

*The Tower At
Oshos d' Agua*

By

Pauline Verhoeff

Chapters the Tower

- 1 The Tower**
- 2 Portugal Ownes the Best Bit**
- 3 Licenses**
- 4 The Licence**
- 5 The first guest**
- 6 The arrival of Sharon Bickly**
- 7 The Third Guest**
- 8 Public Disasters**
- 9 Cardiac Hill**
- 10 Sharon and the Inspector**
- 11 Safari without Lions**
- 12 Loulé Market**
- 13 Sharon Extends Her Stay**
- 14 The Glamping Idea**
- 15 A Loophole**
- 16 The Tents**
- 17 The Glamping Guests**
- 18 The Boat Trip`**
- 19 Online men**
- 20 Celia**
- 21 Sunset with Consequences**
- 22 Fado night**
- 23 The Morning After**
- 24 The LicenseTo Behave**
- 25 The Inspector**
- 26 The Waiting Period**
- 27 One Night Away**
- 28 Another licence arrived**
- 29 The Celebrity**
- 30 Wedding Rumours**
- 31 Graham**
- 32 Sharon's Ex-Husband**
- 33 The Guest from Hell**
- 34 The Blue Folder**
- 35 Tent Three**
- 36 Barry**
- 37 Viral**
- 37 The Proposal**
- 38 The wedding**

Foreword

Pauline Verhoeff has always believed that life becomes far more interesting when things do not go according to plan.

Having lived in several countries and experienced different cultures, she has gathered a lifetime of unusual situations, memorable people and stories that refused to be forgotten. Her writing combines warmth, humour, imagination and a sharp eye for the small absurdities of everyday life.

In *The Tower at Olhos d'Água*, Pauline takes her readers to the sunny Algarve, where beautiful surroundings, Portuguese bureaucracy, unexpected friendships and romantic complications come together. As in many of her books, the characters may believe they are in control of their lives, but life usually has other ideas.

Pauline is also the author of several imaginative novels, including *The Queue*, *The Real Secret* and *The 25th Hour*. These books transport readers into mysterious worlds filled with strange possibilities, hidden truths and unforgettable adventures.

Her novel *How Many Frogs Does It Take?* explores love, disappointment and the sometimes-exhausting search for the right person, while her humorous stories about Portugal and everyday life reveal her talent for finding comedy in even the most difficult circumstances.

Whether she is writing fantasy, romance, mystery or comedy, Pauline's stories are united by the same belief: people are rarely what they first appear to be, life is never entirely predictable, and it is always worth keeping a sense of humour.

The Tower at Olhos d'Água is written for everyone who has ever followed a dream, ignored sensible advice, fallen in love with a beautiful place—or discovered too late that buying a property abroad is only the beginning of the adventure.

Published books

- -
 -
 - *The Q-ube*
 - *The Real Secret*
 - *The 25th Hour*
 - *How Many Frogs Does It Take?*
 - *The Tower at Olhos d'Água*
 - *The Ex-Wives' Lunch Club*
 - *Perikelen op de Zorgboerderij*
 - *Belitung verhalen uit Indonesië*
 - *De Kodebreker!*
 - *B&B Met een Twist*
 - *Perikelen van het Eendje*
- *De zorgboerderij*

Chapter 1

The Tower

Celia had always believed that if a man was going to ruin her life, she should at least do it somewhere with a sea view. This, she felt, showed standards. And besides the view was magnificent.

The old tower stood on the low rise above Olhos d'Água, square and weathered, looking out toward the Atlantic as if it had spent centuries judging boats, storms, invaders, tourists, estate agents and women with champagne.

Below it, the sea glittered in hard blue flashes. White houses tumbled toward the beach. The air smelled of salt, hot stone, grilled fish and the particular optimism that arrived just after signing papers and just before discovering what they meant.

Celia lifted her glass. "To our tower."

Vivienne, who had already removed her sunglasses three times in order to look more dramatically at the view, raised hers.

"To our tower," she said.

Marianne did not raise her glass immediately. She was looking at the folder. She often looked at folders. It was one of the reasons Celia and Vivienne had allowed her into the venture. Celia had money. Vivienne had taste. Marianne had anxiety and a printer.

Together, they had seemed almost professional.

"Marianne," Celia said. "Put the paperwork down and enjoy the moment."

"I am enjoying the moment."

"You're reading clause fourteen."

"I enjoy differently."

Vivienne smiled. "Darling, we have just bought a house in Portugal with an ancient tower and a view of the sea. Surely even clause fourteen can wait."

Marianne looked up. "It says 'subject to legal clarification.'"

Celia waved this away with her champagne hand.

“Everything in Portugal is subject to legal clarification. Parking. Lunch. Whether a shop is open. Whether a man called Rui will arrive at ten on Thursday.”

Rui was the estate agent, and wore excellent shoes, a linen jacket and the kind of smile that made foreign women believe words like “potential” and “heritage feature” were legally binding.

He had shown them the property three weeks earlier on a warm afternoon when the sea looked expensive and the tower glowed in golden light like something from a travel article written by a woman recovering from divorce.

“This,” Rui had said, spreading his arms, “is very special.”

Celia had looked at the tower and felt something inside her sit up.

At forty-eight, Celia had discovered that sitting up inside herself was rarer than it used to be. She had spent fifteen years married to a man who believed life should be managed quietly, preferably by Celia, while he used words like “pressure” and “strategy” to justify never knowing where the clean towels were.

Then he had left her for his nutrition coach who was twenty-nine, extremely bendy and posted photographs of herself on Tik Tok.

Celia had responded by keeping the house, selling the shares he had forgotten she owned, and developing a violent dislike of chia seeds.

Portugal had been Vivienne’s idea.

Not retirement. Celia had been very clear about that.

“I am forty-eight,” she had said. “I refuse to retire before my knees do.”

“Not retire,” Vivienne had said. “Reinvent.”

