ILDEFONSO FALCONES

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

# The BAREFOOT QUEEN

1748

A slave girl and a gypsy seperated by persecution.
Reunited by strength

# About the Book

**Friendship, betrayal and the dawn of Flamenco . . .**

1748, Seville: Caridad, a former Cuban slave, wanders the streets of the city. She has just arrived by boat, and she is lost and frightened in the new country she finds herself in. When she meets Milagros Carmona, a young, rebellious gypsy, the two women instantly become friends. Milagros, like the rest of her people, is standing up to the vicious persecution of gypsies. When Milagros introduces Caridad to her exotic life on the edge of society, her life is changed for ever.

From the bustle of eighteenth-century Seville to the theatres of Madrid, *The Barefoot Queen* is a rip-roaring tale of friendship, betrayal and identity. Drawing us into the world of tobacco smuggling, music, dance and gypsies, it tells the magnificent story of the birth of Flamenco.

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# THE BAREFOOT QUEEN

*To the memory of my parents*

*Being flamenco is:*
*… it's another way of seeing the world …*

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# MAGNIFICENT GODDESS

# 1

*Port of Cádiz, 7 January 1748*

JUST AS SHE was about to set foot on the dock at Cádiz, Caridad hesitated. She was right at the end of the gangway jutting out of the tender that had taken them ashore from the naval ship named *The Queen*. It had travelled from the Indies laden with riches as escort to six registered merchant ships transporting valuable goods. Caridad looked up at the winter sun that illuminated the bustling, teeming port: one of the merchant ships that had sailed with them from Havana was being unloaded. The sun slipped through the gaps in her worn straw hat, dazzling her. She was startled by the commotion and shrank back, frightened, as if the shouts were being directed at her.

'Don't stop there, darkie!' spat the sailor next in line, overtaking her without a second thought.

Caridad stumbled and almost fell into the water. Another man tried to pass her on the gangway, but she jumped clumsily to the dock, then moved aside and stopped again, while part of the crew continued arriving in port amid laughter, jokes and brazen bets as to which woman would be the one to make them forget the long ocean voyage.

'Enjoy your freedom, Negress!' shouted another man as he passed by her, taking the liberty of a quiet slap on her buttocks.

Some of his mates laughed. Caridad didn't even move, her gaze fixed on the long dirty ponytail that danced on the

sailor's back, brushing his tattered shirt to the rhythm of his wobbly stride as he headed towards the Sea Gate.

*Free?* she managed to ask herself. What freedom? She looked past the dock, the walls, where the Sea Gate opened on to the city: a large part of the more than five hundred men who made up *The Queen*'s crew were crowding together in front of the entrance, where an army of officials – commanders, corporals, inspectors – searched them for contraband and questioned them about the ships' course, to find out if any boat had separated from the convoy and its route in order to smuggle in contraband and evade the royal tax office. The men waited impatiently for them to finish the routine procedures; those furthest from the officials, sheltered by the throng, shouted, demanding to be let through, but the inspectors didn't yield. *The Queen*, majestically docked in the Trocadero channel, had transported in its holds more than two million pesos and almost that many wrought-silver marks, plus more treasures from the Indies, along with Caridad and Don José, her master.

Damn his soul! Caridad had cared for Don José on the voyage. 'The scourge of the sea,' they'd said he had. 'He's going to die,' they also assured her. And his time did come, after a slow agony that ate away at his body, day after day, amid dreadful swelling, fevers and bleeding. For a month master and slave remained locked up in the stern, in a small foul cabin with a single hammock. Don José had paid good money to the captain to have it built with thick planks, taking space from the officers' wardroom. 'Eleggua, force his soul to wander lost, never finding rest,' had been Caridad's plea. She could sense, in that cramped space, the powerful presence of the Supreme Being, the God who rules over men's fates. And it was as if her master had heard her, for he begged for compassion with his bilious eyes and extended his hand in search of the warmth of life he knew was slipping away from him. Alone with him in the

cabin, Caridad had refused him that comfort. Hadn't she also outstretched her hand when they separated her from her little Marcelo? And what had the master done then? Order the overseer of the tobacco plantation to hold her down and shout to the Negro slave to take away her little boy.

