The Siege

ARTURO PÉREZ-REVERTE

Translated from the Spanish by Frank Wynne

PHOENIX

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CHAPTER ONE

At the sixteenth lash, the man strapped to the table loses consciousness. His skin is yellowish, almost translucent now; his head hangs limply over the edge of the table. The glow from the oil lamp on the wall reveals the tracks of tears down his filthy cheeks and a thread of blood drips from his nose. The man whipping him stands in silence for a moment, uncertain, one hand gripping the pizzle, the other mopping from his brow the sweat that also soaks his shirt. Then he turns to a third man leaning against the door in the shadows behind him. The face of the man with the whip bears the hangdog look of a hound cowering before its master. A brutish, lumbering mastiff.

In the silence comes the sound of the Atlantic pounding against the shore beyond the shuttered window. No one has said a word since the screaming stopped. Twice, the dark face of the man in the doorway is illuminated by the glowing ember of a cigar.

'It wasn't him,' he says finally.

Every man has a breaking point, he thinks, though he does not say as much aloud. Not before his dull-witted companion. Every man will break at a precise point if only he can be brought to it. It is simply a matter of delicacy, of finesse. Of knowing when and how to stop. One more gram on the scales and everything goes to hell. Comes to nothing. Becomes, in short, a fruitless waste of energy. Of time and effort. Blows struck blindly while the true target is making good his escape. Useless sweat, like that of the torturer now mopping his brow, bullwhip in hand, waiting for the order to continue.

'There's nothing more to be done here.'

The other man looks at him, slow, uncomprehending. His name is Cadalso – the word means a gibbet – an apt name given his office. Cigar clenched between his teeth, the man in the doorway moves to the

table and, stooping slightly, peers at the unconscious body: unshaven, dirt crusted on his neck, on his hands and between the violet weals criss-crossing his torso. Three more lashes, he calculates; perhaps four. By the twelfth blow, he knew all he needed to know, but it was important to be sure. Besides, in this case no one will ask awkward questions. This man was a vagrant wandering the docks. One of the countless human wrecks washed up in Cádiz by the war and the French siege, just as the sea washes flotsam on to its shores.

'He didn't do it.'

The man with the bullwhip blinks, struggling to take in this news. It is almost possible to see the information trickling through the narrow winding pathways of his brain.

'If you let me, I can—'

'Don't be a fool. I'm telling you it wasn't him.'

He continues to study the unconscious man closely. The eyes are half-open, fixed and glassy, though the man is not dead. In his professional career Rogelio Tizón has seen enough corpses to recognise the symptoms. The beggar is breathing shallowly and a vein, bloated by the awkward position of his neck, is pulsing weakly. Leaning down, the comisario becomes aware of the acrid stench of damp, dirty skin, of urine spilled on the ground under the force of the lash. The sweat caused by fear – colder now as the unconscious man grows pale – is very different from the other sweat, the animal reek of the man standing nearby holding the whip. With a rictus of disgust, Tizón takes a deep pull on his cigar, exhales a long plume of smoke that fills his nostrils, obliterating the stench. Then, he stands up and walks back to the door.

'When he comes round, give him a couple of coins and warn him that if he breathes a word of complaint hereabouts, we will skin him alive. Like a rabbit.'

He drops his cigar stub, crushes it with the toe of his boot then takes his broad-brimmed hat, his cane and his grey redingote from the chair, opens the door and steps out into the blinding sunlight; in the distance, beyond the Puerta de Tierra, the city of Cádiz unfurls, white as the sails of a ship perched upon stone walls that seem to rise from the sea.

Flies buzz. They have come early this year, in search of carrion. The

body of the girl still lies on the Atlantic shore of the reef, at the foot of a sand dune whipped by the east wind. Kneeling next to the body, the woman Tizón has had brought from the city works busily between the girl's thighs. The woman is a respected midwife and one of Tizón's regular informants. They call her Tía Perejil. She once worked as a whore around La Merced. Tizón trusts her instincts – and his own – more than he trusts the doctor the police habitually call on, a drunken, mercenary butcher. This is why he calls on this woman for his cases. Twice now in the space of three months. Or four times, if he includes the alewife stabbed by her husband and the innkeeper murdered by a student in a fit of jealous rage. But those were very different cases: it was clear from the outset that they were crimes of passion. Routine. The two murdered girls are a different matter, a strange and much more sinister affair.

'Nothing,' says Tía Perejil as Tizón's shadow alerts her to his presence. 'Her maidenhood is intact, she's as pure as she was when her mother brought her into this world.'

The comisario looks down at the gagged face of the dead girl, her tangle of hair fouled with sand. Fourteen, fifteen perhaps; a scrawny little thing, hardly more than a child. Her skin has been blackened, her features bloated by the heat of the morning sun, but this is nothing compared to the horror of her back, which has been whipped and flayed down to the stark white bones that contrast with the mutilated flesh and congealed blood.

'Just like the other one,' adds the midwife.

