

## Captive

The peppers: you had to admit you loved the peppers. They hung in tangled bunches from the rafters of every cottage, drying in the thin November sun, deep crimson against the whitewashed walls. They were the best part of every meal: the individual peppers roasted over the open flame until the thin outer membrane burnt black and peeled away, leaving the succulent flesh, served with a sprinkle of olive oil. Now, as you walked down the street, your mouth watered at the smell of peppers roasting in each kitchen. You were hungry. You had refused breakfast, claiming an upset stomach. You couldn't eat another sticky sweet roll.

For once, you'd been allowed out on your own. Just down to the Post Office, your daily ritual, to check if anything had arrived. But all week, they'd sent Santiago, the eleven-year old, down on his bike in your place.

"*Siéntese*," they would insist, pushing you down to watch yet more TV. "Sit, sit."

You'd been sitting for two weeks and it was driving you crazy.

You looked over your shoulder to see if you were being followed. Last Tuesday, you'd made a detour, walking out beyond the straggling cottages at the end of the road, past the potato fields, towards the line of leafless beech trees meandering along the river bank. The crisp autumn wind had felt good on your cheeks.

But then you'd heard the sound of the pick-up truck chugging up the track behind you. Carmen's two older brothers had been sent to retrieve you. You couldn't shrug them off. You'd been bundled into the front seat and returned to the television.

"What on earth were you doing out there?"

"Just walking," you'd said.

They stared as if you'd said you were walking on the moon.

They seemed to have forgotten that you had walked into Sartaguda of your own free will. You were in danger of forgetting yourself. You'd been on a six-month adventure, travelling around Western Europe. You'd hiked in the Pyrenees, picked grapes in the south of France, stayed in hostels on the Mediterranean coast. And then hitch-hiked into Spain, heading for Carmen's family home. You'd worked with Carmen for two years, in a hospital in North London. When she returned home last year, she'd issued general invitations to all the girls to come and visit. You were the first to take her up on it.

A gaggle of elderly men was already setting up a game of *boules* in the square opposite the church. They were dressed alike, in baggy overalls and jackets, with identical black berets and swarthy complexions. They stopped and stared as you approached. Two weeks ago, you'd brought their game to a halt. They must have spotted you when you were a tiny speck on the dusty road that led into the village from the highway. You'd walked the last five kilometers, rucksack on your back, the world your oyster. Walked right up to this silent welcoming committee, and asked in your faltering Spanish how to find your way to Carmen Moreno's house. One of the men had nodded wordlessly, and gestured that you should follow him.

That was your last act as a free woman.

You ignored them now as you passed the square and headed to the Post Office: a simple storefront just beyond the church, whitewashed stucco like the other buildings, cool and dark inside. An elderly woman dressed in black was the only customer, her gnarled finger tips fumbling with coins at the counter. You held back, not wanting to rush her. You tried to brace yourself for disappointment. The mail must take forever to get here, you reasoned. Yet you couldn't suppress a little flutter of excitement. Today, perhaps, there would be something.

This was decades before e-mail or Facebook or smart-phone texting. It would never have occurred to you to place an international phone call; like telegrams, these were strictly for life-threatening emergencies. Back then, the only way to hear news from home while traveling was via flimsy blue aerograms, sent to *Poste Restante* at pre-determined destinations. You had given *Poste Restante* Sartaguda to everyone. Surely someone would write. Even if it was only your mother.

The old woman shuffled towards the door. A middle-aged woman with a stout bosom was the only person behind the counter. Last week, a very young woman had been in charge, smiling shyly as she went through the motions of shuffling the same three crumpled manila envelopes that must have taken up residence in the *Poste Restante* box years ago. Now, you tried to peer around the large bosom to see if there was anything new. Before you could speak, the postmistress quietly shook her head.

*"Nada, señorita."*

*Nada.*

You desperately wanted news from home. You especially wanted to hear from Jeff. You needed to know how he'd reacted when he'd heard the news. You'd written to him from

Marseilles, keeping it brief. But Susie was back in London now and was sure to have told everyone what had happened in the vineyards.

