cottage was in our sights. Margarita, livid, stood on the porch waving frantically, Monnie beside her.

'Pep! Teresa! Look at you both. I've been worried sick.' She crossed herself.

We were drenched, and mud caked our knees. Realising I was still gripping Teresa, I released her, a bruise of my handprint stamping her upper arm. We shucked off our sodden boots.

Margarita held up a hand. 'I'll get towels.'

'And I'll make coffee,' Monnie said, placing the pot on the wood-fired stove.

I nodded. My bad leg throbbed from fighting the floodwaters, as did my bad arm from wielding the axe.

We dried ourselves, then sat by the window in relative darkness—the only light a couple of kerosene lamps—and sipped Monnie's brew while anxiously watching the raging cyclone wash away my dream.

It took three hours for the floodwaters to abate. But they did not leave without marking their territory like a beast. We ventured outside to inspect the damage. The stolen sun peeped through a patch of blue sky, casting a gossamer-thin light on the addled land. The scene was a dystopian nightmare. Mud, debris and dying flora were strewn everywhere. Broken furniture and other man-made remains littered the earth.

The floodwaters had risen to window level in the hall, sending logs crashing into the foyer, kitchen and ballroom. One log had smashed into the dining room and ripped a gaping hole in the western wall. A section of parquetry floor had caved in, and the furniture had been reduced to matchwood. Steel girders had snapped like splinters as the logs destroyed concrete handrails and removed whole flights of stairs.

Another log had shot over the cliff on the northern side of the swimming pool and pulled apart the outside wall of the powerhouse, again snapping the huge steel girders like splinters and leaving others in a tangled mess. The system was damaged; the water pipe leading to the turbine had collapsed under the pressure. An island—made of logs, steel, concrete, sand and other debris—had sprung up in the centre of the creek. Several concrete tables, which faced the pool on the northern side, had broken too.

Floodwaters had also drenched the upper gardens, washing away almost everything. The soil was gone, as were Margarita's orchids. Only rock remained. We were unable to venture any

further, for footpaths were washed away. Huge cedar logs, stranded throughout the park, blocked our progress, and thorny vines acted like a barbed wire fence.

‘Never—*never*—did I think such a thing could happen,’ I said, shaking my head.

Margarita was speechless. The others said nothing, their eyes transfixed on the nightmare. I had spent a kingly amount of money creating my dream—twenty-odd thousand pounds—and now it was a mess. I was uninsured for such damage, and repairs, I calculated, would be in the vicinity of eight thousand pounds, maybe more. I feared the cost to repair the castle would portend the end of my short dynasty. I suddenly felt ill, removed from the situation. The damage was an abstract disaster, an abstract funeral of my dream. It was no longer regal and elegant but ruined, like an ancient monument that was once great.

‘We’ll have to close.’ As the words left my mouth, I realised I was uncertain whether we should close permanently or temporarily while we attempted to restore everything—but whether it was repairable was another question entirely—and if it was possible, what would the timeframe be? Months? A year? A tear slid down my cheek. My family had never seen me cry before. I thought of the first time—the only time—I had seen Pare cry: the night Mare died. I was thankful I had returned home and not gone to the hospital. Someone could have been killed.

Suddenly, Margarita took charge. ‘Right. First, we must clear the mud and debris.’

I nodded.

‘Then move the logs.’

I nodded again.

‘And Joseph will have to come home and help out.’

It was painful, but undeniable. Besides, with the long list of impending expenses and a lack of income, which, at the best of times, was subsidised by my other businesses—I feared to learn how the cane had fared—I would be unable to pay the high boarding and tuition fees for Joseph’s school. A haze of failure overwhelmed me.



The next morning, the sun, having no alternative, shone. It felt cruel seeing it up there, glimmering away as though Mother Nature was not guilty of anything.

I went to town, contacted St Joseph’s Nudgee College in Brisbane, explained what had happened and told them I needed my son to return home directly. The headmaster, I noted, offered his apologies in the same manner one offers one’s condolences at a funeral—and, indeed, something had died: my dream.



Others, it turned out, shared my vision. People from across the district came to help clear the debris, their presence offering a glimmer of hope. Like a phoenix, I would rise from the muddy ashes of my dream.

I contacted an electrical technician from the sugar mill to inspect the damaged hydroelectric plant. He recommended changing the system to an alternating current. I soon found a second-hand one from wartime disposals, and once again the sun shone in our *casa*. But I had no idea what to do with the Café by the Pool.

