

## Darkness in Granada

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1

Valentina looks exhausted, thought Phillip appraising his former spouse as she draped her bare arms over the white metal gate to his villa. Her pale skin reflected the dying pink rays of the late December sun as it sunk from view behind a distant mountain ridge. The rolling countryside surrounding Phillip's villa was speckled with white buildings, olive groves, and fruit trees. Long shadows merged slowly into the gathering twilight gloom. On the Mediterranean coast, three kilometers below, the halogen streetlights of Nerja flickered on, lending an orange glow below the ever-changing kaleidoscope of heavenly color. Another stunningly beautiful Andalusian sunset closing out what had been, until this moment, a wonderful idyllic Sunday with dear friends, excellent food, and vino tinto.

Valentina's ice-blue eyes glared hard into his. He stood transfixed with his arms around the slender waists of his dark-haired fiancée, Amanda, and her best friend Salome, the famous Flamenco dancer. He stared right back.

"You needed two women to replace me?" said Valentina finally in English. Her Russian accent still oozing seduction as she rolled her tongue languidly around the r of replace, but her sad expression belied her attempt at humor. Her magnificent long blond hair had lost its former gloss, her face looked thinner, still beautiful, yet vulnerable.

"Your cooking skills left much to be desired," said Phillip. "Too much borsch. What do you want?"

"I need a bed for me and my son."

"We're not a hotel, especially for ex-wives," said Phillip.

"I don't care where I sleep but the little one needs a bath, a proper bed, and some healthy food."

The rear window of the small grey saloon buzzed and slid downward. A boy with shaggy blond hair stuck out his angelic face, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. "Mama, why have we stopped?" he said in Russian.

Amanda gasped. Phillip gulped.

The boy's face was a mini version of Phillip's.

"Now you understand," said Valentina.

Phillip nodded and looked at Amanda, his pulse racing.

What does my love think of all this? He thought. And why does she seem so happy? I'd have thought ex-wives turning up unannounced with a boy that could be my son would have infuriated or at least concerned her.

"They will stay here," said Amanda. "I'll go and prepare the remaining guest room. Salome," she added indicating her bandaged arm. "Come and help."

The two women went inside whispering. Salome walking stiffly with her bad back. Phillip clicked the gate control and watched as it slid back to reveal Valentina's slimmer but still shapely curves dressed in baggy jeans and a loose blouse.

Valentina smiled to herself. Her culinary skills might have been rubbish, but she could see instantly that Phillip hadn't forgotten the intensity of their lovemaking. Men, she thought, they are so easy.

"Your women appear to be injured," said Valentina. "I trust that was nothing to do with you?"

"Of course, not," said Phillip. "But that is none of your business."

Valentina regarded him. "Very well," she said turning then opening the rear door. "Come, Sasha, and meet your real father," she said in Russian.

Sasha climbed down, walked over to Phillip, stopped before him, and held out his hand. "Hello,

Papa,” he said in unaccented English.

Phillip looked him up and down. A tall, skinny boy with steely blue, curious eyes, shaggy blond hair, and a missing bottom front tooth. He reminded Phillip of a photo of himself in the family album. It was even the same missing tooth. Emotion welled over him.

Valentina watched him like a hawk, aware of what Phillip must be struggling with. It’s not every day unknown flesh and blood turn up out of nowhere.

Phillip squatted, returned Sasha’s inquiring gaze, took his hand, and shook it. “Welcome, my son,” he said in Russian. “Forgive me if I seem a little shocked. But you have to be the most wonderful surprise of my life.”

Sasha threw himself into Phillip’s arms. Phillip hugged him. He’d only just met this boy but the certainty that he was his son was never in doubt.

