

*The Valencia
Expatriate Club*

The Valencia Expat Club

a novel



June Patrick

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For Thomas and Zephyr.
My adventure team for life.

A Note to My Readers

Thank you so much for choosing to spend the next few hours with me. My romantic, escapist stories were born out of a deep love of travel and the culture, food, wine, history, and people that come with it.

Every story is thoroughly researched, and I have traveled to every location I write about. The people and places are based on my personal experiences and interviews, which might differ from other people's experiences. I do my very best to capture language and culture accurately. But I am human! I do make mistakes and appreciate your understanding.

Happy travels!

Love, June



Chapter 1

There are exactly seventy-two ceiling tiles in Dr. Martinez’s downtown couples-counseling office. I know this because I counted them three times while James explained why we should get divorced, his voice competing with the angry buzz of fluorescent lights that made everyone look like they were starring in their own personal horror film.

I’d seen it coming—had practically penciled it into my Google Calendar between “Buy more coffee filters” and “Cancel joint Costco membership”—but that didn’t make it any less surreal.

I never really expected divorce to be pretty. You see the slow unraveling of marriages every day in Netflix dramas and in celebrity gossip columns. You think you know what’s coming. But the reality of it still impales you like a lance.

James wasn’t wrong. We *should* be getting divorced. But that didn’t change the fact that it made me feel like an utter failure. What kind of overachiever fails at a marriage at thirty?

Now, three months and twenty-seven passive-aggressive exchanges later, I sat at my home coffee table, staring at final divorce papers while trying not to cry into my fourth cup of coffee. The

mug said “Best Wife Ever”—a white elephant gift from James’s office Christmas party last year. What a fun little joke.

But that is just how life went, wasn’t it? The realities rarely match our expectations. Honestly, I think our marriage had been unraveling since the ink dried on the license—the threads of connection fraying one by one like my favorite college sweater I refuse to throw away. Our nights grew quieter. The distance between us in bed stretched wider than the San Andreas Fault. My silk pajamas gathered dust in the drawer, replaced by shapeless T-shirts that matched the apathy settling over our home like Bay Area fog. The laughter stopped. The charming anecdotes became obnoxiously redundant.

Finally, we faced the truth. No babies to bind us. No major assets complicating things. No love to renew us. The next thing we knew, we were arguing over who got to keep the good ladle.

I sighed, looking around the room. I was going to miss this house more than my actual marriage. We’d gotten lucky and managed to snag a little town house across from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park when the registered sex offender renting it had died in the back bedroom and the owner couldn’t give it away. (Hey, in this housing market, you take what you can get, even if it comes with a questionable history and the occasional unexplained creak.)

We’d turned the cozy hamlet of blue paint with a brick fireplace tucked away in the eucalyptus into a home. But now I resisted the urge to pull up the Zillow listing. The idea that it was on the market was too painful to stomach.

But neither of us could afford to buy the other out at the current market value. So our lawyers thought it best we sell and take our wins. At least the market was up, and once it sold, I’d have a little nest egg. I sighed. It would probably be too depressing living here anyway, surrounded by the ghosts of failure.

“Focus, Dahlia,” I muttered, pushing aside the papers to stare at my laptop screen. The marketing campaign for artisanal dog treats wasn’t going to write itself, and those divorce therapy sessions definitely weren’t paying for themselves. But my brain kept circling back to the fact that I was about to be just another statistic, another ex–Mrs. Something, stepping into an unexpected future with nothing but a collection of self-help books and an iron mermaid bottle opener I fought way too hard to keep. I was beginning to think what I thought was happiness was really just an easy contentment. An arrangement that was simple enough to sink into and build a day-to-day life that made sense on paper.

Grr. There was no way I could focus.

I abandoned my laptop—sorry, bougie dog treats—and wandered into the living room, where moving boxes formed a cardboard city of shattered dreams.

Memories of happier times flickered briefly, only to be overshadowed by the present emptiness. James had the decency to check into an Airbnb until we sorted out the living arrangements. How magnanimous.

Desperate for a distraction, I pulled a box from the closet I’d been meaning to sort through. I’d mostly packed everything for the real estate staging, but I had a few remaining boxes to check. One upside to turning your life inside out is the chance to purge a bit. It’s amazing how much detritus a life can collect—school papers, birthday cards, kitschy knickknacks from weekends in Vegas.

