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**Signed and Sealed**

Standing in the living room, Joe and I looked around.

"It smells damp," said Joe, wrinkling his nose.

"And it's so dark," I said. "Even with the lights on."

"Well, at least it has walls and a roof." Joe's attempt at humour did not amuse me.

Kurt and Alonso had followed us in, still chatting. A hideous plastic chandelier hung from the low ceiling just above Kurt's head, like a crazy Ascot hat. The fireplace was ugly and small, caked with old grease. On one wall a sinister looking crack zigzagged from floor to ceiling, like a lightning bolt.

"What's that?" asked Joe, pointing.

"*Terremoto*," said Alonso, smiling happily.

"The earthquake made the crack," said Kurt.

Joe and I exchanged glances. Earthquakes hadn't even crossed our minds. Could it happen again? Was the house unsafe?

Alonso rattled away to Kurt, who occasionally interpreted for us. "He says he vill present you the television. It is German," said Kurt. We tried hard to look excited at owning the ancient dust covered television squatting malevolently in the corner.

We left Alonso and Kurt downstairs and climbed the stairs, holding onto the flimsy metal pole screwed into the wall serving as a handrail. The cement steps were cracked and filthy. Upstairs there were three rooms, each with a tiny, shuttered, barred window. Dust-laden cobwebs spanned every corner and alcove like tattered Victorian lace. Rusty bedsteads with mildewed mattresses sheltered more beetles and spiders' nests.

"It's awful," said Joe. "Whoever takes this on has got to be mad. It would cost a fortune to put right."

"I agree," I said. "It's horrible. I wouldn't touch it with a barge-pole."

We went back downstairs where Kurt and Alonso were still jabbering away in the living room. We carried on exploring. The living room opened onto another room, then another, and another. We lost count. It was a rabbit warren.

One room appeared to have been hewn out of the mountainside. It was a cave room, dark and windowless.

"This would make a good bedroom for someone," said Joe. "Bet it stays really cool in summer."

"Maybe, but not for us." I said. Joe didn't reply, but there was a peculiar look on his face.

Like most old Spanish houses, this one was a veritable Tardis. Joe had to stoop frequently as the doorways were built for people much shorter than ourselves. Dried hams and rusty agricultural tools hung from the ceilings. Sacks of potatoes leant against crumbling walls.

The only bathroom was downstairs. It boasted a miniature green bath complete with plastic curtain and a chipped sink propped up at a crazy angle by bits of wood. An antiquated toilet with high cistern reminded me of my early schooldays in the sixties. Joe pulled the chain to test it, and it came away in his hand. Quickly, he kicked it behind the toilet to hide it.

"Well, at least it's got a shower," he said and drew the plastic curtain aside. The whole curtain, plus rail, clattered to the floor.

"Don't touch anything else!" I hissed. This house was clearly a disaster. We returned to the living room where Alonso and Kurt were still deep in conversation.

"Where's the kitchen?" I whispered to Joe, and Kurt heard me.

"The wife of Alonso cooks here," explained Kurt, flapping his hand at the open fireplace. Really? I was full of admiration.

The tour was not over; there was much more to see. Alonso showed us more rooms that we hadn't noticed before. Another door opened onto an overgrown walled garden. He showed us two workshops and a fairly decent garage. Still there was more; a ruined building and a plot of fenced land planted with fruit trees – bizarrely on the other side of the street. Everything was run down and neglected, but in spite of myself, I was beginning to be charmed.



*Overgrown garden*

The tour had ended and Kurt turned to us, his blond eyebrows and shoulders raised in question.

"We love it! We'll take it," said Joe.

I swung round and gaped at him, open-mouthed with horror.

When it comes to shopping, even for houses, Joe is impetuous. I am far more cautious. I need to make lists. I need time to think, to weigh things up, to decide.

Buy *this* house? Was he *crazy*? I tried to protest but no sound came out.

I couldn't speak because there was an unexpected battle going on in my head. Heart was fighting with Common Sense. It was a funny thing, but without warning, the house was growing on me. I found my mind churning with ideas for rooms. How to create a kitchen opening onto that walled garden. Perhaps have roof terraces to take in the stunning mountain views.

