



## She Said, He Said

*A CLIFF DIVER scene from Franco Silvio's Point of View*

Silvio's thoughts punched and jabbed at random theories as he drove back to the police station. He was a boxer in the ring with a ghost. Whoever bludgeoned Lieutenant Inocente to death, then sent the body out to sea in the man's own speedboat, was a more elusive opponent than anyone Silvio fought during his championship years.

This late in the day, traffic on la Costera was a mess. Tour buses and hotel vans lumbered in the fast lane, spewing fumes and garish advertisements to *See Acapulco by Night* or rent fleabag shacks along the coast at Punta el Pesquero. Silvio swore as he rode the brake, unable to get around them.

Next to him, Fuentes sat slumped against the passenger door and kept his mouth shut, the smartest thing he'd done all day. Silvio's young partner hadn't exactly covered himself with glory in the abandoned water bottling plant.

Silvio glanced in the rearview mirror. In the back seat, both Cruz and Portillo were mindlessly staring outside. As if she was telepathic, Cruz glanced up and saw him watching her.

The sluggish traffic immediately had Silvio's full attention again.

Cruz made him uneasy. *Too smart. Too curious.*

*Too pretty.* When Portillo took her on as partner, the rest of the detectives assumed he was doing her. Portillo once said that sex with Cruz would be like wrestling a bag of cats and he'd prefer not to bleed to death, but the rumors persisted, gleefully linking her with any man who wasn't dead or on fire.

By the time they got back to the police station, the sun was a ball of fire sinking behind the stucco walls of the building. Twilight spread a purple haze over the parking lot. Silvio lifted his hand to the guard at the entry gate, drove through when the barrier lifted and swerved into his assigned spot.

Portillo and Fuentes bailed out.

A moment later, Silvio was crowding Cruz in the back seat. Before she could scramble away, he pressed the button on his key fob. The sedan doors locked with a beep.

"We need to talk," he growled. "Why did you go to my house?"

Cruz tensed but she didn't pull any panicky girl shit. "Who says I went to your house?"

"My wife is pretty accurate in her descriptions." As soon as Isabel told him about the lovely young woman in skinny jeans and a denim jacket asking questions, Silvio knew it was Cruz.

Sneaking around his own neighborhood of El Roble. Looking for a weakness, something to exploit. He would have done the same.

"You called Lt. Inocente the night of his death." Cruz gave him a hard look. "From your cell

phone. Twice.”

“You think I killed him?” Silvio asked with a snort.

“You were his last known contact. Takes your call, walks out and never comes back. Dead the next morning. You don’t mention it to anybody, just let us run around trying to figure it out, knowing that we’d see the phone records sooner or later.”

“Did you tell Obregon?” It wasn’t the question Silvio intended to ask, but her answer would make all the difference.

He and Obregon had been sworn enemies for a long, long time. Was the union boss using Cruz as a proxy to take him down?

“Tell me what happened,” Cruz said, her tone hinting that she was ready to trade information.

Silvio decided to play. “I called Inocente,” he said. “Went to his place and we talked. He owed me money. He said he’d pay up in a day or so. I saw him go back into the building. He unlocked the door and went in. I went home.”

“He owed you? For what?”

“Nothing to do with you, Morelos da Gama or this water business.”

Cruz narrowed her eyes at him. “Was it a money scam? Trading drugs for counterfeit?”

“What?”

“I think you two were running a money scam. Involving counterfeit dollars.” Cruz shoved a handful of bills in his face.

Silvio stared at the money in surprise. “Where’d you get that?”

“The ransom for the Morelos da Gama kidnapping was paid in counterfeit dollars,” Cruz said. “Just like these.”

“*What?*” Counterfeit was a punch from outside the ring that he never saw coming.

“Is that what you were talking to *el teniente* about?” Cruz pressed, her voice loud and harsh inside the sedan.

“You’re accusing me of killing Inocente over some money laundering scheme?” Silvio leaned closer to her and fury pulled his lips into a snarl. “Go ahead, Cruz. Try to pin a murder on me and I’ll put you in the ground.”

A piercing siren filled the air. Silvio jolted back as he realized that Cruz had pressed the panic button on her own key fob. Two spaces away, her big white Suburban honked and flashed like a carnival ride.

The gate guard galloped up to the big SUV. Inside the sedan, Cruz banged on the window to get his attention.

Silvio hit the unlock button on his fob.

The guard wrenched open the rear passenger side door. Cruz flung herself out before silencing the Suburban. Silvio got out, too. The normal sounds of traffic beyond the razor wire-topped perimeter wall replaced the clanging in his ears.

He spoke to the guard over the roof of the sedan. “Sorry. Technical problem.”

