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The Silent and the Damned

Robert Wilson

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Extract

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Wednesday, 24th July 2002

'I want my mummy. I want my mummy.'

Consuelo Jiménez opened her eyes to a child's face only centimetres from her own, which lay half buried in the pillow. Her eyelashes scratched the cotton slip. The child's fingers grabbed at the flesh of her upper arm.

'I want my mummy.'

'All right, Mario. Let's go and find Mummy,' she said, thinking this is too early for anybody. 'You know she's only just across the street, don't you? You can stay here with Matías, have some breakfast, play a little . . .'

'I want my mummy.'

The child's fingers dug into her arm with some urgency and she stroked his hair and kissed him on the forehead.

She didn't want to cross the street in her nightclothes, like some working-class woman needing something from the shops, but the child was tugging at her, wheedling. She slipped on a white silk dressing gown over her cotton pyjamas and fitted her feet into some gold sandals. She ran her hands through her hair while Mario sheafed her dressing gown and started hauling her away like some stevedore down at the docks.

Taking his hand she led him down the stairs one at a time. They left the chill of the air-conditioned house and the heat, even this early in the morning, was solid and unwavering with not even a lick of freshness from the dawn after another oppressive night. She crossed the empty street. Palm trees hung limp and frazzled as if sleep had not come easily to this neighbourhood. The only sound out on the tarmac came from the air conditioner's fans blowing more hot, unwanted air into the suffocating atmosphere of the exclusive neighbourhood of Santa Clara on the outskirts of Seville.

Water dripped from a split unit on a high balcony of the Vegas' house as she half dragged Mario, who'd become suddenly cumbersome and difficult as if he'd changed his mind about his mummy. The drips clattered on the leaves of the abundant vegetation, the sound thick as blood in the hideous heat. Sweat beaded on Consuelo's forehead. She felt nauseous at the thought of the rest of the day, the heat building on weeks of torrid weather. She keyed in the code number on the pad by the outer gate and stepped into the driveway. Mario ran to the house and pushed against the front door bumping his head against the woodwork. She rang the doorbell, whose electronic chime sounded like a distant cathedral bell in the silent, double-glazed house. No answer. A trickle of sweat found its way between her breasts. Mario pounded the door with his small fist, which made the sound of a dull ache, persistent as chronic grief.

It was just after eight in the morning. She licked at the sweat forming on her top lip.

The maid arrived at the gate. She had no keys. Sra Vega was normally awake early, she said. They heard the gardener, an Ukrainian called Sergei, digging at the side of the house. They startled him and he gripped his mattock like a weapon until he saw the two women. Sweat careened down his pectorals and the ridges of muscle on his naked torso to his shorts. He had been working since 6 a.m. and had heard nothing. As far as he knew the car was still in the garage.

Consuelo left Mario with the maid and took Sergei to the back of the house. He climbed up on to the verandah outside the sitting room and peered through the sliding doors and blinds. The doors were locked. He climbed over the railing of the verandah and leaned across to look in the kitchen window, which was raised above the garden. His head started back with shock.

'What is it?' asked Consuelo.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Sr Vega lying on the floor. He not moving.'

Consuelo took the maid and Mario back across the street to her house. The child knew that things were not right and started to cry. The maid could not console him and he fought his way out of her arms. Consuelo made the call. Zero–Nine–One. She lit a cigarette and tried to concentrate while she looked at the helpless maid hovering over the child, who'd thrown a tantrum and was now a writhing, thrashing animal on the floor, howling himself to silence.

Consuelo reported the incident to the telephone centre at the Jefatura, gave her name, address and contact number. She slammed the phone down and went to the child, took his kicks and thumps and pulled him to her, held him against her and whispered his name over and over in his ear until he went limp.

She put him in her bed upstairs, got dressed and called the maid to come and keep an eye on him. Mario slept. Consuelo looked at him intently as she brushed her hair. The maid sat on the corner of the bed, unhappy at being caught up in somebody else's tragedy, knowing that it would infect her own life.

A patrol car pulled up in the street outside the Vegas' house. Consuelo went out to meet the policeman and took him to the back of the house where he climbed up on to the verandah. He asked her where the gardener had gone. She walked down the lawn to a small building at the bottom where Sergei had his quarters. He wasn't there. She went back to the house. The policeman hammered on the kitchen window and then radioed information back to the Jefatura. He climbed down from the verandah.