Vivienne was forty-nine, with dark hair cut sharply to her jaw and the ability to make inexpensive clothes look deliberate. She had once run a small interiors business in Surrey until a bad lease, a worse boyfriend and a pandemic had folded it like a napkin.

Marianne, also forty-eight, had been the sensible one. Former school administrator. Divorced. Two sons at university. A woman who knew where the passports were, what everyone owed, and exactly how long cheese had been in the fridge.

She had come to Portugal for a week’s holiday and left with a folder labelled POSSIBLE PROPERTIES.

The madness now stood before them in stone. Technically, the property was an old house beside the tower. Whitewashed, cracked, sun-worn, stubborn. It had green shutters, a tiny terrace, 6 bedrooms upstairs, and a downstairs room Vivienne had already imagined as an elegant wine-and-tapas bar.

“The Tower Bar,” she had said.

Celia had approved at once.

Marianne had said, “We don’t know if we can get the licence.”

Vivienne had replied, “That is why we have you.”

Celia had imagined women drinking cold white wine beneath the tower, eating garlic prawns, gossiping beautifully, and staying in tasteful rooms with proper beds without inspirational wall quotes.

No emotional workshops called Awakening Your Inner Pearl.

Just wine, tapas, good sheets and a view.

A place for women who had spent years being reasonable and now wanted octopus’ salad. She had pictured herself on the terrace in a white dress, one hand on the railing, the tower behind her, no husband explaining pension options, no stepdaughter asking whether she had considered “downsizing emotionally,” no one anywhere mentioning hormones.

They had all signed.

Now they stood in front of their future with champagne from the supermarket and three plastic cups because Marianne had packed practical things and Celia had packed earrings.

“To our tower,” Celia repeated.

This time Marianne raised her glass. “To the house,” she said carefully.

Vivienne laughed. “To the house and the tower.”

A voice behind them said, “Not the tower.”

They turned.

An elderly Portuguese man stood on the path, holding a small bag of oranges and looking at them with the gentle pity usually reserved for tourists attempting roundabouts.

He wore a flat cap despite the heat and had the deeply lined face of a man who had spent his life watching foolishness approach from several directions.

Celia smiled. “Sorry?”

He pointed at the tower. “Not yours.”

Celia kept smiling because she had learned from divorce lawyers that panic should never be shown early.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "We've just bought the property."

The man nodded. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"The house, yes. The tower, no."

Vivienne looked at the tower, then at the house, then at the man. "But the tower is in the photographs."

The man shrugged. "So is the sea."

Marianne made a small sound, which Celia ignored.

"The estate agent told us it was a historic feature."

"Yes," the man said. "It is historic."

"And part of the property."

The man tilted his head. "Did he say this or estate agent?"

Vivienne put one hand over her mouth.

Marianne opened the folder with the speed of a woman whose nightmare had just introduced itself politely. Celia's smile became thinner.

"What exactly are you saying?"

The man pointed again. "That tower belongs to Portugal."

For a moment, even the sea seemed to pause. Then Celia looked at her glass. "Well," she said. "Portugal could have mentioned it before we ordered curtains."

The man gave a small smile. "You are English?"

"Mostly," Vivienne said.

"Dutch," Marianne said automatically.

"Complicated," Celia said.

He nodded as if this explained everything. "My name is Senhor António," he said. "I live down there." He pointed vaguely toward the village. "Many people think many things about this tower. The tower does not care."

"That is charming," Celia said. "But we care."

"Yes," he said. "That is why I tell you."

Marianne was reading rapidly. "Oh God."

Vivienne turned to her. "What?"

"Oh God."

"That is not a legal interpretation, Marianne."

Marianne held out the paper. "It says here the boundaries are marked according to the attached cadastral plan."

Celia stared at her. "And?"

"And the tower is outside the red line."

Vivienne snatched the plan. Celia leaned over her shoulder. The red line enclosed the house, the terrace, a cracked little

path, something that might once have been a garden, and a patch of land containing several weeds with confidence. The tower stood just beyond it. Close enough to dominate every photograph. Far enough to belong to someone else.

Vivienne went very still. Celia felt the champagne turn sour in her mouth.

Marianne whispered, "We bought the weeds."

"No," Celia said.

"We bought the cracked path."

"No."

"We bought the broken gate."

"Stop listing."

"And apparently," Marianne said, voice rising, "a historic misunderstanding."

Senhor António nodded approvingly. "Yes. Very common."

Celia turned to him. "This is not common. This is outrageous."

He considered this. "In Portugal, outrageous can also be common."

Vivienne looked back at the tower. "But Rui said we would have tower access."

Senhor António smiled sadly. "Rui says many things. He once told my cousin a roof was traditional because it had no tiles."

Celia's eyes narrowed. "Rui is about to have a very traditional problem."

Marianne closed the folder. "We need to call the lawyer."

"We need to call Rui," Celia said.

"We need to breathe," Vivienne said, though she looked as if breathing had become a decorative suggestion.

Celia took out her phone. No signal. Of course. Portugal, she had already learned, had excellent sunshine and a complicated relationship with mobile reception.

She held the phone higher. Nothing. She turned in a circle. Still nothing. Senhor António watched with interest. "If you stand near the bins," he said, "sometimes the phone works."

Celia looked at him. "The bins?"

"Yes."

"Wonderful. Our empire begins at the bins."

Vivienne suddenly laughed. Not because it was funny. Because it was either laugh or throw champagne at the state. But Marianne did not laugh. She had gone pale beneath her careful sunscreen. "This is serious. We planned the whole business around the tower."

“Not the whole business,” Vivienne said.

“The name is The Tower Bar.”

“Yes.”

“The logo has a tower.”

“Yes.”

“The rooms are called Tower View, Tower Light and Tower Suite.”

Celia looked up.

“We can change Tower Suite to Legal Clarification.”

Vivienne laughed again, properly this time.

Marianne stared at them. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because if I stop,” Celia said, “I may commit a crime, and apparently we already have enough legal ambiguity.”

