

# Prologue

## Downtown Miami – Thursday March 2nd

Sergio Lopez and Jorge Arteaga hurried along the darkened alley, Sergio still carrying the briefcase, which he had refused to leave behind. As they approached the brightly-lit street which crossed the end of the alley, the sound of a distant police siren, somewhere behind them, made them stop dead in their tracks.

‘You gotta ditch the case,’ urged Jorge.

‘But it might have some money inside,’ protested his partner. ‘Once we get outta here we can easily force it open.’

The siren sounded as though it was getting closer.

‘Christ, just look at yourself, man,’ growled Jorge, eyeing his partner’s ripped denim jeans and faded, brown tee-shirt. ‘You just ain’t the type to have a fancy briefcase like that ... and you got blood all over you. If the cops stop us, we’re screwed.’

The fear and indecision in Sergio’s eyes were obvious, but he was clearly reluctant to abandon the case, which he clutched tightly to his chest. ‘I ain’t leaving it ’til I’ve got it open and checked what’s inside,’ he insisted.

The sound of the siren grew louder. Jorge wasn’t in the mood to debate the issue any longer; he wrenched the case from his partner’s grasp and flung it to the ground. ‘Come on! Let’s split ... NOW!’ He emphasised the point by grabbing Sergio’s sleeve, dragging him away from the case and towards the end of the alley.

‘What the fuck you doing, man?’ hissed Sergio, wrenching himself free, ripping the sleeve of his tee-shirt in the process.

He made as if to turn back and retrieve the case, but froze as the flashing blue and red lights of a squad car came to a halt at the far end of the alley, some hundred or so yards away.

‘Shit!’ he muttered, abandoning his lunge for the briefcase and flattening himself against the wall just behind his partner.

There was clearly no turning back now. Hugging the wall closely, they began edging their way away from the squad car and towards the main street, less than twenty yards away. As they reached the street, Jorge crept forward and stole tentative glances to left and right. There was no sign of the cops, nor any sound of a siren, other than the one which wailed insistently from behind them.

‘All clear,’ he whispered. ‘Let’s go!’

They turned to the left and began making their way along the street, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. Within a minute they picked up the sound of a second siren, which seemed to be coming from somewhere ahead of them. They stopped, looking anxiously at one another, unsure whether to turn around or press ahead. When a third siren joined the cacophony it became impossible to determine where each individual sound was coming from.

‘Fuck!’ muttered Sergio. ‘The place is crawling with cops ... what are we gonna do?’

‘Just keep going,’ replied Jorge. ‘They won’t be looking for us yet.’ He was nowhere near as confident as he tried to sound, but Sergio was already on the brink of panic and needed to be kept as calm as possible; the last thing they needed was for him to do anything stupid which might attract attention to them.

They pressed on, Jorge doing his best to make them blend in with the general flow of human traffic in the street. Every time they passed through the pool of light cast by an overhead street lamp, though, Sergio quickened his step as he sought the relative anonymity provided by the more dimly-lit areas between the lamps.

‘Hey, slow down man,’ urged Jorge, grabbing the other man’s arm. ‘You’re just gonna make us look even more fucking obvious.’

Sergio shook his arm free, whirling to face his partner. ‘I ain’t hanging about just waiting to...’

He was cut short by the wail of yet another siren – much closer this time. Seconds later, the flashing lights of an approaching squad car came into view as it rounded a corner, around two hundred yards ahead, and headed directly towards them.

‘Shit!’ hissed Sergio, ‘what the hell do we do now?’

‘Go down there,’ hissed Jorge, indicating a darkened alley just a few yards ahead and to their left.

As they turned into the alley, they could see that it connected with another brightly-lit street, around a hundred yards ahead, which

ran parallel with the one they had come from. They hurried forward, making for the sanctuary of the darkest point, midway between the two streets.

Behind them, the sound of the siren was getting louder; they looked back to see the squad car draw to a halt right at the end of the alley.

‘Goddam it!’ muttered Sergio. ‘They’re bound to spot us now.’