Cavities punched the walls, and the parquetry floor was buckled and twisted like a bent jigsaw piece unable to be fitted into place. I asked friends for advice, and they obliged me by coming from far and wide to inspect the building. The consensus was that it was irreparable.

‘But Pep, where will we serve the food?’ Margarita asked.

‘The hall.’

‘But that’s the theatre.’

‘Well, now it will be more of a restaurant and function centre.’

So, we slaved...

Slaved...

Slaved...



Six months after the cyclone, Paronella Park reopened. As I had predicted, the final cost of repairs was in the region of eight thousand pounds, almost half of what I had initially spent building the castle. That figure, among other things, kept me up at night. I had become even skinnier from worry, work and an inability to eat properly. But my fears no visitors would come were soon allayed. They came—not in wartime numbers—but they came.

CHAPTER SIX

An Answer

One evening, after the castle had reopened, I looked up from my newspaper to find Teresa studying me so intently that, for a moment, I felt as transparent as glass.

‘What are you looking at?’ I asked. ‘My wrinkly, old skin?’

‘Pare, you’ve become so thin.’

Margarita agreed. ‘Much too skinny.’

‘I’m fine,’ I lied.

‘No, you’re run-down.’ She set aside the sock she was darning. ‘You need a break. Why don’t we go to the city for a few days?’

‘I’ve got a park to run.’

‘Everyone here knows how to run it.’

Indeed. They knew because I had taught them. So, I acquiesced. I was too exhausted to argue. Besides, Margarita deserved a break—she had slaved to get everything operating again. I owed her.



Margarita and I were at the Shingle Inn on Edward Street in Brisbane, admiring the Tudor-style décor, when a waitress set down our order. Margarita picked up the teapot and poured us both a cup. I sipped mine cautiously.

‘You know, Pep, I’ve been thinking,’ she said, biting into a patty cake.

‘About?’

‘While we’re here, there’s no harm in visiting the specialist.’

I shook my head.

‘But we’re here now.’

I felt annoyed and deceived. It was almost as if Margarita had planned the trip for that very purpose. ‘No, I—’

‘We’re seeing the specialist, and that’s final. Do it for me, Pep—for Teresa and Joseph—if not for yourself.’



The specialist’s office was cold, clinical and impersonal, and Dr Wright’s demeanour did nothing to warm the atmosphere. His countenance was grave. I had undergone several tests, taken over the course of a few days, and it was time for Dr Wright to deliver his verdict. I tried to bury my fear in the pit of my stomach, but it kept digging its way out.

‘I’m afraid it’s not good news, Mr Paro-nell-i-ah,’ he said.

I would have corrected him—Pah-roh-nell-ah—but my face was busy draining of colour, as was Margarita’s.

‘No *goot*? What you mean no *goot*?’ Margarita asked.

‘It’s cancer of the stomach, and it’s—’

‘But you fix?’

‘—terminal.’

As the irremediable diagnosis was communicated to us in layman’s terms, I knew my time had come. I thought of Stefano. A doctor is always a bad sign. They are like ravens. Their presence ushers in death.

‘But something can be done?’ Margarita persisted.

Dr Wright shook his head. ‘It’s inoperable, Mrs Paronelliah.’

‘You no fix?’

He shook his head again. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I fix,’ Margarita said. ‘I take him home. I fix before. I fix again.’

But I feared there would be no *again*.

Outside on the street, as cars roared past, I blinked away tears, swallowed the knot blocking my throat, then turned to Margarita. ‘Don’t say anything to Teresa and Joseph.’ My voice faltered. ‘There’s no need to worry them.’

‘They have to know. They already know something’s wrong.’

‘Just for a little while.’

‘A little while won’t make any difference.’

‘I’m tired. Let’s go back to the boarding house.’

Margarita said no more, and for that I was thankful.

We returned in silence.

As soon as I walked through the door, I went straight to bed and lay down. Margarita stared out the window. The news hung in the *petit* room to the point of suffocation. We stayed like that—me lying, she staring—for what seemed like an age, until she turned and said, ‘I’m going out for some fresh air.’

I nodded.

Margarita picked up her handbag and left, the door swinging towards me like a slap in the face. I knew where she was going.

She was going to telephone the boy at the Basilisk Post Office and ask him to run to the *casa* and fetch Teresa and Joseph. Then she would say something like, ‘Your *pare* is very, very sick. He’s dying. But be strong. Don’t cry. Don’t let him see how upset you are.’