Valentina climbed back into the car and maneuvered it into Phillip’s drive. She stopped then watched them for a moment, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Phillip released Sasha and stood, his knees creaking. He continued holding the boy’s hand as he opened the driver’s door. Valentine climbed out, went to the rear of the car, and opened the trunk. She removed one of two large suitcases. The tears continued to flow. Phillip and Sasha had immediately bonded. She’d been confident that Sasha would but wasn’t sure if Phillip had changed; perhaps resentment after the acrimonious divorce had twisted him against her. But he was still the same. Soft and trustworthy. A brief moment of regret made her shudder. She’d been stupid and was paying the price. If only she hadn’t been so impulsive, they could still be together. But she shook it off. It was, how it was. Finally, Sasha was with his father. And whichever woman was Phillip’s partner would make a fine stepmother. Perhaps both of them, anything went nowadays. More importantly, Sasha would be safe here; safe and loved.

## 2

Detective Inspector Leon Prado parked next to the many trucks and vans in front of his regular café on the outskirts of Ronda. He climbed out, but then remembered his wife’s parting words from under the cozy warm bed covers at their home in the old town.

“Wrap up warm,” Inma had insisted. “In your mid-fifties, you need to worry about your circulation.”

He buttoned his thick winter coat against the hard frost, made sure his tweed cap was on tight over his thick silver hair and at the preferred angle, then headed toward the steamed-up entrance.

The place was buzzing with drivers enjoying their early Monday morning infusions. He nodded at several acquaintances and took his customary seat by the window. He unbuttoned his coat, shifted the Christmas tinsel and fairy lights draped across the glass, then wiped away the condensation with a serviette to check his car as more vehicles arrived. He didn’t want to be blocked in, as often happened at this time of day.

He scoured the bar area looking for a waiter, nodded to Pepe, who hardly acknowledged him he was so busy but that was all Prado needed to do. They knew what he wanted. While he waited for his breakfast, he watched the barista take down another Serrano ham suspended from the rail over the bar, remove the conical fat collector, mount the leg into a stand, and attack it with a razor-sharp carving knife. Once the outer skin had been removed, revealing the succulent dark pink flesh, he began slicing wafer-thin bite-size pieces at an unbelievable speed. Minutes later, Pepe served his toasted mollete, with local olive oil, and a café solo.

“Buenos días, Pepe,” said Prado frowning as he wrestled with the aluminum lid of the prepackaged clear plastic container. He hated these stupid European Union health and safety laws. Fine olive oil

should be served in glass or ceramic bottles, where it could breathe and be easily poured without spilling. Customers should be able to use as much or as little as they preferred to minimize waste.

“Hola, Inspector,” said Pepe clearing the next table then almost running back to the kitchen.

This was the time of day when Prado did his best thinking. He ignored phone calls, the regulars left him alone and he could chew the delicious bread roll, in as much peace as forty men chattering over jaunty seasonal music would allow. But he was acclimatized to that and was able to shut it out completely.

His mind meandered back to the lunch at Phillip’s yesterday. He wished he could barbecue meat as well as that, then perhaps his family might come around more often. His burnt burgers and half raw sausages were avoided like the plague. Perhaps he’d ask Phillip to help him master the art of the grill. The possibilities of a terrace packed with family enjoying his culinary masterpieces flashed through his mind while he enjoyed his breakfast.

One day, he thought, as he bounced back to reality.

It had been an interesting seven months since heading up a new department in the National Police. It had been an eye-opener. In his previous position, as head of the serious crimes squad throughout Andalucía, he’d been buried in the sordid world of drugs and associated gang busting. The vile things these greedy animals did to each other for ego, power, and money had depressed him, but he was determined that Spanish streets should be rid of the scum and had become obsessed with catching them. However, his relentless drive to arrest such delinquent fools had kept him away from his family. He’d ignored his wife’s yearning for company and missed his boy’s important milestones. Eventually, Inma had enough of the endless broken promises to be home and had thrown him out. He’d found solace in the whiskey bottle in the loneliness of a tiny, rented apartment located near his office in the comisaría in central Málaga. On occasions, he’d slept at his desk. Then the kidnapping of a teenage Danish girl had gone dreadfully wrong. He’d been pushed sideways into what he and everyone had presumed was a dead-end job to prevent him from committing yet more carnage.

As the sole member of the new department for crimes involving foreigners, he’d been given an office next to the station chief on the top floor under the pretext of it appearing to be a promotion. However, he and everyone knew that he was being watched like a hawk. It made him feel like a naughty schoolboy.