Inside one box, I found an old photo album Mom gave me when I left for college, back when I thought I had life figured out. Like most things from that era—including my questionable dedication to Forever 21 bandage dresses—I was spectacularly wrong. I smiled, running my hand over the worn, genuine leather. I delicately opened and turned the pages, laughing at a chunky baby

Dahlia with rubber-band wrists and sporting probably the worst floral dress I'd ever seen.

I smiled as memories graced the pages—Disneyland and summer pool days. Awkward middle school dances—okay, seriously, who was monitoring my fashion choices?

Then my fingers traced over a photo that made my heart squeeze: six-year-old me in my grandmother's garden in Valencia, Spain, both of us covered in dirt and smiling like we'd discovered buried treasure instead of just planting tomatoes. Abuela's garden was a maze of herbs and vegetables, where she taught me that the best things in life take time to grow.

"*Como las plantas, mi amor,*" she'd say, "relationships need tending."

I had no idea what she was talking about then, but it made sense now. I guess James and I weren't much of gardeners.

A wave of grief lapped over me. When I was little, Mom and I would take trips to Valencia, where her mother's family was from. But I hadn't been back since I was ten—the year my world crumbled. Abuela had come out to see me a couple of times, but nearly three years had gone by since I'd last seen her before she suddenly passed away when I was eighteen. The guilt had been eating me ever since.

The sound of a text notification jolted me from my nostalgia spiral. It was my colleague and recently acquired bestie, Cora: *Stop overthinking and sign the damn papers. Then get dressed. We're going out tonight.*

We'd been friendly for a few years but had never hung out much—I had my circle with James; she had her own world. Then, one day six months ago, she pulled me aside after a pitch meeting for a company selling robot-powered smoothie machines.

"I know we're not exactly close, but you look—different. Sad. Are you—okay?" she'd said.

I looked her in the eye and burst into tears. I then confessed all like a drunken taxicab confession.

I looked down at my oversize Nirvana T-shirt—the one with the mysterious stain that might be pizza sauce or evidence of a crime—and sighed. Cora was right. It was time to close this chapter.

My pen hovered over the signature line. One stroke, and I'd no longer be Mrs. Hill. Just Dahlia Delaney again, stepping into an unexpected future with a secondhand heart.

I suppose “till death do us part” should've come with an asterisk: *Results may vary. Forever not guaranteed. Side effects may include questioning everything you thought you knew about love while shoveling Halo Top Mint Chip into your mouth at 3 a.m.*

But maybe that's okay. Maybe sometimes you have to let the story you thought you were writing turn into something else entirely. Like Abuela's garden, you have to clear out the dead things to make room for new growth.

Hill was a boring name, anyway.

Wow, those self-help books were really paying off.

I signed the papers.

Then I texted Cora back: *Fine, but I'm not wearing heels. And you're buying the first round.*

If I had to start over, I might as well do it with good wine and better company.

But first, I needed to figure out how to make artisanal dog treats sound life-changing. A girl's got to pay her therapy bills somehow.



Chapter 2

My head throbbed with the remnants of one—or five—too many artisanal margaritas from Cantina Sol as I sat curled around a triple-size coffee in my leather armchair, when the idea hit me with the subtlety of a mariachi band. I sat up straight, the morning sun stabbing through my venetian blinds like an accusation.

The idea bubbling in my brain felt dangerously like hope. I glanced at my computer sitting on the coffee table among the wreckage of last night's pity party.

Nothing was tethering me to San Francisco. No more brunches with girlfriends—my girlfriend total was currently one. No more James with his perfectly ironed shirts and carefully constructed exit strategy. And now that I'd gone full freelance mode—no more office job.

Valencia.

The word tasted like possibility on my tongue. I shuffled over to the vintage table, drumming my fingers against its water-stained surface, before getting the courage to pull up a browser window. Technically, I still had family in Valencia—a tapestry of relatives I'd discovered during that rabbit-hole genealogy phase two years ago. Back when James and I were planning our future family. Before

everything imploded like a badly baked soufflé. I batted away the thought, not having the mental energy to go there right now.

The genealogy website welcomed me back like an old friend, though we hadn't spoken in a minute. As I scrolled through the family tree, names and connections bloomed across my screen: My mom's mom was my abuela Rosa. And she had a sister, Isabel, who was still alive, and she had a daughter, Ximena, who had Maya. Maya, my second—or was it third?—cousin, was, according to this, a year younger than I was. I vaguely remembered her from my childhood—but would she remember me?

