

DEL CHIVO**MONDAY, 2:12 P.M. COLOMBIA TIME**

Lunch at the Mendoza mansion had been spectacular, possibly one of the top five meals of Sergio Del Chivo's life. Foie gras, veal, octopus, lobster. More fresh fruits and vegetables than Del Chivo had ever seen on one table anywhere. And the chocolate! Alejandro Mendoza, leader of the South American drug cartel known as *Los Bastardos Deseables*, knew how to live, and Del Chivo wanted to live that way, too. And he would, someday.

He vowed that he would.

After lunch, Señor Mendoza invited Sergio into his private office. The room smelled of leather and tobacco and wood polish, the kind made from citrus oils. Mendoza was perched on a giant leather throne behind a very large cherry desk, and Del Chivo sat across from him in a pleated wing chair. There were no windows. The mahogany paneling seemed to insulate the room from the rest of the world, although Del Chivo knew that the two men with automatic rifles standing directly outside the door could hear everything being said.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you here today." Mendoza had a deep, rich voice, like a Latin James Earl Jones.

"It is a great honor, señor. And a privilege. Thank you. Thank you very much."

"Your English is excellent, by the way."

"Thank you."

Mendoza leaned forward and selected a cigar from the box on his desk. He rolled it in his thick fingers. "You've expressed interest in moving up in the organization, and I think it's time. You've shown initiative, and loyalty, and a strong work ethic. I need someone in San Salvador. I would like for you to be my lieutenant there."

"I don't know what to say, señor. This is more than I ever could have hoped for. I come from El Salvador, but I've been here in Colombia for many years, and I love it. Of course I would be very happy to take this position."

"It comes with a price. Every time I promote one of my men, there is a..." Mendoza gave the cigar a long sniff. "A rite of passage. It won't be easy, but the reward will be great. I have confidence that you can achieve this task, that you will pass my little test with flying colors."

"Whatever it is you ask of me, I will do my best, señor."

"That's exactly the right attitude, Sergio. This is why you were picked for promotion. I see great things in your future."

"Thank you, señor. Now what is it that I can do for you?"

Mendoza bit the end of the cigar and spit it into the cuspidor next to his desk. Then he removed a gold lighter from his jacket pocket and began to heat the other end.

"Smoke, Sergio?"

"No thank you, señor."

"A drink? I have an excellent Calvados."

"You have worked hard to become a rich and powerful man, Señor Mendoza. You have earned the right to smoke and drink. I have not, yet."

Mendoza seemed pleased by the answer. He sucked on the cigar and got it going, blowing out a long stream of fragrant smoke.

"Have you ever been to the United States, Sergio?"

Sergio was careful to keep his face neutral, but the memory washed over him.

Los Estados Unidos.

The mere mention of that horrible place made Del Chivo's stomach turn. Sixteen years ago, his family had been tortured and killed by the Treasury Police in El Salvador, an organization that existed largely because of funds and weapons distributed by the Central Intelligence Agency. In essence, the United States had murdered Sergio's mother, and his father, and his sister. Sergio had been a teenager at the time, and he could still hear his father's screams as the ruthless policemen castrated him with a butcher knife.

"No," Del Chivo said. "I have never been there."

Mendoza set his cigar on an X shaped gold stand next to his phone, and poured himself a snifter of Boulard VSOP.

"I am going to send you to the city of Chicago. You have heard of this place?"

"I have."

"If you wish to be promoted to my lieutenant in El Salvador, you must first kill five American citizens, and at least one of them must be a police officer. You must kill them, and then bring their picture ID cards back to me for verification."

Del Chivo sat back in his chair. He had killed men before, but only in self-defense. Why would Señor Mendoza ask him to do this? Five random killings in a strange country. It was a tall order.

"I know you are wondering why I would ask this of you." Mendoza picked up his cigar again. "You are too respectful to ask, but I will tell you anyway. I need to know that your loyalty extends beyond merely following orders, Sergio. I need to know that you would risk everything for me. Your freedom, and even your life. And, even though *Los Bastardos Deseables* earns a great deal of money from the sales of our product there, I need to know that you hate the United States of

America as much as I do."

Sergio leaned forward and met Mendoza's heavy stare.