As I looked at that wounding piece of paper the doctor had given me detailing my results, tears slid down my cheeks and a strange sound escaped my mouth—high, almost hysterical. It was the same sound Pare had made when Mare died. I scrunched up the paper—it felt like a premature death certificate—and hurled it across the room. Regret stabbed at me. I feared that if I had seen the specialist sooner, I could have been cured. Unless Margarita really could fix me.



‘Dinner!’ Margarita called.

Dinner, I thought.

It was the evening of our return. That afternoon, I had passed the kitchen and glimpsed Margarita talking to Teresa and Joseph. They were seated at the table, their eyes rimmed red, and I knew immediately they had been discussing my diagnosis, my *prognosis*—or lack of one. The children did not mention the disease to my face, but their glances and silence spoke volumes. I had to get better for my family. A strange optimism flowed through me.

So, I sat down and ate *petit* mouthfuls, chewing the food until it was mush and could be washed down with a little water.

It stayed down.

I rested.



The meal rebelled.
It came up...
Up...
Up...
One day, the food stayed down.
The next, it protested—even water came up.
I did not understand.
I did not *want* to understand.
I closed my eyes.
I slept.
My optimism waned.
Despondency set in like a fog.



My despondency morphed into a dark, inescapable abyss of depression. I had no saviour, only grief to drown in. I ceased going to the table at mealtimes. Instead, I sat in the lounge room, listening to the radio—to events that no longer concerned me—calling out, ‘Leave the bones.’ If I could not eat, I could at least try to maintain some normality and savour the flavour, even if everything was tinged with a metallic taste.

Despite my worsening condition, I had not given up completely. Staying on my feet was important, and so when business called, I answered. But Margarita was uncertain. Somehow, she had become *my* keeper instead of *I hers*. Whenever I wanted to do something, she intervened. One day in particular comes to mind.

‘You need to rest,’ she said.

‘I’ve sat and rested more than I can stand.’

‘But—’

‘I need to check on one of the farms. Besides, some fresh air will do me good.’

‘Okay,’ she conceded. Then, to Joseph: ‘Go with your *pare*.’

Joseph rose.

‘No, no,’ I protested. ‘Stay. I’m fine.’

Joseph sat back down.

‘No. Go with your *pare*.’

He got up again.

‘I’m not dead yet, Rita,’ I said, grabbing the keys.

Margarita acquiesced to this *petit* freedom and followed me to the door. Joseph sat down yet again.

‘Drive carefully, Pep.’

‘I will.’

I kissed her *adéu*, then went to the garage. As I limped there, I knew Margarita would be returning to her lookout: the front window. From that window, she had watched me come and go since we had called the cottage home. I got into Bonica IV and rested. The short walk from the verandah to the garage had exhausted my emaciated frame.

After a moment, I turned the key—I did not want Margarita wondering what was taking me so long to leave and coming to check—but nothing happened. I tried repeatedly to no avail.

Sighing, I got out, slammed the door shut, walked around the back and pushed it to try to crank the disagreeable apparatus. Pushing was difficult. My body was frail; I was a shadow of my former self. But something within me revolted, and I forced my failing body to use every last ounce of strength.

Too much strength.

Bonica IV lurched forwards, rolling towards the slope, towards the crater where I had lost Pedro's grader all those years ago, and I could do nothing. There was no handle to grab, no lead to yank. Nothing.

It was certain: she would fall over the sixty-foot drop, crashing to her mechanical death. But something happened. God corrected me. She stopped short, her wheels precariously teetering over the edge.

Next, piercing cries cut through the dense air like a knife.

'Pep!'

'Pare!'

'Mista Paronella!'

'Senyor Paronella!'

Margarita, Teresa, Joseph and Monnie burst through the front door and hurried to the Buick. Meanwhile, Albie, Jackie and Richard, having heard the commotion, sprinted across the grounds.

'I'm fine,' I yelled.

Only upon seeing me standing outside the garage did they heave a sigh of relief.

Margarita crossed herself. '*Ai*, we thought you were in the car.'

'We saw you from the window,' Teresa said.

'And thought you'd gone over,' Joseph added.

Of course, that dreaded window.

'No more driving, Pep. No more.'

I protested.

'No. No driving.' Margarita was as firm as a rock.

'But that was beyond my control. It would've happened anyway.'

'Think of the other drivers. You're not well enough. You could cause an accident.'