I leaned back. I had names, but how was I supposed to contact them? I pulled up a Facebook browser and felt a zing of panic as I typed “Maya Santaella” into the search. There she was. Her profile picture showed a woman with laughing eyes, embraced by two small daughters with identical grins. We didn't have the same features—too many generations of genetic remix between us—but something in her expression tugged at my heart. A familiar light that reminded me of old photos of Abuela Rosa.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard as I pulled up the messenger. The cursor blinked at me like a dare.

“Hola, Maya,” I typed, then backspaced. The words came in fits and starts, each one feeling more unhinged than the last. “I'm sorry if this seems completely creepy, but I'm your cousin Dahlia. Your abuela Isabel is my abuela Rosa's sister. So I think that makes us third cousins or something. I think we met when we were very little, but I'm not sure if you remember me. Anyway, I'm planning a trip to Valencia soon, and I'd love to connect. I promise I'm not a serial killer—just a slightly lost soul looking to reconnect with her roots. And maybe find herself in the process (how's that for cliché?).”

I hit send before I could talk myself out of it, then immediately slumped forward, pressing my forehead against the table. My

stomach churned, and I wasn't sure if it was the margarita hangover or the thought of Maya reporting me to Facebook's anti-stalker team.

But even if my Spanish family wanted nothing to do with me, Valencia was big enough to absorb one more lost American trying to find herself between plates of paella and glasses of sangria. At worst, I'd come home with some killer Instagram content and a temporary escape from the smoking crater that was my life. It would at least give me some space to think and plan. Because right then, I had zero plan.

The Messenger ping sent me jolting upright, my heart hammering against my ribs. I opened the message with trembling fingers.

“¡Dios mío!” Maya's response lit up my screen. “I cannot WAIT to see you again, *prima!* ♥”

The tears that sprang to my eyes had nothing to do with my hangover.



Chapter 3

After a red-eye flight from SFO to Barcelona that felt like being trapped in a time loop, followed by a puddle jumper to Valencia's airport, which had me questioning my life choices, I found myself dragging my overpacked suitcase through Ciutat Vella's cobblestone streets. The wheels caught on every historic crevice, providing a rhythmic track to my internal monologue of regret about those four pairs of shoes I'd insisted on bringing.

The summer sun beat down like it had a personal vendetta, but even my jet-lagged brain couldn't help but marvel at the scene around me. Ancient buildings stretched toward the sky, their wrought-iron balconies and jewel-toned tiles telling stories that had begun centuries before I'd decided to have my mini life crisis in Spain.

I navigated the labyrinthian streets, feeling less like a bold adventurer and more like a very sweaty lab rat, until I finally stopped in front of what my maps app insisted was my new home for the summer. The building rose before me, its façade adorned with intricate Moorish carvings that made my quirky San Francisco Victorian look like it was built by a discount contractor. I punched in the door code—a jarring modern contrast, like finding an iPhone in a Renaissance painting—and stepped inside.

“Please don’t let this be a mistake,” I whispered to whatever saint handled impulsive divorcées.

The elevator turned out to be less an elevator and more a medieval torture device masquerading as modern convenience. This single-person metal cage creaked ominously with every floor while descending to the ground level. I squeezed myself and my suitcase inside and pressed the button for the top floor. The ascent was a symphony of concerning noises that had me mentally drafting my last will and testament.

When it finally shuddered to a stop, I wrestled the cage door open and practically fell into the hall. I found apartment seven at the end of the hall and typed in the door code. The ancient door swung open to reveal my home for the summer.

The apartment was what real estate agents would call “cozy” and what ordinary people would call “tiny and weird.” Its wooden beams were so low that they seemed designed for a tenant of the hobbit variety. But something about it captured my heart immediately—maybe it was the eclectic wall art or the way vintage pieces mingled with modern touches like they were at the world’s most aesthetic cocktail party.

I did a quick tour, chuckling at each new quirk I discovered. The bathroom was a particular highlight, featuring a shrunken claw-foot tub and a shower setup that seemed designed by someone who’d only had showers described to them. The floor-level drain and half-hearted shower curtain promised to turn every washing attempt into an impromptu pool party for my entire bathroom. Well, I would tackle that fun, sexy time later.

My mind flashed to the pristine, recently renovated bathroom James and I had designed back in SF—all clean lines and modern fixtures. I eyed the shower situation again, skeptically making a men-

tal note to YouTube: “How to shower in Europe without flooding your apartment.” Surely there was a method?