'And shut him up!' he added on the esplanade in front of the big house, where the slaves had gathered to find out who would be their new master and what fate had in store for them from that point on. 'I can't stand …'

Don José suddenly grew silent. The slaves' shock was clear on their faces. Blindly, Caridad had managed to hit the overseer and get free; she seemed to be about to run towards her son, but quickly realized how foolish she was being and stopped herself. For a few moments all that was heard were Marcelo's shrill, desperate shrieks.

'Do you want me to whip her, Don José?' asked the overseer as he grabbed Caridad again by one arm.

'No,' he decided after thinking it over. 'I don't want to bring her with me to Spain ruined.'

He let her go and shot a severe look towards that big Negro – Cecilio was his name – who then dragged the boy towards the shack. Caridad fell to her knees, her cries joining the boy's. That was the last time she saw her son. They didn't let her say goodbye to him, they didn't allow her to even …

'Caridad! What are you doing just standing there, woman?'

Hearing her name brought her back to reality and amid the din she recognized the voice of Don Damián, the old chaplain of *The Queen*, who had also just disembarked. She immediately dropped her bundle, uncovered her head and lowered her gaze, fixing it on the worn straw hat she started to crush in her hands.

'You can't stay here on the dock,' continued the priest as he approached and took her by the arm. The contact lasted

only an instant; the flustered priest quickly removed his hand. ‘Let’s go,’ he urged somewhat nervously. ‘Come with me.’

They walked over to the Sea Gate: Don Damián laden with a small trunk, Caridad with her little bundle and her hat in her hands, not taking her eyes off the chaplain’s sandals.

‘Make way for a man of God,’ demanded the priest to the sailors crammed in front of the gate.

Gradually the crowd moved aside to grant him passage. Caridad followed behind him, dragging her bare feet, black as ebony, her eyes still downcast. The long, greyish shirt of thick coarse burlap that she wore as a dress couldn’t hide the fact that she was a strong, shapely woman. She was as tall as some of the sailors, who looked up to take in her thick black curls, while others gazed at her large, firm breasts and voluptuous hips. The chaplain kept walking and merely lifted a hand when he heard whistles, impertinent comments and even the occasional bold invitation.

‘I am Father Damián García.’ The priest introduced himself, holding out his papers to one of the commanders once he’d got through the seamen. ‘Chaplain of the warship *Queen*, of Your Majesty’s Armada.’

The commander looked through the documents. ‘Father, will you allow me to inspect your trunk?’

‘Personal effects …’ answered the priest as he opened it. ‘The goods are duly registered in my paperwork.’

The commander nodded as he rummaged around in the trunk. ‘Any mishaps on the journey?’ asked the officer without looking at him, weighing up a small roll of tobacco in his hand. ‘Any encounters with enemy ships or ships outside the fleet?’

‘None. Everything went as planned.’

The commander nodded. ‘This your slave?’ he enquired, pointing to Caridad after finishing the inspection. ‘She’s not listed in the documents.’

‘Her? No. She’s a free woman.’

‘She doesn’t look like one,’ declared the commander, planting himself in front of Caridad, who clung even tighter to her little bundle and her straw hat. ‘Look at me, Negress!’ muttered the officer. ‘What are you hiding?’

Some of the other officers, who were inspecting the seamen, stopped their work and turned towards the commander and the woman who remained before him with her eyes downcast. The sailors who had let them through came over.

‘Nothing. She’s not hiding anything,’ answered Don Damián.

‘Silence, Father. People who avoid a commander’s eyes are always hiding something.’

‘What could this poor wretch be hiding?’ insisted the priest. ‘Caridad, show him your papers.’

The woman rifled through her bundle in search of the documents the ship’s notary had given her, while Don Damián continued talking.

‘She embarked in Havana with her master, Don José Hidalgo, who planned to return to his native land before he died but passed away on the voyage, God rest his soul.’

Caridad handed her wrinkled documents to the commander.

‘Before he died,’ continued Don Damián, ‘as is customary on His Majesty’s vessels, Don José made a will and ordered that his slave Caridad be freed. There you have the manumission document.’

*Caridad Hidalgo* – the notary had written, taking the dead master’s last name – *also known as Cachita; Negro slave the colour of ebony, in good health and of strong constitution, with curly black hair and some twenty-five years of age*.

