

## CHAPTER ONE

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IT WASN'T THAT UNUSUAL FOR LEAH LYNCH to return her seatmate's handshake. She'd done it before with other polite strangers, especially on long flights. The serendipity of the gesture often led to an interesting conversation. This time the plane would depart from New York, journey through darkened skies across the Atlantic and land in Madrid the following morning.

"Hi, I'm Miguel Santiago," her seatmate said and extended his hand. Until then, she'd paid little attention to him. "Great night to fly, isn't it?"

"Perfect night. Nice to meet you. I'm Leah Lynch," she said returning his firm handshake. An unsettling vibe rocked her clear to her toes when their eyes met. But she didn't outwardly react to his touch or the intensity she'd experienced. She simply smiled back, slid her hand away from his and went back to arranging a few items in her seat pocket.

"First trip to Spain?" he asked and raised his seat to the upright position as the flight attendants banged overhead bins shut.

"No, I've taken this journey many times," she said, startled

at the sexual sparks that simply radiated from him.

Miguel's olive-skinned face with its ear-to-ear smile was pleasing to the eye. A few gray strands speckled his thick brown hair combed straight back with soft curls barely touching the top of his starched pinstriped shirt. Penetrating and spirited dark brown eyes complemented his wildly handsome look. A professional aura surrounded him. Successful people had that same unmistakable trait. She guessed his age to be mid-fifties, close to hers. His voice was a smoky baritone, the type heard in compelling commercials. Any receptive woman would love a sexy phone call from him at two in the morning asking if she'd like a visitor for the rest of the night.

"Please raise your seat," the attendant said to Leah, returning her to the reality of the moment.

Complying, she then readied herself for the long flight by removing her shoes and slipping on flimsy, brown airline socks. No stranger to flying or to visiting Spain, she wrote travel articles and popular romance novels that took place in the country. Years ago she'd lived in Madrid and returned often. The ancient stone buildings, the intense sunlight, the purity of the moonlight and the country's sensual underbelly soothed and excited her soul. But regardless of the visit's purpose, romance was the one constant pleasure. Whether she simply flirted with men, made love or enjoyed looking at them, she and Spain understood one another. Spain was her Mecca.

But this three-week trip to Madrid produced anxiety she couldn't shake or explain. When the town car arrived to drive her to the airport, she was waiting outside her apartment building. For most pick-ups – she'd stopped taking taxis and preferred the luxury of a town car – she kept the driver waiting. This time, he jumped out of the car when he saw her, adjusted

her two suitcases in the trunk and opened the door for her to slide across the leather back seat.

“Just confirming, madam. Newark Airport, international departures?” he asked over his shoulder before pulling into traffic.

“That’s right,” she said and checked her travel documents one last time.



A sense of adventure always swept over Leah when she flew. This night was no exception as the engines roared with increased velocity, and the passengers grew silent. As the plane taxied down the runway, she glanced out the oval window at the jagged skyline backlit by a crimson sunset. New York had been her home for many years. But she needed the solitude about to engulf her in Spain, especially since she spoke limited Spanish, to work through her mental agenda and reach a deeper level of self-evaluation.

The decades of freedom after her divorce had produced plenty of giggles, terrific sex – even a brief engagement – but that lifestyle was now stale. Although she vowed never to remarry, a committed companion-lover was a more realistic goal as she moved along in middle age. “Change your thoughts to change your life.” This was her new motto.

Then there was her daughter Dana’s wedding day. Leah dreaded the upcoming event. It meant a return to her Rhode Island hometown. Her divorce from Jim, Dana’s father, was in their healed past and he’d remarried. Leah, however, would attend the wedding alone. Many Rhode Islanders would question her success and worldly views without a man on her arm.

The last tug at her conscience about the trip to Spain – actually, it was the first but she couldn't admit it – was seeing Javier Lorca after a long hiatus. They had shared a lustful affair when she lived in Madrid right after her divorce, and they stayed in touch over the years. When he learned about her upcoming trip to Madrid, he asked if she'd spend the night with him in Salamanca. The beautiful medieval city was a three-hour drive northwest of Madrid.

"I'll get two rooms. You decide where to sleep. We have lots to discuss after all these years. I want you to know you're still in my heart," he said.

"It's different for us now, isn't it?" she said and paused. "Enough for me to meet you in Salamanca."