More than that: a letter was the only way you could see as a way out of here. If you received a letter, you could make up a story, a family emergency – anything that would justify your escape. You spent the wee hours weighing the options. You weren't religious or superstitious, but inventing a seriously ill parent seemed like bad karma. Perhaps your grandmother, who had died three years ago, could be called into service – resurrected briefly and then placed at death's door. Surely that would not create too much cosmic retribution.

You'd never felt so trapped in your life. Your idea had been to stay – what? Perhaps a week at most. Now it seemed impossible to leave. They wouldn't even let you walk down to the river. Your every move was scrutinized.

You couldn't sleep at night. You were not yet familiar with sleepless nights triggered by a high-stress job, or menopause, or a teenage daughter not home by 3a.m. You were young, very young – and you took sleep for granted. But now, night after night you lay awake, tossing in the narrow single bed with its pink flowered sheets, the blood thumping at your temples, listening to the clock in the church tower usher in one o'clock.....two o'clock.....three o'clock....four. You tried to re-wind the tape, imagining yourself walking backwards towards the highway, climbing onto the bus and getting away.

Here's what you couldn't understand: why did Carmen want to keep you here? It wasn't as if you were getting along. After the initial joyous reunion, when the old man – who turned out to be Carmen's grandfather – had delivered you to the front door, and there'd been screams and hugs and effusive introductions to the neighbors, the cousins, the cousins' cousins – once that had subsided, you were left staring at the unmistakable fact that you had nothing in common.

It had been different back in London. Carmen had been one of the boldest, stirring the others on. Unafraid to stand up to the boss.

“No,” she’d say in her heavily accented English, jutting out her square chin with a look of fierce determination. “He cannot be stopping us if we want zis union.”

And join the union you all did. To celebrate, you and Carmen together with two of the Irish girls had taken the train to Brighton for the day. You’d walked arm in arm along the West Pier, giggled at the lop-sided images of yourselves in the distorting mirrors, licked soft-squeeze ice cream cones in the salty breeze.

But now, Carmen’s idea of fun was to watch TV all day. Or spend hours visiting her vast extended family, gossiping with the women of the house – none of whom appeared to work outside the home. You understood less than one word in ten. Initially, Carmen found it entertaining to translate everything that was said, but after two days, she couldn’t be bothered anymore. Most of it was meaningless for you anyway. You didn’t care if Hermosa got her hair styled like Eva’s or not. You had no idea if green or blue was Yolanda’s best color. You had no opinion on whether Marianela should marry Juan or Felipe. For days, you thought Marianela was the shy one with the deep blue eyes and prominent cheekbones that turned pink when she laughed – but no, that was Marcella; Marianela, you finally realized, was a character in a soap opera.

You tried to help out in the kitchen. To do the dishes at least. Perhaps learn how to prepare those peppers. But Carmen’s mother shook her head and gently guided you back to the sofa. And Carmen pouted, as if your offer showed up her own refusal to help with the chores – her protest perhaps at having been summoned back from London, and confined to the village.

Which you could understand, in a way. But back in front of the TV, you thought you might possibly go mad.

In France, your A-level French had danced into action; within a few weeks you were practically fluent. Here, you were tongue-tied, fumbling through your Spanish phrase book, muttering inane platitudes: *Si, me gusto mucho*.

That evening, as you joined the family for the huge, protracted dinner-time ritual, Carmen's brothers and uncle complained that the potato harvest was behind schedule. As best you could understand it, a vital piece of machinery had broken, and they would have to pick the crop by hand. They needed all hands on deck.

"Let's help," you said to Carmen, as the sautéed green beans were passed around the table. This was the fifth course, each item presented individually, washed down with another glass of wine.

"No." Carmen glared at you.

"Why not? It would be fun."

You yearned for physical activity. You must have gained ten pounds. And you weren't afraid of hard work. It would be like picking grapes. The red stains were only now beginning to fade from your hands, four weeks after the end of the *vendange*.

"No." Carmen was firm.