‘What have you got in that bag?’ asked the commander after reading the documents confirming Caridad’s freedom.

She opened up the bundle and showed it to him. An old blanket and a felt jacket … everything she owned. Master had given her the jacket last winter and the blanket two winters back. Hidden among them were several cigars she'd been rationing on the journey after stealing them from Don José. *What if they find them?* she thought, terrified. The commander made a motion to inspect the bundle, but when he saw the old fabric his expression soured.

'Look at me, Negress,' he demanded.

Everyone witnessing the scene saw the trembling that ran through Caridad's body. She had never looked directly at a white man when addressed.

'She's afraid,' intervened Don Damián.

'I said look at me.'

'Do it,' pleaded the chaplain.

Caridad lifted her round face with its thick fleshy lips, flattened nose and small brown eyes that tried to look past the commander, towards the city.

The man furrowed his brow and searched, in vain, for her elusive gaze.

'Next!' he said, suddenly giving in, breaking the tension and triggering an avalanche of sailors.

Don Damián, with Caridad close on his heels, entered the city through the Sea Gate flanked by two battlemented towers. *The Queen*, the third-rate ship of the line with more than seventy guns they'd sailed in on from Havana, stayed behind in the Trocadero alongside the six merchant ships it had escorted, their holds stuffed with products from the Indies: sugar, tobacco, cacao, ginger, sarsaparilla, indigo, cochineal, silk, pearls, tortoiseshell … silver. The journey was a success and Cádiz had received them with ringing bells. Spain was at war with England; the treasure fleets, which up until a few years earlier crossed the ocean guarded by ships from the Royal Armada, had ceased

operating, so the trade was done with register-ships, private merchant vessels that acquired a royal permit for the voyage. That was why the arrival of the merchandise and the treasure, so needed by the Spanish tax office, had sparked a festive atmosphere in every corner of the city.

When they reached Juego de Pelota Street, having passed the church of Our Lady of Pópulo and the Sea Gate, Don Damián stepped out of the floods of sailors, soldiers and merchants, and stopped, turning towards Caridad after he'd put his trunk down on the ground. 'May God be with you and keep you safe, Caridad,' he blessed her.

She didn't respond. She had pulled her straw hat down to her ears and the chaplain couldn't see her eyes, but he imagined them focused on the trunk, or on his sandals, or …

'I have things to do, you understand?' he said in an attempt to excuse himself. 'Go and look for some work. This is a very rich city.'

As he spoke, Don Damián extended his right hand, brushing Caridad's forearm; then it was he who lowered his gaze for a second. When he looked up he found Caridad's small brown eyes fixed on him, just as on the nights during the crossing, when after her master's death he had taken responsibility for the slave and hidden her from the crew by order of the captain. His stomach churned. 'I didn't touch her,' he repeated to himself for the millionth time. He had never laid a finger on her, but Caridad had looked at him with expressionless eyes and he … He hadn't been able to stop himself masturbating beneath his clothes at the sight of such a splendid female.

Shortly after Don José's passing, the funeral rite was carried out: they said three prayers for the dead and his corpse was thrown overboard in a sack with two earthenware jugs filled with water tied to the feet. Then the captain ordered that the makeshift cabin be taken down and that the notary inventory the deceased man's assets.

Don José was the only passenger on the flagship, Caridad the only woman aboard.

‘Reverend,’ said the captain to the priest after giving the notary his instructions, ‘I am placing you in charge of keeping the Negro woman away from the crew.’

‘But I …’ Don Damián tried to object.

‘It’s not hers, but you can feed her with the food Mr Hidalgo brought on board,’ declared the officer, ignoring his protest.

Don Damián kept Caridad locked up in his tiny cabin, where there was only room for the hammock he hung from one side to the other, which he took down and rolled up during the day. The woman slept on the floor, at his feet, beneath the hammock. The first few nights, the chaplain took refuge in reading the holy books, but gradually his gaze began to follow the oil lamp’s beams that, as if of their own volition, seemed to stray from the pages of his heavy tomes to illuminate the woman who lay curled up so close to him.

