1949

The Pyrenees Mountains, Northeast Spain

TERESE SAT HUNCHED over the wheel, steering to avoid larger rocks hindering her passage on the overgrown mountain track. She desperately needed to avoid border patrols, find her uncle’s footpath, and escape across the mountains into France. Pamplona had become too dangerous.

Rocks were constantly thumping beneath the car’s floor. Thorns snapped against the two-seater’s window, scraping the length of the vehicle. Would she get stuck on this abandoned carriage track before she found the footpath? Despite the fading light, she refocused on finding the trail, visualizing the route on her uncle’s map. A grinding shudder shook the car’s passenger door, compelling her to shift direction.

Staring out at the rapidly encroaching twilight, she felt her blind confidence crumble a notch as her foot slipped off the gas pedal. Inhaling deeply, she got her boot back onto the pedal, and thought of Richard waiting in France.

Two weeks earlier, he had first proposed to meet in Bayonne. The offer had been naïve, even ludicrous—as if, as a Spanish Basque, she could simply walk across the border. “A weekend rendezvous, Terese. We can meet after I’m finished in Toulouse.” The suggestion made her realize they remained in different worlds, though the idea appealed: a brief escape from the narrowing confinement of her life.

He tried again a few days later.

“Listen to me Terese, please.” He took both her hands. “Bayonne is just across the French border. Think about seeing your people on the other side of the Pyrenees.”

This alternate Basque existence gained her full attention.

His voice lightened. “Imagine Bayonne’s seaside, the waves rippling in the sun.” She saw the dream fill his vision, then tried to picture a coast she’d never seen. “Look to the harbour, beyond the boats, the ocean open to the horizon. We can stay an extra day if you’d like.”

The idea captivated her, though accepting his foolish ignorance wasn’t possible. “Richard, this academic advisor of yours—this trip is his idea, no? He wants your news; hearing that you’ve made progress.”

His sparkle wavered. “Terese, this opportunity is a chance for us to get away.”

“An opportunity for you. In my case, leaving is more difficult. I . . .” Having no passport for travel, she thought about her driving license.

“What?” His eyes searched for an answer. “Tell me.”

His lack of understanding was so plainly maddening! She took a deep breath. “Richard, we cannot be seen traveling together.” Her clichéd excuse seemed to convince him.

Her reluctance softened by the afternoon. Despite his ridiculous innocence, he’d filled a void she previously accepted as the trade-off for her commitment to medical school. Could a romantic French rendezvous be possible for a Spanish Basque? She couldn’t completely accept the idea, though images of a sunlit harbour flickered desperately throughout her medical rounds.

The next morning, he tapped lightly at her residence. She took her time opening the door, quelling her heartbeat. Their eyes locked as she pulled him in. Without a word, she pushed the door closed. He enveloped her in a long embrace, kisses growing slower and deeper until she pushed back. “Richard,” she whispered, managing a breath as she held him back and reached for the door lock. “Terese,” he breathed before slipping her nightgown from her shoulders. She stepped out of the wispy material that slid onto the floor. He pulled off his shirt, popping a button in trying to free his hands. Reacting to his touch along her bare arms and down her back, she pulled him closer—they stumbled and fell onto the bed.

Her sparkling eyes defused his look of concern, before he planted kisses on her neck and shoulders, then her breasts. A thud sounded outside the dormitory door—they froze—someone continued down the stairs.

They laughed together silently, Terese stifling a stream of giggles. He held up his finger, wagging it playfully, whispering, “That will be enough of that!” Reaching for her, she guided his hands, opening herself as he shifted forward. She responded, increasing their steady rhythm to merge onto a higher level. Closing her eyes, she barely heard the flat smack of a bedside book falling to a distant floor.

As the upwelling spread out to her fingertips, a timelessness took hold. No longer constrained by the tiny room and shoddy bed coverings, she felt a radiating intensity lighten her being. Slowly, steadily, the weightlessness dispersed.

From somewhere, a voice was calling, the sound imposing until her eyelids fluttered open. Shutting them tight as the bedside clock swam into view, she pulled the single sheet over herself and Richard, his breath against her ear. “Are we still here, Terese?” She rolled over, gazing into his face, imagining young laughter filling the air.

