

THE
PÈRE-LACHAISE
MYSTERY

CLAUDE IZNER

Translated by Lorenza Garcia and Isabel Reid

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PROLOGUE

Cauca province, Columbia.

November 1889

They had finally reached Las Juntas after a difficult descent through forests dripping with humidity. A bearded man led the way. Behind him were two Indian bearers, carrying a fourth man in a hammock slung between two poles that rested on their shoulders. They were about half a mile outside the village on a stony path bordered with flowering lavender. The twenty or so shacks surrounded by meagre plantations of maize and tobacco stood out against the charred foothills of the Andes Cordillera. Down below, the restless waters of the river Dagua rolled towards the Pacific Ocean.

The path they had been following ended in front of the grandly named Hacienda del Dagua, an abandoned house dating back to the time when Las Juntas had been a lively centre of commerce between Cali and Buenaventura. All that remained of it now was rubble overgrown with weeds. Only one bedroom, its roof caved in, was still standing.

The bearers placed the improvised stretcher on some straw-filled crates and left hurriedly, muttering the words, '*Duendes, duendes.*' The bearded man pulled a face. Under normal circumstances a haunted house would have aroused his curiosity, but for three days now nothing had gone as planned, and he felt a growing indifference to the world around him. He watched the Indians leave, removed his haversack and looked

around the room.

A mass of cobwebs hung like a thick veil over a jumble of broken carriage wheels, metal cogs, the remains of a telegraph machine and dozens of empty bottles. The man picked up a yellow, worm-eaten volume – the pages almost turned to dust: *Stances à la Malibran* by Alfred de Musset. He laughed to himself. Musset, here of all places! How absurd! He dropped the book and bent over the body lying across the straw-filled crates. The dying man was about the same height as him, but of heavier build. His unbuttoned shirt revealed his chest bathed in sweat, each intake of breath rattling as though it were his last. Red froth bubbled from his mouth. The bullet had hit him in the back, piercing his lung. He's not long for this world, thought the bearded man, surprised at how detached he felt.

He opened the haversack and spread its contents on the compacted earth: a wallet, a couple of cartridges, some underclothes, a knife, some ordnance survey maps. An envelope was sticking out of the wallet, addressed to 'M. Armand de Valois, Geologist with the Inter-Oceanic Company, c/o Señora Caicedo, Hotel Rosalie, Cali, Colombia'. He opened the letter and read it out in a low voice:

29th July 1889

My dearest Armand,

How are you, my duck? Your letter was waiting for me yesterday on my return from Paris. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay at Houlgate. My friend Adalberte de Brix (President Brix's widow, you remember) was renting a villa close to mine. We went on a few pleasant walks together and played lawn tennis,

badminton and croquet and met some charming people – in particular the well-known English spiritualist M. Numa Winner. Just imagine, he predicted both M. de Lesseps's bankruptcy and the cessation of work on the canal as far back as two years ago! I visited him at his house several times in the company of Adalberte. Since her son Alberic was taken in his prime, she has developed a boundless passion for séances and has consulted several mediums, with no real success, until she encountered M. Numa Winner. And now, my darling, can you imagine, she has spoken to young Alberic through him. I should never have believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes. It was astonishing! Young Alberic implored his mother to stop mourning his departure and said that he was happy where he was, and cried out 'Free! Free at last!' What a comfort, don't you agree? I asked M. Numa some questions of my own, and he assured me that your troubles will soon be over and that you will enjoy a well-earned rest. You see, my duck, your little wife is thinking of you. Did I tell you that your bookseller M. Legris, from Rue des Saints-Pères, was involved in a series of sordid murders at the Universal Exposition? Raphaëlle de Gouveline told me that he was seen about with a Russian émigrée, a loose woman who poses nude as an artist's model. Nothing would surprise me about that man; he doesn't wear a top hat and has a Chinese servant. I shall end here as I have a fitting with Mme Maud, on Rue du Louvre. It's a wonderful dress; the cut is quite . . . But hush, now, it's going to be a surprise. Your little wife wishes to look pretty for your return. Write to me soon. I send you a thousand heliotrope-scented kisses.

Your Odette

The sky was clouding over. The man put the letter back in the envelope and replaced it in the wallet, which he slipped into the

dying man's pocket. As he did so, something darted through the air above him, then disappeared. He lit a candle and moved it about slowly. He could see nothing. But he had recognised the flight of a vampire bat – an animal that sucked the blood from people's toes as they slept. In a fit of disgust, he seized a bottle and hurled it. It shattered against the wall. The wounded man coughed; he was suffocating. His breathing quickened and he fixed his eyes on the tall figure standing over him. He tried to sit up, but his strength was draining away with the blood oozing from his mouth and he fell back. It was over. The bearded man crossed himself mechanically, murmured, 'May his soul rest in peace, Amen.' He closed the dead man's eyes.

Now he had to carry out his plan without fail. He would wait until dawn before washing the body – and, most importantly, concealing the wound. Then he would notify the local official, who would come and certify the death and arrange with the magistrate for the speediest burial possible. Las Juntas had been chosen because it had no priest or carpenter; the body would be buried in the ground wrapped in a simple shroud, and in a few months only the bones would remain.

The man threw himself down without taking off his boots. But despite his exhaustion, he could not sleep. He was thinking about what he needed to do. When it was all over, a good mule would get him to the port of Buenaventura in five or six days' time, and there he'd board a Panama-bound steamer from the English Steamship Company. He'd arrive in Barranquilla in time to catch the train. Twenty-four hours later, the ship *La-Fayette* would leave Colombian waters and in mid-December she'd drop anchor at St Nazaire.

He searched in the dead man's pocket and pulled out a half-crushed cigar, which he lit. The vampire bat, hanging from a joist, watched anxiously as the tiny red eye glowed in front of the man's mouth.