He fought against the fantasies that waylaid him when he caught a glimpse of Caridad’s legs that had slipped out from under the blanket that covered her, or of her breasts, rising and falling to the rhythm of her breathing, or of her buttocks. And yet, almost involuntarily, he started to touch himself. Perhaps it was the creaking from the timbers the hammock hung on, perhaps it was the tension gathered in such a small space, but Caridad opened her eyes and all the light from the oil lamp settled inside them. Don Damián felt himself growing red and he remained still for a moment, but his desire multiplied with Caridad’s gaze upon him, the same expressionless gaze with which she now listened to him.

‘Heed my words, Caridad,’ he insisted. ‘Look for work.’

Don Damián grabbed the trunk, turned his back and resumed his path.

*Why do I feel guilty?* he wondered as he stopped to switch the trunk to his other hand. He could have forced her, he'd said to himself whenever he was tormented by guilt. She was only a slave. Maybe … maybe he wouldn't have even had to resort to violence. Weren't all Negro slaves dissolute women? Don José, her master, had admitted in confession that he'd slept with all of his.

'Caridad bore my child,' he revealed, 'maybe two – but no, I don't think so; the second one, that clumsy stupid boy, was as dark as her.'

'Do you regret it?' the priest asked him.

'Having children with the Negro women?' the tobacco farmer replied angrily. 'Father, I sold the little half-breeds at a nearby sugar mill owned by priests. They never worried about my sinning soul when they bought them from me.'

Don Damián headed towards the Santa Cruz Cathedral, on the other side of the narrow spit of land on which the walled city was perched, closing off the bay. Before turning on to a side street, he looked back and caught a glimpse of Caridad as the crowd passed: she had moved to one side until her back was up against a wall where she stood immobile, disconnected from the world.

*She'll find a way*, he thought, forcing himself to continue and turn the corner. Cádiz was a rich city where traders and merchants from all over Europe met and money flowed in abundance. She was a free woman and now she had to learn to live in liberty and work. He walked a long way and when he reached a point where he could clearly make out the construction for the new cathedral near the old one, he stopped. What kind of a job could that poor wretch find? She didn't know how to do anything, except labour on a tobacco plantation; that was where she'd lived since she was ten years old, after English slave traders had bought her for five paltry yards of fabric from the kingdom of the Yoruba in the Gulf of Guinea, in order to resell her in the

bustling Cuban market. That was how Don José Hidalgo himself had explained it to the chaplain when Don Damián asked why he'd chosen her to accompany him on the voyage.

'She is strong and desirable,' added the tobacco farmer, winking at him. 'And it seems she's no longer fertile, which is always an advantage once you're off the plantation. After giving birth to that idiot boy …'

Don José had also told him that he was a widower and had an educated son who'd taken his degree in Madrid, where Don José was headed to live out his last days. In Cuba he'd owned a profitable tobacco plantation in the lowlands near Havana that he worked himself, along with some twenty-odd slaves. Loneliness, old age and the pressure from the sugar growers who wanted to acquire land for their flourishing industry had led him to sell his property and return to his homeland, but the scourge attacked him twenty days into the journey and fed viciously on his weak, elderly state. He had fever, dropsy, mottled skin and bleeding gums, and the doctor declared him a lost cause.

Then, as was mandatory on royal ships, *The Queen*'s captain ordered the notary to go to Don José's cabin to bear witness to his last wishes.

'I grant my slave Caridad freedom,' whispered the sick man after ordering a few bequests for the Church and arranging for the entirety of his assets to be given to the son he would now never see again.

The woman didn't even curve her thick lips in a glint of satisfaction at learning she was free, recalled the priest, who had now stopped in the street.

*She didn't say a word!* Don Damián remembered his efforts to hear Caridad amid the hundreds of voices praying at the Sunday masses on deck, or her timid whispers at night, before sleeping, when he forced her to pray. What could that woman work as? The chaplain knew that almost

every freed slave ended up working for their former owners for a miserable wage that barely allowed them to cover their necessities, which as slaves they'd been guaranteed. Or they ended up forced to beg for alms in the streets, competing with thousands of mendicants. And those had been born in Spain: they knew the land and its people; some were clever and quick. How could Caridad find her way in a big city like Cádiz?