Senhor António nodded toward the house. “The house is good.”

They all turned. The house stood quietly in the sun. It was not grand. It was not perfect. The paint flaked at the corners, the shutters needed sanding, and one drainpipe leaned away from the wall as if embarrassed by its own usefulness. But it had charm. Real charm.

Not estate-agent charm.

The front room opened onto the terrace. Vivienne had seen it immediately: small wooden tables, low lighting, shelves of Portuguese wine, ceramics on the wall, plates of clams, prawns, chouriço, cheeses, figs, olives, bread warm enough to make a woman forgive minor structural issues.

Upstairs, were six rooms that could be made beautiful. Not large, but beautiful. Good mattresses. White walls. Local textiles. Proper lamps. No sad little bedside bulbs that made everyone look recently unwell.

Outside, the tower rose beyond the boundary line like a smug relative.

Celia finished her champagne. “Fine.”

Marianne blinked. “Fine?”

“Yes. Fine. We do not own the tower.”

Vivienne looked at her. “Celia.”

“We own proximity.”

Marianne stared. “That is not a property category.”

“It is a marketing opportunity.”

Senhor António looked amused.

Celia pointed at the tower. “People pay extra for a view of things they do not own all the time. The sea. Other people’s yachts. George Clooney.”

Vivienne folded her arms slowly.

“She has a point.”

“Thank you.”

Marianne was horrified. “She does not have a point. She has shock.”

Celia ignored this. “We will call it The Tower Bar. Wine, tapas, and one legally complicated view.”

Vivienne’s eyes brightened despite herself. “State-owned tower. Privately poured wine.”

Celia pointed at her. “Excellent.”

“No,” Marianne said. “No slogans. No branding. We have to speak to the lawyer.”

“We will.”

“And Rui.”

“We will.”

“And the municipality.”

Celia paused. “Must we?”

“Yes.”

Senhor António raised his bag of oranges. “You must speak to the municipality before moving one stone.”

Vivienne looked at the tower. “What if we only put a chair near it?”

“No.”

“A pot?”

“No.”

“Fairy lights?”

Senhor António’s face became grave. “Never say fairy lights to the municipality.”

Marianne rubbed her forehead. Celia took the folder from her.

“Listen. We bought the house. The house is real. The view is real. The paperwork is rude, but survivable. We are not going home because a tower has commitment issues.”

Vivienne looked at her.

Marianne looked at the square. They were three women in their late forties who had sold, left, escaped, risked, borrowed, invested and boasted. Had told friends they were starting again. They had posted photographs. Celia had captioned one: *New life loading*. Now their new life had begun with a boundary dispute and a man with oranges explaining that Portugal owned the best bit. Vivienne lifted her chin. “I still want the bar.”

Marianne looked at her. “What?”

"The wine-and-tapas bar. The rooms. The terrace. The shop corner. The good lamps. I still want it."

Celia smiled. "Of course you do."

"I want women to come here and eat properly."

"Yes."

"No detox menus."

"God, no."

"No beige."

"Never."

"No sad salads called renewal bowls."

Celia shuddered. "If anyone serves me a renewal bowl, I shall renew it through a window."

Marianne tried not to smile but failed.

Vivienne looked at the house again. "We'll need a chef."

"We'll hire one," Celia said.

"A real one," Marianne said.

"Obviously."

"Not one of those men who puts three chickpeas on a plate and calls it a journey."

Celia laughed. "Marianne, there is hope for you yet."

Senhor António shifted his oranges. "My niece knows a chef."

Celia turned sharply. "Does he cook real food?"

Senhor António considered. "He thinks he does."

"That sounds ominous."

"He studied in Lisbon."

Vivienne narrowed her eyes. "Does he serves foam?"

"A little," Senhor António admitted.

Celia pointed at him. "No foam."

Marianne sighed. "We haven't even got the licence and already we are banning foam."

"That," Celia said, "is called vision."

The wind moved across the hill, carrying the smell of the sea and someone grilling sardines below. A gull cried overhead with the aggressive confidence of a creature that had never signed a contract.

Marianne looked at the folder again. "We really do need to check everything."

"Yes," Vivienne said.

"And call the lawyer."

"Yes."

"And possibly renegotiate."

"Yes."

“And make sure we can get a bar licence.”

“Yes.”

“And confirm we are not accidentally opening an illegal business beside a protected monument.”

Celia raised one finger. “Besides, not inside. Very important distinction.”

Senhor António nodded. “You learn quickly.”

Celia smiled at him. “Only after losing money.”

He smiled back. “Easy in Portugal.”

They stood together in front of the house they owned and the tower they did not. Celia looked at Vivienne.

“All right,” she said. “We continue. But no one says ‘our tower’ again until we know exactly how illegal that is.”

Celia opened the second bottle of champagne.

“Agreed.”

Vivienne held out her glass. “To the house.”

Marianne held out hers. “To legal clarification.”

Celia lifted the bottle and looked at the tower, glowing in the sun as if it had never belonged to anyone and never intended to. “To the tower,” she said, “which is not ours, apparently.”

They drank. Below them, the sea glittered.

Above them, the old tower watched.

And beside it, three women began planning a future built on wine, tapas, paperwork, disappointment, reinvention and the excellent commercial possibilities of public humiliation.

Chapter 2

Portugal Owned the Best Bit

By ten o'clock the next morning, Marianne had created a new folder. This was not a good sign. The folder was blue, labelled in black marker and divided into sections with coloured tabs. Celia found this both comforting and offensive. The label read:

TOWER PROBLEM

Underneath, in smaller letters, Marianne had written:

Possibly catastrophic.

Celia stood in the kitchen of the house they had bought, drinking coffee from a chipped mug and staring at the label.

"Possibly catastrophic seems dramatic."

Marianne looked up from the table, where she had arranged deeds, plans, estate agent brochures, emails, photographs, maps, bank documents and one receipt for champagne. "It is accurate."