The kitchen was more of a suggestion than a room, tucked into the living space like an afterthought, but it had the essentials. A mosaic bowl overflowed with oranges and persimmons that looked like they’d been painted by Vermeer himself, alongside a bottle of red wine and a note that read: “*¡Bienvenida a Valencia!* Our casa is your casa. Should you need anything, do not hesitate to call. —Jose y Antonia Ortega.”

The real magic happened when I pushed open the French doors to the terrace. The space opened like a theater curtain, revealing the final act, and suddenly I was starring in my own romantic comedy. Potted plants dotted the corners, a mosaic bistro set begged for morning coffee, and fairy lights strung along the railing promised to make every evening picture-perfect. The view stretched out before me—terra-cotta roofs, serpentine streets, and, in the distance, the Mediterranean glinting like scattered diamonds in the late-afternoon sun. I resisted the urge to burst into a show tune.

I breathed in deep, letting the foreign air fill my lungs—salt from the sea, fresh bread from somewhere nearby, spices. For the first time since that last day in Dr. Martinez’s office, hope didn’t feel like a foreign concept.

Exhaustion hit like a tidal wave then, but I forced myself to unpack. I arranged my excessive shoe collection in the tiny wardrobe and claimed the quirky bathroom with my familiar toiletries. I placed the garden photo of Abuela Rosa and me on the bedside table—a reminder of what brought me here.

Fighting the jet lag with my last willpower, I poured myself a glass of my hosts’ wine and returned to the terrace. The city was coming alive with evening energy—laughter echoing up from the

streets below, a guitarist somewhere perfecting Spanish romance, and the distant hum of life being lived. I closed my eyes, letting it all wash over me.

My phone buzzed, shattering my moment of Zen.

Are you alive? Kidnapped by Spanish pirates? Please tell me you were kidnapped by Spanish pirates. Cora's text made me smile.

Pirates are really not all they're cracked up to be, I typed back.

Says you. How's the place?

Tiny. Quirky. Perfect. Killer view.

Not jealous. Crying emoji.

I sighed and took another deep sip of wine. Cora saw this as my *Eat, Pray, Love* moment, complete with soundtrack and soft lighting. She was so supportive, but I wasn't sure she quite grasped how something you chose could still leave scars. How wanting a divorce didn't make it hurt any less once it happened.

You'd definitely be jealous of the wine, I wrote instead.

I expect daily updates. Don't fall for the first Spaniard you meet.

If he's a pirate, no promises.

No judgments from me.

I smiled at my phone, then set it aside, letting the evening breeze and the distant guitar take over again. Maybe Cora was right about one thing—this did feel like the beginning of something. I just wasn't sure what yet.



Chapter 4

By 8 p.m.—practically brunch time by Spanish standards—I was dead on my feet. I barely managed to crawl into bed before sinking into the surprisingly plush blankets and passing out. I woke with the gentle urging of the dawn, the purple fan of a new day brushing through my window. I rolled over and groggily grabbed my phone from the nightstand. My phone informed me it was 5 a.m., which I decided to count as a jet-lag victory, even if my body felt like it had been through a clothes dryer.

I stumbled into the kitchen, guided by the siren call of caffeine. I glanced around the kitchen. No coffee maker. Panic promptly made itself known. Surely, no respectable vacation rental would inflict that kind of torture. I glanced around and spotted a small, kettle-like contraption on the stove that looked like a prop from a steampunk movie but hinted at the idea that it might produce what I needed. Beside it sat a bag of ground espresso that smelled decidedly like Spanish heaven. I grabbed my phone and did a photo search of the little kettle, quickly learning it was a moka pot designed to make espresso on the stove.

I stared it down, its little spout winking at me in a challenge. Oh, challenge *so* accepted.

I found a YouTube tutorial featuring an enthusiastic shirtless Spanish chef with instructions on using my new little friend. Following the video's instructions with delicate precision and a fair bit of awkward fumbling, I assembled the pieces: water, coffee, heat. Simple enough, until the thing started hissing like an angry cat, spewing espresso from its spout like a geyser. I grabbed the handle without thinking and yanked my hand back with a yelp that probably woke half the building. I turned off the stove, found an oven mitt, and removed the coffee. I sighed, dreaming of my stainless steel automatic self-cleaning OXO back home. I opened the cupboard, found a small white ceramic espresso cup, and poured.