He sighed and ran his hand several times over his chin and the little hair he had left. Then he turned around, snorted as he lifted the trunk again and prepared to retrace his steps. *What now?* he wondered. He could … he could arrange a job for her in the tobacco factory, she did know about that. 'She's very good with the leaves; she treats them right – affectionately and sweetly – and she knows how to choose the best ones and roll good cigars,' Don José had told him, but that would mean asking for favours and making it known that he … He couldn't risk Caridad talking about what had happened on the boat. Close to two hundred cigar makers worked in those factory rows, constantly whispering and finding fault with others as they rolled the small Cádiz cigars.

He found Caridad still up against the wall, unmoving, defenceless. A group of unruly youngsters were making fun of her and the people coming and going did nothing to stop them. Don Damián approached just as one of the boys was about to throw a rock at her. 'Halt!' he shouted.

Another boy stopped his arm; the young woman removed her hat and lowered her eyes.

Caridad distanced herself from the group of seven passengers who had embarked on the ship about to head upstream along the Guadalquivir River to Seville. Weary, she tried to settle in among a pile of luggage on board. The boat was a sleek single-masted tartan that had arrived in

Cádiz with a shipload of valuable oil from the fertile Sevillian lowlands.

From the Bay of Cádiz they coasted to Sanlúcar de Barrameda, to the mouth of the Guadalquivir. They waited off the coast of Chipiona, along with other tartans and the local *charangueros* that plied between ports, for the high tide and favourable winds they needed to cross the dangerous Sanlúcar sandbar, those fearsome shoals that had turned the area into a boat graveyard. The captains would only brave crossing that treacherous bar when every one of several specific conditions came together. Then they would sail upriver, taking advantage of the tide's momentum, which could be felt up to the outskirts of Seville.

'Ships have sometimes had to wait up to a hundred days to cross the bar,' said a sailor to one elegantly dressed passenger, who immediately shifted his worried gaze towards Sanlúcar and its spectacular marshlands, obviously desperate not to suffer the same fate.

Caridad, seated among some bags against the gunwale, let herself sway with the tartan's rocking. The sea, though calm, seemed somehow tense, just as the ship's passengers did, and that same atmosphere prevailed in the other delayed boats. It wasn't only the wait; it was also the fear of an attack from the British or from pirates. The sun began to set, tinting the water an ominous metallic tone, and the uneasy conversations of the crew and passengers dropped to whispers. The winter revealed its harshness as the sun hid and the dampness seeped into Caridad's bones, making her feel even colder. She was hungry and tired. She wore her jacket, as grey and faded as her dress and both of rough cloth, in sharp contrast to the other passengers who wore what seemed to her lavish clothes, in bright colours. She realized her teeth were chattering and she had goose-flesh, so she searched in her bundle for the blanket. Her fingers brushed a cigar and she touched it delicately,

recalling its aroma, its effects. She needed it, anxious to dull her senses, forget her tiredness, her hunger … and even her freedom.

She wrapped herself up in the blanket. Free? Don Damián had put her on that boat, the first he'd found about to depart the Cádiz port.

'Go to Seville,' he said after negotiating a price with the captain and paying him out of his own pocket. 'To Triana. Once you're there, look for the Minims' convent and tell them I sent you.'

Caridad wished she'd had the courage to ask him what Triana was or how she would find that convent, but he practically pushed her aboard. He was nervous, looking from side to side, as if afraid someone would see them together.

She smelled the cigar and its fragrance transported her to Cuba. All she knew was where her shack was, and the plantation, and the sugar mill she went to every Sunday with the other slaves to hear mass and then sing and dance until they wore themselves out. From the shack to the plantation and from the plantation to the shack, day in day out, month in month out, year in year out. How was she going to find the convent? She curled up against the gunwale and pressed her back up to the wood, searching for contact with a reality that had vanished. Who were those strangers? And Marcelo? What had happened to him? And what about her friend María, the mulatta she sang choruses with? And the others? What was she doing in a strange boat at night, in a far-off land, on her way to a city she wasn't even sure existed? Triana? She had never dared to ask the whites anything. She always knew what she had to do! She didn't need to ask.