She rearranges the girl's dress to cover her legs, then stands up, brushing sand from her clothes. She picks up the shawl that is lying nearby and uses it to cover the dead girl's back, swatting the swarm of flies away from the wounds. The shawl is made of thick brown flannel, as plain as the rest of her clothes. The victim has been identified as a maid who worked at a cheap lodging house outside the city, midway between the Puerta de Tierra and the fortifications at La Cortadura. She had set off on foot to visit her frail mother yesterday afternoon while it was still light.

'So what about the beggar, señor Comisario?'

Tizón shrugs as Tía Perejil looks at him inquisitively. She is a tall, stout woman, sapped by life rather than age. She is almost toothless and

grey roots are visible beneath the dye that tints her greasy mane of hair, which is tied up with a kerchief. Around her throat she wears a necklet of holy medals and devotional scapulars, a rosary hangs from a cord at her waist.

'So it wasn't him, then? . . . From the way he screamed, it sounded like he was guilty.'

The comisario glares at the midwife until she looks away.

'Hold your tongue, or you'll find yourself screaming too.'

Tía Perejil is an inveterate scandalmonger but she has known Tizón for a long time, long enough to know when he is not in the mood for confidences. And today is such a day.

'Forgive me, Don Rogelio, I spoke in jest.'

'Save your jests for your sow of a mother should you meet her in hell.' Tizón slips two fingers into his jacket pocket, extracts a silver *duro* and tosses it to her. 'Now get out of here.'

As the woman walks away, the comisario surveys the scene again, as he has a dozen times already. The east wind has long since erased any footprints from the previous night. Besides, ever since the body was discovered by a muleteer who went to a neighbouring inn to give the alarm, the countless comings and goings have obliterated any clues there might have been. Tizón stands motionless for a moment, alert to anything that might have escaped his notice, then gives up, disheartened. One long track catches his eyes, a broad groove in the side of the dune, and he crouches down to inspect it. As he squats there, he has the fleeting impression that this has happened before, that he has seen himself crouching, studying traces in the sand. But his mind cannot bring the memory into focus. Perhaps it is nothing more than one of those strange dreams that later seem so real, or perhaps that brief, inexplicable feeling that what is happening has happened before. The comisario gets to his feet having reached no conclusions: the furrow could have been caused by an animal, by a body being dragged, by the wind.

As he passes the corpse he notices that the wind has lifted the girl's skirt, baring her leg to the knee. Tizón is not a tenderhearted man. His profession is brutal and certain rough edges particular to his character have long since led him to think of a corpse – whether in sun or shade – as simply a piece of rotting flesh. As a chore that will entail

complications, formalities, investigation, reports to his superiors. Nothing that is likely to trouble the sleep of Rogelio Tizón Peñasco, Commissioner for Districts, Vagrants and Transients, who has spent thirty-two of his fifty-three years working as a policeman, making him a wily old dog. But on this occasion even the hard-nosed comisario cannot help but feel vaguely uncomfortable. And so, with the tip of his cane, he moves the skirt back into place and piles a little heap of sand on it so it will not fly up again. As he does so, he spots a half-buried shard of metal, twisted like a corkscrew. He bends down and picks it up, weighing it in his hand. He immediately recognises it as a piece of shrapnel created when the French shells explode. There are shards of metal like this all over Cádiz. This one probably came from the yard outside Lame Paco's Tavern where a bomb recently exploded.

He drops the piece of metal and walks back towards the white-washed wall of the tavern where a group of onlookers is being kept at bay by two soldiers and a corporal sent by the duty officer at San José at the request of Tizón, who felt confident that a few uniforms would command some respect. The crowd is made up of menials, serving wenches from neighbouring taverns, muleteers, local mothers and their tykes. Standing at the front, by virtue of his status both as the innkeeper and the person who informed the authorities when the body was discovered, is Lame Paco.

'They say it wasn't the beggar what done it,' Paco says as Tizón draws level with him.

'They speak the truth.'

The beggar had been skulking around for several days and the local innkeepers were quick to point the finger when the murdered girl was discovered. In fact it was Paco who had arrested the beggar, kept a hunting rifle trained on him until the police arrived and made sure he wasn't roughed up too badly: just a few kicks and punches. The disappointment is visible on the faces of the crowd – especially the boys, who now will have no one at whom they can hurl the stones they've stuffed in their pockets.

'Are you sure, señor Comisario?'

Tizón does not trouble himself to answer. He looks thoughtfully at the section of wall destroyed by the French shell.

'When did the bomb fall, my friend?'

Thumbs hooked into his belt, Lame Paco comes and stands next to Tizón, respectful and a little cautious. He knows the comisario of old and knows that *'friend'* is simply a turn of phrase and one that, coming from Tizón, could just as easily be a threat. Because Lame Paco is not lame, he has never had a limp, but his grandfather did and in Cádiz nicknames are inherited more surely than money. As are professions. Lame Paco has a face framed by grey whiskers and it is common knowledge that he was a sailor and a smuggler in the past, not to mention the present. Tizón knows that Paco's cellars are full of merchandise from Gibraltar, he knows that on nights when the sea is calm and the wind temperate, the beach is alive with the dark shapes of boats and shadowy figures hauling contraband. Sometimes they even smuggle cattle. But for as long as Lame Paco continues to bribe Customs officers, soldiers and policemen – including Tizón – to look the other way, no one is going to ask questions about whatever is hauled up on this beach. It would be a very different matter if the innkeeper were to become greedy and attempt to shirk his obligations, or if – as some in the city and elsewhere have done – he were to traffic with the enemy. But of that there is no evidence. In the end the people of Cádiz, from the Castillo de San Sebastián to Zuazo Bridge, know each other of old and in spite of the war and the siege, they are are content to live and let live. This includes the French, who have not launched a serious attack on the city for some time, shelling it from a distance as though simply observing the formalities.

