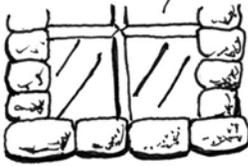


**BLACK
MASK**

PRESENTS

Flamenco

BY ED LYNKEY



ART BY SCOTT HEDLUND

*M*y hotel room's air conditioner gave no relief from the relentless heat. It was 3:30 a.m., the coolest time in Madrid's steamy night. I lay naked on my bed. Sleep was impossible.

My clothes stuck to my skin as I dressed, but no showers here. The drought-ridden city rationed running water by the drop. The zinc basin of water on my dresser was sour with my old sweat. Welcome to Spain in July.

Downstairs the lobby was scattered with chipped rattan furniture and dingy gold leaf. The place might have had class in its glory days, but I doubted it. Decay was already there, waiting, before its first adobe brick was laid.

I asked the whiplike night porter what was good in the galley. It was too hot for either of us to smile, or to nod.

"Cold cod with bitter oranges," he said, squinting jet eyes at me. "Moriles wine, no ice. You hungry, Senor Johnson?"

My head cranked sidewise to mean "no." Angry, I pushed through the lobby's revolving glass door into the sultry blue street blazed by the hotel's neon sign. The night felt hotter if that was possible. And it stank. A rotten smell.

Crossing a narrow alleyway, I stepped into the twin beams of a garbage truck rearing up to a Dumpster. Hands dug deep into my chinos, I tread down the murky side of the street past a yellow mailbox and a blue pay phone guarded by a tough. The weak light showed off his dreadlocks and sharkskin pants. He extended a palm. I didn't grease it.

"Prick," I heard him snarl.

How had I'd ended up in this Spanish inferno? Robert Gatlin, my employer, had brow-beaten me into flying overseas despite my reluctance in these post-9/11 times. So I went. My expected rosy vacation soured. I brought false impressions of Madrid from travel posters and romantic anecdotes about Hemingway.

Arriving, I learned fast the potent truth behind the local adage: "nine months of winter, three months of hell." July was their most torrid month. I thirsted for water. Too bad the city lacked for a river or a port and all the public fountains were parched dry.

Inactivity was my best defense against the swelter. I nixed attending any bullfights although my adobe hotel abutted Las Ventas, the world's grandest bullring. Unless the matador and El Toro swapped roles, I'd no fondness to watch the gruesome travesty, tradition be screwed. Such a hard-nosed attitude I blamed on the merciless heat and my ingrained habit to cheer the underdog.

For a moment, I considered fleeing on the high-speed AVE to Seville, allegedly cooler. Instead, I hiked faster as my thoughts congealed around Robert Gatlin. He was always, it seemed, at the center of my orbit. A billionaire attorney, he championed the downtrodden and long shots. At the same time, he delighted to move between Washington, DC's powerful and elite with practiced ease. In that way and many others, we were polar opposites --

A car horn broke my reverie. The more staid Clamores Jazz Club at Calle de Albuquerque 14, my first preference, was closed. I ducked into a bodega to overpay a drowsy clerk for mineral water. The booze flowing here was of no value to me. I'd been dry for almost five years, and no way was this spring fling going to torpedo all that clean time. A clamor of acid jazz, trip hop, and new funk attracted me.

Here party central raged on day and night. After-hours bars paid stiff fines for serving drinks long after curfew. Nobody cared. I skirted milling swarms of *la gente guapa*, the beautiful people, who came well after Generalissimo Franco. Their parents and grandparents remembered him. Did dinner conversation ever veer, I wondered, to past days not so carefree and footloose? Doubtful. The music played on. My Nikes crunched over yellowing fronds discarded on Palm Sunday. Mass in the turquoise-tiled mosque had been a diversion. As a stranger in the pews I relaxed a bit -- I didn't have to watch my back. Still, at queer intervals, the short hairs on the back of my neck quilled.

Slouching by a granite-block aqueduct the Visigoths hadn't wrecked, the same uneasiness gripped me. Of course, I shrugged it off as a visceral reaction to the partygoers. Against a backlit yellow arcade I glimpsed a blur of scarlet chiffon. It was a flamenco dancer's. Arching a supple back, her head deep dipped and she froze as if an exotic statue. I stared fiercer. Her male partner offstage nursing a bum knee, she danced solo, unencumbered. A guitar strummed. Eyeing the fiery-limbed dancer sent a joy through my veins.

