

1

Torremolinos, Costa del Sol, Spain. 1994

He was sweating now and the stiff blue nylon sutures were catching on the starched collar and the itching was turning to pain, distracting him. And he didn't want to be distracted. Not now. Not with five hundred and eighty kilogram of fighting bull not three metres away and stalking him and the leading horn already dripping red from where the banderillero had got his.

And looking for a kill.

Talking to the bull now. softly, coaxing him and all the time showing him just enough body to keep him confident that there was something real out there and not just the cape tiring him, punishing him. Always make sure he can see the muleta too but show him body if he refuses to come. The words of Antezana, his sometime teacher, milling through the white hot concentration that was his mind.

Crowd growing restless now; he could see the closely bunched group of aficionados from the corner of his eye where they sat on the contrabarrera in the shade. Some were already glancing up at the presidential box, anticipating the white handkerchief and the flat tone from the orchestra signalling the five minute warning. He forced his concentration back to the matt black Miura bull and inched his extended left foot forward arching his lithe body to slip the muleta, spread over the sword, behind his back. A silence settled over the crowd, even the tourists sensing the extraordinary.

'The mariposo or butterfly,' Don Luis said to his guest, his gaze fixed on the young matador below them in the arena where the dying sun was catching the hundreds of small jewels on his jacket turning it into a true "suit of lights."

‘One of the most dangerous movements, putting the man right in front of the bull without the muleta to take the animal past when it charges. To do it now, when the bull has taken up querencia is madness.’ His normally gruff voice had turned soft and husky.

The Arab, stately in his flowing white robes, removed his dark glasses and glanced at his host. ‘Querencia?’

‘When the bull takes up a defensive position at the barrier and refuses to come out making the matador come to him,’ Don Luis replied, noting with some relief that the bull was slowly following Ramon as the young man enticed him towards the centre of the ring, its bulging black eyes darting from side to side as the muleta swayed.

‘You mean this bull is a coward? After almost killing the man who placed the darts?’

‘On the contrary,’ Don Luis replied. ‘This is a true toro bravo but he is clever and has learned quickly and is no longer fooled by the muleta. He is waiting for the man himself. He is now at his most dangerous and if..’

‘Ole!’

The charge had been sudden and fast and only Ramon’s hair-tuned reflexes saved him from the leading right horn as he spun on his left heel snaking the muleta out and to the left for a pase naturel, the bull passing so close the bright red blood from its hump leaving a broad smear on his vest. The crowd tense and perched forwards on their seats now and so quiet that every haunting note from the faena reached Ramon clearly even as he was at the point furthest away from the orchestra. As always the music filled him with a deep sadness. A song of death.

Working closely with the bull now. Provoking the charge with the thigh and then passing the bull quickly with a series of natural forearm passes turning him tighter every time. Knowing just how short he could turn and finally turning him so short with a backhanded pase de pecho that he brought the bull to its knees.

‘Truly remarkable,’ the Arab who sometimes went by the name of Achmat said, his dry tone belied by the twitching of his hands.

‘Note the slowness of the passes,’ Don Luis said, his voice reclaiming its usual vigour as relief coursed through his tensed frame. ‘It makes for great emotion in the bullfight.’

He was glad there was no wind, mindful of the previous Sunday when a sudden gust had lifted the muleta at a crucial moment and Ramon had been caught in the neck by the horn and had been lucky to walk away with only the sutures to show for it. He didn’t have to close his eyes to recall the scene. The hysterical shouting from the crowd, the other matadors hurriedly luring the bull away with their frantically flapping yellow and pink veronica capes, the American tourist in the seat next to him vomiting on her husband’s shoes. And Ramon. Refusing any aid. Waving them all away with a cold fury, reclaiming his sword and scarlet muleta and fixing the bull in position with a final brilliant half turn following a ayadada por dajo and then killing him in the classical way with the right hip over the bloodied horn and the sword between the shoulders of the beast up to the hilt and the bull already dead from the thrust and the crowd wild and on its feet and the old Spaniard in the next seat with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Venter is moving faster now. His hot breath coming in short rasping gasps as he strives to find an inner reserve of energy. Anything that might turn the edge on dying. For death was stalking him and even as he stumbled blindly onwards the blood was seeping through his jacket and running down his leg and it felt warm and sticky and a part of his mind wondered why he was so cold and so dizzy...