"My feelings for the United States go beyond hate," he said, his tone measured. "Tell me where to go, and what to do, and I will do it, Señor Mendoza. I will do it with great pleasure."

Mendoza smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear. Now, just one more thing, and we will go play in the pool with the lovely señoritas."

"You are a most gracious host, señor. I am overwhelmed by your hospitality."

There was an electronic console built into Mendoza's desk. He pushed a button, and the largest plasma television Sergio had ever seen slowly descended from a recess in the ceiling. The screen came to life, and the video started with a close-up of a man's face.

"His name is Jaso," Mendoza said. "Or should I say his name *was* Jaso."

Beads of sweat studded Jaso's forehead. His upper lip was curled in a snarl, his eyes hidden behind a black bandana. As the camera slowly boomed out to a wider angle, Sergio could see that Jaso was strapped to a reclining chair, the type you might see in a dentist's office.

Jaso's arms and legs were chained to the chair, and more chains were wrapped around his chest and neck. Maybe he had struggled to get free before the video started, but he sat completely still now.

Resigned to his fate, Sergio thought.

A man wearing a long white smock and a black leather mask entered the scene carrying a small wooden box in one hand and a steaming towel in the other. He coiled the towel over Jaso's face, and then he opened the box, revealing a very fancy straight razor nesting on a cushion of velvet. He lifted the razor from the box and opened it, the shiny steel blade twinkling under the bright studio lights.

The barber started humming a song as he stroked the razor across the leather

strop attached to the chair. Sergio didn't recognize the tune, but it was a happy little number, something cheerful, something you might whistle on the way to a picnic. The barber obviously enjoyed his work.

"Time for your shave," he said.

"Please, señor! Don't do this! You don't have to do this!"

The barber didn't say anything. He approached Jaso with the razor, and then the screen paused.

"Would you like to see the rest of the video?" Mendoza asked.

Sergio kept his face blank. "If you wish me to."

Mendoza had a sip of apple brandy. "You know, I spent some time in Japan. With some important men there. Powerful men, who do the things we do here. Honor is very big in that country. If they screw up, they call it *kao o tsubusu*. *Losing face*."

Mendoza pressed the pause button again. The scene continued.

It was truly horrible.

After most of Jaso's features had been cut away, the barber finally slashed his throat.

"Jaso was my lieutenant in El Salvador. He is the man you'll be replacing, if you're successful in the United States. He failed me. I do not tolerate failure in my organization. That is why he lost face."

"I understand," Sergio said.

"Are you repulsed?"

Sergio shook his head.

"Good. Because I want you to take more than just the ID from the Americans you kill." Mendoza leaned forward and smiled. "I also want you to take their faces. Can you do that?"

Sergio met his boss's eyes. He nodded.

Mendoza sat back and took a long drag on his cigar, the ash glowing orange. "Good," he said. "You leave for Chicago tonight."

DANIELS

THURSDAY, 10:43 P.M. CST

Under the harsh glare of the Chicago Police Department's portable flood lights, residue from thousands of exhaust pipes and leaky engines rose from the alley's pitted asphalt and coated the puddle of blood with a colorful, greasy film. At the center of the puddle lay a Caucasian male, mid-forties, average height and weight, well-dressed, very dead.

I had checked his pockets for ID, but the killer, or someone who came upon the body after the killer, had taken his wallet.

The deceased had money. Fifty dollar haircut, tailored suit, Ralph Lauren tie and Gucci loafers. Robbery was the obvious motive. Why a rich guy parked in an alley wasn't as obvious.

Most of the blood seemed to have gushed from a single wound on his left inner thigh. Femoral artery. But there was also considerable blood around his head, shoulders and chest.

His face had been flayed off.

I assumed that had been after he died, because there were no defensive wounds on his hands. Not the normal MO of a thief.

It had probably been done with a straight razor or a box cutter, the preferred tools of street criminals who didn't want to get popped holding a handgun or a switchblade.

Bad guys were like bacteria. Adaptable.

The latest trend was hornet spray. A thug would buy a can at the grocery store and then threaten to shoot it into his victim's eyes if he or she didn't hand over the

money. I wondered what kind of mind it took to even come up with something like that. Twenty-some years on the job, over ten of those in the Violent Crimes Unit, had taught me a few things, but keeping up with crooks often seemed like an exercise in futility. Like pushing a boulder uphill just to watch it roll back down again.