'Do you know where Sra Vega is?' he asked.

'She should be in there. That's where she was last night when I called her to tell her that her son would stay the night with my boys,' said Consuelo. 'Why were you knocking on the window?'

'No sense in smashing the door down if he's just drunk and fallen asleep on the floor.'

'Drunk?'

'There's a bottle on the floor next to his body.'

'I've known him for years and I've never seen him incapable . . . never.'

'Maybe he's different when he's on his own.'

'So what have you done about it?' said Consuelo, the testy Madrileña trying to keep her shrillness down in front of the more relaxed style of the local policeman.

'An ambulance was dispatched as soon as you made your call and now the Inspector Jefe del Grupo de Homicidios has been notified.'

'One moment he's drunk and the next he's been murdered.'

'There's a body lying on the floor,' said the patrolman, annoyed with her now. 'He's not moving and he's not responding to noise. I have –'

'Don't you think you should try and get in there and see if he's

still alive? He's not moving or responding but he might still be breathing.'

Indecision flitted across the patrolman's face. He was saved by the arrival of the ambulance. Between them the paramedics and the patrolman found that the house was completely sealed back and front. More cars arrived outside the front of the house.



Inspector Jefe Javier Falcón had finished his breakfast and was sitting in his study in the centre of his enormous, inherited eighteenth-century house in Seville's old city. He was finishing his coffee and looking at the manual to a digital camera he'd bought a week ago. The glass door of the study opened on to the patio. The thick walls and traditional design of the house meant that air conditioning was rarely needed. Water trickled in the marble fountain without distracting him. His powers of concentration had come back to him after a turbulent year in his personal life. His mobile vibrated on the desk. He sighed as he answered it. This was the time for dead bodies to be discovered. He walked out into the cloister around the patio and leant against one the pillars supporting the gallery above. He listened to the blunt facts stripped of any tragedy and went back into his study. He wrote down an address – Santa Clara – it didn't sound like a place where anything bad could happen.

He put the mobile in the pocket of his chinos, picked up his car keys and went to open up the colossal wooden doors to his house. He drove his Seat out between the orange trees flanking the entrance and went back to close the doors.

The air conditioning blasted into his chest. He set off down the narrow cobbled streets and broke out into the Plaza del Museo de Bellas Artes with its high trees surrounded by white and ochre façades and the terracotta brick of the museum. He came out of the old city heading for the river and cut right on to Avenida del Torneo. The vague outlines of Calatrava's 'Harp' bridge were visible in the distance through the morning's haze. He swung away from it and into the new city, grinding through the streets and buildings around the Santa Justa station. He headed out past the endless high-rise blocks of the Avenida de Kansas City thinking about the exclusive barrio where he was heading.

The Garden City of Santa Clara had been planned by the Americans to quarter their officers after the Strategic Air Command base was established near Seville, following Franco's signing of the Defense Pact of 1953. Some of the bungalows retained their 1950s aspect, others had been Hispanicized and a few, owned by the wealthy, had been torn down and rebuilt from scratch into palatial mansions. As far as Falcón remembered none of these changes had quite managed to rid the area of a pervasive unreality. It was to do with the houses being on their individual plots of land, together but isolated, which was not a Spanish phenomenon but rather like a suburban American estate. It was also, unlike the rest of Seville, almost eerily quiet.

Falcón parked in the shade of some overhanging greenery outside the modern house on Calle Frey Francisco de Pareja. Despite the terracotta brick façade and some ornate touches, it had the solidity of a fortress. He forced his foot not to falter at the first man he saw as he walked through the gate: Juez de Guardia Esteban Calderón, the duty judge. He hadn't worked with Calderón for over a year but that history was still fresh. They shook hands, clapped each other on the shoulder. He was astonished to find that the woman standing next to the judge was Consuelo Jiménez, who was a part of that same history. She was different from the middle-class woman he'd met the year before when he'd investigated her husband's murder. Her hair was now loose and with a more modern cut and she wore less make-up and jewellery. He couldn't understand what she doing was here.

The paramedics went back to their ambulance and pulled out a stretcher on a trolley. Falcón shook hands with the Médico Forense and the judge's secretary while Calderón asked the patrolman if there was any evidence of breaking and entering. The patrolman gave his report.