"*Buenos noches*, Senor Johnson," a rasp said behind me. Pivoting on the balls of my feet, my hands flew up into a goofy karate stance.

"Relax," said the man. "If I wished to hurt you, you'd lay in the gutter, a knife planted in your heart."

My eyes burned. "Who the hell are you?"

"A friend I assure you," he said. "Senor Gatlin sent me."

"Gatlin? Great." I'd traveled halfway around the world and put a vast ocean between us and yet the fat man in his posh offices managed to reach out and touch me. "What does he want?"

I said. "Why not leave a message at my hotel desk?"

Smiling rodent teeth, the man moved into fuller brightness just short of my elbow. "Senor Gatlin said your cell phone went unanswered too many times."

"Yeah, I had the misfortune to drop it under a bus."

"Never mind," said the man who I now saw wore a red beret. "We've a long walk in front of us."

"Correction," I said. "You have a long walk. I'm okay where I'm standing, Mister X."

"Call me Paco," he said. "We must hurry. I'll explain en route. Follow me, *por favor*."

"Give me an address, Paco. I'll meet you there first thing tomorrow."

"The American Embassy," said Paco. "An American lady has been kidnapped by terrorists."

"Local authorities deal with such a crisis," I said. "I don't."

Paco nudged me to step off the curbstone. "Senor Gatlin says it's too delicate for them."

That sounded about right. Put Gatlin with the American Embassy in Madrid, mix in a dash of terrorists, and what did you get? Me in a tight jam getting tighter. My glib wisecracks lost their starch as icy fear crawled up my spine. "Lead on," I said with feeble enthusiasm.

We departed the festive bars by taking a subdued path through Parque del Oeote where pimps and their whores freelanced in the black heat. Down the block, I staggered through the out-spill of sallow light from a coin-operated launderette. Three whores inside, smoking stubs, watched their loads bounce around in the wash cycle. Ignoring their stares transferred to me, I caught up to Paco.

"Who is this lady?" I asked him.

"An American," he said. "She was last seen near the Paseo del Prado by a newspaper vendor."

"Near the art galleries? Great. A cultured type," I said. "Her name?"

"Kate Callahan," he said. "She's very rich. Or so I'm told."

"That explains her connection to Gatlin," I said. "Birds of a feather. Why was she abducted?"

"She's very rich," Paco repeated.

"Have the kidnapers demanded a ransom?"

"Not yet. Senor Gatlin expects they'll soon contact the embassy with instructions. The bag man must be ready."

I frowned a little. "The bag man?"

Beneath the red beret, Paco sidled a sly knowing glance at me.

“No-no,” I said, stopping. “Me in a foreign city toting a bunch of cash? Armed crazies gunning for me? Hell, I don’t even speak the local lingo.”

“Senor Gatlin said you’re the best bag man,” said Paco. “He insisted that you deliver the money. ‘Tell Frank,’ he said, ‘I’m still the boss.’”

My reply came after a weary sigh. “Yeah, I make a swell little gopher.” I resumed walking.

* * *

Still too early for the anti-war protestors, the American Embassy at Calle Serrano 75 had a deserted look. A tall slim lady met us at the rear entrance. Her name was Gloria and she urged us to hurry over the dark palm floors. Our footfall echoed off green plaster walls. Closed doors with transoms of frost-flowered glass lined the long corridor. We paraded into a broom closet for an office. I noted the barred window. A short, squatty man dealt us a curt nod. His name was Gary, Special Consul to the U.S. Ambassador of Spain.

So, Paco and Gary were my brain trust. I had a sinking sensation in the depths of my guts.

“Your boss is on our speaker phone,” said Gary. “Talk in a loud, clear voice.”

I complied, saying, “Hello!”

“Frank!” roared a baritone I knew all too well. “We have a situation . . . Frank? Hello? Are you there?”

“Sitting here playing tiddly winks,” I said. “How’s the weather back home?”

“Can the crap,” said Robert Gatlin. “A lady’s life is at stake. Kate Callahan is my old, dear friend.”

“Right. Let me make an educated guess. She’s a member in good standing with your Middleburg aristocracy.”