'The bomb fell yesterday morning, just after eight,' the innkeeper explains, gesturing to the east of the bay. 'It came from over there, from La Cabezuela. The wife was hanging out the washing and saw the flash. Then *boom*, it exploded over there.'

'Any damage?'

'Not much – that bit of wall, the pigeon loft, a few dead chickens . . . The shock was the worst of it. The wife nearly passed out. Thirty paces closer and it would have been a different story.'

Tizón digs a fingernail between his teeth – he has a gold canine on the left – as he gazes across the mile-wide inlet of sea that separates the Reef – Cádiz is on a peninsula, on one side are the shores of the Atlantic, on the other the bay, the harbour, the salt marshes and the Isla de Léon – from the mainland occupied by the French. The east

wind has swept away the clouds so it is possible to see the French fortifications at the Trocadero: to the right the Fort San Louis, to the left the half-ruined walls of the Matagorda and slightly further away the fortified cannonry of the Cabezuela.

'Have any other shells fallen around here?'

Lame Paco shakes his head, then gestures towards the Reef on either side of his tavern.

'They get a few up near Aguada, and down near Puntales they rain down all day – the people round there have to live like moles . . . This is the first time one has fallen here.'

Tizón nods distractedly, still looking towards the French lines, blinking against the dazzling sunlight reflected off the whitewashed wall, the water and the dunes. He is calculating a trajectory, comparing it to others. Something has just occurred to him. It is a hunch, a vague feeling. A nagging sense of foreboding coupled with the conviction that he has somehow experienced this before. Like a line of attack on a chessboard – in this case, the city – made before Tizón could notice it. Two pawns, including the one today. Two pieces captured; two girls.

There might be some connection, he thinks. He has witnessed more complex chess strategies while sitting outside the Café del Correo. Has played them himself, devised them, or used them to counter an adversary's attack. Like a lightning flash, he has an unexpected vision: chess pieces laid out, an unremarkable game, and suddenly, an ambush from behind the knight, a bishop or a pawn, the Attack – and its Capture; a corpse lying at the foot of the dune, dusted with sand carried by the wind. And hovering over all this like a dark shadow, the inkling of something he has experienced before, something he has seen, kneeling as he was then before the traces in the sand and thinking. If only he could remember, everything would be fine. Suddenly, he feels an urgent need to retreat behind the safety of the city walls and begin the necessary investigations. The need to castle, while he considers his strategy. But before he does so, he walks back to the body and, without a word, fumbles in the sand for the twisted hunk of metal and slips it into his pocket.

Meanwhile, three-quarters of a league east of Lame Paco's Tavern, unshaven and half-asleep, Simon Desfosseux, Imperial Artillery Captain attached to the general staff of the Premier Corps, 2nd Division, is cursing under his breath as he numbers and files the letter he has just received from the Seville Foundry. According to Colonel Fronchard, overseeing the manufacture of Andalusian howitzers, the three defective 9-inch howitzers received by the troops laying siege to Cádiz – flaws which caused the metal to crack after only a few firings – are the result of sabotage during the casting process: a deliberate mistake in the alloy that causes cracks and craters to form in the barrel – *pipes* and *blowholes*, in artillerymen's terms. Two workers and a foreman – all Spaniards – were shot on Fronchard's orders four days ago, but this is cold comfort to Captain Desfosseux. He had high hopes for these new field guns which have now proved useless. Hopes that he foolishly shared with Marshal Victor and the superior officers who are constantly pressing him to find a solution to a problem that now seems intractable.

'Scout!'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Inform Lieutenant Bertoldi I will be upstairs on the observation deck.'

Pulling aside the old blanket covering the doorway of his hut, Captain Desfosseux steps outside, climbs the wooden ladder leading to the upper part of the observation post and peers through an embrasure at the city in the distance. Hatless beneath the blazing sun, hands clasped behind his back over the tails of his uniform frockcoat – dark blue with red cuffs. It is not by chance that the observation deck, equipped with several telescopes and an ultramodern Rochon micrometer telescope with a double rock-crystal prism, is situated on the low hill between the fortified gun batteries of the Cabezuela and the fort at the Trocadero. Desfosseux himself chose the location after a careful study of the terrain. From here, it is possible to survey the vast sweep of Cádiz and the bay all the way to the Isla de Léon and, using the spyglasses, to the Zuazo Bridge and the road to Chiclana. All this is his domain. At least in theory: this sweeping expanse of land and water has been placed under his authority by the gods of war and the Imperial Command. An area in which even the word of marshals and generals must sometimes defer to his. A battlefield composed of

singular challenges, trials and uncertainties – and indeed insomnia – in which war is not waged through trenches, tactical manoeuvres and bayonet charges but using intricate calculations carefully worked out on paper, parabolas, trajectories, angles and mathematical formulae. One of the many paradoxes of the complex war with Spain is that this strange battle in the bay of Cádiz – where the precise mixture of a pound of gunpowder or the combustion speed of fuse matter more than the bravery of a dozen regiments – has been entrusted to an obscure artillery captain.