Her eyes grew damp as she remembered Marcelo. She felt around in her bundle for the flint, steel and tinder to start a flame. Would they let her smoke? On the tobacco farm she could; it was common there. She had cried over

Marcelo during the voyage. She had even … She had even been tempted to throw herself into the sea, to put an end to her constant suffering. ‘Get away from there, darkie! Do you want to fall into the water?’ warned one of the sailors. And she obeyed, moving away from the gunwale.

Would she have had the courage to throw herself in if that sailor hadn’t shown up? She didn’t want to replay the scene in her head again; instead she watched the men on the tartan: they seemed nervous. The tide was high but the winds weren’t favourable. Some of them smoked. She skilfully struck the steel against the flint and the tinder soon lit up. Where would she find the trees whose bark and fungus she used to make the tinder? As she lit the cigar and inhaled deeply she realized she didn’t know where to get tobacco either. The first draw calmed her mind. The next two relaxed her muscles and made her slightly dizzy.

‘Negress, share your smoke with me?’

A cabin boy had crouched down in front of her; his face was dirty but lively and pleasant. For a few seconds, as he waited for an answer, Caridad took in his smile. All she could see were his white teeth, just like Marcelo’s when she wrapped her arms around him. She’d had another son, a mulatto born of the master, but Don José sold him as soon as the boy could do without the care of the two old women who looked after the slaves’ little ones while they worked. They all went down that same path: the master didn’t want to support Negro children. Marcelo, her second son, conceived with a black man from the sugar mill, had been different: a difficult birth; a child with problems. ‘No one will buy him,’ declared the master when he began to show signs of clumsiness and defects. He agreed to let him stay on at the plantation, as if he were a simple dog, or a hen or one of the pigs they raised behind the shack. ‘He won’t live long,’ everyone predicted. But Caridad didn’t let that happen, and many were the beatings and whippings she got when they discovered she’d been feeding him. ‘We

provide you with food so you can work, not so you can raise an imbecile,' the overseer said time and again.

'Negress, would you share your smoke with me?' insisted the cabin boy.

*Why not?* thought Caridad. He had the same smile as Marcelo. She offered him the cigar.

'Wow! Where did you get this? It's amazing!' exclaimed the boy after trying it and coughing. 'Is it from Cuba?'

'Yes,' said Caridad as she took the cigar back and brought it to her lips.

'What's your name?'

'Caridad,' she answered amid a puff of smoke.

'I like your hat.' The boy moved edgily on his legs. He was waiting for another puff, which finally came.

'It's blowing!' The captain's shout broke the stillness. From the other ships similar cries were heard. The southern wind was blowing, perfect for crossing the sandbar. The cabin boy returned the cigar and ran to join the other sailors.

'Thank you, *morena*,' he said hastily. Many in this new country called her that, since her dark skin was the first thing they noticed about her.

Unlike the other passengers, Caridad didn't witness the difficult nautical manoeuvre that required three changes of course in the narrow canal. All along the mouth of the Guadalquivir, both on land and on the barges moored on its banks, fires were lit to guide the boats. She didn't share the others' nerve-racking worry about the crossing: if the wind died down and they were left halfway through, it was likely they would run aground. She remained sitting against the gunwale, smoking, enjoying a pleasant tickle in her muscles and letting the tobacco cloud her senses. As the tartan entered the formidable Canal de los Ingleses, with the tower of San Jacinto illuminating their course on the port side, Caridad began to sing softly under her breath to the rhythm of her memories of the Sunday parties, when after

celebrating mass in the neighbouring sugar factory, which had a priest, the slaves from the various estates gathered in the barracks of the plantation they'd come to with their masters. There the white men let them sing and dance, as if they were children who needed to let off steam and forget their rough working conditions. But in every song and every dance step, when they heard the *batá* drums speak – the large *iyá* drum, mother of them all, the slightly smaller *itótele* and the littlest *olónkolo* – the Negroes worshipped their gods, disguised in the Christian virgins and saints, and they remembered their African roots with longing.

