



## BACK TO THE CONVENT

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After this interminable wedding lunch, Ramos decided to walk home despite the snow covering the ground. Fresh out of prison, the long period of deprivation he had just endured had led him to abuse the mediocre Chardonnay from the wedding. The son of post-war Argentine immigrants, Gustavo Miguel Ortega i Llorens, known as Ramos, had become known by selling a fake Rembrandt to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, made by a mysterious forger whose identity he never revealed. But the masterstroke that earned him both fame and those 8 years spent behind bars was undoubtedly the sale of the Louvre Pyramid to a Chinese billionaire.

He had thought that the freezing cold of this winter afternoon would do him good. But, as he arrived at the small square where his apartment looked out, he was overcome with worry. His vision was blurry. He sat down on a bench to try to regain his senses. In vain. Gradually, the trees in front of him and the buildings in the background disappeared in a whitish halo. Panicked, he was searching in his pockets for his phone to call for help when the halo dissipated. His vision was clear again, but he was now in front of a green garden. He recognized immediately the garden of the family home that everyone called The Convent.

Ramos thought he was hallucinating. He stood up and walked towards this distressing scene in the hope of making it disappear. On the contrary, the insects that were screeching in the flowerbeds and the heady scent of the privet hedge around the pond confirmed to him that he was indeed in the Convent garden on a beautiful spring evening. How could he have instantly transported himself to this place of his childhood? Incredulous, he leaned over the water to check that the goldfish were indeed in the pond. A shiver of horror ran down his spine and all his limbs. Instead of the fish, the corpse of a man was floating between two waters. His livid face stood out against the black bottom of the pond and the light of the setting sun was reflected in spots on the ripples of his overcoat. He felt as if he were back in the horrible nightmare he often had, in which he had killed someone without being able to remember who it was. In his dream, he had managed to hide his murder for a very long time, but he was certain that the investigation was starting again, and that he was going to be arrested. The feeling of guilt and the fear of being discovered were so intense that he woke up, trembling and sweating. But this time, it was a real corpse that he had in front of him. Terrified, he ran to take refuge in the house, shouting:

"I'm not the one who killed that man, I'm not the one who killed that man."

In the hall, the familiar atmosphere of the Convent reassured him a little. The painted cement tiles on the floor, the smell of wax on the stairs, the paintings of hunting scenes on the walls, everything was there, reviving the warm atmosphere of the holidays spent with his grandparents. The house seemed deserted. He went up to the first floor, not without checking that the fourth step was creaking, then, pacing the corridor, he inspected the rooms one by one. Nothing had changed and, as was always the case when they had remained unoccupied for a long time, they smelled musty. Arriving at the end of the corridor, he was about to push open the door to the library, when he heard a noise inside. He froze on the spot. After a while, hearing nothing more, he ventured: "Is anyone there?"

"I'm here, Mr. Ortega. I was hoping for your visit."

A rush of adrenaline cut off his legs.

"Please come in." the voice insisted.

The tone was strangely friendly. Running away seemed risky to him. He pushed open the door. A man, standing on the ladder, with his back to him, was consulting one of the thousands of books that lined the four walls of the library. Without hurrying, the man put the book back in place and climbed down the ladder.

"- Good day, Ramos. Let me introduce myself: Inspector Clouzot of the criminal brigade."

A police inspector! They were certainly investigating the murder of the man in the pool. How did he know his name? And why did he pretend to wait for him? Ramos was frightened. He turned toward the door to go out again, but a small, shaggy dog sprang out from under the inspector's feet, barking, and grabbed his calf. Ramos shook his leg to get rid of the animal.

"Call your dog off, damn it. He's hurting me."

"Molly, stop! Let go of the gentleman's leg, come now. You can see he wishes to leave."

Molly let go. Ramos hated those kind of little cantankerous mutts. Standing there in front of him, she was still growling, staring at him with her little black eyes.

"I'm sorry. Molly must have noticed something about you that she didn't like. She's very sensitive to details. In our business, details are very important, you see. The guilty party is always betrayed by a detail."