The body was discovered forty minutes ago. Patrol car, who'd pulled up to ticket the silver Mercedes we were parked behind in the alley. Probably the vic's car. Keys still in ignition, but the car wasn't running. Registered to William Shipman, 43 years of age, a resident of Streeterville.

I sat in my 1989 Chevy Nova and jotted down some notes for my preliminary report while Sergeant Herb Benedict, my partner, complained about the weather.

"This is ridiculous," he said. "March third, and it's ten freaking degrees outside. And dropping as we speak. Global warming my ass."

"You should send a terse letter to Al Gore, telling him he's full of shit."

Herb rubbed his shoulders and shivered. "Or I could move to Florida."

"Hurricanes."

"California."

"Earthquakes."

"Alabama"

"Southerners," I said.

"What's wrong with southerners?"

"They don't like city slickers like you."

"You know the National Shrimp Festival is in Alabama," Herb said.

"Alabama also has hurricanes."

"Is there any place nice to live?"

"No," I said. "It sucks everywhere."

Herb reached over and picked up my badge and police ID card from the center

console.

"Lieutenant Jacqueline Daniels," he said. "*Lieutenant*. That means you make more money than me. Seems like you could afford a car with heat that works."

"This car is a classic. They don't make them like this anymore."

"For a reason. It's a piece of garbage."

"When you write Al Gore, complain about my car, too."

Herb's salt-and-pepper mustache turned downward. "Maybe it isn't my position to judge..."

"Here we go."

"...but maybe fixing the heat in this rust bucket is more important than buying designer clothing all the time."

Today I wore a Burberry Brit leather trench over an Armani wool pantsuit. Gucci scarf, pointy-toe ankle boots by Pour la Victoire. There were a pair of long johns from Walmart under the slacks, but nobody needed to know that.

"I dress well to feel good about myself," I said.

"You know what else would make you feel good about yourself? A car made in this decade."

I didn't feel like talking about it. I switched on the radio, dialed in a station that played oldies.

Frankie Avalon was singing a song called "Gingerbread."

I changed the station.

"Why don't you walk inside and get us a cup of coffee?" I said, trying to concentrate on my notes.

Benedict must have sensed the change in my mood. He knew I wasn't a fan of gingerbread.

"Did you know Frankie Avalon started out as a tightrope walker?" he asked.

"I didn't know that."

"Yeah, and he did it without Annette!"

"Coffee, Herb. Please."

The alley we were parked in was alongside a CigsMart, a small convenience shop catering to your nicotine and sugar addictions twenty-four hours a day. The ashtray in the Benz was well-used. That could have explained why it had stopped here. But why not park in the lot? Why the alley?

Sergeant Benedict climbed out of my Nova, ducked under a strip of yellow tape, and waddled to the front door. Despite all the diets he'd been on recently, he seemed to have gained some weight. The heavy coat he was wearing might have had something to do with it, but in the office the other day I'd noticed his chin had gone from a double to a triple. He had blood pressure issues, and I figured it was only a matter of time until he started taking insulin with his morning donut. Herb was my partner, but he was also my friend. I wanted him to stay healthy and live to a ripe old age.

On the east side of the alley, in front of a dilapidated garage at the edge of someone's backyard, three men huddled and stared at the orange flames rising from a fifty-five gallon steel drum. The one in the middle appeared to be Hispanic, the other two African American. They each wore a skull cap—one brown, one green, and one black with an orange C on it. I could hear them talking and laughing over my car radio. They passed a jug of wine around, didn't seem impressed that a fresh corpse lay only twenty feet away, or that there were cops everywhere. Probably used to it. That's the kind of neighborhood it was.

I guessed the black guys to be in their late-fifties or early-sixties, although it's hard to judge with winos. Excessive alcohol tends to accelerate the aging process. It's like pressing the fast-forward button on this movie of the week we commonly call *Life*. The third man, the one in the middle, was much younger. Mid-thirties, I guessed, and I doubted he'd been on the street for very long. He just didn't have the

look.