By land, Cádiz is unassailable. Even Simon Desfosseux knows this, and though no one dares say the word to the Emperor Napoleon, it is accurate. The city is connected to the mainland only by a narrow reef of stone and sand some two leagues in length. The reef road is heavily fortified at a number of points with strategically placed bastions and gun batteries, defences further reinforced at two key points: the entrance to the city itself, the Puerta de Tierra, equipped with 150 cannons, and, midway along the reef, the Cortadura, a defensive trench still in the process of being dug. Further off, where the peninsula meets the mainland, is the Isla de Léon, protected by a maze of salt marshes, channels and tidal creeks. Such obstacles to any attack are further complicated by the English and Spanish warships anchored in the bay, and by the *Fuerzas Sutiles* – the fleet of gunboats that patrols the bay and the inlets. This formidable array of forces would turn a French assault on land into mass suicide; consequently Desfosseux and his compatriots confine themselves to waging a war of positions along the front line while waiting for better times or some reversal of fortune in the Peninsula. And as they wait, the orders are to tighten the stranglehold on the city, to intensify the shelling of military and civilian targets. It is a strategy about which the French authorities and the government of King Joseph harbour few illusions since it is impossible to blockade the principal access to Cádiz, which is by sea. Ships flying under the flags of various nations come and go and the Imperial Artillery is powerless to stop them. The city still trades with the rebel Spanish ports and half the world besides, resulting in the cruel irony that the besieged are better provisioned than the besiegers.

To Captain Desfosseux, however, this is all relative. Or rather, it matters little. The outcome of the siege of Cádiz, or indeed of the war

with Spain, weighs less heavily on his mind than the work that engages all his imagination and his skill. As far as he is concerned, war – something he has only recently experienced, having previously been Professor of Physics at the School of Applied Artillery in Metz – is a matter of the practical application of the scientific theories to which he has devoted his entire life. His weapon is a slide rule, he likes to say, and his gunpowder trigonometry. The sweeping panorama of the city and the bay is not a target but a technical challenge. He does not say this aloud – to do so would earn him a court-martial – but it is what he believes. Simon Desfosseux's private war is not about national insurrection but a problem of ballistics and his enemy is not the Spanish but the challenges imposed by the laws of gravity, by friction, air temperature, the nature of elastic fluids, initial velocity and the parabola described by a moving object – in this case a bomb – before it reaches (or fails to reach) the intended point with adequate efficiency. On the orders of his superiors, Desfosseux reluctantly attempted to explain this two days ago to a visiting delegation of French and Spanish officials who had come from Madrid to assess the progress of the siege.

He smiles mischievously as he remembers. The delegates arrived in carriages by the road that runs along the San Pedro river: four Spaniards and two Frenchmen, thirsty, tired, eager for their trip to be over and fearful that the enemy might welcome them with a cannonade from the fortress at Puntales. They clambered down from the coaches, shaking the dust from their frockcoats, waistcoats and hats and all the while looking around apprehensively, trying to pretend they were at ease and composed. The Spaniards were officials in Joseph Bonaparte's government; the French included a secretary to the Royal Household and a squadron leader named Orsini, aide-de-camp to Marshal Victor, who was acting as a guide for the visitors. It was Orsini who suggested a succinct explanation of the matter, so that the gentlemen might understand the importance of artillery to the siege and advise Madrid that, to be done well, things had to be done slowly. '*Chi va piano, va lontano*,' he added – Orsini, in addition to being Corsican was something of a buffoon – '*Chi va forte va a la morte*.'[1] Et cetera. Desfosseux, who understood the implication, fell into line. 'The

[1] 'He who moves slowly goes far; he who goes quickly goes to his death.'

problem,' he explained, calling on his inner professor, still very much alive beneath his uniform, 'is not unlike that of throwing a stone. If it were not for gravity, the stone would travel in a straight line. But gravity exists. This is why the trajectory of a projectile propelled by the expanding force of a gunpowder blast is not a straight line but a parabola determined by the uniform acceleration imparted as it leaves the cannon barrel and the vertical pull of free fall which increases in direct proportion to the time the projectile remains in the air. Are you following?' It was clear that they were having trouble following his logic, but seeing one member of the delegation nod, Desfosseux decided to proceed. 'The problem, gentlemen, lies in determining the force required to maximise the distance travelled by the stone while minimising the time it spends in the air. Because the difficulty, gentlemen, is that the "stones" we are throwing are bombs with timed fuses which explode whether or not they have reached their target. Then there are additional factors: air resistance, divergence caused by cross-winds, not to mention vertical axes which, in accordance with the laws of free fall, determine that distance travelled will be proportional to the square of the time elapsed. Do you still follow me?' He was keenly aware that no one now was following him. 'But, obviously, you know all this . . .'