"This is intolerable. I will complain to your superiors. What are you doing here with this dog?"

"I'm investigating a disturbing disappearance reported in the neighbourhood. A man left his house to smoke a cigarette the night

before last and he still hasn't come back. Didn't you run into anyone when you arrived earlier? He was wearing a large dark coat.”

Why was this so-called inspector pretending not to know that there was a corpse in the pool? It looked like a trap. It was better not to talk about the corpse.

“I arrived here by chance, only a few minutes ago. I didn't see anyone.”

“This was your grandparents' house, wasn't it?”

“Indeed. But I don't see the connection with your investigation.”

“You claim to have arrived "by chance" at your grandparents' house. Admit that it is surprising.”

The policeman's affable tone only added to Ramos's concern.

“Listen, continue your investigation as you please, I'm leaving. And call your little dog back, so he doesn't jump on me.”

“As you wish.” said Inspector Clouzot, adding curtly: “Molly, heel!”

There was only one thing to do: flee from this disturbing policeman. Ramos was about to rush towards the door but the inspector called out to him again.

“You've already had dealings with the police, haven't you?”

The "already" made his blood curdle.

“That was 8 years ago. I was convicted and served my sentence. I only got out of prison yesterday morning. You can see that this has nothing to do with your case.”

“Why are you justifying yourself? I am convinced that you have nothing to do with this disappearance. Did I say something that made you believe that I thought otherwise?”

Convinced that he was about to come to the corpse in the pool, Ramos exploded.

“But what do you want from me, in the end? Since the beginning you have been beating around the bush with your honeyed little air. I have had enough. Let me go.”

“As you wish. I'm not the one holding you back.”

Ramos rushed to the door. It had closed and, itself covered with book shelves, it was no longer distinguishable from the wall. Fighting against panic, Ramos tried to locate its outline but his gaze was lost among all the books. With his hands, he began to feverishly scan the shelves to find the handle. Out of breath, in desperation, he turned to Inspector Clouzot. The policeman was looking at him, a mocking look. Ramos tried to scream but no sound could come out of his tight throat. A hand shook his shoulder.

“Sir. Hey! Sir. Wake up. You can't stay on this bench, it's too cold.”

Ramos needed a few moments to remember where he was. Leaning over him, Camille scrutinized him, worried. He could only see the iris of her eyes, a deep blue surrounded by a thin golden crown.

“I must still be dreaming. Or I'm dead. Are you an angel?”

“No, sorry, but at least this confirms that you're not dead.”

“Can I touch you, please?”

He reached out to Camille's cheek. She accepted the incongruous caress, until Ramos began to extend it to her neck. She pulled his arm away, giving him a surprised look and a small smile.

“I am not dreaming, indeed. On the other hand, I persist in thinking that you are an angel. Do you know that you saved me?”

“Yes! Without me, you would have died of cold on this bench.”

“I’m not talking about that. You pulled me out of a horribly distressing nightmare. Thanks to you – and the beauty of your eyes – I wake up feeling serene and joyful.”

“I am delighted. But, in turn, can I ask you an indiscreet question?”

“What could I refuse an angel?”

“I think I recognize you. Are you Ramos Ortega?”

“i Llorens. It's me.”

“Ramos Ortega i Llorens: the man who sold the Louvre Pyramid! I can't believe it.”

“Are you shocked?”

“No, I'm not. I'm a journalist and I'm preparing a book on the great crooks of all eras. You're on my list, obviously. Would you agree to tell me about yourself?”

“With great pleasure, beautiful blue-eyed angel. I live there, you see, on the first floor. Come, we can talk about anything you want in front of a good fire.”

Ramos tried to get up, but the wedding wine was still taking effect.

“Oh la la” Camille said. “Looks like you’ve been overindulging. Lean on my shoulder.”

She put her hand around his waist to support him. They carefully crossed the small snowy square, Camille laughing out loud every time she had to catch Ramos's missteps.