Consuelo Jiménez was fascinated by the new Javier Falcón. The Inspector Jefe was not wearing his trademark suit. He wore chinos and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows. He looked younger with his grey hair cut very short, a uniform length all over. Perhaps it was his seasonal style but she didn't think so. Falcón was feeling the weight of her interest. He disguised his unease by introducing another of his officers, Sub-Inspector Pérez. There was a moment of nervous confusion in which Pérez moved off.

'You're wondering what I'm doing here,' she said. 'I live across the street. I discovered the . . . I was with the gardener when he discovered Sr Vega lying on the kitchen floor.'

'But I thought you bought a house in Heliopolis?'

'Well, technically, it was Raúl who bought the house in Heliopolis . . . before he died,' she said. 'He wanted to be near his beloved Bétis stadium and I have no interest in football.'

'And how long have you been living here?'

'Nearly a year.'

'And you discovered the body.'

'The gardener did, and we don't know that he's dead yet.'

'Does anybody keep a spare set of keys?'

'I doubt it,' she said.

'I'd better take a look at the body,' said Falcón.

Sr Vega was lying on his back. His dressing gown and pyjamas had come off his shoulders and were constricting his arms. His chest was bare and there seemed to be abrasions on the pectorals and abdomen. He had scratch marks at his throat. The man's face was pale and looked hard, the lips were grey and yellowish.

Falcón went back to Juez Calderón and the Médico Forense.

'He looks dead to me, but perhaps you'd like to take a look before we break down one of the doors,' he said. 'Do we know where his wife is?'

Consuelo explained the situation again.

'I think we have to go in,' said Falcón.

'You might have a job on your hands,' said Sra Jiménez. 'Lucía had new windows put in before last winter. They're double glazed with bulletproof glass. And that front door, if it's properly locked, you'd be better off going through solid wall.'

'You know this house?'

A woman appeared in the driveway. She was difficult to miss because she had red hair, green eyes and skin so white it was painful to look at in the brutality of the sunlight.

'Hola, Consuelo,' she said, homing in on her amongst all the official faces.

'Hola, Maddy,' said Consuelo, who introduced her to everybody as Madeleine Krugman, Sra Vega's next-door neighbour.

'Is there something wrong with Lucía or Rafael? I saw the ambulance. Can I do anything?'

All eyes were on Madeleine Krugman, and not just because she spoke Spanish with an American accent. She was tall and slender with a full bust, an unstarved bottom and the innate ability to give dull men extravagant imaginations. Only Falcón and Calderón had sufficient testosterone control to be able to look her in the eye, and that required concentration. Consuelo's nostrils flared with irritation.

'We need to get into this house very urgently, Sra Krugman,' said Calderón. 'Do you have a set of keys?'

'I don't, but . . . what's the matter with Rafael and Lucía?'

'Rafael's lying on the kitchen floor not moving,' said Consuelo. 'We don't know about Lucía.'

Madeleine Krugman's short intake of breath revealed a straight line of white teeth broken only by two sharp incisors. For a fraction of a second the invisible plates in the lithosphere of her face seemed to spasm.

'I have the telephone number of his lawyer. He gave it to me in case there was a problem with the house while they were on holiday,' she said. 'I'll have to go back home . . .'

She backed away and then turned to the gate. All eyes fastened on to her rump, which shivered slightly under the white linen of her flared trousers. A thin red belt like a line of blood encircled her waist. She disappeared behind the wall. Male noises, which had been suspended under the bell jar of her glamour, resumed.

'She's very beautiful, isn't she?' said Consuelo Jiménez, annoyed at her own need to draw attention back to herself.

'Yes,' said Falcón, 'and quite different to the beauty we're accustomed to around here. White. Translucent.'

'Yes,' said Consuelo, 'she's *very* white.'

'Do we know where the gardener is?' he asked.

'He's disappeared.'

'What do we know about him?'

'His name is Sergei,' she said. 'He's Russian or Ukrainian. We share him. The Vegas, the Krugmans, Pablo Ortega and me.'

'Pablo Ortega . . . the actor?' asked Calderón.

'Yes, he's just moved here,' she said. 'He's not very happy.'

