

JOHN DESJARLAIS

VIPER

A MYSTERY

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PROLOGOMENA

I will make you enemies of each other:
You, serpent, and the woman.
She will crush your head
And you will strike at her heels.

Genesis 3:15

CHAPTER 1

Selena De La Cruz finish-welded the high-flow exhaust tubes at the manifold flanges, twisted off the white flame, and lifted the mask to inspect her work. *Perfecto*. She blew at the torch as though it were a smoking gun and thought about the next tasks: install a low-temperature thermostat to keep the Charger's engine cool, check the brake bleeder valves, and — line one on the garage phone trilled.

¿*Ay, ahora qué?* she sighed with a roll of her eyes. Hadn't she made it clear to her new receptionist, Felicia, that her lunch hour in the insurance-claims garage was *sagrada* and she was not to be disturbed while working on her car? She ducked from under the Matco lift, tugged off her work gloves and crossed to the Formica counter, her Filas sneakers squeaking on the glossy concrete floor. She raked her fingers through her sable hair. It must be an *emergencia*, she thought, her heart rate accelerating with each quickened step. *Un accidente malo* with injuries. Lord knows how the early November drizzle had slicked the roads.

She seized the chirping phone and punched a button. “¿*Sí, Felicia?*”

“Selena? Is that really you?” asked a man's voice.

She wrinkled her brow. It wasn't her brother Francisco asking for another loan. It wasn't her brother Lorenzo looking for a place to crash, now that his wife had kicked him out again. It wasn't Reed Stubblefield, calling about their weekend date; he knew better. And it felt a bit presumptuous for an insurance-agency customer to call her by her first name. The nerve. And how did he get this direct-line number? She drew a cleansing breath and used her softest business voice. “How may I help you, sir?”

“Selena Perez, ex-DEA?”

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“Who is this?”

“Geez, you don’t know how hard it is to find you.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. “I’m sorry, sir, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do. But being hard to find was the whole idea, wasn’t it?”

She rifled through her memory. “Del?”

“The same,” Del Bragg, her old team leader said with a snort.

“Say, I like your new last name. Dee-lah-Crooz?”

“From John of the Cross, a Spanish poet,” she said, her breath suddenly short. “I always liked his work.”

“Yeah, well, I always liked your work, too.”

“That’s not true. You wrote me up twice for insubordination.”

“Three times. The third was because of that little girl you shot. I know you want to forget about that.”

“What do you want, Del?”

“So don’t thank me for getting the media off your butt about it. She lived, didn’t she? Aren’t you over it yet?”

“I said, what do you want?”

“Guess you’re not over it, not even five years later,” Bragg said. “But I need you back anyway.”

“When I left the agency, it was for good,” Selena said, biting off the words. “I did everything I needed to do, and I’m done. Goodbye.”

“The Snake is out of prison,” Bragg shot back.

Selena brought the receiver back to her ear. “No way.”

“Way,” Bragg said. “His lawyer finally got the appeal. The judge said there was no evidence to prove the substance he was attempting to buy from you was heroin since the state couldn’t provide any chemical testing on it at the time. You remember why, don’t you?”

The fire.

“He’s free and back in business,” Bragg continued. “We need your help to find him.”

“Yeah, right,” she huffed. “You’ll just blow my cover and make me a target for every dopehead I ever busted. Forget it, Del.”

“You blew your own cover, Selena,” Bragg retorted.

“What do you mean?”

“Hang on a sec.” Some paper rustled. “Here it is. I’ve got a *Sinnissippi Weekly Observer* newspaper clipping in front of me now, the whole story of some murder case involving a priest. You helped the River Falls police last spring, and there’s your picture, big as day. You’re still lookin’ great. Working out, huh? Love the long hair. Hey, are you seeing this guy in the other picture — Red Stubblefeld?”

“Reed Stubblefield,” she said shortly. “And it’s none of your business.”

“It might be. Listen up: If I can get hold of this newspaper article and recognize you and find you, anyone can, including The Snake, and believe me, I think he’s looking for you.”

Selena felt her forearms prickling with goose bumps.