What did it matter, I thought, if I had been in the Buick, if it had fallen over the edge? I'm dying anyway. What difference does it make if I die in bed or in a car accident? It was at that moment I accepted the truth in its most chastising form. Death is death, whatever way Fate and Destiny deem it. My end was the same either way—sealed. They did not understand, and suddenly my frustration morphed into anger.

'My days may be numbered, but I've still a few more to count,' I said, harsher than intended.

A loaded silence hung between us.

'How am I meant to do things?' I continued. 'How am I meant to go to town?'

'Joseph,' Margarita said, her voice barely a whisper.

'He's too young.'

'I'll organise it.'

Tired of fighting—of fighting Margarita, of fighting the thing devouring my body—I surrendered.



True to her word, Margarita fixed it. She contacted the sergeant at the local police station, informed him of my illness, and got permission for an underage Joseph to get a licence and taxi me around town—I would never drive again.

I missed driving—the feeling of my hands on the wheel, the motion of steering, of being in control. Sometimes, when everyone was too busy to notice, I tiptoed to the garage and sat in the driver's seat of Bonica IV—she had been towed back from the brink of death, unlike me—with my hands on the wheel.

It was strange having Joseph drive me. When he went too fast, I would press my foot against the car floor as though the passenger side had its own set of brakes, and when I realised none existed, I became irascible.

‘You’re going too fast,’ I would snap.

Joseph would slow down.

‘*Ai*, now you’re pottering along like an old *senyora*.’

Off he would go again, too fast.

‘Don’t you know how to drive?’

Joseph’s face would fall. He would apologise, and I would feel terrible. The ruthless disease devouring my body had manipulated me into a ruthless, unforgiving man.

Joseph, I am sorry. You are a good son, the best son. I will never forget that winter’s day when you took my old bicycle out of the garage, hoisted me onto the seat, and—as I was too weak to pedal—pushed me along the path.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Retrospect

I attended the funeral of a local *senyor* by the name of Sebastiano Scarcella today. He died from an abscess of the liver on a dreary winter's day at Innisfail Hospital. My prayers have now changed from wishing to live to wishing to die at home in the marital bed, instead of at a cold, clinical hospital.

Sebastiano was only forty-one years old. He is survived by his wife, daughter and son. I am sixty-one, and I will not live to be sixty-two. Margarita will be a widow at forty-six. I cannot help but wonder if she will remarry.

Reverend Father Muldoon officiated Sebastiano's service at Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church.

It was a difficult day both mentally and physically. Sitting on the hard wooden pew was exhausting, and shortness of breath made speaking challenging. I relied on Margarita to relay pleasantries and condolences. Though they asked me little because I emit the smell of illness.

Sebastiano was then interred in the Catholic corner of Innisfail Cemetery. I felt as though I was attending my own funeral or, at the very least, being given a glimpse of it. My will to function is now extinguished, like a candle burnt down to the wick. I have retreated to bed and resolve never to leave it. I will die in this bed, not in a hospital.

Soon, I will meet my Maker. I have resolved to stop eating, to stop drinking water—not that I can consume much anyway. My concern now is not prolonging life but ending it as quickly and painlessly as possible. What cannot be cured must be endured. Ended. Finished.

The castle needs a crypt.

I should have built a crypt.

Every King has a crypt.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Request

I awake to find Margarita showing a strange boy around the marital room. I know it is not you, Joseph—his build is different. ‘*Ai*, good. You’re awake. Pep, this is Stanley Onaindia.’

Groggy, I look at her askance.

‘Stan-ley Oh-nah-in-dee-ah,’ she says louder.

I nod. I am not deaf, just confused, and defeated. I know the Onaindias—they are friends of ours—I just do not understand why the boy is in my room.

‘He’s going to help you, Pep.’

I nod again.

‘Okay?’

Another nod.

‘I’m going to make lunch.’

Margarita leaves. We are alone. Pots and pans clang and bang, and for some reason I am suddenly transported back to the day I arrived in Girona.

Antonia is in the kitchen making dinner. I am in the room, spitting into a rag, trying to clean my shoes.

Stanley walks towards me. To my shock, he reaches for the sheets. I recoil. He lifts up the cloth and retrieves a bedpan, along with my embarrassment. I am no longer a boy with elephantine ears playing hide-and-seek among the olive groves, but a mewling baby.

I have reverted, come full circle. How cruel that one is born a baby and dies one too. The bed has become a bassinet, and in this bassinet, I have nothing to do but stare at the ceiling and dwell.