'That's all very well, but what I want to know is do these bombs reach Cádiz or not?' asked one of the Spaniards, summing up the general feeling of the group.

'We're working on it, gentlemen' – Desfosseux glanced at Orsini who had taken a watch from his pocket and was checking the time – 'We're working on it.'

One eye pressed to the viewfinder of the micrometer, the artillery captain surveys Cádiz, walled and white, resplendent amid the blue-green waters of the bay. Close yet unattainable – *like a beautiful woman*, another man might say, but Simon Desfosseux is not such a man. In fact the French bombs hit various points inside enemy lines, including the city itself – at the absolute limit of their range, although often they do not explode. However, despite the captain's theoretical work and the dedication and skill of the Imperial Artillery veterans, they have not yet succeeded in extending their range beyond 2,250 *toises*,

making it possible to reach the eastern walls of the city and the surrounding area, but no further. Even these bombs are usually ineffective by the time they land since the fuses snuff out during the long flight – an average of 25 seconds between discharge and impact. Desfosseux's cherished ideal – what troubles his sleep and fills his days with a nightmare of logarithms – is a bomb with a fuse that will burn for 45 seconds fired from a field gun capable of attaining more than 3,000 *toises*. On one wall of his hut, pinned up next to the maps, the diagrams and tables, the captain has a map of Cádiz with the location of every bomb: those that exploded are marked with a red dot, those that did not by a black dot. The red dots are discouragingly meagre and they, like the black dots, are all grouped around the eastern sector of the city.

'At your service, Captain.'

Lieutenant Bertoldi has just climbed the ladder to the observation deck. Desfosseux, who is still looking through the micrometer, turning the copper wheel in order to calculate the height and distance of the towers of the Iglesia del Carmen church, turns away from the eyepiece and looks at his aide.

'Bad news from Seville,' Desfosseux says. 'Someone added a little too much tin to the brass alloy when they were casting the 9-inch howitzers.'

Bertoldi wrinkles his nose. He is a short, pot-bellied Italian from Piedmont with red whiskers and a cheerful face. He has spent five years with the Imperial Artillery. Those laying siege to Cádiz are not all French: there are also Italians, Poles and Germans. Not to mention the Spanish troops offered by King Joseph.

'Accident or sabotage?'

'Colonel Fronchard claims sabotage. But you know the man . . . I don't trust him.'

Bertoldi half smiles, something which always makes him look sweet and youthful. Desfosseux likes his assistant, in spite of his weakness for the sherry and *señoritas* at El Puerto de Santa Maria. They have been working together since crossing the Pyrenees a year earlier after the rout at the Battle of Bailén. Sometimes, when Bertoldi has had too much to drink, he can be a little too familiar, too friendly. It is an infraction for which Desfosseux has never reproached him.

'Nor do I, Captain. The Spanish manager of the foundry, Colonel Sánchez, isn't allowed anywhere near the furnaces . . . Fronchard supervises everything personally.'

'Well, he was quick to find a scapegoat. He had three Spanish workmen shot on Monday.'

Bertoldi's smile broadens and he makes a gesture as though washing his hands.

'Case closed, then.'

'Exactly,' Desfosseux says scathingly. 'But we still have no howitzers.'

Bertoldi raises a finger in protest.

'We have Fanfan.'

'Yes. But it's not enough.' As he says this, he peers through an embrasure at a nearby redoubt protected by gabions and mounds of earth where, covered with a canvas tarpaulin and angled at 45 degrees, stands an enormous bronze cylinder – a *grand mortar* – known to its friends as Fanfan. It was Bertoldi who named it. In fact it is a prototype Villantroys-Ruty 10-inch howitzer, capable of firing an 80lb bomb at the eastern wall of Cádiz but, as yet, not one *toise* further. And this is only possible when the wind is favourable. With a west wind blowing, the only things being scared by these bombs are the fish in the bay. The howitzers cast in Seville should have been a marked improvement, having benefited from calculations and tests done using Fanfan, but there is no way to verify them now, at least not for some time.

'We need to trust in Fanfan,' says Bertoldi resignedly.

Desfosseux shakes his head.

'I do trust him, you know I do. But Fanfan has his limits . . . as do I.'

The lieutenant is staring at him, and Desfosseux knows he is looking at the dark circles under his eyes. The fact he has not shaved does little, he fears, for his military bearing.

'You need to get more sleep.'

'And you' – a complicit smile tempers Desfosseux's harsh tone – 'should mind your own business.'

'This *is* my business, Captain. If you were to fall ill, I would have to deal with Colonel Fronchard and I'd defect to the enemy before I

allowed that to happen. I'd swim over. They have a better life in Cádiz than we do here.'

'I intend to have him shot. Personally. And afterwards I plan to dance on his grave.'