"It is pessimistic."

"It is colour-coded."

"That does not make it true."

Vivienne came in from the terrace carrying a notebook and wearing linen trousers so elegant they made the cracked tiles look nervous. "It's worse than we thought," she said.

Celia turned. "No sentence that begins like that should be allowed before breakfast."

Vivienne placed the notebook on the table. "I measured the terrace."

"And?"

"If we cannot use the tower, the terrace is smaller than I imagined."

"Everything is smaller than imagined," Celia said. "Men's dicks, profit margins, hotel bathrooms, emotional maturity."

Marianne tapped the folder. "We need a lawyer."

"We have a lawyer," Celia said. "She was very reassuring when we transferred the deposit."

“She was reassuring because Rui’s documents were incomplete and you kept saying things like, ‘I have a feeling about this place.’”

“I did have a feeling.”

“Yes. Apparently, indigestion.”

Vivienne poured coffee. “Who is the lawyer again?”

“Dr. Sofia Mendonça,” Marianne said. “Office in Albufeira. Speaks excellent English. Looks as if she could kill a man with a paperclip.”

Celia brightened. “I like her already.”

“You met her twice.”

“I liked her then too. I simply liked the tower more.”

At the mention of the tower, all three women looked through the open kitchen door. There it stood. Beyond their terrace, beyond the uneven path, beyond the red line on the cadastral plan, the old tower rose in the morning sun with maddening dignity. It was square, blunt, and silent. Its stone had weathered into shades of sand, smoke and old bones. Small openings cut into its walls looked out toward the sea like narrowed eyes. It did not look romantic this morning. It looked smug.

Celia folded her arms. “It knows.”

Vivienne followed her gaze. “It has probably seen worse.”

“Worse than three women accidentally buying the wrong historic monument?”

“It has survived pirates, storms, empire, tourists in flip-flops and possibly British men ordering large beers in their underwear before 10 am.”

Marianne sighed. “It did not survive us. We don’t own it.”

“Yet,” Celia said.

“No. Not yet. Not ever. That is the issue.”

The appointment with Dra. Sofia Mendonça was at eleven-thirty. They arrived at eleven-twenty because Marianne believed punctuality was respect, Vivienne believed it was branding, and Celia believed lateness should be used only when entering restaurants or ending marriages.

Sofia’s office was on the second floor of a pale building above a pharmacy. The waiting room contained three chairs, a large plant, a framed certificate and the kind of silence that made one sit straighter.

Dra. Sofia Mendonça emerged at exactly eleven-thirty. She was in her early fifties, though Celia suspected she had been born looking professionally unimpressed. She wore a cream

blouse, dark trousers and glasses sharp enough to correct spelling by proximity.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” Marianne said.

Celia held out the blue folder. “We may have bought the wrong thing.”

Sofia looked at the label.

Then at Celia.

Then at the folder again. “Come in.”

Her office was neat, cool and contained no unnecessary softness. This reassured Marianne and alarmed Celia, who preferred legal spaces to have at least one decorative object suggesting mercy.

Sofia took the documents, spread them across her desk and began reading.

Nobody spoke. Celia tried not to fidget. Vivienne crossed one leg and looked calm in the way only women with excellent trousers could.

After several minutes, Sofia removed her glasses. “You bought the house.”

“Yes,” Marianne said.

“And the terrace.”

“Yes.”

“And the small parcel of land marked here.”

“The weeds,” Celia said.

Sofia glanced at her. “The land.”

“The weeds are on the land.”

“Then yes. You bought the weeds.”

Vivienne made a small sound. Sofia continued, “You did not buy the tower.”

Celia closed her eyes. Marianne wrote something down. But Vivienne spoke, “But the brochure said historic tower access.”

Sofia held up the brochure. “The brochure says ‘adjacent to historic tower with possible access subject to legal clarification.’”

Celia leaned forward.

“That phrase should be illegal.”

“It is not.”

“It should at least come with an alarm.”

Sofia almost smiled. “Estate agents often use elastic language.”

“Elastic language,” Celia repeated. “How charming to know Rui lied in Lycra.”

Sofia turned to another page. “The tower is classified as cultural heritage. It belongs to the Portuguese state. It is not private property. You cannot alter it, claim it, rent it, install lighting, attach signs, put furniture inside it, open it commercially, or include it as part of your licensed premises.” Vivienne slowly lowered her coffee cup, although she did not have coffee.

“No lights?”

“No.”

“No tasteful little table outside it with two glasses of wine?”

Sofia looked at her. “Outside where?”

“Near it.”

“How near?”

“Atmospheric near.”

“No.”

Celia stared at her. “What if the table is emotionally, but not legally, near?”

“No.”

Marianne wrote: **No atmospheric furniture.**

Vivienne leaned back. “Well. That is disappointing.”

“It is not unusual,” Sofia said. “Old defensive structures, watchtowers, chapels, parts of walls — foreigners often assume that if something is beside a property, it belongs with the property.”

Celia’s eyes narrowed.

“Foreigners are encouraged to assume this by dishonest real estate brokers.”

“That also happens.”

“Well you at least admit Rui was slippery.”

“I can say his description was misleading.”

“Slippery is more satisfying.”

Marianne nodded approvingly. Celia disliked how often useful people were inconvenient.

Sofia turned her computer screen slightly toward them. An image of the tower appeared, along with a short heritage description in Portuguese.

“The tower is old,” she said. “Sixteenth century. Built as part of coastal surveillance. It watched the sea for danger. Corsairs, enemy ships, attacks. These towers warned the villages.”

For the first time that morning, Celia stopped feeling only cheated. She looked at the photograph. The tower, stripped of estate-agent lighting and champagne fantasy, became something else. Not theirs. But real.

Vivienne leaned forward. "So, it was a warning tower."

"Yes."

"People stood there and watched the horizon?"

"Yes."

"For pirates?"

"Corsairs, maritime threats, raids. The Algarve coast needed watching."