Cruz backed against the side of the Suburban as the guard hustled back to his shack. One

hand was on the driver's door handle and she was breathing hard. "Answer my question. Why did Lieutenant Inocente owe you money?"

"I run a book," Silvio said. It was a poorly kept secret; cops throughout the department placed bets with him. "Did it when I was suspended and just kept going. Inocente put down a bet, lost, and paid up with counterfeit *norteamericano* dollars. Fake, same as those."

"When?"

"The week before. Tried to trace it with a couple of my informants but nobody knew anything. I didn't know what to do and finally decided we had to have it out. I needed the money." He was torn between telling Cruz to mind her own fucking business and making her understand why he needed Inocente to pay his debts.

"You needed it for Monday," Cruz said slowly. "If you don't get the accounts settled on Monday the kids don't eat on Tuesday."

So she knew his weak spot after all.

"My wife is a good woman," Silvio said. He jabbed a finger at Cruz as she stood there by the Suburban, her face revealing nothing. "This means a lot to her. Things haven't always been easy. She . . . she lost a lot of babies over the years. So these kids on the street . . . they're like hers."

"I want to believe you but you should have said something. You were the last person to see *el teniente* alive."

Silvio wanted to shake the woman until that ponytail slapped her face. "I didn't kill Inocente. You can call Obregon if you want and he'll ruin my career but he won't find any evidence that I killed him. I knew you wouldn't believe me about the phone call so I just kept my mouth shut figuring we'd find the killer before the records came. *Rayos*, when was the last time we got phone records that fast?"

"Your story better check out," Cruz warned.

"I just wanted what he owed me," Silvio said. He was about to walk away when one of those phantom jabs rattled his brain. "Before you start chasing your tail, what did you say about a ransom?"

"Do you remember the day Rico and I got a reward for saving the kidnapped kid? Morelos da Gama's kid?"

Silvio nodded.

"Counterfeit. Same as what I showed you." Cruz fished out another fake bill.

A world of bad possibilities opened in front of Silvio. "Inocente gave it to you."

"This hulk was full of it and somebody knew," Cruz cocked her head toward the Suburban. "You remember that *el teniente* told me to take Kurt Rucker back to his hotel after he made his statement? Well, the army checkpoint was gone and we were ambushed by a truck full of shooters. We never made it to the hotel but I got us to my uncle's garage. We took the car apart and found the money. A bank told us it was fake. So we left the vehicle on the side of the road and the next day the money was gone and the child was there."

"Morelos da Gama paid his kid's ransom with counterfeit? That's this water company crap's

all about?"

"I don't know exactly what happened," she admitted. "The Pinkerton agent who worked for the family turned the ransom over to somebody who claimed to be Lt. Inocente. An accomplice, I guess. He was supposed to do the actual handoff to pay the kidnapers. The Pinkerton agent turned over pesos. But the ransom the kidnapers got in exchange for the child was in counterfeit dollars."

Silvio took the fluttering counterfeit bill from her hand but his thoughts went back to the first day Fausto Inocente took charge of the squadroom. Suspicions that the smooth talker was on the take were soon confirmed. From the selective way Inocente assigned cases to his constant gambling, the signs were easy to spot. Not to mention the swank apartment, the speedboat, and expensive wife.

"So Inocente and his pal switched the money," he said and gave back the bill. "They knew where they could get counterfeit at a discount, did a switch, and kept the real."

Cruz gasped like she just took a right cross to the jaw. "Of course, *el teniente* kept the real money. Took it from the person claiming to be him, switched it for the counterfeit to pay off the kidnapers. Kept both the real ransom and some of the counterfeit to cover his gambling debts."

Silvio enjoyed a spurt of satisfaction that he was the one to fill in the puzzle piece instead of her. "Who do you like for the accomplice? Or maybe that's not important. Maybe Morelos da Gama found out that he was tricked and killed Inocente."

"His alibi checks," Cruz pointed out. "He was in Chicago with his wife and child at some hospital for amputees."

"Maybe he contracted for the kill," Silvio surmised. "Or maybe the kidnapers took out Inocente because they know he delivered fake cash."

"But what about Lt. Inocente having had sex right before he died?" Cruz asked.

"Well, I didn't bang him," Silvio scowled.

Cruz's mouth twitched.

"So what have we got?" Silvio decided to ignore both her almost-laugh as well as the sex angle. "Morelos da Gama's kid got snatched because papa is dealing drugs in somebody else's territory. The kidnapping sends a message to either cut them in or get out. Let's assume Inocente was his partner. A way to get gambling money that he can't squeeze out of his brother. Inocente isn't worried about the message, he's too busy seeing the kidnapping as an opportunity to get something for himself. He switches the ransom with the help of a friend, but never tells Morelos da Gama. Takes the real money but also pockets a little of the fake stuff thinking it will come in handy at some point. Like paying his detectives a reward. He probably kept the real reward cash, too, you know."