That first sip hit me like a lightning bolt, and I forgot all about my OXO. This wasn't the pretentious nut water they served back at Dream Roasters, my overpriced, bougie neighborhood haunt where baristas treated coffee like a performance art. This was pure liquid gold—no milk or sugar needed to mask its perfection. By the second cup, my blood had been replaced with caffeinated joy, and I was pretty sure I could see through time.

The shower situation demanded my attention next, as I was still wearing eau de airplane mixed with notes of stale pretzel and mini-bottle regret. I faced the bathroom's strange corner setup like a gladiator entering the arena. I laid an extra towel around the drain as my only defense against turning the entire room into Venice. When I turned on the handheld showerhead, it went rogue, spraying water in all directions like a broken sprinkler. I shrieked, did an involuntary interpretive dance to avoid the spray, and nearly wiped out on the tile. But I refused to be defeated by European plumbing on day one. Through sheer determination and some questionable yoga poses, I dove in, lathered up, and emerged victorious, clean and smelling like jasmine.

I had made plans to meet up with Maya that afternoon, but I

had a few hours to kill. So I decided to venture out into my new neighborhood. I had earmarked the famous Mercat Central as my first adventure. Not only was I anxious to get to know this ancestral city, but I also needed to stock my apartment with some gourmet delights.

The morning sun had already warmed the limestone buildings to a toasty gold when I stepped onto Carrer dels Drets. A cat, channeling its inner Spanish aristocrat, lounged in a second-story window box, conducting a lazy inspection of passersby from its throne among the geraniums. Above, white sheets danced on a clothesline like party ghosts, their shadows playing tag across the sun-bleached walls.

The grand market announced itself first through scent—paprika and saffron riding the breeze, snaking through the alley. Next followed waves of citrus that transported me straight back to Mom’s kitchen when the Spanish mood had struck her. The Mercat Central’s art nouveau dome rose above the medieval rooftops ahead, its stained glass catching the morning light like a crown of jewels.

I checked my phone’s map purely out of habit, my mom’s voice echoing in my memory: *Always follow your nose! The scents will guide you home.* Mom was especially fond of a home-cooked meal. In that moment, she would have been right—even if every street sign had suddenly vanished, the perfume of fresh bread, coffee, and spices would have led me straight there.

At a corner café outside, a cluster of elderly men held court over tiny cups of espresso, debating something with the fervor of soap opera stars. One caught my eye and tipped his flat cap—a gesture so like my grandfather’s that my heart did a little somersault in my chest. I hurried past, weaving through the morning crowd of shoppers armed with their wheeled *carritos* overflowing with vibrant produce.

The dome loomed closer now, catching and scattering the morning light.

The city's voice grew stronger with each step—metal shutters clattering up like percussion, neighbors exchanging musical greetings, their conversations bouncing off ancient walls. My mother's family had walked these same streets, breathed this same air, carried home treasures from the same market I was approaching. The thought wrapped around me like a warm embrace.

Finally, Mercat Central stood before me with its weathered green copper dome and brick-and-iron entry. I clutched my shopping bag like a security blanket, feeling ridiculously like a kindergarten on her first day. It was just grocery shopping—how hard could it be?

The answer hit me the moment I stepped inside: very hard, when every sense was being ambushed by pure magic. The sensory overload was real. Fruits and vegetables created a painter's palette of color, while legs of *jamón* hung like stalactites from the ceiling. Towers of olives and preserves rose like edible architecture. Spanish chatter ricocheted off the iron rafters, mixing with the distant strum of a guitar to create the market's own special symphony. Sunlight poured through the stained-glass dome, scattering rainbow confetti across the bustling scene below.

As I wandered the aisles, history seemed to seep from the walls. The market had stood here since 1928, so I'd read, but its soul reached back even further to when merchants sold their wares under the open sky in the Plaza del Mercado. Every detail felt significant—the wrought-iron curlicues, the storytelling ceramics, the mosaics capturing snippets of Valencian life. It was as if the essence of the city had been distilled into this one magnificent building.

Around me, shoppers inspected produce with the intensity of art critics, while fishmongers transformed their work into perfor-

mance art and butchers wrapped meat with military precision. The air was rich with the mingled aromas of fresh produce, fragrant spices, and briny seafood.