Celia looked at Marianne. "Well, that is irritatingly good."

"What is?" Marianne asked.

"The story."

Sofia held up one hand. "Careful."

"I haven't done anything."

"You are thinking commercially. I can see it."

Vivienne smiled. "She gets that look before invoices happen."

Celia ignored them. "A tower built to watch for danger. Three women buy the house beside it after being misled by a man in expensive shoes. We open a wine-and-tapas bar called The Tower Bar. The tower warns women against pirates, estate agents and anyone who says 'trust me' without documents."

Vivienne's eyes lit.

Sofia's did not. "You may refer to the view," Sofia said. "You may mention the public history in general terms. You may not imply ownership, control, access or official partnership with the state unless permission is granted."

Celia smiled. "Ok we say: We don't own the tower. We simply drink beside it."

Sofia paused. "That may be legally safer."

Vivienne wrote it down.

Marianne looked up. "What about the bar licence?"

Sofia turned to another tab. "That is separate. You need planning permission for change of use, fire approval, health inspection, licensing for food and alcohol, and possible noise restrictions because of proximity to residential properties and heritage."

Celia stared. "I thought Portugal liked wine."

"Portugal likes wine very much," Sofia said. "Portugal also likes forms."

Vivienne asked, "How long?"

Sofia gave the pause of a woman about to ruin several fantasies. "It depends."

Celia pointed at Sofia. "No. That phrase is worse than subject to legal clarification."

"It is accurate."

"It is a swamp wearing lipstick."

Sofia was definitely almost smiling now. "With correct documents and a cooperative municipality, perhaps months."

"And without?" Vivienne asked.

"Longer."

"How much longer?"

Sofia folded her hands. "Portuguese longer."

Marianne wrote this down and underlined it twice.

Celia leaned back in her chair. "So, to summarise. We own the house, the terrace, the weeds and the disappointment. Portugal owns the tower. Rui owns a flexible conscience. The municipality owns time. And we may, after several months, possibly sell wine near a protected monument as long as we do not place a chair where history might trip over it."

Sofia considered this. "That is not a legal summary, but yes."

Vivienne laughed.

Celia sat up. "What can we do immediately?"

"You can renovate the interior of the house within permitted limits."

"Good."

"You can prepare licence applications."

"Less good."

"You can ask the municipality about signage. And can document Rui's representations and consider whether there is a claim for misrepresentation."

Marianne brightened. "Excellent."

Celia smiled. "Now we're cooking."

"No," Sofia said. "You are gathering evidence."

"Same."

Sofia handed back the brochure. "Keep every email, message, photograph and voice note. Do not threaten him in writing."

Celia looked offended. "I am perfectly capable of threatening him verbally."

"Do not do that either."

"You are removing all my hobbies."

"I am protecting your position."

Vivienne touched Celia's arm. "Let the solicitor frighten him. She has better stationery."

Celia sighed. "Fine."

Sofia looked at each of them in turn. "One more thing. Do not make jokes online about the state owning the tower until I have reviewed the wording."

All three women went very still.

Sofia narrowed her eyes. "You already made a post."

"No," Marianne said quickly.

"Not exactly," Vivienne said.

"What did it say?"

Celia took out her phone and showed her. The photograph had been taken the previous evening: the tower glowing behind them, the three women raising glasses. The caption read:

New life begins. The tower is ours. Probably.

Sofia closed her eyes briefly. "Delete 'ours.'"

"But it says probably."

"Delete 'ours.'"

Celia edited the caption.

New life begins. The tower is nearby. Legally, that is safer.

Sofia read it. "That is better."

"It is less glamorous."

"Glamour is rarely admissible."

By the time they left Sofia's office, the morning had become afternoon. The sun was high, the pavements bright, and Celia was hungry enough to consider biting a municipal official.

They found a café near the square and sat outside beneath an umbrella that flapped whenever buses passed.

Marianne opened her folder. Celia opened the wine list. "It is lunchtime," she said.

"We need clear heads."

"We have clear heads. We also have betrayal."

Vivienne ordered sparkling water, white wine, grilled prawns, salad, bread, cheese and something involving potatoes because she said no woman should face licensing regulations on lettuce alone.

When the food arrived, Celia took one bite and sighed.

"This. This is what we serve. Garlic. Salt. Olive oil. Lemon. Heat. Life."

Vivienne nodded. "Simple but generous."

"Local but not themed."

Marianne looked up from her notes. "No wooden boards that look impossible to clean."

"Agreed," Vivienne said.

“No foam,” Celia added. “No edible flowers unless they taste of something.”

“Do edible flowers taste of anything?” Celia asked.

“Regret,” Vivienne said.

They began planning properly then.

Not fantasy planning. Not champagne planning. Survival planning.

The downstairs room would become the bar: warm, intimate, shelves of wine, good glasses, ceramics, low lamps, a counter in old wood if they could afford it and cleverly painted MDF if they could not.

The terrace would have small tables, but only on their side of the red line.

Marianne drew the line in her notebook.

Celia labelled the other side: **Portugal.**

Vivienne labelled their side: **Us.**

Between them she drew a dotted line and wrote:

Emotional Ownership Zone.

Marianne crossed it out.

They named the three rooms upstairs.

The first: **The Sea Room.**

The second: **The Olive Room.**

The third, with the best glimpse of the tower if one leaned slightly to the left: **The Not-Ours Room.**

Marianne objected. Vivienne loved it. Celia said people would pay extra for a room with a sense of humour. Then they discussed the chef.

This produced fresh anxiety.

“We need someone local,” Vivienne said.

“We need someone good,” Celia said.

“We need someone legal,” Marianne said.

“We need someone who understands that women in their late forties do not cross Europe to be served moral vegetables.”

Vivienne wrote:

Chef Requirements

Garlic confidence. Without fear of butter. Understands prawns.

Can cook potatoes in more than one emotional register. Does not say “clean eating.”