I decided to walk over there and have a word with them. Talking to drunks is usually a dead end, but it was worth a try. As I approached, the one on my left—the one wearing the brown beanie—said, "Hey, baby. Looking good tonight."

I held my star up. "Lieutenant Jacqueline Daniels," I said. "CPD."

He slapped his hand against his cheek, and his mouth went from a sly smirk to a surprised *O*. Exaggerated expression, like a cartoon.

"A police woman!" he said.

"Yeah, and a fine one," Black Cap said. "Those are nice duds."

"Thanks."

"But your car is a real piece of shit."

I was able to ignore that jibe because I'm tough. "I need to know what happened in the alley tonight."

"Guy got killed," Black Cap said.

"No kidding. And I suppose none of you guys saw anything, right?"

"We ain't been here long. All these damn flashing blue lights is what brought us out in the first place."

It was like a party to them. They were enjoying the show.

I handed Black Cap a business card.

"Give me a call if you hear anything," I said.

"Can I give you a call if I *don't* hear anything?"

"Probably not a good idea."

I turned to walk away, but one of them called back to me. "Hey, lady cop."

I stopped.

"Is there some sort of reward, or something, for information?"

It was the younger Latino in the green cap. His accent was Hispanic, but didn't sound Mexican or Puerto Rican. I guessed South America.

"There might be," I said. "Did you see something?"

His dark eyes looked me over, head to toe. "Give me your card. Maybe I call you if I remember."

Was he hiding something? Greedy for a reward? Scared to talk? Playing some sort of game? High? None of the above?

I gave him a business card and waited.

He stared at me, saying nothing.

"Do you hang around here?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"Did you see the murder?"

A shrug.

"Did you see who might have killed him?"

Another shrug.

His two buddies laughed. I could have arrested all three of them for public intoxication and an open liquor container, but why? On very cold days, some homeless people would intentionally provoke cops to get a warm bed and a free meal for the night. If that was their intent, it wasn't worth my time, or the paperwork.

"Call if you remember anything," I repeated.

When I turned to go I almost got speared in the gut by my partner. Herb was carrying a plastic grocery bag in one hand and a long fork in the other, the kind you use to turn steaks on a barbecue grill.

"Stick around," he said. "I'm going to roast some marshmallows."

"Marshmallows?"

"Yeah, I'm starving. I bought some graham crackers and chocolate bars too. We can have s'mores."

I shook my head and walked back to the Nova, where I found two large cups of coffee in the drink holders between the seats. I peeled the lid off one, took a sip,

and watched Herb play summer camp with the alcoholics. A couple of minutes later, the uniform I'd spoken to earlier tapped on my window. Her nametag said S. Burwig.

"Got info on the car's owner," she said. "DMV and NCIC."

She handed me a printout of his driver's license and info. Hard to tell if the photo matched, considering our vic no longer had a face, but everything else seemed to fit. No priors, no record, no warrants.

"Thanks," I said.

"I also called 411," she said. "A hunch. Rich guy, might be listed."

It was good thinking. "And?"

"There's a Dr. William Shipman in the phone directory. Office is on Addison, a few blocks east."

"Did you call them?"

"Yes. The answering service picked up, and they paged the person on call, a PA named Nancy Stearns. She told me Dr. Shipman left with some colleagues a few hours ago. He drives a silver Mercedes."

"Good work."

"So how'd he end up in the alley?"

I was thinking the same thing. "Could be he stopped for some smokes, lot was full. Figured he'd be in and out real quick. Or someone lured him into the alley somehow."

"Drugs?" Burwig asked.

I couldn't picture a rich doctor doing a dope deal in an alley.

"Someone could have flagged him over, yelling for help," I said. "A doctor would respond, right? Or..."

"Or someone in the car with him made him pull into the alley," Burwig said, finishing my thought.

"Someone angry enough to cut off the doctor's face. Then take his wallet and make it look like a robbery. But why not take the car? Or the expensive shoes? You were first on scene, right?"

"Yeah."

"Did you turn his car off?"

"No. It was already off."

This was looking less and less like a robbery and more and more like premeditated murder.

"How long before the ME shows up?"

"He's going to be a while. Said it's been a busy night."

"Aren't they all?"

Burwig nodded, turned and walked away.

A few minutes later, Sergeant Benedict opened the passenger's side door and climbed in, two blackened marshmallows dangling from the end of his barbecue fork.