Weeks have passed, and I have not become less embarrassed. I have resigned myself to Fate and Destiny's plans. I submit my ravaged body like an attacked animal on its last legs. I want only to die as suddenly and quickly as lightning and be spared the anguish of a protracted death. I will my body to surrender. The time has come to impart my final advice.

'Teresa. Go get Teresa,' I tell Stanley.

He obeys.

Teresa enters. I pat the bed. She sits down.

'Listen to me. Aldo isn't coming back for you. Find a good man, one who wants to stay here and work the castle.'

Tears well in her big brown eyes. She nods, but I fear behind it lies obstinacy. I fear it because she is like me.

'Go get your brother.'

'Sí, Pare.'

Teresa leaves, then Joseph enters and sits down.

'Look after your *mare* and sister for me.'

‘I will, Pare.’ Joseph swallows tightly.

‘You’re now the man of the *casa*.’

After Joseph leaves, I ask Stanley for a favour.

‘Stanley, do you like stories?’

‘I do, Senyor Paronella.’

‘Come, sit. I have one to tell you—and bring a pen and paper.’

He sits.

‘As I tell you this story, my story, I need you to do something for me. Can you do something for me?’

‘Anything, Senyor Paronella.’

‘Write down everything I say.’

He agrees.

‘I was born during a tempest...’

CHAPTER NINE

The Last of the Few Letters I Ever Write

T*o my dearest Teresa and Joseph,*

As I lie here in bed—my deathbed—a honeybee buzzes past my window and cruelly reminds me of the sole thing I long to forget: my waning mortality.

Bees, I have come to realise, represent Man in many ways. Like Common Man, they toil for the term of their natural lives only to have a bigger, stronger creature rob them of the fruits of their labour. Defence is futile, for if they defend themselves, they die a strange death—a sort of altruistic suicide. As I think this, my mind drifts back across the Seven Seas to the mythology of my youth.

Bees, my àvia told me many moons ago, bridge the Natural World to the Underworld. When I asked her why, she said it was because wild hives are almost always located in caves, and caves are the mortal entrance to the Underworld. As a boy, I came to fear caves and the wild hives I found in the cracks of rock walls, for it meant there was

an entrance to the Underworld nearby—and although I could not see it, I had no doubt it existed, just like air.

I fear crossing this Bridge of Death. The thought of my soul, my energy, floating across it and entering the mouth of a cave, engulfs me with despair, and like all men engulfed by despair, I dwell. I dwell on the past, the present, and the lack of a future. This dwelling has gained momentum of late—the buzzing has suddenly become incessant!—and I am transported back to my childhood, back to that distant day in the village when everything changed, when my life truly began.

It seems like only yesterday I was racing up the lane to Casa Soler, labouring in the olive groves, learning how to make xuixos under Senyor Puig's tutelage, talking with Senyor Adrià, watching the bulls run, journeying across the Seven Seas, hearing the Italians sing in the cane fields, fleeing the country, marrying your mare, and building this castle. All these lives live within me like a Russian doll.

At night, I pray you will be all right without me, that I have taught you right from wrong. For when all is said and done, my presence in your life is a season or a reason, but certainly not a lifetime.

I pray the sun will set behind my eyes. But death is yet to heed my wishes. It lingers. Sometimes I struggle to swallow my saliva, and at such times, I think of everything I have eaten over the course of my lifetime. Starvation is a lonely way to die. But I have realised one thing: you enter this world alone and leave it alone.

Though death lingers, I know it is close because strange, unexplainable things keep happening. At night, lights flicker, but no windows are open and no breeze stirs the trees. When there is a breeze, it is cool like the Pyrenees in winter even though the weather is hot. Morning or night, the clock is forever stopping at the same time: eleven past eleven.

I spy my mare, pare and àvia in the shadows, but they are not there, or so I am told. Whenever I venture outside to sit in the morning sun, a white feather always floats across my path, gently falling to rest at my feet. And there is an unusual abundance of butterflies—blue, black, white, orange, yellow.

I feel like an old baby, a barely breathing paradox, being sucked into the light of a strange, God-like womb. I have been ill for almost three seasons. I fear dying in a hospital instead of at home. In death, the poor and wealthy, the intelligent and foolish, are alike. Money and privilege buy many things, but not immortality. However, I concede, I have lived longer than others. Longer than Senyor Soler, longer than my mare, Stefano, Antoni, Farmer Jones, and Sebastiano.