Marianne added: Proper hygiene certificates.

Celia added: Attractive enough for atmosphere but not so attractive that he becomes unreliable.

Vivienne looked at her. “That is not a hiring category.”

“It should be.”

After lunch, they returned to the house carrying bread, cheese, wine, and the heavy knowledge that their dream was still possible, only more complicated and less vertically accessible than advertised.

Senhor António was standing by the path, speaking to another old man.

He lifted a hand. “You spoke to the lawyer?”

“Yes,” Celia said.

“And?”

“Portugal remains in possession of its tower.”

He nodded. “Good. Portugal will be relieved.”

Vivienne smiled. “Tell us about it.”

“The tower?”

“Yes.”

Senhor António shifted the bag he carried. “It watched the sea. Long ago, men stood there. If they saw danger, they warned the village. Smoke, bells, shouting. I don’t know. Depends who tells the story.”

“No pirates anymore?” Celia asked.

Senhor António glanced down. “Depends who tells the story.”

Marianne laughed. The tower stood above them, sunstruck, no longer quite an enemy. But not theirs. That remained annoying.

Although it had changed shape in Celia’s mind. Yesterday it had been a possession. A fantasy. A beautiful backdrop to a new life in which she would stand above everything that had disappointed her.

Today it was older than their plans and entirely indifferent to them.

That was also annoying. But useful.

Celia looked at the tower. “Fine,” she said to it. “You can stay state-owned.”

Vivienne followed her gaze. “But we get the tables.”

“And the wine,” Marianne said.

“And the story,” Celia added.

Senhor António smiled. “Stories are easier to own.”

Marianne frowned. “Legally?”

He laughed. “No. Better than legally.”

That evening, the three women sat on the terrace on their side of the red line. Marianne had marked it temporarily with three small stones and a piece of string, because apparently

trespassing on national heritage could happen emotionally and spatially.

They ate bread and cheese from paper wrapping. They drank wine from mismatched glasses. The house behind them smelled of dust, old plaster and possibility. Below, Olhos d'Água began to glow with dinner lights. Beyond them, the tower darkened against the sky. Vivienne raised her glass.

"To The Tower Bar."

Marianne lifted hers. "To licence applications."

Celia looked at the old stone silhouette beside them. "To the tower," she said. "Not ours. Very rude of it."

They drank.

For the first time since Senhor António had ruined their champagne, Celia felt the future return. Not as she had imagined it.

Smaller, perhaps. More complicated. With shitless of forms.

Celia had long ago learned that a woman could survive many things if she could make them funny before they made her bitter.

The tower had once watched for danger coming from the sea. Now it watched three women in their late forties prepare to open a wine bar beside a legal problem.

History, Celia thought, had no idea what was coming.

Chapter 3

Licenses

For the first three weeks, Celia believed bureaucracy was a phase. Like jet lag. Or optimism. Or the short period after a divorce when people said things like, “At least now you can focus on yourself,” as if oneself were a small potted plant that only needed watering.

By the fourth week, she understood that Portuguese bureaucracy was not a phase. It was a mine pit. A belief system. Possibly a religion, although one without candles, mercy or opening hours. The first list arrived from Sofia, their solicitor, on a Monday morning. Marianne printed it immediately.

Vivienne read it standing at the kitchen counter. Celia refused to look at it until she had coffee. Then she looked at it and said, “No.”

Marianne frowned. “No what?”

“No to the list.”

“You can’t say no to a list.”

“I can if the list is unreasonable.”

“It’s not unreasonable. It’s required.”

“That,” Celia said, “is often the same thing in Portugal.”

The list covered everything they needed to turn their beautiful, crumbling, legally disappointing little house beside the tower into a wine-and-tapas bar with three tasteful rooms. It did not look like a list. It looked like a hostage note written by civil administration. They needed permission for change of use.

They needed approval for food service.

They needed an alcohol licence.

They needed terrace permission.

They needed proof of ownership.

They needed proof that they did not own the tower.

They needed a fire inspection.

They needed a hygiene inspection.

They needed a kitchen plan.

They needed an architect’s drawing.

They needed proof of waste collection.

They needed a contract for pest control.

They needed insurance.

They needed tax registration.

They needed a complaints book.

They needed an online complaints book.

They needed a sign explaining the complaints book.

They needed certificates for food handling.

They needed to prove that staff understood hygiene, fire exits, allergens, handwashing, refrigeration temperatures and the emotional difference between prawns and seafood risk.

They needed permission for music.

They needed permission for the sign.

They needed permission for the terrace furniture.

They needed permission for the planters marking the line between their property and national heritage.

They needed confirmation that the planters did not imply ownership of the tower. They needed confirmation that no light, wire, hook, nail, banner, lantern, flower basket, decorative ribbon, menu board, chalk sign, stool, barrel, table, chair, umbrella, parasol, bucket, basket, candle, or “other object of commercial or atmospheric intention” would be placed on state-owned land.

Celia stared at that sentence. “Other object of commercial or atmospheric intention,” she read aloud. Vivienne looked at the ceiling. “They know us already.”

Marianne highlighted the phrase. “Important.”

“It is not important,” Celia said. “It is deranged.”

“It is legally important.”

“I am beginning to understand why pirates attacked the coast. They were probably trying to avoid applying for a terrace licence.”

Sofia had warned them. “You must do this properly,” she said when they had met her in Albufeira. “No shortcuts.”

Celia had smiled sweetly. “Darling, I am a woman in her late forties. Shortcuts are how I still have knees.”

Sofia had not smiled. “No shortcuts with the Câmara.”

Marianne wrote that down.

Vivienne asked, “Could it take a few months?”

Sofia paused. The pause was not encouraging. “It depends.”

Celia put both hands flat on Sofia’s desk.

“I am going to ask you to stop using those words.”

“It depends on the Câmara, the fire department, the health authority, the licensing office, the architect, the inspections, the documents, the portal and whether anyone asks for further clarification.”