“I can be at your house at 1500 hours to talk this over. I don’t want to come to your office, since we might need you undercover again. I told your receptionist we were the police checking on somebody’s ID. It wasn’t a lie. Hey — you live alone?”

“Yes.”

“Not surprised. Can you get the afternoon off?”

“I’m the boss.”

“Still got your piece?”

“No. It was government issued. I returned it.”

“I thought so. I’ve got another one for you. You didn’t like the standard government model, though, is that right? You had a P226 Sig Sauer, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Her heart recoiled against her ribs *pow pow pow*.

“You’re gonna need it,” Bragg said. “You remember what he said to you on the day we busted him.”

She closed her eyes. “I do.”

And the images of that day flooded back.

CHAPTER 2

It was five years ago.

At that time, like every time, Selena saw right away why he called himself *La Serpiente*, The Snake.

For one thing, he wore rattlesnake-skin boots with the steel toes that Bragg and her Anglo colleagues at Drug Enforcement sneeringly called “Fence Climbers.” When he crossed his sinewy legs and swung his foot, the tip glinted.

For another, his unmoving onyx eyes fixed on her cleavage — not all that uncommon when she met men — but that gaze was not measuring her size. It was calculating a striking distance. She averted her eyes to the side, a demure Mexican custom she hadn’t lost through acculturation. Locking eyes is also how snakes paralyze their prey. She wouldn’t give him the pleasure.

With a casual shake of her head, she quickly assessed possible escape routes. A back door. Two open windows where the greasy odor of *tamales fritos* drifted in from the outdoor *cantina*. No telling what was beyond the ratty blankets hung as partitions on laundry lines that stretched along the barracks wall. Behind them, shadows and voices. A woman’s giggle. Along the opposite wall, empty bunk beds, the men away at work. It might be rural Illinois, but it looked just like the barrio back-alleys of Mexico City when she did undercover work there.

She puzzled over why The Snake arranged to meet here, in makeshift quarters for immigrant slaughterhouse workers, where the stink of hog offal clung to the men’s overalls and to the army-surplus sheets. Maybe he thought its remoteness more secure against reconnaissance or a raid. He was certainly more in control, and she didn’t like it.

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A horse-faced *mestizo* shouldered through the partition. The man gave her a leer and then winked at her. Selena's stomach clenched in disgust. Women behind the blankets were servicing laborers, and this man thought she was one of them reporting for work. She narrowed her eyes to angry slits, and the man, intimidated, hurried to the door and ducked out.

"*Abí nos vemos,*" The Snake rasped to the departing customer. See ya later. No doubt he would.

"I didn't know you ran a side business," Selena said, masking her revulsion. "Are the women documented?"

The Snake laughed through his teeth. It sounded like a hiss. "Does it matter?" he said. "They are fully employed, and they put food on their family's table. Maybe someday they can afford fancy shoes like yours."

We'll nail you for aiding and abetting human trafficking, too, slimeball, Selena thought, glancing around, anticipating areas of possible threat.

"I was hoping for a meeting place more private, as before," Selena said. *And more open, like a parking lot.* Less chance of being trapped or taken hostage.

"So do they," he said, waving a hand at the door where another customer arrived. *La Serpiente* shifted in his chair and smiled at him. No fangs. But the teeth were bleach white and evenly spaced like the military tombstones that paraded on both sides of her brother Antonio's grave.

"And when did you start using bodyguards?" Selena asked, lifting her chin at the stern woman and the bald goon in the V-shaped beard and black T-shirt standing beside the seated Snake. The man's hungry eyes scanned her up and down. A phone blinked in his ear. A Beretta gleamed from his belt.

"Since I could afford them," The Snake answered. "Business has been good, and when business is good, people try to take advantage of you. I'm sure you won't. Let's see what you brought for me today. But first —"

He cocked his head, a signal. "Rosita! *Búscala.*"

The copper-cheeked woman with peroxide hair and gang tattoos stepped forward to search Selena for weapons or a wire.

Selena stuck out her arms, crucifix-style. “I was already searched outside by the door guard.”

The Snake smiled. “I know. I like to be sure.”