In his heart, Desfosseux knows that the setback in Seville changes little. He has spent long enough here in Cádiz to know that neither conventional cannons, nor howitzers will be enough to raze the city to the ground. Having studied similar situations, like the siege of Gibraltar in 1782, Desfosseux would be inclined to use large calibre mortars, but none of his superior officers shares his opinion. The one person he succeeded in convincing – after much effort – Alexandre Hureau, Baron of Sénarmont, artillery general and commander, is no longer here to support him. Having distinguished himself at the battles of Marengo, Friedland and Somosierra, the general became so overconfident, so dismissive of the Spanish – whom he disparagingly referred to as *manolos* – as did all the French, that during a routine inspection of the Villatte gun battery on the Isla de Léon near Chiclana with Colonel Dejermon, Captain Pinondelle, the battery commander and Simon Desfosseux, who had been assigned to the cortège, the Baron of Sénarmont insisted on testing the new gun limbers. The general insisted that all seven cannons be fired at the Spanish lines, specifically at the Gallineras battery. When Pinondelle argued that this would simply draw greater enemy fire, the general, playing the role of the brave artilleryman to the hilt, took off his hat and quipped that he intended to catch every *manolo* grenade.

'Now stop arguing and fire, at once,' he ordered.

Pinondelle duly gave the order. And when the Spaniards returned fire, it transpired that Hureau, to his credit, had misjudged the position of his hat by only a few inches. The grenade landed between him, Pinondelle and Colonel Dejermon, the resulting explosion killing all three. Desfosseux was spared because he was somewhat further back looking for a place where he might discreetly urinate behind some earth-filled gabions which took the brunt of the impact. The three men were buried in the Chiclana hermitage of Santa Ana and with the Baron of Sénarmont was buried any hopes Desfosseux had of levelling Cádiz by mortar fire. Though at least he had the consolation that he lived to tell the tale.

'A pigeon,' says Lieutenant Bertoldi, pointing at the sky.

Desfosseux looks up in the direction indicated by his aide. It is true. Coming from Cádiz, the bird flies straight across the bay and past the inconspicuous pigeon loft located next to the artillery barracks and along the coast towards Puerto Real.

'It's not one of ours.'

The two soldiers exchange a glance then Bertoldi looks away. He is the only person with whom Desfosseux shares his professional secrets. One of which is that without carrier pigeons, there would be no red or black dots on his map of Cádiz.

The painted ships hanging on the walls and the scale models in the display cases seem to sail through the gloom of the little mahogany-furnished office, circling the woman writing at her desk in the patch of sunlight that filters between the half-drawn curtains of one window. The woman is Lolita Palma, thirty-two years old, an age by which any tolerably intelligent woman of Cádiz has given up all hope of marriage. But marriage has not been among her chief concerns for some time now; indeed it does not concern her at all. She has more important matters to worry about: the time of the next high tide, for example, the movements of the French corsair felucca that regularly plies the waters of the bay between the headland at Rota and the cove of Sanlúcar. Today, she is worried about the imminent arrival of a ship. From the watchtower on the terrace an elderly manservant has been following the ship's progress with a spyglass ever since the tower at Tavira signalled a sighting to the west: a ship at full sail two miles south of the sunken reefs at Rota. It could be the *Marco Bruto*, a 280-ton brigantine equipped with four cannons, two weeks late coming back from Veracruz and Havana with a declared cargo of coffee, cocoa, dyewood and currency to the value of 15,300 *pesos*. For some days the *Marco Bruto* has been listed in the worrying fourth column of the register that charts the fate of every ship linked to the trade of the city: *delayed, no news, disappeared, lost*. Sometimes, in this last column, are inscribed the fatal words: *lost, with all her crew*.

Lolita Palma is bent over the piece of paper on which she is writing a letter in English, pausing now and then to consult the figures

inscribed in the thick volume of exchange rates, weights and measures that lies open on the desk next to the inkstand containing a silver box of sharpened quills, a sandbox, seals and sealing wax. She writes on a leather desk blotter that belonged to her father and bears the initials *TP*: Tomás Palma. The letter, bearing the family letterhead – *Palma y Hijos, established in Cádiz in the year of our Lord 1754* – is addressed to a correspondent in the United States of America and details a number of irregularities in a cargo comprising 1,210 *fanegas* of flour which arrived in port a week ago after forty-five days in the hold of the schooner *Nueva Soledad* arriving in Cádiz from Baltimore. The cargo has since been reshipped to Valencia and Murcia where food is scarce and flour more prized than gold dust.

Each of the model ships that decorate the office bears a name and Lolita Palma is familiar with every one: some ships she has only heard of, since they were sold, laid up or lost at sea before she was born. Some, she trod the decks of with her brothers as a girl, watching their sails unfurl against the bay as they set out or returned, heard their ringing, hallowed, often enigmatic names – *El Birroño*, *Bella Mercedes*, *Amor de Dios* – in countless family conversations: how this one was late putting in to port, how that one was caught up in a nor'easterly gale, how another was pursued by a pirate ship between the Azores and San Vicente. All with detailed references to ports and their cargoes: copper from Veracruz, tobacco from Philadelphia, leather from Montevideo, cotton from La Guaira . . . far-off places as familiar in her house as Calle Nueva, the church of San Francisco or the Alameda. Letters from correspondents, consignees and partners are filed away in thick folders in the ground-floor office next to the warehouse. Ports and ships: two words that have been intimately entwined with expectation and uncertainty for as long as Lolita Palma can remember. She knows that for three generations the fortunes of the Palma family have depended on these ships, on the fortunes made on a day's run, on how they face down calm seas and heavy swells, on the bravery and the skill of their crews in eluding the dangers on sea and land. One of the ships – *Joven Dolores* – even bears her name, or did so until recently. A fortunate ship, the *Joven Dolores*; having spent a profitable career ferrying cargo, first for a British coal merchant and later for the Palma family, she is now spending her old age, nameless and flagless, moored

peacefully off the Punta de la Clica near Carraca creek. A ship that never fell victim to the ocean's fury, to pirates, corsairs or to enemy flags; a ship that never brought the shadow of death into a house, left no widows or orphans.