Vivienne closed her eyes briefly.

Marianne wrote faster.

Celia said, “Further clarification is beginning to sound like a man who says he just wants to talk.”

Sofia looked at her over her glasses.

“Do not underestimate further clarification.”

They did not. Further clarification arrived everywhere. The architect, Pedro came first. Vivienne disliked him immediately because he was handsome and calm, which suggested either deep competence or emotional laziness. Celia liked him because he looked at the cracked walls with professional gloom and said, “This is possible.”

Marianne liked him because he carried measuring equipment. Pedro was in his early fifties, with salt-dark hair, a quiet voice and the irritating habit of being right without seeming pleased about it. He walked through the downstairs room, the future bar, and said, “You need more ventilation.”

Celia pointed at the open door. “There is Portugal.”

“For the kitchen.”

Vivienne followed him. “We want warmth. Character. Atmosphere.”

“You also want extraction, drainage and surfaces that can be cleaned.”

“Must romance always be wipeable?”

“In hospitality, yes.”

Then came the fire officer. He was polite, stern and utterly unmoved by Vivienne’s lighting scheme. He wanted emergency signs.

Celia objected. “Green plastic arrows will destroy the mood.”

The fire officer looked at her. “So will fire.”

Marianne wrote: **Emergency signs unavoidable.** Vivienne tried to find attractive emergency signs online and failed.

Then came the health inspector. She inspected the kitchen plans with the expression of a woman who knew every way humanity had poisoned itself with mayonnaise. “No wooden boards for food preparation,” she said.

Vivienne sighed. “But wood is beautiful.”

“Wood is also porous.”

Celia whispered, "So are men, but people keep marrying them."

The inspector looked at her. Celia smiled back at her. The inspector did not.

Then somebody came the licensing office, tax office and e tourism registration.

Then someone asked whether the three rooms were part of the bar, separate from the bar, above the bar, beside the bar, associated with the bar, or merely emotionally related to the bar.

Marianne replied with a diagram.

They asked for a clearer diagram.

Marianne sent one in colour.

They requested black and white.

She sent black and white.

They asked for the original colour version again. By the second month, Marianne had developed a filing system so sophisticated Vivienne said it could run a small country. By the third month, Celia wanted to set fire to it.

"We need a stamp," Marianne said one morning.

"Of course we do," Celia replied. "We are not women. We are documents in shoes."

"A company stamp."

"For what?"

"For one of the forms."

"Which form?"

"The form confirming we understand another form."

Vivienne laughed so hard she had to sit down. But ordered a company stamp. The company had a name now.

The Tower Bar, Lda.

This had taken three separate discussions, two accountant meetings and one argument because Celia wanted the official business description to include "wine, tapas and controlled disappointment," which the accountant did not find useful. The accountant was named Paulo. He was small, neat and had the steady expression of a man who had seen foreigners discover IVA before.

"You need invoices for everything," he said.

"We have invoices," Marianne said.

"Correct invoices."

"Are there incorrect invoices?" Celia asked.

Paulo looked at her with pity. "There are many incorrect invoices."

Vivienne whispered, "I miss ignorance."

The next shock was the complaints book.

"You must have a Livro de Reclamações," Paulo said.

"A book for complaints?" Celia said.

"Yes."

"Why would we provide stationery to unhappy people?"

"It is required."

"Can we also provide wine so they complain less?"

"That is your business model."

They ordered the complaints book.

Celia wanted to place it in a locked drawer labelled **FOR PEOPLE WITH NO JOY**.

Then came the online complaints book. Celia stared at the website. "So people can complain without even coming here?"

"Yes," Marianne said.

"That is disgusting."

The fourth month belonged to the terrace. Nothing caused more trouble than the terrace, that was small, beautiful and apparently a battlefield of invisible lines. Miguel measured it. Marianne measured it. A municipal technician measured it. Then another technician said the first measurements were not acceptable because they referred to a plan that had been updated in 2009 but not uploaded until 2014.

Celia stood in the doorway while this was explained and said, "I am beginning to respect crime."

Sofia told her not to say that in emails.

The problem was the tower. Always the tower although it did nothing, required constant discussion. They were not allowed to imply it was theirs.

They were not allowed to use it in their logo in a way that suggested ownership. They were allowed to show a "stylised nearby historic structure" as long as the text clarified that the structure was public heritage.

Celia stared at the proposed logo. "It looks like a depressed chess piece that lost his crown."

Vivienne redesigned it.

The municipality asked for a version without the little flag on top.

"There is no flag on the real tower," the email said.

Celia wrote a reply beginning, "There is also no sense of humour in your department," but Sofia intercepted it.

"No," Sofia said.

“I hadn’t sent it.”

“You were about to send it.”

The planters became an international incident. Not officially. But emotionally. Vivienne wanted blue ceramic planters filled with rosemary and lavender to mark the edge of their terrace. Marianne submitted the plan.

The municipality asked if the planters were fixed.

Then she replied:

They are physically movable but operationally not intended to be moved.

The municipality replied:

Please clarify.

Celia poured wine at eleven in the morning.

The fifth month brought COVID. Not actual COVID. Paper COVID. A ghost of COVID. An administrative afterlife.

Someone asked for updated health and safety protocols including cleaning procedures, ventilation, staff illness policy, guest hygiene information, distancing contingency measures, and proof that rooms could be sanitised according to current guidelines if required.

Vivienne looked at the draft protocol.

“Do we still need this?”

Marianne said, “Apparently.”

“But the world has moved on.”

“Not the Portugal.”

Celia took the paper. “Staff illness policy. Fine. If staff are ill, they stay home. If guests are ill, they stay in bed. If I am ill, everyone suffers.”

Marianne took the paper back. “We need formal wording.”

Vivienne created a cleaning schedule while Celia created a sign that said:

Please wash your hands.

The health inspector approved the cleaning protocol but requested allergen information.

