

# Forgotten Women

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## Prologue

Ventas prison, 1938

My dearest love,

Let me assure you that I am well. The silence in the prison cells as thousands of women prisoners wait for the call they dread is deeply distressing. Every night is the same. The guards come in the hour before dawn to select the next victims to be shot by firing squad. The only crime of many of these poor women is to have supported their husband by not revealing his whereabouts, or simply to raise funds for the Republican cause. Even failing to follow the teachings of the Catholic Church with sufficient diligence can result in execution, particularly if the family is of the wrong political persuasion.

Sometimes I feel that anticipating one's death is almost worse than the actual event itself, rather like waiting to be sacrificed to ancient pagan gods. The agony becomes so intense that desperation grows inside me to get it over with quickly.

Each night, when the call finally comes, the eyes of the women being taken go instantly blank, as if they've already departed this world and are looking beyond the grim walls of the prison to a life of peace in the hereafter. They walk to meet their fate with pride and courage, dressed in their best, heads shaved.

I confess to breathing a sigh of relief each time I am passed by, even if my heart bleeds for those less fortunate than myself. An emotionally charged silence generally follows, as those of us who have been spared listen for the sound of the shots that mark the end of yet more innocent lives.

Some prisoners have had their sentence commuted to anything from ten to thirty years. I can't recall how much of my five-year sentence I have served here in Ventas prison, or La Pepa as some call it. I've lost track. But then time no longer seems relevant. I do hope you are still safe, my darling. I live in hope for the day when this dreadful war is over and we'll be together again.

Sorry, my love, but I had to stop writing this letter and have returned to it a night or two later. I was interrupted by a heart-rending scream, then forced to watch in agonised silence as a woman frantically fought a guard who was dragging her child from her arms. He strode away with the screaming infant tucked under his arm as if it were no more than a rabbit. Silence descended upon everyone as the poor woman fell into a stupor, realising she had but hours to live. Perhaps she no longer cared, having lost the battle to save her child. The lack of facilities is such that many babies don't survive birth. Nor do their mothers.

The conditions here are unbearable: fleas, lice and bedbugs, with very little water to drink or wash ourselves. Yet we endure it all without complaint. It's the safest way. I've grown accustomed to battling hunger, dysentery, food poisoning, malnutrition and rat bites, even the regular beatings. But living with the fear of torture, rape and execution is another matter altogether. I try to be brave, as always. Did I write to tell you about the interrogation I had to endure, once I'd recovered from the trauma? Can't quite remember. I do hope you receive all my letters. I'm so grateful for yours that R brings to me. Reading them daily gives me the will to battle on.

*Must hurry to finish this one as letters are already being passed to friends before the guards come for their next victims. Wedding rings, crucifixes, earrings and other jewellery are also being handed over. I have none left, as I've given them all away in payment for food and other necessities. Mothers are whispering a loving farewell to their children, preparing for the worst as they struggle not to shed a tear, fearful of frightening them. Babies are put to the breast to silence them too.*

*Ah, a small voice has started to sing. This happens often, almost as if the women feel the need to indulge in some light relief to make their last hours on earth joyous. I'm singing along with them. Can you hear me in your heart, my darling?*

*Sadly the singing has stopped almost instantly at the sound of footsteps clomping on the stone paving that leads to our cells. My heart is racing. The sound of breathing too has almost ceased. Fists are clenched. I hear soft whimpers and cries. The guard has entered and is reading out names. The women called rise at once to their feet, knowing there can be no delay in obeying or more will be taken in retaliation. Five are now standing in line. I am safe. Oh no . . .*

## PART ONE

### Chapter One

*Scotland – Summer 1986*

THE VISITOR gazing at the picture for the last twenty minutes had hardly moved an inch. He seemed riveted by its beauty, or the message it gave out with its images of clenched fists, soaring aeroplanes, flags, soldiers toting guns, and an injured woman holding her child to her breast, all randomly inserted into a beautiful Spanish landscape. Was he moved by the memories it evoked, Jo wondered. No, that wasn't possible. He was far too young to remember a war that ended nearly fifty years ago.

