

CHAPTER 3

Detective Inspector Leon Prado scrutinised the name plaque on the wall beside his boss's office entrance, 'Jefe Superior, Provincia de Málaga: Francisco Gonzalez Ruiz'. With some trepidation, he rapped on the door.

"Enter," said a stern voice in Spanish.

Prado was tall, well-built, and in his early fifties. He had a thick head of silver hair and a round, friendly face. He strode purposefully into the Málaga Police Chief's spacious domain. Usually, Prado made a pithy remark about how the other half lived as he headed for the visitor chair in front of the grand mahogany desk. He said nothing; today wasn't the moment for joviality.

"Sit down," said the chief, tapping on his laptop.

Gonzalez was short, slight, and in his early forties. His thin black hair was swept straight back from his forehead. Chiselled features, a Roman nose, and cold obsidian eyes lent him an imposing disposition.

Prado was familiar with his superior officer's mind games to intimidate subordinates and gain the upper hand. They usually didn't worry him, but as he watched his boss finish whatever vital task he was doing, his pulse raced, and his stomach churned. He knew what was coming.

With a final flourish, the boss hit the Enter key and peered directly into Prado's brown eyes. Prado tried not to flinch; he was accustomed to hiding his true feelings from this man, and somehow he returned the piercing gaze with equanimity.

"Inspector Prado," said Gonzalez, picking up a beige folder and scanning its contents. "During the last six months, nine girls have been abducted, and it's been a fortnight since you screwed up the kidnapping case. Not one girl has been found, and the few leads you have stumbled on yielded nothing. Furthermore, since the kidnapping, you've been off sick for over sixty per cent of the time, and when you do bother to turn up, fail to contribute anything worthwhile to our heavy workload. What do you have to say?"

"Sir, it has been thirteen days since Angelika was taken," said Prado in clipped tones. "In all my years serving this department, I've never encountered such an elusive perpetrator. I needed time away from the daily clutter to think this through."

The boss continued to glare at Prado.

Prado was not at all surprised by his senior officer's rant. He'd expected it days ago. The long-awaited call, though, only came yesterday. The chief's administrative assistant politely requested Prado attend what she'd called an 'appraisal'. However, Prado had already heard rumours flying around the office. He was about to be sacked from his job heading up the Málaga Serious Crime Squad. He even knew who his successor was.

"Have your mental meanderings concluded?" asked Gonzalez. "Anything which might assist your colleagues in finding these girls?"

"Nothing concrete, but it would help to publicise names and photos of the girls," said Prado. "However, you seem more interested in protecting visitor numbers than solving crimes."

"This area survives on Tourism; we dare not frighten potential customers away with what are only suspicions."

"Nine missing girls are a fact, Sir."

"Nothing links any of them. They could be separate incidents."

"There are several connections, Sir. They are of different nationalities, under twenty, beautiful, and have advanced knowledge of English."

"What have you concluded?"

"Their disappearances are not random acts of madness. Each girl has been thoroughly researched. The abductors knew the best time and place to take them without leaving any trace."

"Nothing on CCTV?"

"They avoided all cameras, and there are no witnesses. It has been extremely well-planned and coordinated. I'm convinced one person or group is responsible?"

"Sounds plausible, but why would they want so many?"

"Probably not for their embroidery skills?"

"Oh. I see," said Gonzalez. "To open a brothel?"

"We would hear about that. No, it will be for something off the radar. A slavery ring, perhaps, or selling them to wealthy overseas buyers. I don't think they are for the abductor's use."

"And your reasoning is?"

"No bodies, Sir. These girls have been taken for a purpose that requires them to stay alive and probably in good health. If the perpetrators were rapists, they would have been used and disposed of. We'd have found at least some of their remains by now."

"Anything else you wish to add?" said Gonzalez, glancing at Prado's file. "No grovelling or lame excuse for your time off work?"

"The doctor's report is in the file, Sir."

"Doctor's report, Prado? At this level, we don't take notice of medical opinion. Depression, it says. We're all fucking depressed, but it doesn't stop us from getting up in the morning and doing our bit for the taxpayer. You're a senior policeman; you should be immune to illness. Next, you'll be expecting to enjoy the damn job."

"Something less demanding might improve my health and effectiveness, Sir."