She continued singing softly, isolated from the captain's urgent orders and the crew's busy dashing about, and she sang just as she had sung to put Marcelo to sleep. She believed she was touching his hair again, hearing him breathe, smelling his scent … She blew a kiss. The boy had survived. He still got yelled at and slapped by the master and the overseer but he had won the affection of the other slaves on the plantation. He was always smiling! And he was sweet and affectionate with everyone. Marcelo didn't know slaves from masters. He lived free, and occasionally looked into the slaves' eyes as if he understood their pain and encouraged them to free themselves from their chains. Some smiled back at Marcelo sadly, others cried in the face of his innocence.

Caridad pulled hard on the cigar. He would be well taken care of, she had no doubt about that. María, who always sang in chorus with her, would look after him. And Cecilio too, even though he had been forced to separate the boy from her … All those slaves that had been sold along with the land would take care of him. And her son would be happy, she could feel it. But her master … May your soul wander for all eternity without rest, Don José, yearned Caridad.

# 2

SEVILLE'S TRIANA DISTRICT was on the other side of the Guadalquivir River, outside the city walls. It was connected to the city by an old Muslim bridge built over ten barges anchored to the riverbed and joined by two thick iron chains and various mooring lines stretched from one shore to the other. That outlying district, which had been dubbed the 'garrison of Seville' for the defensive function it had always performed, reached its pinnacle when Seville monopolized trade with the Indies; the difficulties navigating the river led to the House of Trade being moved to Cádiz, which meant a considerable decline in population and the abandoning of numerous buildings. Its ten thousand inhabitants were concentrated on a limited stretch of land on the river's right shore, and bounded on the other side by La Cava, the old trench that, in times of war, comprised the city's first line of defence and flooded with waters from the Guadalquivir to turn the outlying district into an island. Beyond La Cava one could make out sporadic monasteries, chapels, homes and the extensive fertile lowlands of Triana.

One of those convents, on Cava Nueva, was that of Our Lady of Health, with Minim nuns, a humble congregation devoted to contemplation, silent prayer and frugal living. Behind the Minims, towards San Jacinto Street, on a small dead-end alley named after San Miguel, were thirteen tightly packed clusters of apartments around a central courtyard into which nearly twenty-five families were crammed. Twenty-one of those were gypsy families, made up of grandparents, children, aunts, cousins, nieces,

grandchildren and the odd great-grandchild; those twenty-one were devoted to ironwork. There were other forges in the Triana district, most run by gypsies, the same hands that in India and in the mountains of Armenia, centuries before emigrating to Europe, had turned that trade into an art. However, San Miguel was the nerve centre of smiths and tinkers in Triana. On to the alley opened the old apartments clustered around a courtyard that were built during Triana's period of splendour in the sixteenth century: some were no more than simple blind alleys of rows of squalid little houses; others were buildings, sometimes elaborate, of two or three storeys arranged around a central courtyard, whose upper levels opened on to it through high corridors and wooden or wrought-iron railings. All of them, almost without exception, offered humble dwellings of one or at most two rooms, in one of which there was a small niche to cook with coal, when it wasn't in the courtyard or passageway itself as a service available to all the neighbours. The washbasins and the latrines, if there were any, were located in the courtyard, for everyone.

Most of these clusters of apartments in Seville were occupied during the day only by women and the children who played in the courtyards, but the smiths in Triana spent their workdays there since their forges were installed on the ground floor. The constant ringing of the hammers on the anvils coming from each of the forges merged in the street into a strange metallic clatter; the coal smoke from the forges, which often emerged from the courtyards or the very doorways of those modest workshops without chimneys, was visible from every part of Triana. Along the length of the alley, surrounded by the smoke and noise, men, women and children came and went, played, laughed, chatted, shouted and argued. In spite of the tumult, many of them were silent and stopped in the doors of those workshops with their emotions running high. Sometimes

you could make out a father holding his son back by the shoulders, an old man with his eyes squinting or several women repressing a dance step as they heard the sounds of the *martinete*: a sad song accompanied only by the monotonous pounding of the hammer whose rhythm it matched; a rhythm and song all their own, which had followed them throughout time and everywhere. Then, with the *quejíos* of the blacksmiths, the hammering became a marvellous symphony that made your hair stand on end.

That 2 February 1748, the feast of the Purification of Our Lady, the gypsies weren't working at their forges. Few of them would attend the church of San Jacinto or the church of the Virgin of Candelaria to ask for blessings on the candles they used to light their homes, but despite that they didn't want any problems with their pious Triana neighbours and even less so with the priests, monks and inquisitors; that was a compulsory day of rest.