I wandered the aisles like a kid in a candy store, resisting the urge to touch everything—because knowing me, I’d probably knock over an entire display of priceless Spanish artifacts.

Taking a deep breath, I approached a fruit stall where an elderly vendor’s smile could have powered a small city. His enthusiasm hit me like a sunbeam.

“¡*Hola, guapa!*” he exclaimed, gesturing at his produce with the showmanship of a Vegas magician. “¿*Qué necesitas hoy? ¡Tenemos las mejores naranjas de Valencia!*”

My brain performed an emergency reboot, desperately searching for the Spanish vocabulary I’d learned over the years.

“Uh, *hola,*” I managed with all the linguistic grace of a toddler. “I need . . . oranges? ¿*Naranjas?*”

His grin widened to impossible proportions. “¿*Sí, sí! ¡Naranjas! Muy buenas. ¡Cuántas?*”

I rifled through my mental Spanish phrasebook, finally extracting: “Uh, *cinco?* Or, um, *media kilo?*”

His eyes lit up like Christmas had come early. “¿*Cinco kilos! ¡Perfecto!*”

Wait, was that right? Oh no. I watched in horror as he began enthusiastically loading enough oranges to supply a small juice factory.

“No, no!” I protested, waving my hands.

A middle-aged woman materialized beside me, her eyes twinkling with the kind of amusement usually reserved for watching puppies chase their tails.

“*Hola, querida.* Do you need *ayuda?* I can help,” she said kindly.

I deflated with relief. “*Sí. Gracias.* I think I accidentally ordered enough oranges to fill a dump truck.”

She turned to the vendor and unleashed a rapid-fire directive. Moments later, I was the proud owner of a reasonably sized bag of oranges.

“*Gracias,*” I said to both of them, slowly backing away before I could cause any more citrus-related incidents.

Emboldened by my partial success, I ventured toward an olive display that put my local Whole Foods olive bar to shame. The colors ranged from deep purple to bright green, with variations I hadn’t known existed outside a Pantone catalog. The scent of garlic, herbs, and brine made my mouth water, drowning out even the market’s symphony of vendors calling their wares and the rhythmic *thunk-thunk* of knife on cutting board from the nearby *jamón* stand.

There was a small tasting selection where eager patrons gathered, and I studied their technique like I was cramming for a final exam. Step one: grab toothpick. Step two: don’t make a fool of yourself. Simple enough.

I reached for an olive just as another hand entered my field of vision. Our fingers brushed, and a jolt of electricity shot through me that had nothing to do with static and everything to do with the man attached to that hand. I startled, my elbow catching the edge of the display. In slow motion, I watched the bowl tip, sending olives skittering across the floor like tiny, oily bowling balls plotting their escape from Valencia.

“Oh God,” I muttered, dropping to my knees to gather the runaways. A pair of worn Adidas sneakers appeared in my vision, their owner crouching down beside me.

“Here’s one making a break for Barcelona,” the man said in clear American English, reaching for a particularly adventurous olive that had rolled halfway to the next stall. His voice hit some long-dormant chord in my memory, but I couldn’t place it.

“Clearly they’ve inherited my wanderlust,” I said, then immedi-

ately wanted to stuff the words back into my mouth. Who actually says “wanderlust” out loud?

“Wanderlust requires intention,” he said, and something in his tone made me look up. I locked eyes with a man who had no right to look that mysterious and broody at 10 a.m. He carried a shopping bag brimming with produce and sported a fitted chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. And were those—yep, tattoos—peeking out? How deliciously cliché. The design looked like a world map, reimagined by someone who’d gotten tired of borders.

“And what would you call it when there’s no intention?” I asked, trying to ignore how familiar his features seemed. Like a word stuck on the tip of my tongue, or a dream half remembered.

“Running away.” He said it simply, no judgment in his voice, but I felt the words like a slap. Before I could respond, the vendor—a jovial man whose mustache deserved its own zip code—was at my side.

“I am *soo, soo* sorry!” I said, feeling my cheeks heat. “*Lo siento.*” He interrupted with a booming laugh.

“*¡Tranquilo, tranquilo!*” He helped me up, waving away my attempts to apologize. “These things happen! The olives, they have minds of their own, *sí?* I am Juan.” He speared a fresh one and handed it to me. “Here, try. Best olives in Valencia. Maybe all of Spain. Maybe the universe!”

I accepted it, grateful for the distraction. The explosion of flavor—garlic, herbs, and something I couldn’t name—was so intense I almost forgot my embarrassment. Almost.