'That doesn't surprise me.'

'Of course, it was you, wasn't it, Juez Calderón, who put his son in jail for twelve years?' said Consuelo. 'Terrible case that, terrible.

But I didn't mean that when I said . . . although I'm sure that's a contributing factor. There's a problem with his house and he finds the area a bit . . . dead after living in the centre of town.'

'Why did he move?' asked Falcón.

'Nobody in the barrio would talk to him any more.'

'Because of what his son did?' said Falcón. 'I don't remember this case . . .'

'Ortega's son kidnapped an eight-year-old boy,' said Calderón. 'He tied him up and abused him over several days.'

'But didn't kill him?' asked Falcón.

'The boy escaped,' said Calderón.

'In fact it was stranger than that,' said Consuelo. 'Ortega's son released him and then sat on the bed in the soundproofed room he'd prepared for the kidnap and waited for the police to arrive. He was lucky they got to him first.'

'They say he's having a hard time of it in prison,' said Calderón.

'I can't find any pity for people who destroy the innocence of children,' said Consuelo, savagely. 'They deserve everything they get.'

Madeleine Krugman returned with the telephone number. She was now wearing sunglasses as if protecting herself from her own painful whiteness.

'No name?' said Falcón, punching the number into his mobile.

'My husband says his name is Carlos Vázquez.'

'And where's your husband?'

'At home.'

'When did Sr Vega give you this number?'

'Before he went to join Lucía and Mario on holiday last summer.'

'Is Mario the child who slept at your house last night, Sra Jiménez?'

'Yes.'

'Do the Vegas have any family in the Seville area?'

'Lucía's parents.'

Falcón broke away from the group and asked to speak to the lawyer.

'I am Inspector Jefe Javier Falcón,' he said. 'Your client, Sr Rafael Vega, is lying on his kitchen floor incapacitated, possibly dead. We need to get into his house.'

A long silence while Vázquez digested this devastating news.

'I'll be there in ten minutes,' he said. 'I advise you not to try to break in, Inspector Jefe, because it will certainly take you much longer.'

Falcón looked up at the impregnable house. There were two security cameras on the corners. He found two more at the back of the building.

'It seems the Vegas were very security conscious,' he said, rejoining the group. 'Cameras. Bulletproof windows. Solid front door.'

'He's a wealthy man,' said Consuelo.

'And Lucía is . . . well, neurotic to say the least,' said Maddy Krugman.

'Did you know Sr Vega before you moved here, Sra Jiménez?' asked Falcón.

'Of course. He told me that the house I eventually bought was going to come up for sale before it appeared on the market.'

'Were you friends or business associates?'

'Both.'

'What's his business?'

'Construction,' said Madeleine. 'That's why the house is built like a fort.'

'He's a client of mine at the restaurant in El Porvenir,' said Consuelo. 'But I also knew him through Raúl. They were in the same business, as you know. They joined forces once on some developments in Triana years ago.'

'Did you know him just as a neighbour, Sra Krugman?'

'My husband is an architect. He's working on some projects for Sr Vega.'

A large silver Mercedes pulled up outside the house. A short, stocky man in a white long-sleeve shirt, dark tie and grey trousers got out. He introduced himself as Carlos Vázquez and ran his fingers through his prematurely white hair. He handed the keys to Falcón, who opened the door with a single turn. It had not been double locked.

The house seemed bleak and freezing after the heat of the street. Falcón asked Juez Calderón if he and the forensics could take a quick look before the Médico Forense started his work. He took Felipe and Jorge to the edge of the tiled floor of the kitchen. They looked, nodded to each other and backed away. Calderón had to prevent Carlos Vázquez from entering the kitchen and contaminating the crime scene. The lawyer didn't look as if he was used to having a hand placed on his chest by anybody but his wife in bed. The Médico Forense, already gloved, was ushered in. While he checked for a pulse and took the temperature of the body Falcón went outside and asked Consuelo

and Madeleine if they would be available for interviews later. He made a note that Consuelo was still taking care of Vega's son, Mario.

The Médico Forense murmured into his dictaphone as he checked the ears, nose, eyes and mouth of the victim. He took a pair of tweezers and turned over the plastic bottle which lay close to the body's outstretched hand. It was a litre of drain cleaner.