A bell sounded, indicating the art gallery was about to close, and she sighed with relief. This first day of the exhibition had been exciting but long and tiring, as they'd started preparations nearly twelve hours ago. Jo's mind instantly leaped ahead, wondering if Felix would be late again this evening, then she bleakly remembered their relationship was over. It was going to take time for her to adjust to life without him.

The lingering crowd was rapidly thinning as people made for the exit, but still the man didn't move. He was tall with black curly hair, formally dressed in a grey suit, a loosely knotted silk scarf hung around his neck despite the warm summer evening outside, and he had a certain tension in his powerful shoulders.

'Are you going to ask this fellow to leave, and deal with the old lady on the banquette who seems to have nodded off?' a voice demanded in her ear.

Jo smiled at the director with resigned patience, knowing he considered it beneath him to assist with such a mundane task. 'The old lady is my grandmother, waiting for me to take her home, but, yes, I'll see the gentleman out.'

Normally when she approached a visitor they'd instantly get the message and leave. Not this time. He didn't even glance at Jo as he began to speak in grumbling tones. 'You do appreciate this picture is a forgery. Someone is attempting to pass this piece off as the work of Ramón Peña Barros, no doubt in a bid to increase its value. That could be the fault of a fraudulent artist, or the gallery itself.'

Jo snapped her gaze from the picture to take in the ferocity of the man's expression, a frown creasing his brow. 'I assure you we do not exhibit forgeries in this gallery, nor do we commit fraud,' she retorted, the shock of his accusation resonating in her voice. 'The exhibition is to commemorate the year when local Scots joined the International Brigade at the start of the Spanish Civil War. The identity of this artist is not a major factor as the painting is very evocative of the era. The gallery has not attributed it to any particular artist.'

'I take it you are not familiar with Peña Barros then?' the young man said, a tightness to his jutting jaw.

'I'm afraid not. What makes you so certain the picture is a forgery? Is this simply a guess on your part?'

He glowered, his dark eyes glittering with fresh anger. 'I do not make a *suposición*. I know what I am talking about. The work is quite well executed but lacking his usual finesse and style, among other things that are plainly wrong. For a start it doesn't bear a signature, just a smudge of paint as if someone has scrubbed out the name.'

Jo had to agree with him there. She'd been concerned about that too, and badly wished to know who the artist was. But she'd fallen in love with the painting on sight, with its bright colours and the political aspect it gave of the war. 'I assumed the name was rubbed out because of the danger the artist might have found himself in by producing such a picture during the conflict,' Jo said, her curiosity alerted as she realised the man must be Spanish. 'How did you come to hear of this exhibition?'

He brushed this question aside with a flick of one hand. 'I do not think that is relevant. This picture should most definitely be checked out, the paint and canvas analysed.'

Aware of the director rattling his keys by the door, Jo dreaded to think what his reaction would be if the gallery were indeed charged with fraud. Highly ambitious and hugely controlling, Mark Carter did not allow his staff much freedom to explore their own ideas. Discovering the picture had been the inspiration to hold this exhibition. Gran had obviously been less impressed with it as she'd dumped it in her attic. But then she was not an easy woman, and Jo had found it necessary to battle hard to win them both round. Offering a polite smile she hastened to reassure this visitor she'd no reason to doubt that the paint and canvas were of that era. 'Appropriate checks were made.'

'Did that include an x-ray? Sometimes a forger will paint over an existing picture in an effort to prove authenticity.'

'I'm afraid not, but we'll certainly get that done as you've made me curious to know if it is by this Peña Barros. We made no claims for it to be a famous work of art, merely an exhibit to illustrate the war.' Indicating that he should follow her, Jo began to lead the way to the exit. 'Now I must ask you to leave. It's closing time.'

Glancing about him at the empty gallery the man looked slightly startled. '*Lo siento*. I'm sorry, I didn't realise. But someone has clearly copied the original, or more likely a photograph of it, and chosen to add certain items as an embellishment. I assure you there is no woman and child in the original. Also, the house is viewed from a slightly different perspective and . . .'

'You know it?'

Jo was startled to find this question being asked by her grandmother, who had come over to join them and was regarding the young man through narrowed eyes, her face having gone even paler than usual.

'Indeed, I am most familiar with it. Not simply the house, but the picture itself. Known as *Casa Oliva*, it hangs on the wall of my family's *finca*. Here's proof,' he said, handing the old lady a photograph. Then turning back to Jo he said, 'You are welcome to come and see it for yourself should you wish to compare the two, although it is in Spain.'