"*Think of the work!*" said Common Sense. "*The place is a disaster!*"

"*Yes, but imagine how it could be... Imagine being part of this little village. Look at those views...*" said Heart.

"We're looking for a project," said Joe. "I think we could do wonders with this cottage. And perhaps we could build a couple of houses in the orchard over the road. It's just an overgrown eyesore at the moment, and the old ruin up there is dangerous."

"Permission from the council will not be a problem," said Kurt.

Common Sense gave up the fight. It didn't matter about frayed electric cables sticking out of walls like discarded spaghetti. Never mind the heaps of grit like dusty molehills in every room where the walls were forever disintegrating in avalanches.

Yes, I could see past all the decay. I could visualise this place as our home and project for the next five years, maybe longer. My heart hammered.

So that was it. We had found The House.

If Kurt was delighted at our decision to buy the house, he didn't show it. However, he wasted no time. We drove straight back down the mountain to the city.

"We must make all things lawful," he said. "It is lucky. The paperverk is correct. Alonso already has an *escritura* for the house."

I had read about *escrituras*, or deeds to houses. Very few owners bothered with them as most houses were passed down from generation to generation. Buying an old Spanish house with its paperwork already in order was a rarity.

Kurt marched us into the bank in Almería to open bank accounts and pay a deposit. The bank was large and airy. There were comfortable easy chairs, sweets in bowls, free coffee, ashtrays and magazines laid out on coffee tables for those waiting. I mentally compared it with the grim, unwelcoming banks I was familiar with in England. I knew which I preferred.

We were introduced to our new bank manager, Lola. Another surprise. Could this really be our bank manager? Lola was lovely; sable haired and sultry. When she spoke (in flawless English) her husky voice was like dark treacle running through sugar cane. I caught Joe gaping and kicked him under the table.

There were no formalities, we were on first name terms immediately. Efficient as well as beguiling, Lola beckoned seductively over her shoulder, led us to her office, then helped us sign on the dotted lines. I recalled the stuffy suited bank managers I had met in England. Sussex suddenly seemed a long way away.

Joe stopped drooling long enough to hand over a credit card to pay the deposit, and that was it. The die was cast. We were going to live in a tumbledown cottage in a quirky little village in the Alpujarra mountains.

We were given four months to pay Alonso the balance for the house. Meanwhile, the papers would be prepared ready for the official completion of sale. Nothing more to do now except return to England.

"I can't believe we've done it!" I said outside the bank. "We've paid a deposit on a house here in Spain! I wish we didn't have to go back to England. I wish we could just stay here for ever."

"Well, we can't," said Joe. "And don't forget, when we *do* move out, life's not going to be a picnic. We need to get that house up to scratch if we're going to make a good profit in five years."

"But if we love it, we might stay permanently," I said, clinging to my dream.

Joe snorted. "We'll see," he said.

The holiday was over. Back to England to plan and wait for the paperwork to be completed. Time to exchange sapphire skies for steel.



Back in England we began preparations. We found a letting agent to handle the rental of our house. We transferred money through cyber space to Luscious Lola at the Spanish bank. We took crash courses in Spanish. We waited while winter melted into spring. And then, at long last, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"This is Kurt."

"Oh! Hello, Kurt. How are you?"

"I am vell. The papers you vill sign now. I haf made an appointment with the Notary for you May 23rd, 12 o'clock."

"Right, I'll check the flights and..." but the line was already dead.

Which was why, on May 23rd we found ourselves in the Notary's office. Venetian blinds cut out the sunlight and bright fluorescent strip-lighting flickered above. We all sat round a huge oval polished table. The Notary presided in an important looking upholstered chair. The rest of us sat in red plastic ones. Besides ourselves, there was Kurt, his business partner Marco, Luscious Lola and Kurt's solicitor wife Paula. Opposite us and dressed in their best clothes, all in a row like swallows on a telegraph wire, sat Alonso and his wife, his three grown up sons and their wives, his daughter and son-in-law.

