

Child's Play

CHILD'S PLAY

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Child's Play

Part One

Carmen O’Inns

“What a beautiful building,” said Carmen O’Inns.

“What’s more, it’s a school with an excellent reputation,” added Isaac Tonñu. “So prestigious nobody would suspect anything could have happened here.”

The iron gates slid silently open. As Isaac pulled into the drive, the taxi wheels seemed to make each pebble on the gravel path crunch. The drive was circular, with the school on the far side, so you approached the building from one side and left from the other, after passing the rhododendron bushes, then a well-tended rose bed, and finally the green-framed sash windows of St Severin College.

“What do we know about the victim?”

Carmen O’Inns consulted her black notebook. Name: Oscar Beil. Age: 11 years. Time last seen alive: in the gym class at 10.30 a.m. Cause of death: apparently by drowning in the school swimming pool – yet what were those marks, those marks...

“What marks, O’Inns?”

“It’s still too soon to say exactly. But, although we haven’t seen the results of the forensic report, according to the boy’s father there was a crescent-shaped indentation on his left temple.”

“Anything suspicious about his death?”

Carmen O’Inns stretched her legs. She always travelled in the front passenger seat rather than in the back, so that she could comfortably extend the full ninety-two centimetres of her limbs in their Woford tights.

“Who found the body?” asked Isaac Tonñu, but Carmen O’Inns didn’t reply to this question either. She had taken her powder compact out of her handbag and was conducting the inspection

that was a feature of every case she worked on: she needed to confirm she was looking as attractive as possible. First she examined her jet-black fringe, satisfying herself that it was neither too long nor too short; too thick nor too thin; that it set off her features to perfection, with its combination of indigenous traits and the jade-green eyes of her Irish ancestors. Then she checked her lips: a skilful blend of a natural outline enhanced by a touch of silicone, that made her look a lot younger than the thirty-seven years that featured on her identity card. The rest of her looks only added to her charms: she had the posture of a ballerina, and strong thighs slender enough to enhance her flat stomach, as she shifted in her seat.

When asked where she came from, Carmen O’Inns always gave the same reply: “From the land of rum, with a few extra drops of whiskey.” “Whiskey” and not “whisky” she would add with a knowing wink. “No Scotch mists about me. In other words, I’m half from the Caribbean and half from the land of Erin.”

She also liked to point out that she was a psychoanalyst rather than a psychiatrist or a psychologist, and that she believed in world peace, the forces of nature and man’s innate goodness, but that for some reason she still couldn’t fathom, she always found herself up to her neck in deep water. Like now, for example.

“Was it the boy’s parents who came to you?”

“It was the boy’s father,” O’Inns corrected him. “Oscar Beil didn’t have a mother, and he was an only child.”

“It’s such a dreadful tragedy! He was so young. And then, those marks on his temple...” Tonñu shuddered as he drew up in front of the main school building.

Isaac Tonñu was not his real name. He was born Isaac Newton, but when he arrived in Spain from his native Belize, he had decided to reverse the two syllables of his surname: Tonnew or, better in Spanish, Tonñu. It sounded less foreign and much more suited to his height and his colour: one metre,

eighty-nine centimetres of sleek black male. It also led to fewer jokes, although he would never have let anyone make fun of him. Whether it was Isaac Newton or Isaac Tonñu, he knew how to look after himself.

When they pulled up outside the school entrance, O’Inns didn’t move, but waited for Isaac to walk round the taxi and open the door for her. They had been working together for more than three years now and kept faithfully to their set rituals. They had faced danger together many times, as during *The Mysterious Balanchine Affair* and in the case known as *Death Dances to a Latin Beat*.