"These are going to be heavenly" he said. "You like s'mores, right?"

"I'll pass. Do you think he had car trouble?"

"Who?"

"The owner of the Benz. I just noticed his hood isn't closed all the way. Maybe he stopped in the alley to check his engine."

"Alley is dark," Herb said. "Parking lot is lit up. Why not pull into the parking lot?"

Good point. I started my car.

"Where are we going?"

"Home," I said.

"I thought you wanted to wait for the Medical Examiner."

"We can stop by their office in the morning. I got probable ID on the victim, and

it's pretty obvious how he died."

"Next of kin?"

"Not going to happen tonight. Need the M.E. to sign off, and I'm not going to knock on someone's door at two a.m. with a maybe. We'll handle it first thing tomorrow."

I put the car in gear, steered toward the parking lot's exit while Herb ferreted through his plastic grocery bag.

"Stop the car, Jack!"

I stopped the car. Herb was visibly distraught.

"What is it?" I said.

"Those guys stole my crackers."

"The winos?"

"Yeah."

I looked toward the steel drum. The flames had died down, and the three men were gone.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, well," I said. "Live and learn."

"Bullshit. Drive around the neighborhood for a minute. I'm going to find those bastards, and I'm going to arrest their sorry asses."

"What are you going to charge them with?" I asked. "Graham theft?"

I laughed again, eased into the late night traffic on West Addison Street. Herb was still pouting about the crackers when I dropped him at his door.

COLT

FRIDAY, 8:56 A.M. EST

People generally look after their own best interests. It's a flaw in the human species, a glitch. It starts the day you're born, and it ends the day you die. It's the

reason emotions like jealousy exist.

Greed.

Envy.

Hatred.

It's the reason wars are fought.

If you ever find someone who truly and consistently cares about what happens to you, someone who loves you unconditionally, someone who would take a bullet for you without giving it a second thought, then you need to cling to that person like paint on a wall. It's very unlikely you'll ever run across anyone like that again.

Fifteen and a half years ago, I crawled from the wreckage of a chartered jet seconds before everyone who mattered to me went up in a ball of flames. My wife Susan, our baby daughter Harmony, my band Colt .45, everyone. I was the sole survivor, and there was nothing I could do to save them.

Susan was the love of my life, my soul mate. There would never be another, I'd thought at the time. But was it possible for a guy like me to have gotten lucky twice? And did I even have what it took to fully commit to a woman again?

It's the kind of thing you think about when you wake up too early and stare at the ceiling for a couple of hours.

I reached over to the bedside table and shut my cell phone's alarm off. Edgar, my girlfriend's big furry gray cat, had been lying there on the table blinking at me lazily, nonchalantly, but the abrupt trill startled him. He jumped down and darted out the bedroom door.

"Scaredy cat," I said, talking to myself as much as to the animal.

"Five more minutes," Laurie said.

"I thought you wanted to get up at nine."

"Five more minutes."

I grabbed the phone, climbed out of bed, started toward the kitchen to make a

pot of coffee and open a can of 9 Lives.

And that's when the call came.

"This is Colt," I said.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Female. Older. Smoker. Possibly hard of hearing.

"I'm here," I said.

"Is this Nicholas Colt, the private investigator?"

"Allegedly."

She started coughing into my ear, finally got it under control and said, "My name's Doris Green. I tried the number you have listed in the phone book all day yesterday, but I kept getting an answering machine. I was just lucky to have—"

"Sorry," I said. "I've been away from the office for a few days."

The *office* was a 1964 Airstream Safari travel trailer parked on lot twenty-seven at Joe's Fish Camp in Hallows Cove, Florida. Laurie lived in Jacksonville, thirty miles northeast of there, and I'd been staying at her apartment more and more over the past few months. We were living together, technically, although the camper on Lake Barkley was still a nice place to have.

"I have a very serious problem," Doris Green said. "I was wondering if you might be able to help me."

"I might be able to. What's your problem?"

Emphysema? Chronic bronchitis? Lung cancer?

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone," she said. "Would it be possible for us to meet somewhere in person?"

"Sure. But could you just give me a general idea of what you're talking about?"

"I'm talking about murder," she said.