I have been many things in life, among them a peasant and a King. But whether I am dying a rich or poor man, I do not know. It has been an adventurous vida, as my àvia had predicted all those years ago, and I have travelled in many different directions, like the wind did that cold winter's night I was born, but I am unsure if I have always taken the high road she spoke of. Sometimes I feel like I possessed something grand and wasted it—like a rich man gambling every last penny. Among the sadness and regret, I have come to realise one thing: life is a tempest, a thing to be weathered and endured.

I am not an idle senyor, as you know, and over these last few months I have decided to write my memoirs. These pages are for you both; for when I am gone, I will not be able to answer any of your questions. As you know, I am a storyteller. I am not, however, a writer—especially a letter writer—or even a reader. I left school too young. Teresa, am I not guilty of telling you to sew instead of reading a book?

You may wonder how I got these words down. Dear Stanley Onaindia wrote them for me.

SASHA PACINO

This is my story.

And my story is your story.

Your loving pare,

Always.

P.S. I am the man on whom thy tempests fell all night.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the story of José Paronella's life. While it is a work of fiction, it is inspired by true events. José Paronella was born in La Vall de Santa Creu, Girona, Catalonia, Spain on February 26, 1887, and immigrated to Queensland, Australia in 1913, where he earned his fortune and fled the Black Hand before later returning to build a castle and pleasure grounds known as Paronella Park. José died in his wife Margarita's arms from terminal cancer of the stomach at Innisfail Hospital at 6.30am on August 23, 1948. He is buried at Innisfail Cemetery. Margarita passed away on April 2, 1967. She was buried next to her husband. Their headstones have since been moved to the park.

I have attempted to draw an accurate and unexaggerated picture of his life. My interpretation of events is informed by extensive research, during which I consulted a range of primary and secondary sources including books, records, archives and local histories.

While several characters have been invented or omitted, most are taken from historical records. Many known and established facts about Paronella's life have been reproduced in this novel, and events have either been drawn from the record or are a result of speculation, meaning they are fictional likelihoods. For instance, Paronella working with confectioner Emili Puig—inventor of

Girona's most famous pastry, the *xuixo*—is not true. Puig is thought to have invented the pastry in the 1920s, a time when Paronella was in Australia, but this has been added for the purpose of storytelling. Additionally, the iconic red and white outfits worn during the Running of the Bulls were not popularised until the 1930s but have been included for dramatic effect. It is likewise unknown whether Paronella contracted the Spanish flu.

Ultimately, in order to compress a lifetime into a text less lengthy than an encyclopaedia, a little pruning has been done. A few events have consequently been changed or rearranged for literary ease. For example, Paronella's father died in 1905, but the year has been altered to 1913 to condense the story. No offence is intended towards living relatives of any character whose name I have borrowed in the service of telling Paronella's story; I hope you see it as the love letter to Queensland I intend it to be.

Several noteworthy books and articles have been written about Paronella, but foremost I am indebted to the research of Dena Leighton, author of *The Spanish Dreamer: A Biography of José Paronella*.

Other books I found useful include: *The Girl from Mena Creek: A Novel* by Grace Bogaert, *Catalonia: Art, Landscape, Architecture* by Barbara Borngässer, *Catalan: A Language of Spain* by A. Scott Britton, *The Spanish Experience in Australia* by Carmen Castelo, *Catalan: The Ultimate Beginners Learning Guide* by Guillem Figueras, *Grave Tales: Bruce Highway* by Helen Goltz and Chris Adams, *Basilisk: Township of South Johnstone* by Santina Lizzio, *Crossing the Bridge: Shire of Johnstone 1880—2008*, also by Lizzio, *Bulls before Breakfast* by Peter N. Milligan, *Pandemic: The Spanish Flu in Australia 1918—1920* by Ian W. Shaw and *Gaudí: The*

Complete Buildings by Rainer Zerbst. Noteworthy articles include 'We are Queenslanders: Contemporary Multicultural Tapestry of Peoples,' Section C by Cristina Poyatos Matas (of the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland publication); 'The Portrait: José Paronella,' retrieved from the Catalan Footprint in Australia; 'A Personal Account of the 1918 Cyclone' by Reg Elder; 'Unravelling an Enigma: In Search of the Truth of North Queensland's Black Hand' by Adam Grossetti; and 'Queensland's Spanish Castle' by Simon Miller.

The ruins of Paronella's castle can still be seen today.

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