Jorge grabbed his shoulder and dragged him back until they were both flattened with their backs against the wall. ‘Just keep going ... slowly. If we stay close to the wall, we can make it to the other end without them spotting us.’

Sergio nodded, nervously. ‘OK ... let’s go.’

They edged forward, occasionally looking back; the car was still there, but now they were within about twenty yards of the other end of the alley. With a bit of luck—

Another squad car screeched to a halt right in front of them. They both dived into a doorway just to their left, huddling behind a garbage dumpster which was parked outside. Seconds later, the alley was flooded with light as one of the officers switched on a powerful flashlight.

‘That’s it,’ whispered Sergio, ‘we’re trapped now ... we gotta give ourselves up.’

As the beam from the flashlight swung away and played up and down the wall opposite, they were afforded a brief moment of darkness. Jorge clamped his hand across his partner’s mouth and dragged him further back into the doorway alongside the dumpster. ‘Listen,’ he hissed, hand still pressed against Sergio’s mouth, ‘I don’t intend to go down for no murder rap, so just stay calm and don’t panic. They ain’t spotted us yet.’

Sergio wrenched himself free of his partner’s grip, his eyes flaring with anger. ‘I didn’t do no murder ... that’s your fucking problem.’ He reached behind his waist, and withdrew from his belt a wicked-looking knife with perhaps a nine-inch blade, holding it up in front of his partner’s face. ‘Now you do what you like, but I’m going out there, hands in the air.’

He lowered the knife, preparing to throw it to the ground in front of him when he stepped out from the shadows. In that brief moment, Jorge grabbed the hand holding the knife, and once again clamped a hand over his partner’s mouth. The other man tried to turn the knife back, but Jorge was the stronger of the two.

Their faces were just inches apart as the tip of the knife was forced, ever so slowly, closer to Sergio’s body. His eyes widened in abject terror as he felt the cold steel penetrate the thin fabric of his tee-shirt and press against his skin. Jorge brought to bear his full body weight and, millimetre by millimetre, the knife sank into the other man’s flesh. Sergio’s eyes bulged in terror and pain as he made a last, superhuman effort to resist, but his strength was failing. Jorge gave one final thrust, angling the knife upward beneath the other man’s rib cage. His expression changed to one of surprised shock. Jorge twisted the knife to left and right before withdrawing it and plunging it deep into the other man’s body for a second time. The life drained from his eyes and Jorge felt his body go slack, its dead weight dragging downward. He removed his hand from the dead man’s mouth, and slid it under his arm and around his back, taking the weight of the body as he withdrew the knife. He allowed the limp form to slide slowly to the ground, dragging it as far into the doorway as possible.

Panting from the exertion, he stole a glance back down the alley, in the direction from which they had come. One of the cops had got out of the squad car and was playing the beam of another flashlight up and down the alley. Jorge pressed himself back into the doorway.

‘Anything up that end?’ came the distant voice.

‘Nah, nothing here,’ replied the man at the nearer end of the alley, switching off his flashlight.

Jorge heard the sound of the nearer car making off, emitting a brief chirrup from its tyres. Seconds later, he heard a car door slam and the other squad car also moved off.

He remained stock-still for around thirty seconds, allowing his pounding heart to settle a little, before bending down to remove the wallet from Sergio's back pocket. No sense in leaving that behind, he thought. He slipped the wallet into his own pocket, before cautiously, emerging from the doorway, stepping over the body, taking care to avoid the rapidly spreading pool of blood.

Stealing another couple of glances up and down the alley, he stripped off his bloodstained tee-shirt and used it to wipe his fingerprints from the handle of the knife before dropping it into the dumpster. He then used the ruined tee-shirt to wipe the worst of the blood off his hands before dropping that, too, into the dumpster.

Finally, he set off down the alley, hoping that his bare-chested appearance would not attract too much attention. It was a risk, but not as bad a risk as being seen covered in blood. On a warm evening like this, he wouldn't be the only young guy roaming around without a shirt on.

Shame about Sergio, he thought, but the crazy bastard always did panic too easily. He just hoped his bosses wouldn't be too hard on him for the way he had dealt with his partner ...