“Thank you, Isaac,” said Carmen O’Inns, almost whispering into his ear as she glided out of the car. Both of them could feel the electric current flash between their bodies. “Not now,” O’Inns told herself, “now’s not the right moment.” But her rebellious side couldn’t stop two irresistible images from surfacing in her mind: first, the inky black of his skin submerged in her pale, Irish flesh; then the faint fragrance of musk that enveloped their nights together as they lay naked on the terrace of his new penthouse overlooking the Royal Palace, the two of them alone in the darkness, in the vast, slumbering city. “Why do we always think of sex when death is in the air?” mused Carmen. “Why is death so orgasmic?” She was about to answer her own question when...

“When... When what? When what, for God’s sake?” Luisa asked herself, pausing at the keyboard and reading through the paragraph she had just written. “Can death be orgasmic?” That’s what she’d written. And how about someone like Isaac Tonñu – or Newton? Could he be a taxi driver and be living in a penthouse? That was before she started getting into the other inconsistencies in what she’d just written, such as how unlikely it was for someone, however intrepid a detective they might be, to string together so many ideas in the short distance

between the iron gates and the school entrance. And what about that school? Wherever in Spain would you find a school (a boarding school, least of all a co-educational one, and called St Severin to boot) so similar to du Maurier's Manderley, with a rhododendron drive and all the rest of it? Do rhododendrons actually grow in Spain? How do you spell them anyway? Rhodendros? Rhodedendrons?

Luisa put her hand over her mouth. It was a habit of hers, as if this was the only way to rein in her rampant imagination, the imagination which had created Carmen O'Inns in the first place. It's said the characters that writers create are their alter egos, the summary of all they might wish to be but aren't, and yet that was clearly not the case here. Perhaps thirteen years earlier, when Luisa Dávila, moderately successful as a children's author and with an even more muted track record in serious literature, had decided to create this sexy and inquisitive busybody of a psychoanalyst, the hypothesis might have held true. That is why she made Carmen several years younger than she was; gave her a physique similar to her own, but even more appealing, with green eyes she didn't possess; and invented an exotic background for her along with an equally evocative name.

Whereas she was called Luisa, came originally from the River Plate region and was Spanish by adoption, her character rejoiced in a name which in any language (with the possible exception of Spanish, in which she had become a world-famous author) signified beauty and a sense of adventure: Carmen. She had also been prophetic in selecting her nationality, because long before ethnic fashions came in, and before Latin music conquered the planet with its merengues and salsas, she had dreamt up the figure of Carmen O'Inns, who was Latin American like her, but Cuban and slinky. Isaac Newton had been introduced as a minor character in earlier novels, but Luisa now thought he could move on to play a major role. The fact is that in each new book in the series featuring Carmen O'Inns (this was

the sixth), her heroine found herself torn between two lovers. One was generally sensible and conventional. The other was difficult, a dangerous rogue... Of course, Carmen didn't end up with either (whoever heard of James Bond in a couple?) but the love scenes recurred throughout her escapades, providing an agreeable counterpoint to the investigations. On this occasion, for example, Luisa suspected that Carmen O'Inns would find herself either in the arms of Newton or in those of the murdered boy's father. So far this was no more than conjecture, because one of the most enjoyable aspects of being a writer – in fact, the only one – was to be the first and most surprised reader of what she had written. This of course was a cliché, as she never tired of telling people whenever she was asked the classic question: “Tell us, Señora Dávila, do you know beforehand what is going to happen in your novels, or do your characters grow and escape from your control?” It might sound like a cliché to say she did not know what was going to happen twenty pages further on, but it was the simple truth. Though perhaps not the whole truth. To be more precise, Luisa Dávila was constantly surprised by what her characters got up to: not because they took on a life of their own (that was such nonsense), nor because she wrote following the dictates of some mysterious muse or other, as some of her colleagues affirmed, but because, as in real life, things happen, and as a result you have to improvise as best you can. It was the same with her creations: they reacted to whatever happened, and so the plot developed. Afterwards, if something did not fit, or if a character turned out not to be sufficiently interesting, she backtracked, killed off the unfortunate misfit, and then made sure she tied up all the loose ends. Nothing simpler.