"Less demanding, he says. Such as what, school-crossing controller?"

"Your job looks just about perfect, Sir."

Gonzalez looked taken aback, then smiled and chuckled, his grim face softening at his elder colleague's insolence. "You're past caring, aren't you, Prado?"

"After thirty-two years, the thrill of the chase and the solving of the crime have lost their initial attraction. With the delays in bringing perpetrators to court and the reluctance of judges to punish, I'm wondering why we bother with a police force."

"That's a poor indictment on our country's legal system."

"You asked."

"Is that all?"

"Are you sure you want to hear?"

"I'm interested in your perceptions."

"Even the crooks have changed. They used to be intelligent and creative, but were challenging to hunt down. Nowadays, they are ghosts preying on gullible victims hiding behind computer screens based out of our jurisdiction. The villains we catch locally are impoverished and desperate for a square meal. They need help rather than punishment. The remainder are smugglers pushing drugs or money launderers hiding behind offshore companies deep in our luxury housing urbanisations. Technology has replaced dogged detection, and even though candidates are university-educated, the quality of colleagues has slipped. Police work was a gritty and exciting career out in the field. Now, it's a tedious plod behind a desktop. Sorry, Sir, but I'm too long in the tooth and no longer appropriate for this modern world of detection. Please fire me or give me something interesting."

"I could let you go now. It's within my power."

"It would hammer my pension."

"Why would I care? Private investigating or security guard work pays better than the police. Your pension pot would thrive, and the reduced costs would look good on my statistics."

"Sir, you may be younger than me and have the support of politicians, but you aren't insensitive. We've worked together for the last fifteen years, and the many difficult cases I solved have earned you brownie points with your superiors. Firing me would make it hard to live with your conscience."

Wouldn't it, Sir?"

The chief looked long and hard at Prado, who returned his gaze, unflinching.

The chief shook his head. Despite Prado's words hitting home, he'd made up his mind. He had an agenda to keep.

"I never thought I would have to say these words to you, Inspector Prado. You were the bedrock of my team and earmarked for greater things. I can tolerate the lack of progress with the missing girls, but the way you managed Angelika's ransom delivery was a disaster, and your performance since has been pathetic. Regretfully, I must confirm that your employment as head of the Serious Crime Squad has been terminated on the last day of April. DI Conejo will take over."

"Thank you, Sir," Prado said, standing up.

"Sit down, Leon. I haven't finished with you yet."

Prado slumped back down in the chair, his worst nightmare playing out before him. The prospect of being a security guard terrified him.

El jefe picked up another file on the far corner of his desk and tossed it to Prado.

Prado turned it around and looked at the words typed on the front label— 'New role— responsibility for crimes involving foreigners throughout Andalusia.' He opened the file and speed-read the single printed sheet inside. The title described the job perfectly. He looked up and found the chief regarding him with a kindly expression. "It's tailor-made for you, Leon."

"Except for one minor thing, Fran."

"You don't speak foreign languages."

"Correct."

"You also won't have any staff or budget, but you may liaise with appropriate departments as needed."

"So, it's a political appointment?"

"The marketing boys at the tourist office dreamed it up in response to the mayor's concerns about the increase in crime by foreigners against foreigners. They reckon it will enhance our focus on safer tourism. We're just a little ahead of ourselves for a change."

"About nineteen years, Sir."

"Ha. We managerial types prefer to call it strategic planning. It has the potential to grow into a challenging position. Are you aware that at any point in time, if we include residents and tourists, there are more foreigners in Andalusia than natives? While the total number of cases is still low, it's the only growth area in criminality. The good news is the incidents are more complex than the tedious local crooks you referred to, which should satisfy your hankering for interesting things to do. For the moment, it fits your criteria of not demanding, but I don't know for how long."

"I like the concept, but how can I do my job when we don't have multi-lingual officers?"

"I suggest you find volunteer translators. Plenty of linguists among the foreigners will be happy to assist. You'll find them in medical centres, hospitals, or language schools. English will be the most important, followed by German, French, Russian, and Moroccan Arabic. I wouldn't bother with Armenian or Swahili; they all speak English. You'll report to me directly. Dismissed."

"Thank you, Sir," said Prado, standing up. "When do I start?"

"First of May."

"That was last week."

"I had every confidence."