Once the plane was aloft, the flight attendant's refreshment cart rattled down the aisle. Leah avoided alcohol on overnight flights after years of groggy landings. A sleeping pill was in her purse. She'd take it and hope for a few hours' sleep before the Madrid arrival. The cabin crew knew not to disturb her for dinner.

"Would you like a drink?" seatmate Miguel asked Leah.

"Sure, why not? I'll have a red wine."

"And I'll have Dewars on the rocks," he said, and paid for both drinks.

"Thank you for the treat."

"My pleasure. To a safe trip," he toasted as they clicked plastic glasses.

"Absolutely to a safe trip." She noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"So what about you? Is this your first trip to Spain?" Leah asked and turned in her seat to look at him. She felt slightly obligated to begin a conversation because of his generosity.

There was also a celebratory ambiance starting to take shape.

“Second trip. Last year I completed the Camino de Santiago pilgrim’s trail. It took me three weeks. I walked half of the arduous route and bicycled the rest.” His overland journey began in Leon, a northern province in Spain, and ended in Santiago de Compostela, a city located in Galicia, close to the Atlantic.

“You must be a spiritual man,” Leah surmised, knowing the solitary pilgrimage required a special stamina to reach the cathedral and St. James’ tomb. When completed, Miguel joined a select group acknowledged for over one thousand years.

“I’m not devout. I did it to test my physical endurance and because I love to travel in Spain. Plus, the cathedral carries part of my last name, which I find amusing.”

Perhaps it was the closeness of their seats that kept them talking after take-off and where Leah learned Miguel was a native-born Spaniard who’d immigrated to Virginia as a boy with his family. But America never settled in his heart. He balanced his unrest as an adult with frequent trips to Mediterranean countries. The family-owned Santiago Bros. Jewelry Company was his to run when he returned from Spain, yet he expressed little passion for the new position. Had his family not dictated his career, Miguel would have pursued one in the arts. He owned a valuable collection of modern art and scoured exhibits for emerging painters. His musical tastes included opera, jazz and country. He read voraciously, mostly classics or avant-garde literature, disliked sports and only watched independent films.

“Have you ever been married?” Leah asked.

“Once. It was brief and decades ago. No children either. I’m not sure I know how to choose the right woman.” Now middle-

aged and after a succession of girlfriends, he lived with Susan Ingram, a divorced mother of three grown children who were on their own. “Last night while I packed she asked if we’d be married soon,” he said.

“That’s a fair question. You live together. Will you marry her?”

“I said I wasn’t ready,” he answered sharply. “Strange, isn’t it? This trip doesn’t include her, and we just moved in together.”

“I’m surprised. Don’t you travel with her?”

“Of course we take trips but I don’t like the long ones where it’s 24/7 togetherness. I like my solitude. I’ve never lasted more than four years with any woman. No matter how much she loves me, it’s never enough,” he sighed. “I wish I could find the right woman. Susan is a wonderful person, but I’m not sure she’s it.”

“You don’t love yourself enough,” Leah said, somewhat startled by her quick and judgmental observation of his love life. “You have to begin from within before you can love someone else unconditionally.” His perplexed expression made her add that maybe Susan was right for him. “Give it time,” she said.

“We’ll see,” was his too-quick reply.

Miguel and Leah didn’t watch the movie when the tiny screens lowered into the cabin. Instead, they revealed more about themselves with an uncommon openness for new seatmates. It enlightened Leah to learn how others lived their lives. The depth of Miguel’s truthfulness became evident as their conversation deepened.

“So what about you?” he asked glancing at her with a wry smile. “What’s your story? What will you do in Spain?”

Something compelled her to open up about herself. He made her feel so free. “I’ve been divorced for years. My children

are grown. I'm a freelance travel writer and novelist. I live in New York," she said with an air of confidence. "I also have a former self when I lived a dismal life in tiny Rhode Island as a simple homemaker and mother. That was before I moved to New York," she added. It never crossed her mind that Miguel couldn't handle that detail.

What she omitted was being any woman or every woman struggling to find the courage to divorce her husband. She was a beaten-down and broke woman gasping to breathe renewed life into her troubled soul. Once she won those battles, both internal and external, she changed forever. She took bold and unheard of risks to survive on her own and help her live life as she saw fit. She would never again blindly follow a path chosen for her by others. She left Rhode Island and relinquished the care of her teenage children to her ex-husband.