Her alarm clock’s mechanized tick intensified, tainting the silence of their sanctuary. She lay still a moment longer, wanting to postpone the workday that awaited her. “Your advisor could come to Pamplona.”

“Davidson refuses to recognize the civil war is over.” He kissed her shoulder before continuing, “That Franco won.”

Was he holding back, hiding his expectations? Or was her pessimism safer than hoping for his rose-tinted view?

“What else?”

A lengthy silence. “Pamplona isn’t recognized as an accredited university; Toulouse is the only alternative.”

She removed her hand from his chest, turning over to face the wall, then pulled away the sheet to get up.

Later that day, in the bare lunchroom, he resumed. “Terese, Davidson has to agree on Pamplona as a base for my fieldwork. I’ll only spend time in Toulouse when absolutely necessary—we’ll survive.”

Why did his voice sound less certain than his words? “Richard, why have you waited to tell me this? Pamplona won’t be home if we are only surviving between your visits.” Her voice hardened. “This French trip isn’t just about others seeing us together. Your English professor wants to ensure he can count on you as his student, no? Bueno. I have my internship to consider.” Seeing his reaction, she hesitated. “You have no idea what seeing Basque France would mean to me—but I cannot compromise my medical studies, or my family’s faith in me.”

Another night brought conflicted hope. She dreamt of meeting Richard in France, the joy magnified by speaking her own language, ordering in shops and restaurants.

A week before leaving Pamplona, Terese announced, “Richard, I’ll try my best to meet you.” She enjoyed watching his face light up. “We should be back by Tuesday to minimize missing my rounds.”

Her Spanish driving license might be enough to cross the border into France, but getting there was the problem. Passport control before the border made rail travel inadvisable. If she drove on the highway, police checks were more likely the closer she got to France.

Two days later, Terese saw Richard off at the train station. His awkward departure filled her with doubt, but that evening his absence generated an unexpected aimlessness. Would her love for him be enough to counter her expectations of disappointment?

After a nearly sleepless night, she volunteered to take on extra duties at the hospital. She worked late and fell into bed exhausted. Waking abruptly, she longed for his touch in her empty bed.

The day before she planned to leave Pamplona—still without a reliable means of getting to Bayonne—two dark-suited men approached her as she stepped outside for a breath of air.

“Señorita Burguera!” She swung around, the reply on her lips fading at the older man’s dead eyes. He reached for her as a car drew up. She glared at him, pulling her arm away. The man’s thin lips tightened as the other policeman opened the back door. He gestured, “Por favor.” She glanced at him, then the older policeman, and got into the car.

Dead Eyes squeezed in beside her on the rear seat; his partner joined them from the opposite side. She turned to the rear window but saw no one. When they arrived at Guardia Civil headquarters, both men escorted her inside. The younger policeman stood with her at the front desk.

“Name.” The sergeant, head down, pen poised over paper, waited. A sudden movement as Dead Eyes swept in beside her, taking the paperwork, gesturing for them to follow. The sergeant looked up, his mouth open, head tracking his papers. “Un momento, señor!”

They strode along the hallway, the senior policeman pushing open a closed door. Questioning faces glanced up from a session in progress. He stood glaring until the assembled group rose and exited, clutching their half-open briefcases. He indicated one end of the conference table. His partner pulled out a chair for Terese, sitting down beside her.

Dead Eyes dropped the sergeant’s papers in front of her. He rotated his chair and sat across from her, leaning forward over the chair-back with his elbows on the table. His open hands rested against his forehead as though shielding his sunken eyes from the overhead light.

Terese returned his stare. Only when she broke eye contact did he speak.

“Señorita Burguera, these activities of yours—inciting student unrest at illegal gatherings . . .”

“Illegal gatherings? Our meetings—"

“ENOUGH!” he shouted, slamming his fist on the table. “You will shut your mouth and listen, vasca!” he hissed.

She jerked in her seat at the Basque slang, forcing herself to stare back at the bridge of his nose.

“This path you advocate has no future in Spain.”

She glanced at his partner.