Falcón backed away down the corridor and checked the downstairs rooms. The dining room was ultra modern. The table was a thick single sheet of opaque green glass mounted on two stainless steel arches. It was fully laid for ten people. The chairs were white, the floor was white, the walls and light fixtures were also white. In the chill of the air conditioning the dining experience must have been like the inside of a fridge, without the clutter of butter trays and old food. It did not seem to Falcón that any entertaining had ever taken place in this room.

The living room by comparison was like the inside of a confused person's head. Every surface was covered in bric-a-brac – souvenirs from around the world. Falcón saw holidays in which Vega obsessively filmed with the latest technology while his wife devastated the tourist shops. On the mid section of the sofa was a cordless phone, a box of chocolates with half a tray uneaten and three remotes for satellite, DVD and video. On the floor was a pair of pink fluffy slippers. The lights were off, as was the television.

Each of the stairs up to the bedrooms was made out of a slab of absolute black granite. He checked the glass-smooth surfaces as he moved slowly upwards. Nothing. The floor at the top of the stairs was made of black granite inlaid with diamonds of white marble. He was drawn to the door of the master bedroom. The double bed was occupied. A pillow lay over the face of the occupant whose arms lay outside the light duvet on the bed. There was a slim band of a wristwatch on an arm flung out as if reaching for help. A single visible foot had bright-red toenails. He went to the bedside and checked for a pulse while looking down on the two depressions in the pillow. Lucía Vega was dead, too.

There were three other rooms upstairs, all with bathrooms. One was empty, another had a double bed and the last belonged to Mario. The ceiling of the boy's room was painted with a night sky. An old, one-armed teddy bear lay face up on the bed.

Falcón reported the second dead body to Juez Calderón. The

Médico Forense was kneeling by Sr Vega's side and working at prising his fingers apart.

'There seems to be a note in Sr Vega's right hand,' said Calderón. 'The body's cooled down quickly in the air con and I want him to get it out without tearing it. Any first thoughts, Inspector Jefe?'

'On the face of it, it looks like a suicide pact. He's smothered his wife and then drunk some drain cleaner, although that's a nasty, lingering way to kill yourself.'

'Pact? What makes you think there was an agreement?'

'I'm just saying that's what it looks like,' said Falcón. 'The fact that the little boy was left out of it might indicate some collusion. A mother wouldn't be able to bear the thought of the death of her own child.'

'And a father could?'

'It depends on the pressure. If there's the possibility of financial or moral disgrace he might not want his male child to see that or live with the knowledge of it. He would see killing him as a favour. Men have killed their entire families because they think they have failed them and that it's better nobody survives bearing their name and its shame.'

'But you have your doubts?' said Calderón.

'Suicide, whether it's a pact or not, is rarely a spontaneous thing and there are some spontaneous elements to this crime scene. First, the door was not securely locked. Consuelo Jiménez had called to say that Mario had fallen asleep so they were sure he wasn't going to return, but they didn't double lock the door.'

'The door was shut, that was enough.'

'If you're about to do something unnatural you would put yourself behind locked doors to make absolutely certain there was no possibility of interruption. It's a psychological necessity. Serious suicides normally take full precautions.'

'What else?'

'The way everything has just been left here: the phone, the chocolates, the slippers. There seems to be a lack of premeditation.'

'Well, certainly on her part,' said Calderón.

'That is a point, of course,' said Falcón.

'Drain cleaner?' said Calderón. 'Why would you take drain cleaner?'

'We may find there was something stronger than drain cleaner in the bottle,' said Falcón. 'The reason? Well, he could be meting out

punishment to himself . . . you know, cleaning himself of all his sins. There's also the advantage of it being noiseless and, depending on what else he's taken, irrevocable, too.'

'Well, that does sound premeditated, Inspector Jefe. So there are both spontaneous and planned elements to these deaths.'

'All right . . . if they were lying on the bed together holding hands, dead, with a note pinned to his pyjamas then I'd be happy to treat it as suicide. As it stands, I would prefer to investigate the deaths as murder before deciding.'

'Perhaps the note in his hand will . . .' said Calderón. 'But strange to get dressed for bed before you . . . or is that another psychological necessity? Getting ready for the biggest sleep of all.'