Gatlin grunted as much in the affirmative. I sensed three pale, pinched faces hovering over me with eager scowls. “We need to keep this low-key,” he said, “and close it out fast.”

“Right. Once I make the ransom drop, I’ll tail the pick-up team to wherever they’re holding Ms. Callahan.”

“Precisely. Look, Frank. I realize this task falls outside of your purview,” said Gatlin, “but I’m confident you’ll use this as an opportunity to excel. Paco will supply you with any aid such as a translator, a guide, a back-up, transportation -- ”

I broke into his sentence. “An arsenal?”

“A gun?” Moaning, Gatlin breathed out heavy. “Negative. It doesn’t fit our scenario.”

“It fits mine,” I said.

“Oh, whatever makes you happy. Now get on the stick and good luck.” Without any further comment, his side of the communication fell into the white noise of a dial tone.

"Your boss sure gets to the point," Gary said.

"Right. Was there a ransom note?" I asked.

"No," said Gloria. "Only a phone call earlier to the embassy. Working late, I fielded it. Imagine my horror to hear what they'd done to Ms. Callahan and what they demanded for her safe return. Well, after pulling my heart out of my throat, I notified the Ambassador at his residence. He ordered to me await further direction."

Nodding, I ran with the rest of her story. "Meanwhile, the Ambassador places some telephone calls including to Ms. Callahan's family. They run to their well-connected lawyer, Gatlin. Along with the Ambassador, they cook up this can't-miss plan. How long before the Ambassador arrives?"

"No, he went back to bed," Gloria said.

"Say what?" I asked her.

Gloria went on. "We're the experts, he said, so handle it. Just ensure it's handled very discreetly. No messes." Did her slight modulation in tone denote sarcasm?

"Near retirement, the Ambassador can ill-afford to make waves," said Gary as if that blunted any doubts about this unorthodox operation. "We can, I believe, finesse this ourselves." His look at Gloria was long and soulful.

"You're a damn fool," I said, seeing red. Lawyers: all style and no substance.

"Mr. Johnson, your lack of teammanship," said Gary, "jeopardizes our chances to triumph."

"Never mind," Paco rasped. He slid off the red beret. "Press on."

My gaze went to him. "Have you alerted the *policia nacional*?"

Gloria squeezed my shoulder. "No, Mr. Johnson. We were overruled on contacting them. Should I?"

I gave a little headshake. "No, I guess this is our baby."

"Here you go." Paco slapped a cold hard object into my hand. It was an Astra 357, an archaic relic constructed by an old-line Spanish firearms manufacturer. A double-action six-shooter, its design aped my S&W .357 back home locked inside a desk drawer. Smiling, I squeezed the black rubber grips. It fisted fine.

Gary interrupted my silent love fest. "Carrying weapons is too rash," he said.

"Tell you what, why don't you play the damn middle man?" I asked.

Paco interceded. "Frank, Gloria will accompany you. A couple won't arouse suspicion. Gary and I will shadow you."

A red flag snapped up in my head. "You and I will go. With my ass on the line, it's my call."

"God damn," said Gary. "You're an amateur at this, Johnson."

Two paces spanned the distance between us. My fingers balled into fists.

“Whoa, guys.” The gooseneck desk lamp rotated upward to blast light on Gloria’s profile. “Mr. Johnson, please don’t underestimate my assets.” Her campy humor broke the tension and I had a slim expectation that everything was going to turn out all right.

“The ransom,” I said. “How much is it?”

Gary and Paco in tandem said: “Fifty grand.”

“All this for a piddly sum. Why?”

Gary put on a pained expression. “They’re testing the waters. If it goes easy, you can bet they’ll pull a similar stunt on a grander scale eighteen months, maybe two years down the line.”

“Are they homegrown terrorists?” I asked.

“Yes, always the worst kind,” said Gary.

We waited. There was precious little else to do. Paco and Gary played cards, a version of poker I didn’t recognize. Gloria read a paperback novel. Sue Grafton. I sat by the coffee urn watching them. Adrenaline poisoning my system left me jumpy which explained my flinch when the desk telephone rang.

“Grab that,” said Gary. “They wanna talk to the guy lugging the money. That’s you.”

I got up and greeted the caller.

“Do you have the cash?” asked a greasy monotone.