With her divorce came financial freedom. Her career as a writer took off. But she imagined the ultimate freedom would be finding a true and unconditional love with the right man. Until she found him or he found her, she'd be a collector of affections. She'd love herself unconditionally and take chances with her heart. She didn't tell Miguel that philosophy.

"I'm an F.O.S.," she said hoping to deflect further in-depth personal questions.

"What's that?"

"Friend of Spain. I love the country. I discover more about myself with each visit. Don't get me wrong though. I couldn't accomplish a physical journey like yours on the Camino but I do make equally thrilling choices. That's why I return often. Spain is a gorgeous place to get lost in."

"Hmmm. You sound like an interesting woman. You'll have to tell me more about yourself and those adventures. Do

you have a boyfriend?” he asked sheepishly.

“Not really. I’m a risk taker, even in love,” she said. “It’s a different approach than most women take. I’ll opt for bliss over boredom any day. I’m going to meet someone at a Salamanca hotel after we land tomorrow. Separate rooms, by the way. We were lovers a long time ago when I lived in Madrid. We were both newly divorced. When I returned to the States, he remarried his ex-wife and moved back in with their four children. But he’d call me faithfully on my birthday. It kept our friendship alive through the years. He’s not a cad. He’s a nice guy. Just words between good friends.”

“He obviously loved you; otherwise, he wouldn’t call. Loving two women at the same time isn’t that hard. We men fantasize about a woman like you. But here comes the reality after so many years. What’s going to happen in Salamanca?”

“I should have mentioned earlier that his wife died in a car crash with two of their children. We’ll see what happens,” was all she volunteered.

She didn’t tell him about the ultimatum she planned to spring on Javier. The time had come for a serious commitment. She also wanted to take him to her daughter’s wedding. How could she have divulged so many intimate details to this seatmate named Miguel? But it didn’t really matter since they’d land and go their separate ways.

“Interesting tale, Leah. Good luck renewing whatever you had, but a dead wife is still in his picture. And that hotel in Salamanca you mentioned? I have a reservation there, too, but a week later.”

“Really? It’s a former convent. Don’t tell them you’re not devout. You’ll be asked to publicly recite the rosary before they let you in.”



When the film ended, the screens returned to their ceiling slots. The cabin lights dimmed and softened the plane's ambiance. Passengers adjusted their bodies into cramped seats, ripped open plastic blanket bags, tucked tiny pillows behind their necks or folded them against a window. Some chose to read by a narrow beam of light streaming from overhead. Miguel and Leah covered their bodies with small blankets but didn't close their eyes. They spoke in softer tones so as not to disturb nearby passengers.

"Why did you leave Rhode Island and move to New York? Forgive me for prying but that was a ballsy mid-life change for a divorced woman with kids," he said.

"My divorce was amicable. We agreed to disagree about our marriage. It took years of arguments to reach a point where the split benefited both of us. I wanted marriage, children, a large amount of freedom and the opportunity to pursue my newfound writing career. My husband wanted me home as a married woman with children and no career. We never agreed on how to live our married lives but could move forward without one another. Actually, his parenting skills at the time were better. I always wanted to live in New York. That's where the publishing world is. Our teenage children were fine with the divorce and my moving away," she said softly as the intimacy of her new friendship with Miguel grew. She instinctively began to trust him. He understood her soul. He wouldn't judge her harshly.

"When I arrived in New York, I had no home, no furniture, not even a spoon. I only had enough money to survive and myself to count on. My first novel flopped so I licked my wounds, wrote a second and succeeded with many bestsellers."

"Were you still involved with your children? Did you see

them often?”

“Of course I was involved and saw them a lot. In fact, my daughter lives in New York now. My son lives in California. I didn’t miss a beat as their mother. My husband did a wonderful job as Mr. Mom. We were trailblazers with that lifestyle and didn’t know it.”

“You’re refreshingly revealing and a remarkable woman.”

“Thanks. And one more thing I resolved. I’d be my own best friend. Try it. It works. I’m now a happy, well-adjusted, self-assured woman and thankful to be so. My mind and heart are finally in sync,” she said.