“They’re incredible,” I said to Juan.

“You don’t normally see one so enthusiastic about fermented pit fruit,” the mystery man said in a throaty voice, leaning in uncomfortably close.

I swallowed slowly, then swiveled around to flash him an incredulous look. “Be careful. I think publicly criticizing olives is a capital crime in Spain,” I said.

He tilted his head. “Good to know how the authorities will finally take me down.” He flashed a devilish grin. “I would never criticize Juan’s olives, though. They have a viral following.”

“Social-media-savvy olives? Be still my digital marketer’s heart.” Something flickered across his face—like I’d referenced a long-forgotten childhood joke.

He studied me for a moment longer than comfortable. “You’re a long way from home.”

“Bold assumption. Maybe you should be solving crimes somewhere with observation skills like that.”

Something shifted in his expression then, a softening around the eyes that made him look suddenly, devastatingly familiar.

Juan interrupted us. “He is right! Juan’s olives are famous in all of Spain. Maybe all of Europe. Maybe the universe!”

The mystery man nodded toward Juan. “It might also be a capital crime not to indulge.”

“How can I argue with the word of another wandering American?” I said.

His mouth twitched, and his eyes narrowed just slightly as though I’d said something wrong.

“Sorry, are you Canadian? You don’t seem nice enough,” I said.

Juan thrust another olive sample between us. “You cannot leave without trying the queen olive.”

The mystery man accepted it with a nod of thanks. “Have to get going. Enjoy your—*wanderlust*.” He drew out the word, making it sound like something you shouldn’t say in polite society.

Then he disappeared into the crowd, leaving me with an unsettling feeling of *déjà vu* and a bag of olives Juan had somehow con-

vinced me to buy. I watched him weave through the market until he vanished behind a display of hanging *jamón*, unable to shake the sensation that I'd met him before.

"Who was that?" I asked Juan, who was already arranging his olives back into their precise formation.

He shrugged, mustache twitching. "American man. Lives here now. He comes by a lot. Very mysterious, *sê?*" He winked. "But his Spanish? Terrible."

I laughed lightly and gathered my purchases. I thanked Juan and moved along to the next stop—a cheese stall, where a tiny woman with serious fortune-teller vibes handed out samples. She smiled at me through bright coral lips that complemented her golden complexion perfectly. She sported large gold hoop earrings and at least a dozen colorful bangles on her wrist. A scarf in a bright mosaic pattern was woven through inky-black hair.

"Come!" she commanded, brandishing a cheese wedge like Excalibur. "You don't want to miss my *Espadán*. Made from raw goat's milk, forty days of aging. *¡Muy delicioso!*"

The sample melted on my tongue, creamy and sharp, making me question every cheese decision I'd ever made in my life.

"*Muy delicioso*, indeed," I agreed, already mentally clearing space in my tiny fridge.

"*¡Sí*, I told you. Five euros," she declared with the finality of a judge's gavel.

Something possessed me—maybe the ghost of my bargaining ancestors—and I heard myself say, "Five euros? How about three?"

She clutched her chest as if I'd stabbed her. "*¡Tres! ¡Ay, mi corazón!* Four euros, final offer."

Laughing, we sealed the deal at four euros, and I turned to leave, feeling rather proud of my market survival skills. Maybe I wasn't completely hopeless at this whole Spain thing after all.



Chapter 5

Later that afternoon, having survived my first morning as a wannabe Valencian (and only getting lost three times, which I was counting as a personal victory), I made my way to meet my cousin Maya.

The narrow cobblestone streets of Ciutat Vella felt nothing like San Francisco’s sensible grid system, where the streets mostly cut in straight lines through the city. Here, the streets twisted like the game of Snake I used to play on Mom’s old Nokia phone.

I checked my phone for the café’s location, feeling a mix of excitement and nerves.

It had been so long since I’d had any contact with my mom’s Spanish family that my stomach was fluttering. I forced myself to breathe with each step—it was all going to be great.

Finally, I spotted my destination—Café Mariposa, a cozy venue tucked away in a picturesque alley. I took a deep breath and stepped inside. The warm, dim lighting enveloped me like a warm hug. The traditional Spanish décor—colorful tiles, wrought-iron fixtures, and rustic wooden furniture—combined with the soft Spanish guitar music played in the background, made me feel like I was in a scene from a Penélope Cruz movie.