Rosita circled behind her. She ran her calloused hands up Selena’s black jeans, ankles to hips, rubbed her back and belly, patted her sides and chest, lingering there. When she stepped away, she whispered “Nice shoes” in Selena’s ear with an envious look at her red open-toed Espadrille wedge sandals. The woman’s teeth were streaked and cracked. Meth-head. It was bigger than heroin or weed in the Midwest now, smuggled across the border or made on remote farms where the ingredients were easily available. “It’s in her bra,” Rosita announced in a gravelly smoker’s voice.

“I also keep my passport there when I travel to see The Barracuda in Oaxaca,” Selena said.

The Snake leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “Did you see him last week as you promised? What does he think of my little business proposal?” he asked.

It wasn’t so little. He wanted to be the Mexican cartel kingpin’s Chicago — and hence Midwest — distributor.

“The fact that I’m here should tell you,” Selena said.

He smiled, satisfied. “Tell me again: does he really look like a barr—”

“Yes,” Selena said, jumping on the question too soon. Did it make her seem nervous? “Little teeth, always showing. Breathes through his mouth. Eyes widely set, so they look like they are on the sides of his head. He says he can see all around him and no one can take him by surprise.”

“Another thing we have in common,” he said, closing his eyes. The snake eyes tattooed on his eyelids made him look awake and prepared to lunge. No one would dare assassinate him in his sleep.

He opened his eyes and curled his lip, a sign that she had passed the test. Why was he testing her? Didn’t he trust her after two

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walkaway buys, the \$50,000 flashroll, the dinner and that dance with his cold hand in the small of her back?

“Here’s what he has for you to sell,” Selena said, slipping two fingers down her scalloped blouse and extracting the one-ounce sample. “If you do well with the first shipment, he says he will consider a partnership. You have the down payment?”

The Snake snapped his fingers, and Rosita produced a thick roll of greenbacks. She waved it in the air.

Selena flicked the baggie in The Snake’s direction. The burly thug beside him snatched it in mid-flight. The man’s belt creaked when he leaned over. He snapped open the ziplock bag, licked a fingertip, and dipped it in.

“*Chocolate de Fumanchú*,” the bodyguard confirmed.

Low-life amateur, Selena thought. No professional tests it like that anymore. Must be watching *Miami Vice* reruns.

“I never test heroin myself,” The Snake apologized, “not after what happened to Don Caballo last year in Colombia.”

“Forgive me, *señor*,” Selena said, “but it was Venezuela.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed with palms up in mock dismay at his error. “But of course. How could I forget?”

Test two over. Something wasn’t right. She held out her hand, waiting for the money.

“The poor man,” *La Serpiente* said. “I’ve heard tell that Fortune, as they call her, is a drunken and capricious woman and, worse still, blind; and so she doesn’t see what she’s doing, and doesn’t know whom she is casting down or raising up.”

Always with the Cervantes quotes. Especially when he was edgy. *Does he suspect something? Is he provoking me with that “woman” line? Is he stalling?* “You did not forget his terms, I trust?” she said, tapping her foot.

“I remember,” he said.

That was good. There was no need to belabor the details. *Get in, get out.* “Good,” Selena said, extending her palm. “I’ll take my payment and be on my way.”

The bodyguard pressed his palm to his earpiece and then whispered something close to his boss's ear. The Snake's pupils widened.

"One last thing, Selena, *mi corazón*," he said, dwelling, it seemed, on the *s* sounds.

A new condition? Test three? *Play impatient. Balk and threaten to back out.* She rested her palm on her hip. "Sí, what is it?"

"That truck pulling in — is it my delivery already?"

Rosita pulled back a window shade. "It's just the *Supermercado* produce delivery truck for the *cantina*."

"They already came early this morning," *La Serpiente* said, scowling. He pointed to Selena's feet. "Take off your shoes."

Madre de Dios, he knows. She shook a finger at him, irritated. "¿*Qué cochinada es esta?* Give me the money now or the deal is off."

"The shoes, *por favor*."

The bodyguard drew his Beretta.

Aimed at her.

She kicked off her shoes.

The door splintered open. The room blazed white, and the blast from the Magnum 470 flash grenade hurled Selena to the floor.