But it hadn’t turned out so badly after all.

The job was far less physically demanding, most of it cerebral, and much could be done by teleworking.

He’d found time to reconcile with his wife and now grown boys away at university in Sevilla. Life was sweet once more.

He finished his coffee and resumed the ninety-minute journey down to Málaga center. His first task was to review the Crown case with el jefe, his boss. He mulled over the details as he drove.

It was a grey morning as Prado joined the tail end of the morning rush hour on the tree-lined Avenida de Andalucía. The stop, start, gradually untangled as he crossed the bridge over the currently dry Rio Guadalmedina where he turned into the maze of narrow streets of the Casco Antiguo, old town. He passed the Teatro Cervantes, turned into Calle Ramos Marín, and arrived at the comisaría. He returned the pool car to the underground garage, went up to the top floor in the lift, knocked on his boss’s door and went straight in.

He found Jefe Superior, Provincia de Málaga: Francisco Gonzalez Ruiz, standing at the picture window gazing over the bustling Plaza de la Merced. Office workers scurried across the former medieval marketplace to their respective buildings. Language students ambled in small groups from the several cafes to their daily lectures chatting animatedly.

Prado noticed his boss’s uniform jacket was hanging over the back of his desk chair. Almost unheard of, thought Leon, half-naked at work. There must be something special cooking. Prado

couldn't help but notice that his chief was staring at the statue of the artist Pablo Picasso. He was sitting on a bench at the opposite corner of the tree-lined square in front of his birthplace. Two attractive women were perched on either side of his bronze likeness, sitting on the bench having their photo taken by a young man.

"Are you watching the pretty girls or is the statue inspiring you?" said Prado.

El jefe turned and indicated that Prado should take a seat. "You were right," said el jefe frowning. "The great man has stirred my grey cells into action. Not that you'd notice."

"Wasn't he a bit of a womanizer?" said Prado grinning.

"He was an artist," said el jefe. "Form, shape, and texture dominated his life."

"Especially the female of the species."

"And it's precisely his skills at representing them on canvas that might help us resolve the Crown case," said el jefe sitting down. "But before we lose ourselves in that, I'd like to review progress since forming your new department."

"Where would you like to begin, Sir?" said Prado.

"Frankly, Leon, after leading the fast-paced serious crime squad for nearly twenty years, I was skeptical that you could adjust to working on your own on more dreary cases, but I'm pleased to say that you have surprised me. I'm impressed by how you have compensated for your lack of linguistic talent by surrounding yourself with excellent voluntary translators."

"Phillip and Amanda are far more than just interpreters, Sir," said Prado.

"Remind me why."

"When I met Phillip Armitage at the Guardia Civil in Nerja, he was a lonely, ex-British soldier in his early forties licking his wounds after an acrimonious divorce. He ran an internet guide to Spain which, at the time, he was finding somewhat tedious and his considerable language talents were underutilized. Now, after helping me solve my first three cases, he has rediscovered his lust for life and proven himself an asset to our police force. He not only helps with English, German, and Russian speakers but provides amazing insight into their culture and knows how they think. His assistance in the Crown investigation has been invaluable."

"I agree, and Amanda?"

"Amanda Salisbury is thirty-three years old, American by birth but has lived here since she was seven. Her father was stationed at the joint Naval base in Rota, near Cadiz. Her mother is of Moroccan origins and insisted her daughter grew up with equal exposure to both parental cultures. She speaks Arabic, French, English and her Spanish is better than mine. Her videography skills contributed to solving both our first two cases and her feminine intuition is amazing."

"And now they are engaged to each other?"

"Yes, but they don't let that interfere with the help they provide."

"Does that mean you wish to continue working with them?"

"Yes, even if I had full time assistance but I think we should consider giving them some sort of recognition for their services. They do after all work for nothing and relish giving something back to their adopted country."

"For which we are grateful. What do you suggest?"

"We could at least pay their expenses promptly and a word of encouragement from you in front of the team here would be well received. Most know them by now and all show respect despite them being foreigners."

"I'll give it some thought. Now, where are we with the Crown case?"