Her grandmother was staring at the black and white photograph, an expression of stunned disbelief on her wrinkled face, almost as if a host of memories were flooding into her head. A tear slid down her cheek and Jo quickly put an arm about her to give her a warm hug. 'What is it? Don't upset yourself, Gran. I'll deal with this.'

Ignoring her granddaughter she lifted her troubled gaze to meet that of the young man's, and speaking with measured calmness asked, 'Who are you?'

He gave a slight bow of his head. 'My name is Anton Quintana Méndez.' Then he turned to address Jo. 'I am only here for a short time, but you can reach me at the Almere Hotel. I look forward to hearing the results of your investigation. In the meantime, I recommend you remove this picture from the exhibition. Otherwise, I may feel obliged to sue the gallery.' Upon which threat he strode out through the door, head held high.

Jo had wasted no time in having the picture examined, which fortunately confirmed her assumption that the canvas, paint and style were entirely in keeping with the era. The director, however, had been far from happy when Jo showed him the photo of the alleged original and pointed out that this young man had threatened to sue the gallery.

‘Sorry, Mark. I did admit at the time that we had no idea who the artist was, but didn’t think that mattered. You agreed that it is a beautiful picture, painted in a style evocative of the period, and gave permission to display it.’

‘Do not attempt to put the blame on to me. It was *your* choice, *your* decision, *your* exhibition,’ he dismissively remarked, making it very clear that any charge of forgery would be directed against her entirely.

Jo winced, feeling slightly irritated that her boss wasn’t prepared to support her. Had she messed up on this project because of the traumas life was throwing at her right now? She pushed all of that from her mind as she sat in the bar with Anton Quintana Méndez at his hotel, and prepared to relay the results. He’d ordered afternoon tea, but before the waitress had finished setting out the teapot and cups and saucers, together with a plate of scones on the table before them, he began firing questions at her. His expression grew increasingly sceptical as Jo gave her explanation that all was as she’d expected.

‘So you have nothing new. *¡Nada!*’

‘Not about the authenticity of the picture, no. Unfortunately, our expert has no other work by Ramón Peña Barros to compare this picture with, in order to check such matters as brush strokes or choice of palette colours. He could find no record of him, so who he is remains a puzzle.’

‘It might prove your expert’s inefficiency. Peña Barros is an artist known for painting posters of the Spanish Civil War. Not as famous as Picasso, or Salvador Dalí, but he most certainly had a following.’

Jo felt her cheeks grow warm with embarrassment as yet again she was being accused of failing in her job. It made perfect sense that the artist had painted posters, not pretty pictures or similar works of art, so why hadn’t her expert checked that out? Why hadn’t she asked him to? She really seemed to be losing it. Setting aside any hope of a cup of tea, as Señor Méndez made no move to pour her one, she reached for her bag to pull out an envelope. ‘He did, however, discover something of interest. When our expert took the painting out of the frame he found a letter tucked into the back. It’s fascinating, if somewhat distressing.’

Señor Méndez was instantly alert. ‘May I read it?’

‘Of course.’ Jo handed it over, then picked up the teapot and filled his cup before attending to her own needs. She’d missed lunch, having been called to the director’s office to receive a reprimand, rather like a naughty schoolgirl.

‘Would you mind reading it to me?’ he asked, handing the letter back to her. ‘It is very squiggly writing and my English may not be up to the task.’

‘Your English sounds impressively fluent to me,’ Jo assured him, ‘although I do agree parts of this letter are not easy to decipher.’ With a smile she took one quick grateful sip of her tea. ‘I’d guess it was a letter to the lady’s lover or husband.’

“*Ventas prison, 1938,*

*My dearest love,*

*Let me assure you that I am well . . .*” Jo continued to read the letter with great sensitivity, struggling to blink away her tears as she had done every time she’d read it. ‘It ends with “*The women called rise at once to their feet, knowing there can be no delay in obeying or more will be taken in retaliation. Five are now standing in line. I am safe. Oh no . . .*”’ I suspect her name was called at that point.’ She glanced up at him expecting a cool reaction, but was surprised to see that he was looking equally moved.