The difficulties lay elsewhere. What was hardest of all was to make her writing seem true to life, to achieve the “suspension of disbelief” or, put another way, to tell a story that was accepted as real, however unlikely. That was it exactly: getting people to suspend disbelief and to join in the game was what most

worried Luisa Dávila, and at the moment it was causing her considerable anguish. She wondered how likely it was that in Spain – a country where private detectives did little more than spy on adulterous spouses, where anyone in their profession met with so many legal restrictions on obtaining a gun permit, not to mention trying to check fingerprints on a database, or the impossibility of getting hold of DNA samples – a young Caribbean-looking woman, a psychoanalyst by profession, would be able to solve every perplexing variety of murder, assisted only by her impressive physique and – as Hercule Poirot might have said – her “little grey cells”? For years now, other European thriller writers had chosen to create detectives better suited to their times. They made them either members of the State security forces, former cops or agents who knew how to bug phones, use police labs, and were able to rely on all that technology can offer in the service of the law. Amateur detectives, with their magnifying glasses and bloodhound instincts, in the old-fashioned style of a Conan Doyle or Chesterton, were as incongruous nowadays as medieval knights embarking on their holy mission to right wrongs.

However, in spite of the myriad doubts which assailed her whenever she began a new novel, the fact was that until now Luisa Dávila had succeeded in *getting away with murder*, as a critic on the *New York Times* enthused, or – what amounted to the same thing – she had survived where so many other writers failed, and made her character’s adventures believable, despite the fact that she was an extravagant mixture of Merimée’s cigarette girl and Miss Marple.

So here we have Luisa Dávila, recently turned fifty-two, embarking on a new novel at the same time as she was moving into a new apartment in an old building close to the Prado Museum overlooking the Retiro Park. It had cost her a small fortune, but no matter: she finally had money, respectability and her independence. What’s more she had won them all by

herself, without any help from parents, husbands or lovers. The rest of her life could be easily summed up. She had arrived in Spain in the mid-1960s thanks to her father’s job: he had been his country’s consul in Madrid until 1969. Then, having lived in various other countries for more than a decade, Luisa had returned to the city of her adolescence. Behind her were two distant marriages of which the first (to a French author with an imposing name, one of those sunk by the events of May 1968) had left her with the convenient aura of being a left-wing writer; and the second, even briefer (this time to a crackpot Chilean, as handsome as he was sociable, whom she put down to her mid-life crisis), had left her with a taste for the good life, in sharp contrast to her naturally introverted character. That was all she’d inherited from her husbands, because even her daughter Elba, born when she was on the verge of turning forty, didn’t belong to either of them, but was the consequence of another set of circumstances to which Luisa referred as little as possible. Why should she have to? One of the many advantages of being a woman at the dawn of the twenty-first century – words she had put into the mouth of Carmen O’Inns on numerous occasions and in the widest variety of situations – was that “We no longer have to explain or justify anything we do from the navel down”. This, which might sound provocative when uttered by Carmen’s Caribbean lips, remained just as true of the eminently sensible, conventional life led by Luisa Dávila.

Elba

It took Elba at least two days to thoroughly investigate the new apartment. Not because it was too big (and it was big, big and bare, according to her), but because it appeared so plain, with no nooks and crannies where she could find what she was looking for, a secret refuge like the one she had enjoyed in her previous home. A place where she could hide away, perhaps with a friend, in this new, cold apartment. There was no trace of animals either. Not so much as a fly. The only exception was the caretaker's cat, but she wasn't allowed to bring him into her flat, because her mother didn't like cats. According to Elba, she was afraid of them.