An English burr-walnut barometer-clock by the office door sounds three deep peals which are echoed, almost immediately, more silvery and distant, by the other clocks throughout the house. Lolita Palma, who has just finished her letter, sprinkles sand on the fresh ink of the last sentence and leaves it to dry. Then, using a paperknife, she carefully folds the sheet of paper – white, heavy paper of exceptional quality from Valencia – and having written the address on the back, strikes a phosphorus match and carefully seals the folds with wax. She does this as she does everything in life – slowly and meticulously. Then, placing the letter on a wooden tray inlaid with whalebone ivory, she gets to her feet in a rustle of silk from the dark, delicately embroidered Chinese *peignoir* shipped from the Philippines which falls to her satin slippers. As she gets up, she steps on a copy of the *Diario Mercantil* which has fallen on to the Chiclana rug. Picking it up she places it with the others – *El Redactor General*, *El Conciso*, some old newspapers in English and Portuguese – on a low table.

Downstairs, one of the young maidservants is singing as she waters the ferns and the geraniums around the marble coping of the pool. She has a beautiful voice. The song – a ballad popular in Cádiz about a romance between a marchioness and a patriotic smuggler – rings out more clearly as Lolita Palma leaves the office, walks around two of the four sides of the glassed-in gallery on the main floor and climbs the white marble staircase leading to the terraced roof two floors above. Outside, the dazzling sunlight is in stark contrast to the gloom within, the low whitewashed walls of the terrace shimmer in the afternoon sun, the terracotta tiles are warm underfoot while all around the city bustles like a beehive set into the sea. The door to the watchtower in one corner of the terrace is open and, climbing a narrower flight of steps – a spiral staircase with wooden treads – Lolita Palma arrives in a mirador similar to those found in many houses in Cádiz, especially among those families – charterers, shipowners, merchants – who have businesses related to the harbour and the sea. From these watchtowers, a careful observer can recognise a vessel coming into port and, with the aid of a

spyglass, can read the signals hoisted on the yardarm: private codes by which each captain lets the shipowner or his agent know how the crossing has gone and what cargo he is carrying. In a merchant city like Cádiz, where the sea is the principal thoroughfare, an umbilical cord in time of war and peace, fortunes can be made through a stroke of luck or an opportunity seized, and for rivals, knowing a half hour earlier or later whose ship it is and what the signals convey, could mean the difference between bankruptcy and riches.

'She doesn't look like the *Marco Bruto*,' says Santos.

The elderly manservant has worked for the Palma family since the days of her grandfather Enrique, having signed up as a cabin boy on one of his ships at the age of nine. One hand is crippled now, but he still has a seaman's eye and can identify a ship's captain by the way each one unfurls his sails to avoid the sunken reefs of Las Puercas. Lolita Palma takes the spyglass from him – a fine English gilded brass Dixey with a draw tube – rests it on the lip of the embrasure and looks out at the ship in the distance: square-rigged, with two masts sailing under full canvas to make the most of the fresh westerly wind blowing from starboard, and also to outdistance another ship – rigged with two lateens and a jib – approaching from the headland at Rota, hugging the wind, intent on cutting her off.

'The corsair felucca?' she asks, pointing towards it.

Santos nods, shielding his eyes with a hand that is missing both ring and little finger. On his wrist, at one end of an old scar, is a faint tattoo, faded by sun and time.

'They saw her coming and set more sail, but I don't think they will catch her. She's too close to land.'

'The wind might shift.'

'It might but, if I may be so bold Doña Lolita, at worst she would get the wind on her quarter. Enough to make it safely into the bay. The felucca would get the worst of it being head to wind . . . Give her half an hour and I'd reckon she'll leave that French felucca standing.'

Lolita Palma gazes at the reefs at the entrance to Cádiz, visible even at high tide. To the right, further in, English and Spanish warships, sails furled and topmasts lowered, lie at anchor between the stronghold of San Felipe and the Puerta de Mar.

'And you say she's not our brigantine?'

'I don't think so.' Santos shakes his head without taking his eyes off the sea. 'Looks more like a polacca to me.'

Lolita Palma peers through the spyglass again. Despite the excellent visibility afforded by the west wind, she cannot see any signal flags. But it's true that though the ship is square-rigged like the *Marco Bruto*, her masts, which from this distance seem to have no crow's nests and no crosstrees, look nothing like those of a standard brigantine. Disappointed and irritated, she looks away. The *Marco Bruto* is already late and there is too much at stake. To lose this ship and her cargo would be a severe blow – the second in the space of three months, and all the more severe since there is no insurance to cover any losses. Because of the French siege, all goods and property are shipped solely at the risk of individuals and shipowners.