‘I would very much like to know more about this lady, including her name,’ he quietly said.

‘The letter bears no signature. It would seem that whoever this poor woman was, she did not have time to write it. It’s hard to imagine how one would feel faced with the prospect of death by firing squad.’

‘That’s how it was during the Civil War. People were arrested, kidnapped and sometimes executed for no reason whatsoever, other than politics. That part about the person who delivered her lover’s letters, will you read it again please?’

Jo flicked her gaze over the letter to find it. ‘*I’m so grateful for yours that R brings to me. Reading them daily gives me the will to battle on.* Unfortunately she doesn’t give the full name. Are you thinking it could be this artist, Ramón?’

His eyes narrowed in deep thought. ‘It’s possible, I suppose. I was thinking that my grandmother’s name also begins with R.’

‘Really? What a coincidence.’

‘Her name is Rosita.’ After a thoughtful pause he cleared his throat and said, ‘It would appear that this picture does have a genuine connection with the war, whoever the artist might be. I’d like to apologise for my earlier reaction. It was perhaps wrong of me to accuse you, or the gallery, of forgery. I should have made more of an effort to discover the full facts before making such an accusation. *Lo siento.*’

‘Apology accepted,’ Jo said, feeling a flicker of interest in the way his face lightened and became quite handsome when he gently smiled at her. ‘As I said, we made no claim about the artist, and had no wish to pass it off as the work of this Peña Barros.’

‘I accept that now, but something is not quite right. This letter raises more questions than answers.’

‘Not least why it was tucked into the frame of a painting hidden in my grandmother’s attic, which is where I found it.’

He stared at her, his darkamber eyes wide with surprise. ‘So you didn’t buy the picture at auction, then?’

Jo gave a little shake of the head. ‘I came across it when clearing out Gran’s belongings when she moved house. She’s lived in Kirkcudbright all her life, and was most reluctant to leave the house by the river where she’d lived for so long. But now well into her sixties I helped her to find somewhere smaller and easier to maintain, and conveniently close to the centre of the village. I hoped my mother, or more likely my father, would help with the move. Now living in London, Mum had no wish to return to Scotland, and, as always, Dad claimed he was far too busy even to assist his elderly mother shift all her stuff. So it was all down to me. The reason is more likely that my parents were reluctant to meet up again. They’re divorced, so no longer speak to each other,’ she said with a wry smile.

‘That can’t be easy.’

‘It certainly isn’t. I feel like a referee at a wrestling match where those two are concerned. Anyway, I do what I can for Gran in the little spare time I have available, as I love her dearly, although she can be as equally stubborn and difficult as her son. Very distant at times.’ Taking another sip of tea to prevent herself from divulging more of her personal problems, Jo gave an apologetic smile. ‘Sorry, you didn’t come all the way from Spain to hear me ranting on about family issues. Nor, I dare say, simply to visit this exhibition.’

He let out a sigh. ‘As a matter of fact I did. Would you believe I came at *mi abuela*’s request, or rather her instruction? My grandmother read about the exhibition in a local newspaper, and sent me here in the hope of discovering information about old friends. She too is approaching seventy, and having been diagnosed with cancer, thinks this might be her last chance to find them.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ A small frown puckered Jo’s brow as she considered what he’d just told her. ‘But why would *your* grandmother imagine she’d find her old friends at *this* exhibition?’

‘It was because they were Scottish members of the International Brigade who went out to help the Spanish people in their hour of need. I very much doubt she’s heard anything from them since the war ended. It has long been a taboo subject. No one was permitted to speak of it. Spaniards are only now discovering the truth of what happened, and beginning to demand that the bodies of their lost relatives be dug up from the areas where they were shot, so they can be reburied in the *cementerio* with other family members.’

‘Oh, that must be so painful. I wonder if any of these friends of your grandmother’s are still alive? Do you know their names?’

‘I have them written here,’ he said, opening up his notebook to show her.

When Jo read the first name she gave a puzzled frown. ‘Charlotte McBain. That’s a name I recognise, although I’m not certain who this lady is exactly. I’ve never heard her mentioned before, but the surname is most familiar. Oh, my goodness, Libby Forbes. That’s my Gran, whom you recently met. Did she really take part in the Spanish Civil War. She’s never said a word about that.’