Right from the outset, what she liked best was the entrance hall, with its two facing mirrors, one large, the other much smaller. The second one appealed to her because of the way it reflected and cast shadows in the first. Elba was a little frightened by the larger mirror's frame, which was apparently made of twisted, ash-white wood. It reminded her of dead tree trunks washed up by the sea, like drowned corpses. By contrast, the mirror glass shone with a blue tinge, and made her look almost pretty. If she turned her head to one side, narrowing her eyes and tilting her face slightly to the left, she almost looked like a princess. Of course, Elba was too grown-up now to believe in such things, only silly little girls thought they were princesses, but she had her own reasons, or at least had them until quite recently, for wondering about her past. Not now though. Now, although the mirror reflected her in a frail, blue-tinged silhouette, Elba knew she wasn't a princess, because she'd asked Luisa and Luisa had explained it very clearly to her: "Sweetheart, it's very common

for adopted children to think their biological parents are royalty or film stars or celebrities, but I can guarantee it never turns out that way. You only have one mother, and that's me. And remember, I love you very, very much."

Luisa had raised her voice when she mentioned the word *adopted* and again when she said *biological*, just like a teacher explaining something essential for the pupils to understand, however ugly or unpleasant it might be. It was the same tone a doctor might employ when he said the word *vaccination* or a cook, *spinach*. Elba knew it well. In her view there were two kinds of grown-up: those who used pretty expressions to describe horrible things, calling spinach "Popeye's lunch" and vaccinations "fairy nips", and those who preferred ugly words to describe ugly things, and raised their voices as if to say: "See? I don't regard you as a silly child any longer, so I'll tell you in plain language."

Elba couldn't remember the first time her mother had told her she was adopted. Perhaps she had been so small that she still hadn't worked out how adults use ugly words, and yet she clearly recalled the day when Luisa had insisted she wasn't a princess. That had been when she decided to call her Luisa rather than mum or mummy.

"How long are you going to keep this stupid game going?" her mother asked Elba, the third day she heard herself addressed by her Christian name. Elba simply shrugged and scarcely glanced up from the pressing task of feeding her dolls. "They also call me Elba now," was her only explanation, because she didn't know how to make Luisa understand that while she appreciated her refusal to speak to her like a silly little girl any more, she was also capable of telling the plain truth.

The frame of the big mirror Luisa had hung in the hall might have frightened Elba a little, but she soon learnt to stand on tiptoe to see herself in the glass. It was true: there was no way she could be a princess: she had short, straight black hair, and

eyes to match. "Black as coals", as the geography teacher at her previous school had often said. Whenever she did, Elba would peer round the classroom, desperately searching for someone else who looked like her. But the nearest she found to her own looks was on a wall chart near the window showing "Peoples of the World". This included a photo of a little Laplander (she had just learnt the word in lessons and liked it a lot) who lived in Finland in a log cabin and travelled everywhere by sleigh. For some time, Elba thought she must be from the icy homeland of the Lapps, and made great efforts to read all about them, to discover what they ate and what their customs were. Elba wasn't the only adopted girl in her class. Irina, for example, wasn't sure who her real parents were either, but she at least did know she'd been born in Russia, and didn't have to spend all her time trying to discover her roots, searching on the Internet or the school's wall charts.

"Come on, Elba," her mother said to her one day, "why don't you stop thinking about all that stuff? I couldn't tell you where your family is from even if I wanted to. Adoption laws are like that, they prevent us knowing who the original parents were, my love." "What if it turns out I come from another country, Luisa? Couldn't I at least learn where I'm from?" But her mother shook her head: "All I can tell you is that you were born in Madrid, not in Russia or Ecuador, and certainly not in Finland. But that doesn't mean a thing. Your biological father could be Spanish, but might just as well not be."

For a long while, before they moved and Elba discovered the hall mirror, she had imagined herself as being many different nationalities. It was around this time that she appeared one day with a hideous doll under her arm, which she had bought with her own money in a pound shop. It had dark, mousey hair that matched its clothes. Elba swore it looked just like her. "Isn't this the prettiest dress you've ever seen?" she asked, carefully smoothing down the doll's skirts. The dress was made of a