"I won't disappoint you."

"I know, and I've moved your office up to this floor. It will look like a promotion."

"Not necessary, but thanks again, Fran."

"It's for my benefit," said Gonzalez. "We will be breaking new ground, and I need you close to brief me on what's happening."

"Thank you, Sir," said Prado, picking up his new job file and heading for the door.

"One more thing," said Gonzalez. "What with the illegal migrant traffic through Italy and Greece being curtailed by the European Union, they've resumed entering Spain via Morocco. I'm informed there is a growing network of crooks exploiting them. See what you can do to close them down."

"That sounds more like my work, but I don't want to cross swords with the Guardia Civil?"

"You won't. They need help, so I volunteered your services."

"Thank you, Sir," said Prado, opening the door. "What about the missing girls?"

"Your replacement has already taken over the investigation."

"Conejo is a good choice, and he deserves the promotion."

"That's big of you, considering you two are usually at loggerheads."

"His methods are different."

"But he gets results."

"Often at the expense of colleague's welfare. The man's a misogynist, and you've put him in charge of a massive case finding nine or more missing women?"

"This is a police station, not a social club. Our job is to catch criminals and send them to prison, not invite them for coffee."

"Then why do so many of his officers demand a transfer?"

"That is no longer your concern. I'm convinced a new face might spot things you missed. Let's see what he makes of it. If he wants your opinion, he'll ask. Until then, stay away from the case and concentrate on your new cushy, less demanding job."

"Yes, Sir," said Prado, closing the door behind him.

Gonzalez smiled, nodded and called a WhatsApp contact on his mobile phone. A male voice answered immediately and asked, "How did he react?"

"As expected," said Gonzalez. "He's relieved to be gainfully employed. I'll feed him his first case shortly."

"He suspects nothing?"

"Oblivious."

"Excellent."

Gonzalez ended the call with an expression of satisfaction.

Isabel, the chief's administrative assistant, was waiting for Prado outside. She was a well-rounded but stylishly dressed woman in her late thirties with dyed, blond-highlighted hair. She had an uncanny knack for being in the right place at the right time.

She escorted him down to the far end of the corridor, opened the last door, and waved him in.

"If I can help in any way, Leon, just call me," said Isabel, patting him on the shoulder as he walked through the door into his new domain. "It's good to have you back. We missed your terrible jokes."

"Thanks, Isabel."

Prado looked around.

A new phone and laptop sat atop the spacious but cheap pinewood desk. He opened a drawer and checked the manufacturer's label. As he thought, Swedish, thankfully, somebody else had unravelled how to assemble it. He checked out his new toys: the latest models, even a protective case for the phone. Nice touch, thought Prado. He tended to throw phones at stupid people. Isabel had already loaded both with his customary password, files, contacts, and favourite websites. Málaga Football Club was in pole position. She's terrific, he thought.

Prado hung his jacket over the back of his chair, sat in it and swung from side to side. It was surprisingly comfortable, so he prepared himself for the first crucial task in his new career. He leaned back, placed his feet on the desk, closed his eyes, breathed a sigh of contentment and let his mind wander.

Why hadn't I settled for a less challenging career? What made me push myself hard, and who had

I been trying to impress? My parents, wife, the pretty girl in reception, colleagues, the world, or perhaps it was to assuage my thirst for achievement? It certainly wasn't for money. Why does this inner voice constantly nag me to do better? Can it never be satisfied? If I had chosen to ignore it, perhaps I would still live happily with my wife and could see more of my boys. Instead, all it has brought me is loneliness.

On the other hand, was I deluding myself? Maybe I needed a mission to stop me from going insane with boredom. Perhaps a loving relationship, gardening and parenting weren't enough for me. I needed a sense of fulfilment, a career worth having. Yet, what has it brought me? I've been fired and pushed sideways.

Not everyone can be the boss. Most of us are like me, stuck halfway up the ladder, disillusioned and bitter.

His eyes blinked open at this revelation.

"Am I bitter?" he said aloud.

He thought for a while, rubbing his earlobe.

"No, but disappointed. At least I am still gainfully employed. If this less demanding job works out, maybe I can repair the damage to my marriage.

And with that glimmer of hope, Prado settled back for the first crucial task of his new appointment.

A siesta.

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