'Let's hope he was the sort who left his security cameras on and the recorders loaded with tapes,' said Falcón, returning to the pragmatic. 'We should have a look in his study.'

They crossed the entrance hall and went down a corridor by the stairs. Vega's study was on the right with a view of the street. There was a leather chair tilted back behind a desk, with a framed poster of this year's bullfights held during the Feria de Abril hanging on the wall.

The desk was a large, empty, light-coloured piece of wood with a laptop and a telephone. Three drawers on castors sat underneath. Behind the door were four black filing cabinets and at the end of the room the recording equipment for the security cameras. There were no LEDs and the plugs were out of the wall sockets. Each recorder had an unused tape inside.

'This doesn't look good,' said Falcón.

The filing cabinets were all locked. He pulled at the mobile set of drawers under the desk. Locked. He went upstairs to the bedroom and found a walk-in closet, with his suits and shirts to the right and her dresses and a vast number of shoes (some worryingly similar) to the left. A tall set of drawers had a wallet, set of keys and some change on top.

One of the keys opened the drawers under the desk. There was nothing unusual in the top two, but as he pulled on the third drawer something at the back butted up against the ream of paper at the front. It was a handgun.

'I haven't seen many of these,' said Falcón. 'This is a Heckler & Koch 9 mm. You own one of these if you're expecting trouble.'

'If you had one of those,' said Calderón, 'would you drink a litre of drain cleaner or blow your brains out?'

'Given the choice . . .' said Falcón.

The lawyer appeared in the doorway, his dark brown eyes set hard in his head.

'You have no right –' he started.

'This is a murder investigation, Sr Vázquez,' said Falcón. 'Sra Vega is upstairs on the bed, she's been suffocated with a pillow. Any idea why your client should have one of these in his study?'

Vázquez blinked at the gun.

'Seville is one of those curious cities where the wealthy and privileged people of Santa Clara are separated from the drug-ridden disadvantaged ones of the Polígono San Pablo by a small barrio, the paper factory and the Calle de Tesalónica. I imagine he had it for his own protection.'

'Like the security cameras he didn't bother to switch on?' said Falcón.

Vázquez looked at the inert recorders. His mobile went off playing the first few bars of Carmen. The lawmen grinned at each other. Vázquez went down the hall. Calderón closed the door and Falcón knew what he'd suspected as he'd shaken the Juez's hand that morning – there was news and it was relevant to him.

'I wanted you to hear this from me,' said Calderón, 'and not the rumour machine in the Jefatura or the Edificio de los Juzgados.'

Falcón nodded, his larynx suddenly paralysed.

'Inés and I are getting married at the end of the summer,' said Calderón.

He'd known this was coming but the news still rooted him to the floor. It seemed like minutes before his feet, moving at the pace of a diver's on the ocean floor, brought him close enough to shake Calderón's hand. He thought about gripping the judge's shoulder in comradely fashion but the bitterness of his disappointment filled his mouth with the taint of a bad olive.

'Congratulations, Esteban,' he said.

'We told our families last night,' said Calderón. 'You're the first outsider to know.'

'You'll make each other very happy,' said Falcón. 'I know.'

They nodded to each other and disengaged.

'I'll get back to the Médico Forense,' said the judge and left the room.

Falcón went to the window, took out his mobile and thumbed up Alicia Aguado's number from the address book. She was the clinical psychologist he'd been seeing for more than a year. His thumb stroked the call button and a flash of anger helped him to resist pressing it. This could wait until their regular weekly appointment the following evening. They'd covered his ex-wife Inés a million times over and she would just chastise him again for not moving on.

Javier and Inés had settled their differences. It had been a part of the rebuilding process after the Francisco Falcón scandal had broken fifteen months ago. Francisco was the world-famous artist whom Javier had always believed to be his father, but who had been revealed as a fraud, a murderer and not his real father after all. Inés had forgiven Javier even before they'd arranged to meet some months after the media frenzy. It had been his coldness, captured by her terrible rhyming mantra, *Tú no tienes corazón*, *Javier Falcón.* 'You have no heart, Javier Falcón', that had finished their short marriage. Given his family history it was now clear to her why he should have been deficient in this fundamental human way. Over the last few months of his therapy thoughts of her had subsided, but whenever her name came up there was an unmistakable leap in his stomach. Her terrible accusation still mangled his mind and, in forgiving him she'd become, in his unstable state, someone to whom he had to prove himself.

