

Prologue

I took a room in the Hotel Centro, the last of the old places still left. It had housed my love for José, soothed my pain, given me hope. Since the last century little had changed. The spacious, old-fashioned bathrooms, the pedestal sinks decorated with china cupids, the huge lofty rooms, peeling paint, mosaic floors, had remained due to lack of money or a desire for an authentic time which had gone. My room, pale green with lace curtains, made the light soft. For a moment there was the thrilling damp atmosphere I remembered from the first winter when I was his fiancée.

He tapped on the door, punctual and polite, and suggested we eat locally in Girona. His embrace was as always, but fast, as though someone was waiting for him. We crossed the bridge to the square with the restaurants and he went automatically into the Casa Marieta, one of the family-run businesses where the three waitresses still wore yellow and were kind and motherly. Not surprisingly, the place was filled with regulars. The owner had married the fourth waitress, tiny, perfectly shaped, nicknamed 'Snow-White'. She had a wonderfully optimistic attitude that went no deeper than the pale perfection of her skin. I asked why

we hadn't gone to Cal Ros or one of our other favourite places. 'They've all changed now,' he said.

It was 1972, and Girona had indeed changed. The chain shops from France and England had replaced many of the Catalan businesses. A local café had become an English pub. The clothes were the same as anywhere else, and the young were learning English. Something had gone out of José, a light, a flame. He'd been instrumental in getting the Fontana d'Or gallery established, and I was surprised to hear he was no longer there.

'They are short-sighted and have no vision,' José continued. I took it he meant the money people at the municipality. The new mayor and he did not get on.

While I'd been in Los Angeles and New York selling my books for films, writing scripts, making a documentary, he had lost the fight to keep his position and had even considered leaving the city. But he'd recently found something bigger and more glorious.

He seemed preoccupied and finished his food quickly. Then he asked about the boys. I didn't tell him much about my life except that I never stayed away in the US for more than three weeks at a time – whatever the deal – as I needed them to have security.

'The Jews were here in medieval times,' he said. 'They brought skill and brilliance to this city. They were the craftsmen, doctors, jewellers, lawyers, and teachers and brought wealth and quality of life to the whole province. It was known as the Golden Age. The Jewish mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were born here.' He described them as the heart of Cabbala, the secret teaching involving Jewish mysticism and theosophy. 'I want to restore this, our heritage, and build a Jewish site, a centre of Cabbala.'

He took me back to the Roman stone wall opposite his mother's apartment on the carrer de la Força. All I could see was what had always been there, a high stone wall, part of this ancient narrow street continuing up the hill without a gap until out of sight there was a stairway leading to a drinking fountain with an animal's head. He tapped the wall. 'There is nothing behind here.'

I said I'd never thought about it one way or the other.

'No one has,' he said. 'It's never been questioned. Everyone thinks behind this wall is the next passageway and those buildings up there.' He pointed to some visible walls. 'They have no ability for mathematics in this town. And behind here ...' he walked further up the carrer de la Força and slapped more stone. '... is an eighth-century street. And I will open it up.'

For once I had no questions. Except one: 'Do you still love me?'

He took me back down to the arch at the bottom of the street and we curved under it, through the tunnel, up the stairs around the crumbling wall as we had earlier that day. The entrance to the wasteland was through a broken piece of wall covered with high, tough weeds. The ground was full of rubbish, dirt, dust, and was used by tramps, the homeless, prostitutes, and ownerless dogs. The wall along the carrer de la Força kept it private. Who would want to be here anyway? He said occasionally there was the sound of digging in the night. 'They came here, an old man and his son, to dig for the treasure of the Jews.'

He pointed to a high stone building with an open terrace at the top, and above I could see a timber-beamed underside of the flat roof. 'That is one of the oldest and best houses in Girona. It belongs to Carmen Aragó, the most cultivated woman in the city.'

I thought 'best' was doubtful. The smell rising in the heat from the desolate area was terrible.

To one side, trees hid broken steps to a lower level of further desolation, paved with uneven stones. The rest of the surrounding stone buildings in disrepair seemed closed and dark, with an occasional shuttered window in a smashed façade beyond a wall.

'This was a flourishing area of twenty-four houses and a courtyard.'

What was left of them was hard to define. This wasteland had been the courtyard where the great Rabbinic scholar Nachmanides had, through Cabbala, pierced reality as we know it. José said the Jews were expelled in 1492 and the area had been closed by order of the Church ever since.

'How did you find it?'

He paused. 'I lived opposite as a child but did not know it was there. There were stories, more legends, passed down through generations.'

So I asked how he would restore it, and he said by raising money. And he mentioned a sum which I thought was high for the municipality.

'Oh, no, they're not having this. It will be privately owned.' He sat in the dust and held a piece of stone, rolling it around in his hand. 'This is what it is.'

'This?'

'What they're all looking for. The mystery. It's here.'

He seemed older in an obvious way, but there was something else as he looked at me. I thought it might be sorrow. He was still absolutely beautiful.