"What if *el teniente* was actually one of the kidnapers?" Cruz countered. "Morelos da Gama doesn't know. Just thinks Fausto Inocente will help because he's Bruno Inocente's brother and all."

"Maybe." Silvio was back in the ring again, testing theories with short, swift feints. "But why ask the police to deal with a kidnapper when Pinkerton was already on the case? No, I think

they were partners. Morelos da Gama trusted him and Inocente double-crossed him.”

“What happened to your partner?”

The question caught him off guard. “My partner? As far as I can tell, Fuentes is a calculating rat out to get what he can.”

“I meant Garcia,” Cruz said quietly.

Silvio didn’t answer right away. The brainstorming evaporated and he remembered why he never wanted to work with a woman. Too interested in poking fingers in things that were nobody’s business.

A couple of uniforms barreled out of the rear door to the station, their laughter competing with the steady sounds of traffic beyond the gate.

The sun had completely set, leaving behind a crimson tinge in the darkening sky. Cruz leaned against the door of the Suburban, letting him know she had all the time in the world.

*Too smart. Too curious.*

“Besides my wife, he was my best friend,” Silvio said finally. “He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Inocente questioned your judgment pretty strongly,” Cruz said.

Inocente wasn’t in Silvio’s corner when Garcia was killed. Silvio always wondered if Obregon paid Inocente to step aside and let the police union mete out punishment. “Inocente was a fucking asshole,” he told Cruz. “If I was going to kill him, I’d have done it then.”

That was enough heart-to-heart crap for one day. He turned around, dismissing her with a flick of the hand over his shoulder.

“*El teniente* was interested in tunnel construction,” Cruz called after him. “He’d talked to some specialist in hydraulic concrete. Built a strange prototype tunnel with these ventilation holes. I think it’s got something to do with the Maxitunnel and the El Machete gang.”

Silvio stopped. “The Maxitunnel is the main artery into Zetas territory.”

“The Maxitunnel *is* Zetas territory. Every kid who sells candy by the tunnel toll booths knows it.”

“You think Morelos da Gama and Inocente were using it to distribute?”

“I know that El Machete is a feeder gang for the Zetas.”

“Lots of connections,” Silvio said.

The mercury lights on the top of the perimeter wall flicked on. The parking lot got busier as the day shift headed home, relieved to have made it through another day. The evening shift arrived, walking into the station with the hunched tension and worried faces of cops who knew that Acapulco’s streets were dangerously different in the dark.

Silvio walked back to the Suburban where Cruz waited, one hand on the door handle.

As the mercury lights hissed high above their heads, they crafted a workable theory. The kidnapping, the counterfeit, the tunnel, the water company. To Silvio’s aggravation, they worked well together, taking turns pulling threads and weaving them into a narrative that finally made sense.

Inocente and Morelos da Gama were pushing drugs into Zeta territory using the water

company as cover. El Machete gang members kidnapped the child, then killed Inocente over the counterfeiter for their Zetas overlords who were now doubly angry.

“Big question now,” Silvio summed up. “Did Morelos da Gama keep the business going alone? Or did the kidnapping scare him into closing it down?”

“He took his wife and child out of the country,” Cruz pointed out. “They’re safe. The thing is too big and profitable to shut down.”

“I want to see Inocente’s tunnel project. Compare it to the Maxitunel construction. You remember how to get there?”

“You’d better be playing straight with me.”

The *chica* still suspected him! Their momentary rapport burst like a bubble. “You can believe whatever the fuck you want to, Cruz,” he said angrily and turned on his heel.

“I’m not supposed to make any arrests in the case,” she said, stopping Silvio in his tracks. “Just let Obregon know when I’m close to the killer. He’s supposed to take it from there. Gave me some bullshit story about cleaning up Guerrero.”

Too smart.

Smart enough to put two and two together and conclude that Obregon had an angle on Inocente’s murder that he needed to protect. But Silvio couldn’t discount the rumors that stuck to Cruz like a second skin.

He pivoted back to her. “Are you sleeping with Obregon? Is that why he put you in charge?”

“No, you *pendejo*.” Cruz rolled her eyes. “Along with you, he’s the last man on earth I’d ever sleep with.”

Silvio snorted. Either she’d never been Obregon’s proxy or she’d just chosen sides.

“I’ll bring the doughnuts tomorrow,” he said.

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