The Notary straightened the stack of papers in front of him and raised one finger for silence. Alonso's family stopped twittering instantly and sat still. Order restored to his satisfaction, the Notary began. Slowly, he read aloud the deeds of the estate, all sixteen pages of it. He may as well have been reading instructions on how to split the atom; we understood nothing. I entertained myself by watching the others. Kurt sat straight and tall, staring directly ahead, occasionally twitching the blond forelock from his eyes. His wife Paula nodded wisely every few moments. Marco looked bored and kept clearing his throat. Alonso beamed but was clearly out of his depth. His wife and daughter held hands and glanced at each other frequently. Only the son-in-law listened intently, head on one side, eyes furtively flicking from the Notary back to us.

Eventually, papers were signed and Luscious Lola produced several piles of banknotes from

her briefcase. These were pushed over to Alonso. Before he could reach them, the son-in-law's hand shot out like a trap-door spider, and intercepted the piles. More papers were read aloud to the accompaniment of 'flip,flip,flip,' as the son-in-law counted the banknotes. Paula and the Notary finalised a few small points and still the 'flip,flip,flip,' continued.

We didn't notice who finally pocketed the money, but at last we were presented with a huge bunch of keys. This acted like a signal, and the atmosphere changed dramatically. The transaction was complete and celebratory smiles wreathed every face. Chairs scraped as everyone sprang to life. A fest of handshaking and back clapping commenced. All the women were seized, embraced and kissed.

Kurt and Marco were the last to leave.

"Thank you, Kurt," I said. "Thank you for sorting out everything so efficiently."

"It is no problem," he said. "I haf arranged the electricity and the vater, also." We shook hands yet again, and Kurt and Marco walked away.

No going back, we'd done it, we now owned a house in a tiny Spanish village. I tightened my grip on the bunch of keys then danced a little jig on the pavement.

"We're moving to Spain! We're moving to Spain! No more England! No more rain!"

Passers-by looked amused, Joe just shook his head.

"Don't use up all your energy," he said. "Remember what work we've got to do this week."

As it was the school half-term break in England, we had allowed ourselves a week in Spain. Now that we had the house keys, that week was action packed. We wanted to move in the summer so we planned to clear the house in readiness, but with only a week, it was a tall order.

First thing - buy a wheelbarrow in the shopping mall. All wheelbarrows in Spain seemed to be bright yellow with green handles. I took a photo of Joe wheeling it through the shopping centre but we were never to see that photo, or any of the others we took that week.

Our hotel room was on the third floor with a balcony overlooking the gardens. I was the first to wake one morning, and couldn't find my handbag.

"Joe? Have you seen my bag? I thought I left it on the armchair, but I can't seem to find it."

"No, haven't seen it. Wish someone would give me a euro for every time you've lost your bag! Huh! I'd be a rich man. Can't be far. Have you been out on the balcony this morning?"

"No, why?"

"Well, the sliding door is slightly ajar." Joe opened it further and stepped out onto the balcony. At exactly the same moment, the man from the room next door stepped out onto his balcony.

"Morning," said Joe, stretching.

"Oh, hello, there," said the man. "Just escaping the missus. She's lost her bloomin' handbag again."

"You're joking!" said Joe, amused. "So's mine! She's looking for it now."

It took a couple of seconds for the penny to drop, then they both stared at each other, wide-eyed.

#### **Spicy Mediterranean Dip**

*A mildly spicy, smooth, light dip  
perfect for an aperitif or buffet.*

**1 large jar of chickpeas (not dried)**  
**175 ml (6 fl oz) olive oil**  
**Salt**  
**1 teaspoon pepper**  
**2 tablespoons cumin**  
**2 teaspoons hot paprika**

**Place the chickpeas and the olive oil into a large bowl and blend into a smooth puree.**

**Add the salt and pepper and the cumin and blend again.**

**It is important to taste as you go, adding more cumin as necessary.**

**Pour into a dish, sprinkling the top with a little more cumin and the hot paprika. Then place in the freezer for about 10 minutes to set slightly.**

**Serve with slices of raw carrot, cucumber, peppers and celery.**