"Four adults working together seeking retribution against Marquez, their former headmaster, and abuser when they were teenagers at school, is a conspiracy, not a case," said Prado.

"Call it what you like, but where are we?"

"After thirty odd fruitless years hunting down Marquez, I believe that something occurred two

years ago to reinvigorate their campaign. It prompted them to commit serious crimes to flush out their adversary. Risking their liberty in such a fashion suggests desperation. It's as if their lives will be worth nothing unless they can exact their own form of justice."

"Perhaps they were concerned old age might kill Marquez off before they could find him," said el jefe.

"Possible, but I'm inclined toward an unforeseen event of some sort. Worrying about Marquez dying before they could find him wasn't anything new."

"You could be right," said el jefe. "I have to say that I was impressed by their inventiveness. I've not come across anyone trying to flush out their adversary using his favorite hobbies as bait. But what a weird mix of preferences? I can only assume that Marquez must have had one hell of a fucked-up childhood to become obsessed by perverted sex, illegal bullfight gambling, religious artifacts, and a penchant for Picasso paintings, especially his muses. What do you propose to do next?"

"We have Malcolm Crown in jail awaiting trial for setting up a sex trafficking ring and dark web voyeur website that included abducted underage teens," said Prado. "Patrick O'Reilly established an illegal bullfight gambling service. Sonia Augustin used her restoration workshop as a front for stealing precious religious artifacts and auctioning them off online. It leaves us with one victim, still out there hunting for Marquez. We have no idea who he or she is, or where Marquez is hiding. My instincts tell me that we shouldn't wait for the fourth victim to call the shots. We need to be proactive in flushing them both out and I suggest that we use the one remaining passion of Marquez that has not been exploited."

"Picasso?" said el jefe.

"Correct, Sir."

"Have you seen this?" said el jefe sliding over a small pamphlet.

Prado picked it up and speed read both sides. It advertised a Christmas exhibition at the Parador Hotel located in the Alhambra Palace in Granada. 'Picasso and his Muses' was the title of the event. The inauguration was due at lunchtime on the coming Friday, the day of the El Gordo Christmas Lottery draw; in four days. It would close the day before Los Reyes Magos, on the afternoon of the fifth of January. The chief executive of the state-owned Parador Hotel chain would introduce the mayor of Granada, who would officiate. He was to thank Anne Pennington, the American owner of the collection for allowing these rare paintings to be moved from her private gallery at home in Granada city to a high-security conference room in the hotel. The American Ambassador to Spain would also be attending from Madrid along with several distant relatives of the Picasso family.

"Big guns for a relatively small event," said Prado.

"If you knew your Picasso, this is no minor happening," said el jefe. "These paintings haven't seen daylight for over thirty years. Every Picasso lover in the world won't be able to resist this and it's been promoted heavily through art connoisseur media."

"May I safely assume that you want me to hijack this event to flush out Marquez?"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking and with luck, the fourth member of the conspiracy. They are just as desperate to locate Marquez as we are."

"I'm not sure if the paintings on their own would be enough for Marquez to risk revealing himself," said Prado.

"That's exactly why I was gazing at the great man," said el jefe. "Seeking some kind of signal from him."

The mid-morning sun chose that moment to illuminate the square. Something metallic flashed on the hand of one of the women by Picasso as the sun faded quickly behind a cloud.

"That's it," said Prado. "Do you remember the religious artifacts that Amanda and Phillip discovered in Vélez-Málaga when they were helping the Flamenco dancer Salome Mendosa look into her birth family background?"

“The Las Claras treasure, of course,” said el jefe. “What about it?”

“Have you considered adding it to the exhibition?” said Prado. “With his favorite paintings and artifacts all under the same roof. Marquez should be wetting himself.”

“That should do it,” said el jefe. “But there is just one tiny complication.”

“Several complications, Sir. Salome, our beloved Flamenco dancer, and owner of the treasure might not cooperate. The hotel won’t have a spare room near the paintings, and can we arrange all this and publicize it in time?”

“I’m sure all those can be dealt with, Leon. But how the hell do we do it without an obvious police presence?”

“I know exactly how,” said Prado. “And there won’t be a cop in sight.”