'I'd like you to stay up here in any case. Until you're sure it's not her.'

'As you wish, Doña Lolita.'

Santos still calls her Lolita, as do all the old retainers and servants in the house. The younger ones call her Doña Dolores or señorita. But within Cádiz society, whose members watched her grow up, she is still Lolita Palma, granddaughter of old Don Enrico. The daughter of Tomás Palma. This is how those who know her still refer to her at social gatherings, at meetings and soirées, and it is how she is referred to on the Paseo de la Alameda, on the Calle Ancha or at midday mass on Sundays and holydays at the church of San Francisco – the doffing of hats by the men, the slight bow of the head by the ladies in mantillas, the curiosity of aristocratic refugees who have just been told her story: a young woman from the best family with every advantage who, because of tragic circumstances, has had to take over the running of the family business. She had a modern education, obviously, like many young women in Cádiz. She is modest, never ostentatious, nothing like the frivolous young ladies of the fusty aristocracy, capable only of writing their suitors' names on dance cards and titivating themselves while they wait for *papá* to marry them, and their title, off to the highest bidder. Because in this city, it is not the august, ancient families who have money, but the merchants. In Cádiz, the only nobility respected is hard work and here young ladies are educated as God intended: as girls they are taught to look after their brothers, to be pious but not

sanctimonious, and they are tutored in practical subjects and perhaps a foreign language. One never knows when they might have to help out with the family business, deal with the correspondence or something of the sort; nor indeed whether, having been married or widowed, they might have to deal with the problems that afflict many families with mouths to feed, regardless of their wealth. It is common knowledge that, thanks to her father, Lolita – whose grandfather was an eminent syndic – was taught arithmetic, international exchange, weights and measures, foreign currencies and double-entry bookkeeping. She reads and writes English fluently and has an excellent command of French. People say she knows a lot about botany – plants, flowers and suchlike. Such a pity she is still a spinster . . .

This parting comment, '*such a pity she's still a spinster*', is the petty-minded revenge – malicious, but acceptable – of Cádiz society on the domestic, commercial and civil virtues of Lolita Palma, whose exalted position in the world of commerce is not, as everyone knows, conducive to private pleasures. She has only recently come out of mourning after a family tragedy: two years before her father was carried off by the last epidemic of yellow fever, her only brother, the natural heir of the family, died fighting at Bailén. There is a sister some years her junior who was married off at a young age to a city merchant while their father was still alive. And the mother, of course. What a mother.

Lolita Palma leaves the terrace and goes down to the second floor. On the landing, above the frieze of Portuguese tiles, hangs a portrait of a handsome young man in a high-collared jacket and a broad black tie; he gazes out at her with a friendly, faintly mocking smile. A friend of her father and the shipping agent in Cádiz for an important French company, he was drowned in 1807 when his ship foundered on the rocks of Bajo Aceitera off Cape Trafalgar.

Looking at the portrait as she comes down the stairs, Lolita Palma runs her fingers along the balustrade of delicately veined white marble. Though years past, she still remembers him. Perfectly. The young man's name was Miguel Manfredi, and the painting exactly captures his smile.

Downstairs, the servant – her name is Mari Paz and she works as lady's maid to Lolita – has finished watering the plants. The silence of the afternoon pervades the house on the Calle del Baluarte, a short step

from the heart of the city. The three-storey house is built of local sandstone, and the stout double front door, with gilded bronze studs and doorknockers in the form of ships, is invariably left open. A cool, spacious vestibule in white marble leads to a gate and the courtyard around which are the storehouses for perishable goods and the offices used by employees during working hours. The house itself has a staff of seven: old Santos, a maidservant, a black slave, a cook, young Mari Paz, a steward and a coachman.

'How are you today, *mamá*?'

'Same as always.'

A softly lit bedroom, cool in summer and warm in winter. An ivory crucifix above a white lacquered iron bedstead, a French window leading on to a balcony with a railing and shutters that overlooks the street and on the balcony, ferns and geraniums, and pots of basil. There is a dressing table with a mirror, another full-length mirror and a mirrored wardrobe. Lots of mirrors and lots of mahogany, very much the style of Cádiz. Very classical. A painting of Our Lady of the Rosary on a low bookshelf – also mahogany – on which there are also seventeen octavo volumes containing the complete collection of the fashion pamphlet *Correo de las Damas.* Sixteen, in fact, since volume seventeen is lying open on the lap of the woman, propped up on pillows, who now tilts her head slightly so her daughter can kiss her cheek. She smells of the Macassar oil she constantly rubs into her hands and the Frangipani powder she uses to give herself a pale complexion.

'You took your time coming to see me. I've been awake for some while.'

'I had work to do, *mamá*.'

'You always have work to do.'

After first plumping the pillows, Lolita Palma draws up a chair and sits next to her mother. Patient. For an instant, she remembers her childhood, when she dreamed of travelling the world aboard those ships with their white sails that glided slowly across the bay. Then she thinks again of the brigantine, the polacca or whatever it was – the mysterious ship which at this very moment is coming out of the west, rigging taut, sails set, fleeing the hunting corsair.