'Keep the girl away from the randy *payos*,' warned a gravelly voice.

The words – spoken in Caló, the language of the Spanish and Portuguese gypsies – echoed through the courtyard that opened on to the alley. Mother and daughter stopped in their tracks. Neither of them showed surprise, even though they didn't know where the voice came from. Their eyes ran over the courtyard until Milagros made out in one dark corner the silvery glints coming off the buttons on her grandfather's short, sky-blue jacket. He was standing upright and still, with his brow furrowed and his eyes lost in the distance, as he often did; he had spoken while still chewing on a small, unlit cigar. The girl, splendid at fourteen, smiled at him and spun around gracefully; her long blue skirt with petticoats and her green scarves fluttered in the air amid the tinkling of several necklaces that hung from her neck.

'Everyone in Triana knows that I'm your granddaughter.' She laughed. Her white teeth stood out against her dark

skin, the same shade as her mother's, the same shade as her grandfather's. 'Who would dare?'

'Lust is blind and daring, girl. There are many who would risk their lives to have you. I would only be able to avenge you and there isn't enough blood in the world to mend that pain. Always remind her of that,' he added, addressing her mother.

'Yes, Father,' she replied.

Both women waited for a word of farewell, a gesture, a sign, but the gypsy, hieratic in his corner, was silent and still. Finally Ana took her daughter by the arm and left the house. It was a cold morning. The sky was overcast and threatened rain, which didn't seem to be an obstacle for the people of Triana who were heading to San Jacinto to celebrate the blessing of their candles. There were also many Sevillians who wanted to join the ceremony and, carrying their altar candles, they went over the bridge or crossed the Guadalquivir aboard one of the more than twenty boats that took people from one shore to the other. The crowd promised a profitable day, thought Ana before recalling her father's fears. She turned her head towards Milagros and saw her walking with her head held high, arrogant, attentive to everything and everyone. As a pure-bred gypsy should, she then acknowledged, unable to suppress her pleased expression. They couldn't help but notice her girl! Her thick chestnut hair fell down her back and blended into the long fringes of the scarf she wore over her shoulders. Here and there, her hair was adorned with a colourful ribbon or a pearl; large silver hoops hung from her ears, and necklaces of beads and silver lay over her young breasts, captive in the boldly plunging neckline of her white shirt. A blue skirt clung to her delicate waist and almost reached the floor, where her bare feet could sometimes be seen. A man looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Milagros realized instantly, with feline instinct, and turned her face towards him; the girl's chiselled

features softened and her bushy eyebrows seemed to arch in a smile. The day begins, her mother said to herself.

'Shall I tell you your fortune, strapping lad?'

The strong man attempted to continue along his way, but Milagros smiled openly and approached him, getting so close that her breasts almost brushed against him.

'I see a woman who desires you,' added the gypsy girl, staring into his eyes.

Ana reached her daughter in time to hear her last words. A woman … What more could a man like him desire, big and healthy but obviously alone, who carried a small candle? The man hesitated for a few seconds before noticing the other gypsy woman who had come over to him: older, but just as attractive and proud as the girl.

'Don't you want to know more?' Milagros regained the man's attention as she looked deeper into his eyes, where she had already seen his interest. She tried to take his hand. 'You also desire that woman, don't you?'

The gypsy girl could tell that her prey was starting to give in. Mother and daughter, in silence, coincided in their conclusion: easy prey. A timid, spineless character – the man had tried to hide his eyes – in a large, bulky body. Surely there was some woman, there always was. They only had to encourage him, insist that he overcome the embarrassment that was holding him back.

Milagros was brilliant and convincing: she ran her finger over the lines on the man's palm as if she were really reading that gullible man's future. Her mother watched her, proud and amused. They got a couple of copper coins for her advice. Then Ana tried to sell him a contraband cigar.

'Half the price they sell them for in the Seville tobacco shops,' she offered. 'If you don't want cigars, I have snuff, too, of the highest quality, clean, no dirt in it.' She tried to convince him, opening the mantilla she wore to show him the merchandise she had hidden, but the man just sketched