“LOOK AT ME! Telling students to speak an outdated language will not be tolerated! You will no longer attend these rallies.”

The words broke through her emotional roller coaster. What he said confirmed the authorities were taking notice—her activities were important.

“Am I clear?” Without waiting for a reply, he continued. “Now, tell me what you know about your uncle.”

“My uncle?”

“Really, Señorita Burguera.” His tone became softer, prodding. “The smuggler.”

Was his previous warning about promoting Basque rights a cover? Feigning indifference, she said, “What could I know about him? He disappeared years ago.”

“Wasn’t he your only uncle? You spent a lot of time with him.”

“He looked after my mother when my father died.”

“Yes! I’m sure he looked after your mother.”

Terese ignored his smirk. “He provided for us, by whatever means possible.”

“By smuggling!”

She resisted the policeman’s piercing gaze, continuing to stare at his nose. When she saw his thin lips begin to open, she added, “Do you know what happened to him?”

He stared at her. “I will do the questioning.”

As the afternoon wore on, Dead Eyes continued badgering Terese regarding her uncle. She insisted her uncle had revealed nothing of importance.

Why did he suspect she was hiding something? Her uncle hadn’t revealed very much—only suggesting he’d uncovered something of significance.

The younger partner leaned forward. “Teniente señor, my understanding of these matters is incomplete, but this smuggler must’ve disappeared near the start of Germany’s war. How old could Señorita Burguera have been?”

“Your point, Pérez?”

The younger policeman gestured towards the back of the room. After a muted discussion, Dead Eyes’ partner escorted Terese back to the car. As Pérez drove her to the hospital, she bit her lip, her head down.

Before dropping her off, he placed his hand on her arm. “My partner is convinced you know more than you’re telling us.” His hand remained on her arm. “I’m not sure your uncle would confide anything of importance to a young girl.” He searched her eyes as she looked up, “At least, that’s what I told him.” A pause. “Will you contact me if you remember anything more?” When she didn’t reply, he added, “Did he tell you anything about his adventures?”

She looked away to mask her reaction. Her uncle had told her many stories, most of them as entertainment—except the discovery he’d made of the secret valley. Was the valley that important? The police questioning appeared to confirm it was.

Pérez reached across to open her door, handing her a slip of paper with his telephone number. As she hurried away from the car to the residence building, their questions dissolved her remaining doubts—she needed to escape Pamplona. The questioning would resume if she stayed.

The interrogation session replayed as she lay on her bed staring at cracks in the ceiling. How could she get to France without a passport? The task seemed impossible. Having overcome other obstacles in winning her place as an intern, she remained nearly certain she would get to Bayonne.

If she was on a local bus or on foot, her driving license might be enough to cross the border into France. Other Spaniards near the border worked in France—many would be Basque. She doubted they all had passports.

Her uncle never had a passport, yet he’d rarely been stopped. His antics drifted through her thoughts as she looked over to his stylized trail map that hung by the window. The faded sketch rekindled memories of home: her mother, her cousins and her father’s last surviving brother. His features flickered in her mind, accompanied by his voice on the drives she remembered in his two-seater.

Her eyes popped open. His map! Couldn’t she drive close enough to the French border to cross over on foot using his smuggling trails? She wouldn’t need to rely on her license being accepted.

Terese jumped up, pulling the sketch from the wall, careful to detach a torn corner. The mountain journey made sense—if she wasn’t detected. She stared at the traces and wiggles showing routes through the passes. Many were roughly drawn, but the footpath he used most often was clearly indicated. The trail branched off from an abandoned track he’d talked about on one of their longest outings.

Her thumping heart slowly calmed. Gathering warm clothes, her boots, the last of her food, her medical bag, and the map, she packed them and laid down wide-eyed, hoping to get some sleep.

A few hours later as Friday dawned, she was on the road, tapping her foot, humming a song he taught her on their drives into the hills. The tank was full of gas. She recalled what he said at the end of their drives.

“Always fill the tank. You never know what lies ahead.”

But now, in the fading light, on the broken mountain track, she sensed failure. No amount of resolve could find an unmarked trail in the dark.