And now this. Still, Inés had been seeing the judge for nearly a year and a half. They were the new golden couple not just of the Seville legal system, but of Seville society as well. Their marriage was an inevitability, which didn't made the news any easier to bear.

Vázquez appeared on his shoulder in the reflection of the glass. Falcón switched back into professional mode.

'How surprised are you to find your client dead under these strange circumstances, Sr Vázquez?' he asked.

'Very,' he said.

'Where's the licence for his gun, by the way?'

'That's his private affair. This is his house. I'm only his lawyer.'

'But he entrusted you with the keys to his home.'

'He has no family here. When they went away for the summer they often took Lucía's parents, as well. There is someone in my office all the time. It seemed . . .'

'What about the Americans next door?'

'They've been here barely a year,' said Vázquez. 'He rents that house to them. The husband works for him as an architect. He didn't like people to get too involved in his life. He gave them my telephone number in case of emergencies.'

'Is Vega Construcciones his only company?'

'Let's say he's in the property business. He builds and rents out apartments and offices. He constructs industrial property to order. He buys and sells land. He has a number of estate agencies.'

Falcón sat on the edge of the desk, his foot swinging.

'This gun, Sr Vázquez, is not for discouraging burglars. It's a gun for stopping a man dead. Even if you clipped a man on the shoulder with a 9 mm bullet from a Heckler & Koch you'd probably kill him.'

'If you were a rich man who wanted to protect his family and home, would you go out and buy a toy or a serious piece of weaponry?'

'So, as far as you know, Sr Vega is not involved in anything criminal or borderline illegal.'

'Not that I know of.'

'And you can think of no reason why anybody would want to kill him?'

'Look, Inspector Jefe, I'm involved with the legal aspects of my clients' businesses. I rarely get involved in their personal lives unless it has an impact on their business. I know about his company. If he was doing anything else then he was not employing me as his lawyer. If he was having an affair with another man's wife, which I doubt, I wouldn't have known about it.'

'So what is your reading of this crime scene, Sr Vázquez? Sra Vega upstairs, suffocated by a pillow. Sr Vega downstairs, dead with a litre of drain cleaner by his side. While their son, Mario, is in the hands of a neighbour for the night.'

Silence. The brown eyes steadied on Falcón's chest.

'It looks like suicide.'

'At least one of those deaths has to be a murder.'

'It looks like Rafael killed his wife and then himself.'

'Did you ever see any evidence of that level of instability in your late client?'

'How's anybody supposed to know what goes on inside a man's head?'

'So, he wasn't looking at business failure or financial ruin?'

'You'd have to speak to the accountant about that, although the

accountant was not the finance director. His knowledge would probably be confined.'

'Who was the finance director?'

'Rafael kept things close to his chest.'

Falcón gave him his notebook. Vázquez wrote down the accountant's name, Francisco Dourado, and his details.

'Is there any scandal brewing that you know of, involving Sr Vega or his company?' asked Falcón.

'*Now* I know you,' said Sr Vázquez, smiling for the first time with astonishingly perfect teeth. 'Falcón. I didn't make the connection before. Well . . . *you're* still here, Inspector Jefe, and my client hasn't gone though anything like you did.'

'But *I* didn't commit any crime, Sr Vázquez. I wasn't facing moral ruin or personal shame.'

'Shame,' said the lawyer. 'Do you think shame still has that sort of power in our modern world?'

'It depends on the society in which you have built your life. How important its opinion is to you,' said Falcón. 'By the way, do you hold Sr Vega's will?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Who is the next of kin?'

'As I said, he has no family.'

'And his wife?'

'She has a sister in Madrid. Her parents live here in Seville.'

'We'll need someone to identify the bodies.'

Pérez appeared in the doorway.

'They've pulled the note out of Sr Vega's hand,' he said.

They went to the kitchen, squeezing past the forensics who were crowding the corridor with their cases, waiting to get on to the crime scene.

The note was already in a plastic evidence bag. Calderón handed it over, eyebrows raised. Falcón and Vázquez frowned as they read it, and not just because its ten words were written in English.

'. . . the thin air you breathe from 9/11 until the end . . .'