‘Which doesn’t surprise me. The Fascists continued to pursue their quarry for many years after the war ended. It was not an easy transition to democracy following Franco’s regime.’

‘But why didn’t she tell *me*, her own granddaughter?’

‘The silence inflicted on survivors could well be the reason, but it also worked as a means of security.’

A new thought struck Jo. ‘What if this letter was from Gran, then she was fortunately released? Maybe that would explain her reluctance to speak of it. I’d love to learn more about her early life, over which she is remarkably silent. And as the x-ray has proved this picture to be of that era and we’ve found this intriguing letter tucked behind it, I would like to compare it with the original version, if you wouldn’t mind? Once this exhibition is over, of course.’

‘You’d be most welcome.’

‘Thank you.’ Jo made the impulsive decision that she really had nothing to lose by going to Spain to investigate these issues more thoroughly. In any case, she felt badly in need of a holiday in view of the fact her life was in complete turmoil. ‘I’m also keen to learn more about this alleged artist, Ramón Peña Barros. Perhaps he was the lover this poor lady was writing to. Maybe your grandmother has the answer.’

‘I’m sure *mi abuela* could tell us a great deal, if we can but persuade her.’

‘Were you upset because that young man assumed the picture to be a forgery, Gran?’ Jo asked with concern as they enjoyed Sunday lunch together at a local restaurant by the marina, the sun glinting on the blue waters of the River Dee. ‘How did you come by this picture? You never did tell me. I was completely unaware that you joined the International Brigade. Unbelievable! How did that come about? You must have had to endure so much during the Civil War. What a brave young woman you were.’

‘The painting was left tae me by a friend,’ Libby said, ignoring all other questions.

‘Who is this friend?’

Libby made no attempt to answer this question either. Being sent this picture some years ago had taken her completely by surprise. She’d locked it away in the attic not wishing to look at it, or recall the horrors of the past. But confronted by that young man, an all too familiar fear had sparked within her, as she realised his possible connection was only a small part of the puzzle. Could he provide the answers she’d so longed to find? Somehow, Libby doubted it. Then why was he here? Did he know the artist, or had he come to Scotland for some other reason? If so, what would that be? She could hardly bear to think.

Her troubled thoughts were halted as Jo went on to explain how the young man’s grandmother had sent him here. ‘She’s called Rosita and is apparently a friend of yours.’

‘Nae real friend o’ mine. Never was, and never will be.’ Libby spat out the words with a hasty venom she instantly regretted, wishing she’d held on to her silence. ‘I have nae wish to discuss the subject any further. Let’s put it tae rest.’

‘Sorry, but I’m intrigued to know more, so thought I’d go to Spain to investigate this picture.’

Libby stared at her granddaughter wide-eyed with dismay. ‘No, no, dinna ever go there.’

‘Why not? The exhibition will be over by the end of the week and I could do with a break, as well as to organise a comparison between this alleged forgery and the original. Anton has invited you too, Gran. It would be wonderful if you came with me.’

Libby felt the lump of fear expand inside her chest. That was most definitely a road along which she had no wish to travel. Having been persuaded to allow Jo to put the picture on public display, despite the risks involved, it was clear to her now that she should have thought things through much more carefully. But how could she stop her from going to Spain? She was a grown woman with a mind of her own.

‘There’s something else you might like to see,’ Jo was saying. ‘We found a letter tucked inside the frame.’

Now Libby’s heart began to pound as her granddaughter slipped it into her hand. Dear lord, what might this reveal? Tears flooded her eyes as she read it, but she handed it back without a word.

‘Have you any idea who this woman might be? Did you know her?’

Libby pressed her trembling lips together, making no comment.

‘Did she go with you to Spain, or did you perhaps meet her there? I’d love to hear what made you decide to go and fight in the war, and how you coped with the battle.’

‘We went tae help the Spanish people, no tae fight,’ Libby wearily remarked, then stared out across the river watching the fishing boats come in, feeling as if she was slipping back in time to another world. In 1936 the Spanish Civil War had felt like not only a worthy cause but also a great adventure, one they were all willing to grasp, being young and each struggling with personal problems. But the results of that decision had been shocking and changed their lives forever. Would her worst fears now erupt all over again, proving she should have remained a forgotten woman?