Gary hoisted up an airline carry-on bag to show me. “Yeah,” I said. “Now what?”

“Don’t ask questions,” Greasy Monotone directed me. “Listen. Six a.m. Bring the money to the bullring. Las Ventas. Walk to the middle alone and hang loose. Got it?”

“I got that you’re American,” I said. “Your deadpan delivery didn’t give you away. Your idiom ‘hang loose’ did.”

The voice lapsed into its natural guttural growl. “Do like I said or the rich bitch gets her throat cut.” The connection went dead.

“Johnson, you scare me. Don’t screw around with them,” said Gary. “They’re serious. Do what they say. Hear me?”

Ignoring him, I spoke to Paco. “Your homegrown terrorists are really Americans. They’re not overly sophisticated, just blood-thirsty and greedy.”

Paco swallowed. “Then we better act fast to spare Ms. Callahan’s throat.”

* * *

Gloria and I rode in her car, a dented up Russian compact, along the Paseo de la Castellana, the main north-south artery paved over an ancient riverbed. Water flowed here. But not in a good

while. We passed the ubiquitous motor scooters with their one-eyed headlights shining. Despite the predawn's chiaroscuro, Gloria wore a pair of sky-blue sunshades offset by her olive-hued skin and jet-black hair combed back from her forehead. In a flashing moment, I pictured the flamenco dancer performing her hot numbers in the plaza.

"Have you enjoyed your stay here?" Gloria asked.

"It's too infernal hot for me," I said.

"You'll get use to it. Soak up our culture," she said. "Go to the bullfights."

"I don't dig spectacles of death. Are you a native of Madrid?"

"Yes," she said. "Paco and Gary, though, aren't."

"Is that important?" I asked, suspicious.

Her elegant shrug showed a disarming nonchalance. "Only because you brought up the topic." The smile, her first, revealed a beauty, which Madrid until then had kept under wraps.

"Gary is a prick," I said. "Please excuse the profanity."

"Don't apologize," said Gloria. "In this case, your profanity is appropriate."

I stirred in the cramped seat. "Can you make them in the rearview mirror?"

"No."

"Great."

We rushed on through the rows of ragged tents and scrap plywood shelters in the *chabolas*, the shantytowns. Arid air whipped in from our windows rolled down to catch whatever cool blessing it brought. The snow-capped Sierras looming in front of us suggested two things: skiing and ice cream. I felt homesick.

"I'm also not used to the idea of a siesta," I said.

"Very few here take a siesta," Gloria said after a little laugh. "It's an all too common misperception."

Before I could respond, bounding into the windshield's view came the bullring designed like a modern coliseum. The peppy car blew through a red traffic signal. Gloria swerved to avoiding smashing a black cat. We parked underneath a frescoed cupola and entered through the matadors' green room. It was paneled with mirrors as if they thrived on drinking up their own images. What I saw: an overweight detective much improved by the sinewy dark beauty hooked to his right elbow.

"Pssst, Frank. Through here."

Gloria guided us through a second smaller door and left me on the verge of the bullring's red dust. Not certain what the script now called for, I scanned rows of bleachers in the sun and the more expensive seats in the shade. The longer I stared at the crimson circle, the more it reminded me of blood. Kate Callahan's. Mine. The bull's.

I shivered.

Plodding straight ahead, I had to lift my shoes higher through thick dust to reach the ring's midpoint. The carry-on bag didn't weigh half as much as the steel wedged in my waistband. I halted where I judged the kidnappers expected to find me.

Why did I feel like a clay pigeon?

Six a.m. hit and missed. After the fashionably late five minutes was up, I knew something had gone awry. My dread fixed on the kidnappers having spotted us arriving in Gloria's Russian junker. My right hand snaked behind me to requisition the Astra.

"Frank," a husky whisper said. "Something's wrong."

Turning, I saw Gloria trembling in a golden shaft of sunshine.

"What?" I asked, running.

Whirling as a flamenco dancer, she reached for my arm. "The victim, Ms. Callahan. S-she's dead."

"Good Lord," I said.

The first gunshot cracked into the bullring, its echo off the concrete bleachers deafening. Propelling us toward the doorway's hard cover, my other hand rode up, elbow locked. The Astra flamed, lending its bark to the din. Lead rounds danced at our feet. Spits of red dust kicked up.