Yet something was missing. Her two children were once her focus, but they were now grown, which should have simplified her decision about who she’d become next. But she still floundered. Leah didn’t mention Dana’s wedding to Miguel. It was too much information to reveal. She was also looking for tenderness in her life. She did tell him that. When he grew silent with her comment, she didn’t elaborate. Instead, her mind drifted to the recent phone conversation she had with Rocio, a *Madrileña* friend now in her late sixties.

Their friendship began when Leah lived in Madrid years ago. Rocio loved practicing her fluent English with Leah, which didn’t help Leah improve her bumbling Spanish. They kept in contact when Rocio located to New York with her husband. She began a career importing Spanish antiques. She also began an affair with a Spaniard from Barcelona. When discovered, it destroyed her marriage and forced her back to Spain, practically penniless. With her feet firmly planted in the antique business, she managed to resurrect herself as a financially secure woman, sending rare Spanish antiquities to the best galleries in the States. She married a second time only to see it fail in eighteen

months, souring her on men and falling in love again.

“Don’t you miss tenderness in your life?” Leah had asked her friend.

“Sometimes, but I have cats to fill that need.”

“Oh, come on. Level with me. Don’t you want a man in your life again? He could make you happier.”

“If we are always happy, we are stupid. We should struggle with something. That’s how we get inspiration from life,” Rocio said. Spaniards often used *we* to lump others into their philosophy. “As for being in love, that’s a sickness. Why haven’t you figured that out yet?”

“Because I’m a hopeless romantic, that’s why. You used to be one, too, Rocio. Get that feeling back. It’s important to our well-being.”

“You’re a silly woman, Leah. Forget romance now. You’re too old.”

“No I’m not. Hope springs eternal with me. But let’s discuss this tenderness subject when I arrive in Madrid. See you soon.”

At one point in the flight when Miguel returned to his seat after a body-stretching stroll in the aisle, he put his arm around Leah’s shoulder and leaned into her.

“You fall in love too fast,” she said, giggling a little self-consciously at his boyish and physical gesture. Even though he was handsome, savvy, a charmer, risqué, well dressed, funny and a terrific conversationalist, she regretted telling him about her tenderness yearnings. Putting his arm around her was daring for a seatmate to do, but it felt good. She wasn’t about to ask for a seat change so late in the flight. Miguel wasn’t a predator; they were both simply in happy moods. Their comradeship was building as the flight continued. She assumed her conservative and stylish look, green eyes and black hair appealed to him.

She was only mildly concerned about the few extra pounds she'd gained with age. Her softer and lower body type was a metaphor for her approach to life. She was now softer to be around and her expectations not as high as they'd been when she was younger.

In the darkened cabin, Leah daydreamed about the purity of her conversation with Miguel. It deserved the purest of compliments. If she had brushed her soft lips over his, which was their personal and adult truth at that moment, he'd have accepted her gift without question. He had such nice, full, welcoming lips. But that was the scene she wrote in her head, not reality.

"Hi again," he whispered and breathed a conciliatory exhale after a long silence. He then lowered his questioning eyes and sighed.

"Who knew we'd enjoy this flight so immensely, but we need to doze off," she said and closed her eyes just before his lips moved in a blow-away kiss. It felt so natural to relax in her seat, cross her left leg over her right and allow her shoulder to touch his. They'd boarded as strangers but quickly became more than casual traveling companions. It was all so odd to feel such a strong attraction for him so fast, and on a plane. What was happening? Whatever it was, it created a great flight. She'd use the scene in one of her novels.

When dawn's light seeped in throughout the cabin, the overhead screens lowered again to show a tiny plane on an animated path nearing southern Europe. Miguel and Leah had traveled in a cocoon-like airplane row headed toward their Promised Lands. Hers was Spain where she experienced her heart and emotions at their deepest level. His was the Mediterranean soil where his soul flourishes anew, especially

since his European roots had been ripped out of him when he moved to Virginia as a child.

With little time left in the flight, Miguel tucked a pillow behind his neck and closed his eyes. Leah did the same and listened to his deep breathing while he napped, but his presence and allure led her to uncross her legs and move her right knee to rest against his.

“Are you awake?” Miguel whispered, as the plane began its descent over Spain. “We’re almost there,” he said and gently leaned against her in order to open the window shade.

She liked his warm body next to hers. When the flight attendants walked through the aisles handing out immigration forms, she and Miguel flipped their trays down to complete theirs with a shared pen. Below, Spain’s ochre-colored landscape with its wavy groves of olive trees grew closer with the descent.