But that had all been last Sunday, last week. This was now. The last ole! still ringing round the confines of the arena, Ramon strode over to Jose, his sword handler, waiting at the barrera. The bull watched him go with head slung low and flanks moving like great bellows.

‘Muyo humbre, no?’ Jose asked as he handed Ramon the battered silver cup with cold water and watched him sip. He had been worried as

had Antezana, Ramon's banderillero and ever critical observer and possibly the only man there who knew as much about fighting bulls as Ramon. Antezana had been waiting with Jose and Ramon allowed himself a smile as he pointed to the thick bloodstained bandage around the older man's thigh where the horn had got him as he placed the darts. 'You're getting too old for this? Maybe time to go and sit on the beach with the grandchildren?'

'No hoy derecho!' Antezana replied indignantly and then in a dropped voice. 'This one is bad, amigo. He favours the right horn but is weak in the right eye which makes him lunge up at any sensed movement. Be careful.'

Ramon nodded. He was glad to have his old friend confirm his own observation and, in a way, angry that they had not picked the flaw up earlier. When they had been passing the bull with veronicas, during the first movement of the faena, they should have seen it, noticed that the animal lowered the leading right horn only when the cape was moved out to the left and down but any sound from its blind spot and it would lunge... A mistake that could have cost Antezana his life and not just a cornada to the thigh.

He would have to be soundless at the moment of truth when going over the top of that right horn.

Filled with a sudden cold resolve now he washed his hands and took the muleta and the new sword. The sword with the tip angled to one side to facilitate the kill. Jose had thrown water over the small scarlet cloth to keep it down should fate decide to send wind. Ramon carefully scuffed some of yellow sand from the arena onto the bottom edge of the wet muleta to add more weight and ran his gaze along the packed galleries. He picked out Petra sitting next to Don Luis and the guest and noted the very bright colours of the flowers she clutched to her bosom. Noticed also the blush on her cheeks and the yellow ribbon in contrast to the raven black hair worn slightly longer than the fashion that year. Their eyes met and she waved and he allowed himself a smile. It would not do for a

matador to wave at the crowd. Not at the moment of truth.

Down a short flight of stairs now and almost stumbling as he glanced over his shoulder. Damn maze and the alleys getting narrower and darker and dozens of doors and windows and living people behind them all and nobody opens when he hammers on their door and his shouts reverberate around the courtyards and over the roofs and nobody wants to know. Venter crouched for a moment in the shadow of a low wall and wedged the sodden handkerchief into position under his belt, buttoning his jacket to add extra pressure. How much blood can a man lose before he dies he thought and tried to clear his spinning head. Plan. Must have a plan to get out of here and back to the hotel. Goddamn hellhole. Stinking rat hole and to think that during the day hundreds of tourists would gingerly pick their way through these very narrow alleyways in search of that elusive bargain.

Tangier.

How he wished he'd waited for backup but he had been so close. So close. He regained his feet by working his way up inch by inch against the moss laden wall and fixed his gaze in the general direction of where he heard a ship's horn and stumbled forward into the night.

So close.

'It's time,' Antezana said and Ramon nodded and walked to the waiting bull.

It was the third bull of the afternoon and the tourists had seen the death of the first two and knew what was coming and sat quietly and even the unexpectedly blasé amongst them felt a skipped heartbeat or a quickening of the breathing or perhaps just a sharpening of the senses. Don Luis glanced at his guest and was pleased to see the man engrossed in the spectacle. It was good. Tonight they would eat and drink well and that was always good for business.