I sensed how the moneybag excited our unseen attackers.

Gloria never screamed but I did. A heavy blow scorched my forearm, its razor force shredding fabric before shaving off several layers of flesh.

"Leave the money for them," said Gloria, smacking at my hand.

"Move!" Firing over a shoulder, I dragged her along. We stumbled into the matador's greenroom, breathless and disheveled.

"You've been hit," she saw. "Does it hurt bad?"

"It only hurts like hell," I managed to sputter out.

Fearsome fists banged on the outside steel door. I winced. The reflections in the many mirrors showed two very frightened people. "Look." She took me behind the lockers where Kate Callahan smiled from ear-to-ear, a smile of blood slit by their razor.

I threw open the other doors and raced to the edge of the bullring. With a mighty heave, I tossed the bag of banknotes in a clumsy arc through the air to plop near the center.

"What did you just do?" asked Gloria. Their pounding on the door halted.

"The bull has been unleashed," I said. "If the kidnappers want their money, they must duel for it."

Gloria gave a stern gasp. "No. That's crazy."

I pushed away her hand. "That's the rule here."

Planting myself against the cinderblock wall, wetting my lips, I leaned to peer across the bullring. The bag waited in the sun. A shadowy man-shape flickered across the bull's chute. Toro, toro, I thought.

My shaky finger snugged on the Austria's trigger.

"Hey you," hollered over a voice I recognized as Greasy Monotone.

"What's your idea?" I screamed back. Sweat oiled my bent finger.

"Show yourself. Be a man. We'll see who packs the most guts."

I realized this was harebrained. Nothing smarter flew into my head. "Fine. On the count of three. One- two-three."

Two abreast, the men appeared just as my squinting eyes ran into sunlight. Hell broke loose. Their gunfire was quickest. My volley, however, was luckiest. My zigzag charge, maybe, confused their aims.

One slug clubbed the smaller man high in the chest. His knees crumbled. Thrilled, I rotated the steel sights right, fired again. And again. Grabbing the gunman tried to hold in his shot out entrails.

Bent over his prostrate writhing form, I couldn't resist it. "Looks like I pack the most guts." He scowled in reply before going all limp in the bullring's hot dirty light.

* * *

At the U.S. Ambassador's swanky office, we gathered. The door was locked. Lieutenant Garcia, his black trousers with white shirt uniform too crisp for my tattered mind, posed questions. He sat at my side, pen and my *denuncia* in hand. It was only my statement but he eyed me like it was my confession.

Across a wide desk the U.S. Ambassador fidgeted

My legal counsel, Gatlin talked over the speakerphone. My bullet-scorched arm throbbed.

"We've detained Paco," Lieutenant Garcia said, his accent edged with rancor.

The Ambassador silently drummed fingers on the desktop. "And Gary?"

Garcia glared at me. He did that a lot.

"Dead. Knifed in the heart. A clerk discovered him in the bullring's museum."

"Good Lord," the Ambassador came to attention.

"Who was in on it?" Gatlin asked from afar. "Why did they kill Ms. Callahan?"

The Ambassador slid a knuckle over a perspiring brow. "Was Gary a ringleader?"

"No," said Garcia. "Paco claims Gary caught on that Paco was the inside man. And the other two killed Gary."

Garcia glanced at me. "But now that the two thugs are dead it will be hard to sort out."

"Why in thunder did they murder Ms. Callahan?" repeated Gatlin's distant voice.

"They panicked." Garcia said. "Paco pleads innocent to all the killings. He puts it on the dead thugs."

Garcia shrugged. "It will be difficult to prove him wrong."

The Ambassador bobbed his doughy chin to line on me. He had lost interest in Garcia. I had lost interest in the whole caper.

"Will Gloria be reporting for work today?"

All eyes parked on me.

"Nope," I told the Ambassador. "After dropping me at the hotel, she drove off for Seville."

"Why?"

I made them wait as I stretched my weary body as best I could.

"Gloria decided to dance the Flamenco at her father's salon there. She tells me that she loves to teach, and that the oranges of Seville are the sweetest in Spain."

I stood up. For the first time in days I smiled.

"I think I'll follow her to Seville and find out for myself."

THE END