The cook had not yet been hired, so they had to invent a sample menu. This was how the first draft of the menu came into existence.

Garlic prawns.

Clams in white wine.

Grilled sardines.

Piri-piri chicken.

Cheese and chouriço board.

Tomato salad.

Potatoes.

Almond cake.

At the bottom, Marianne added:

No foam.

Sofia told them to remove it from the official version.

By month six, Vivienne had started naming the delays.

"Today's delay is called Eduardo," she said one afternoon.

"Why?" Marianne asked.

"Because someone called Eduardo at licensing has asked whether our exterior sign creates 'visual pressure' on the protected tower."

Celia looked up. "Visual pressure?"

"Yes."

"The tower is made of stone. It survived. I think it can survive typography."

Marianne added visual pressure to the blue folder, which soon became three folders. Then five. Then a box. Then two boxes. Until Celia started calling them "the children."

"Where are the children?" she would ask.

"In the office," Marianne would say.

"Have the children eaten?"

"They have been scanned."

"Good."

The house changed slowly through all of this. Walls were repaired. Floors sanded. Tiles cleaned. A bathroom was rebuilt after the plumber discovered a pipe doing something he described as "creative."

The bar counter arrived. The shelves went up. The upstairs rooms softened into beauty. The Sea Room received blue shutters, a linen headboard and lamps Celia said made everyone look like they had slept well, even if they had not.

The Olive Room received green accents, a writing desk and a small painting of a fig tree Vivienne found in Loulé.

The Not-Ours Room received the best bed, the best chair and the best view of the tower, which remained legally unavailable but commercially irresistible. Celia often stood in that room and looked out.

"You are costing extra," she told the tower.

The tower said nothing. It was annoyingly consistent.

By month seven, they had learned the rhythms of Portuguese administrative life. Emails arrived either immediately or after so long that Marianne had forgotten what question they

answered. Appointments were confirmed verbally, then denied by the portal. The portal crashed on days when Marianne had courage. Documents uploaded successfully and then disappeared. One office said they needed paper copies. Another said paper copies were no longer accepted. A third said both were required. Just to conform they send seven inspectors. Until. Celia began to suspect Portugal was not a country but a test of female endurance disguised as sunlight. The locals, meanwhile, were entertained. Senhor António came by most mornings with oranges, figs, opinions or warnings. "You have the licence?" he would ask.

"No."

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Or another tomorrow."

Dona Lurdes came too, sometimes with bread, sometimes with gossip, sometimes just to look at the kitchen and shake her head at choices she did not yet understand. "You need a chef," she said.

"We know," Vivienne replied.

"You need a good chef."

"We know that too."

"You need a chef who does not make food for sad rabbits."

Celia turned. "Can she be on the interview panel?"

Marianne created a recruitment document.

Celia added: **No sad rabbit food.** By month eight, they were tired.

Not defeated.

But tired in the way only waiting can make people tired. Work was easier than waiting.

Arguments were easier than waiting. Even sanding shutters was easier than waiting. Waiting made the imagination rot. What if the licence never came? What if the bar could not open? What if they had bought a house beside a tower they did not own and renovated it into a very expensive private dining room for themselves, three women and a solicitor? Vivienne had a quiet panic one evening in the unfinished bar. Celia found her sitting on the floor behind the counter, surrounded by unopened boxes of glasses.

"Are we idiots?" Vivienne asked.

Celia sat beside her.

"Yes."

Vivienne laughed, but not much.

“I mean it.”

“So do I.”

Vivienne looked around the room. “I put everything I had left into this.”

“I know.”

“If it fails—”

“It won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No. But I know we’re too annoying to fail quietly.” Vivienne leaned her head back against the counter.

“I wanted this to feel like a beginning.”

“It is.”

“It feels like being trapped in a printer.”

Celia took her hand. For once, she did not make a joke immediately. Outside, Marianne stood on the terrace, measuring the distance between the planters again even though it had already been measured by four people and one man with a laser.

The tower stood beyond her in the dusk. Watching.

“We will open,” Celia said.

Vivienne squeezed her hand. “And if we don’t?”

“Then we will invite women here illegally and call it a private supper club.”

“Celia.”

“I’m joking.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No,” Celia admitted. “Not entirely.”

By month nine, the air changed. Not because anything had happened.

Because everyone had stopped inspecting it. The house was ready. The bar was ready. The rooms were ready. Signs were ready. The website was ready. The booking system was ready. The menu existed in draft form.

The only thing missing was permission to open.

Chapter 4

The Licence

Nine months later, Portugal surrendered. Not dramatically. It did not apologise. It did not send flowers. It did not admit that nine months was a long time to decide whether three women could serve wine beside a tower they did not own.

Portugal simply sent an email.

Marianne saw it first. She was sitting at the newly painted bar at eight twenty-seven on a Tuesday morning, wearing reading glasses and the expression of a woman who had spent half a year developing an intimate and hostile relationship with municipal portals.

For months, she had downloaded documents. Then translated them. Printed them and signed them. Then discovered that one signature was in blue ink and another should have been black.

Then resubmitted. Then somebody send a request for proof that the toilet door opened in a direction acceptable to public safety. Then received another request for confirmation that the terrace tables would remain entirely on their side of the red line and would not, as one official phrase had put it, “encroach physically upon protected heritage.”

Celia had framed that sentence.

It now hung in the downstairs ladies’ toilet.

At eight twenty-seven, the email arrived. Marianne opened it. Read it. Then, very quietly, she said, “Oh.”

Vivienne looked up from arranging ceramic bowls on a shelf. Celia, who was standing on a small ladder trying to hang a brass wall light without understanding gravity, turned her head.

“What sort of oh?”

Marianne did not answer.

Celia froze.

“Marianne. There are good ohs and bad ohs. Do not stand there like a woman in a medical drama.”

Marianne took off her glasses. “The licence is approved.” For one second, nobody moved. The old house seemed to hold its breath. Then Celia dropped the screwdriver. Vivienne put