But Carmen was out-manuevered. There was a lot of laughter and bantering which you couldn't follow, and then it was somehow decided that you would indeed join the crew the next day.

Carmen was grumpy but you loved it. Working in the fields: this was what staying in a small village in northern Spain should be about. You rode on the back of the pickup, legs

dangling off the tailgate, the early morning mist hovering over the olive groves. You passed other teams of workers, some in horse-drawn carts. The work was hard and primitive: bent over double, digging with small hand-held tools, unchanged from the work of peasants centuries ago. But you didn't mind. For once you had an appetite for lunch; you bit into the egg and potato *tortilla* and crusty bread which Carmen's mother had wrapped in a red gingham cloth. You gazed up at the golden hills in the distance, the midday sun warm on your face.

Your back and legs were still strong from your work in the vineyards. You thought of those days: the long rows of vines skirting the hillsides; the grape juice oozing into the cuts on your fingers; Jean Pierre brushing his hand against yours each time he exchanged your full bucket; *le petit mas* at the edge of the field where you and Susie had stayed – until torrential rain interrupted the harvest for a week. The *mas* had flooded, sending you both to the boys' flat in the village for refuge – and more. Much more.

All evening, Carmen complained bitterly: her back was sore and her fingernails filthy. To sabotage any suggestion that you should return the next day, she hatched an alternative plan. You (the girls) would go to Calahorra for the day. You would all get your hair done. Your hair was pulled and tweaked and declared to be in desperate need of attention. You weren't consulted. You were dragged along, and somehow could find no way to resist. Carmen and her cousin insisted on paying for everything: the haircut you didn't want, a bracelet you knew you would never wear, the lunch in the white-tablecloth restaurant. You weren't even allowed to choose a postcard for your mother; you selected one with a landscape of hills and trees, but Olga snatched that away and bought one with a photograph of the church instead.

You spent the day saying *Gracias, gracias* when what you wanted to say was *Get me out of here*.

The next day at the Post Office: still no letters. You pulled out the postcard and purchased a stamp for *Inglaterra*. On the bench outside, you composed a few cheery lines for your mother. *Having a wonderful time....* You would never confess to being miserable.

You dragged yourself back to the house and endured another huge lunch. Carmen was in a good mood and sat next to you for the first time in days, translating whatever you didn't understand. Another cousin, Juanita, was visiting with an adorable two-year old, whose Spanish was on par with yours. The boy waddled up to you and climbed on your lap. Everyone laughed and clapped. They took snapshots of you with the toddler. He smelled like soft peaches. You began to see how Carmen might be happy here, nestled in this enormous family. You felt guilty for plotting your escape.

There was talk of another trip to Calahorra. Clothes-shopping was on the agenda. Top of the list: a new outfit for you. You cringed. You'd been comfortable for months in your worn jeans and baggy khakis. Since your arrival in the village, you'd been resisting, refusing to compare yourself to Carmen and her relatives, determined to stay true to yourself. *I am my own person, I am not like you. I like these clothes.*

And you were on a strict budget. The night before, you'd conducted an inventory, displaying your remaining funds on the bedspread upstairs: eighty pounds in travelers' checks; two hundred francs from your work in the *vendange*; three hundred and twenty six *pesetas*. That was it. One good thing about being here: you weren't spending any money.

But you couldn't help seeing yourself through their eyes, and feeling ashamed. Your jeans were torn now along the seam of your inner thigh. You had nothing but faded t-shirts and one shapeless sweater. You had no dress-up clothes with you on this trip. You'd had no need for them. And how would they fit in your rucksack?



They wouldn't. So what were you doing in the shoe shop trying on black pumps with pointy toes? How did you come away with a white blouse and black skirt purchased by Carmen's Aunt Maria? Why did you thank her profusely?

At least you spotted the train station that day. And made an excuse to go inside. *I have to go to the toilet.*

"Again? You went in the restaurant."

"*Dolor de estómago,*" you said clutching your belly.

You came out clutching the timetable for the Barcelona train. And quickly hid it deep in your pocket.

Back home in the village, everyone admired the spoils of the day: a dozen shopping bags brimming with new dresses, cardigans, brightly-colored scarves. Carmen had bought new shoes identical to yours, which her mother found hysterically funny for some reason. Olga had a deep blue shawl made from the softest cashmere, which looked incredibly expensive to your untrained eye. You couldn't understand where the money came from. How could potato and pepper-picking be so lucrative?

Carmen declared that you still needed something to wear at the Christmas ball.

Christmas? You could barely conceal your panic.

My God, that was a month away. Time to get serious about a getaway plan.

But the mail..... You felt compelled to wait until your letters arrived. You went to the Post Office every day.

Still *nada*.

You couldn't stand being so passive. You would have to make a move. You started to mention Barcelona. You invented a friend who lived there. The weather turned much colder in

the village. You made a point of observing that it was no warmer than London. That you were trying to avoid the English winter. You showed a great deal of interest in the TV weather reports for the Costa Brava. It was warm and sunny there.

Finally a letter arrived. But not at the Post Office. Carmen's grandfather extracted it from his overalls at the end of the day, handing it to you with a toothless grin. You wondered how long he'd been holding on to it.

It was a letter from Jeff.

A terse, angry letter. He was upset. *Heard all about your lion-tamer....* Susie was talking all right; those were her words, her little joke. Jean Pierre and Marcel were itinerant workers, had done a stint as circus hands over the summer. Jeff was not amused. He seemed to have forgotten your agreement. It was supposed to be okay for you each to see other people.

Well, at least now you knew. He was upset. You would write a soothing letter, and give him time to get over it. Definitely not head home yet. Do some more traveling. You really did want to go to Barcelona. You had not a friend there exactly, but a contact, a name. A leftist. Who supposedly spoke fluent French. With a couch you could probably sleep on. It was an exciting time politically. Just a year after the death of Franco.

Yolanda's birthday was the following Sunday. A celebration was planned: back to Calahorra, for dinner and then a discotheque at one of the bars. You studied the timetable. There was a night train for Barcelona, leaving at 1a.m.

That was it!

You stared at that thin column of numbers and thought of the liberation that they offered. Arrival in Barcelona at 9 a.m. the following morning. The joy of it! You imagined exploring the streets, walking for hours, sitting in cafés, answering to no one.

You just had to figure out the best strategy: give them a few days to get used to the idea, or go for the element of surprise? Throw your rucksack into the back of the car at the last moment? You couldn't quite see yourself doing that. It seemed too ungrateful.

"I've had a letter from my mother," you said. You hadn't, but Jeff's would substitute. You'd kept it carefully hidden in case Carmen decided to snoop. "She wants me to come home."

"Oh."

"Next week." You could sense this was working.

"Oh."

"I'm going to catch the train to Barcelona on Saturday."

"But you have to stay for Yolanda's birthday party."

"All right. I'll go right after that. Perhaps there's a night train." For good measure, you added: "I'm homesick. I need to go home."

You didn't mention the London winter, and neither did they.

Now you couldn't sleep because your body twitched with excitement. Only two more days! You had twinges of guilt. You should be more grateful for everything they'd done. You and Carmen were getting along better, now that the end was in sight. She dragged you off after breakfast – not telling you where you were going of course – but led you to a warehouse for a morning of packing red peppers into crates, and you reminisced about the London days. You laughed together at the memory of Mr. Johnston's face when the result of the union vote was announced. You updated her with what news you had about Moira, Beth and the others girls. Carmen confessed that she missed those times. You asked if she might return to London one day. She gently shook her head no. You didn't ask why not.

On your last day, no one objected when you said you wanted to walk down to the river on your own. You stayed out for two hours.

And you enjoyed that last evening out in Calahorra. You drank four large glasses of *sangria*. You danced with Carmen and Olga and Yolanda and Marcella and Eva, laughing through the noise and the smoke. You danced ferociously even though the black pointy shoes were killing you.

But later, when the train pulled away from the station and glided into the moonless countryside, you walked to the end of the carriage, opened the window, and hurled the shoes into the darkness.