"Police! Search warrant!" Del Bragg bellowed. "Down on the floor! Down! Down!" The agents behind him, in helmets and Kevlar armor, rushed in and dropped to their trained positions. Selena sprawled on the planks, covering her head. The Snake's bodyguard squeezed two shots into the air before Bragg did a Rambo-roll and unloaded fifteen rounds from his M-4 into him. Cartridges flew. Hot grenade shards skittered across the floor. Women shrieked "*¡La migra! ¡La migra!*" as the fabric of the hanging blankets crackled into flames and smoke filled the room.

Rosita, on hands and knees, grabbed Selena's sandals and scrambled for the back door. An officer yelled at her to halt. She shook a shoe at him in scorn. He mistook it for a pistol. He pumped five deafening rounds into her.

The snapping fire raced across the blankets and leaped to the walls like a ravenous animal. Wailing women stumbled outside,

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sheets to their breasts, kerchiefs over their mouths and noses. Agents coughed despite their masks, hauling men outside with their arms twisted behind them, shouting in badly accented Spanish.

Bragg seized Selena by the arm, yanked her to her feet, and hauled her outside. Once in the open, he jerked her arm up behind her to the middle of her back and shoved her toward the supermarket truck, barking, “You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent —”

“Not so hard, Del,” Selena said through gritted teeth. “You’re hurting me.”

“Gotta make it look real, dollface,” he grunted in her ear. He resumed his mock arrest. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney —”

Bragg pushed her past The Snake who was belly-down in the dirt with an officer’s boot in the small of his back and with his head jerked up by the hair. Another agent waved a search warrant in his grimacing face.

“This is your fault, Selena!” The Snake hissed. “I’ll get you for this!”

“It’s your fault!” she screamed at him. “*¡Puerco! Pig!*”

“*¡Putá! Whore! ¡Traidora!*” he spat back.

“Shut up,” the officer said, and rammed his M16 stock into his ribs.

The paddy wagons screeched up, although at a farther distance than planned. The barracks were engulfed now. Smoke billowed from the windows and long tongues of flame licked the tarpaper roof, spitting an acrid smell.

“Get these rats out of here!” Bragg ordered, still gripping Selena’s wrist like a vise below her shoulder blade. “Let the others go. We got what we came for. And get those pickup trucks out of the way before the gas tanks blow.”

“Local fire on their way, sir,” an agent called with a phone to his ear.

“Good.” He pushed Selena behind the delivery truck and released her.

She rubbed her throbbing elbow, took two steps and dropped to one knee, gulping for fresh air. Nausea writhed in her belly.

Bragg stripped off his helmet and face mask. "You all right, Selena?"

"Sure, Del."

She wasn't. She fought off dizziness.

"Let me get you some water."

Selena wiped bitter spit from her mouth. She watched Bragg open the truck cabin's creaking door and toss his helmet on the seat. She tried to swallow, but her throat burned from stomach acid and smoke. She levered up, steadied herself against the truck, and faced the Quonset hut barracks that were now completely consumed in flames. The blurry heat prickled her cheeks.

That was a close call. Too close.

She back-fisted the truck in anger. The evidence was burning. Maybe the recording would be enough. They might have gotten him for prostitution or human trafficking if Del had detained the women. Not our jurisdiction, he'd say. That's for the ICE guys or the FBI. *Gringo idiota.*

Bragg twisted off the cap of a water bottle and handed it to her. She took an eager mouthful, rinsed, and spat.

"You know what I think?" Bragg chortled. "I think he wasn't interested in the sample at all. He wanted to hold you hostage. To see what you were worth to The Barracuda. He didn't know about the mic in the shoes. He just wanted to keep you from running away. He was probably going to ask for your clothes next. Don't thank me for busting in a little early."

"Fine, I won't," she said, wiping her mouth.

"We got everything. The mic in the shoes worked good."

She squinted at the roiling flames.

"I liked those shoes," she said.

CHAPTER 3

Selena slipped into the faux leopard slingbacks and examined the fall of her pinstriped pantsuit leg over them in the hallway mirror when the doorbell chimed promptly at 1500 hours. She brushed away a little excess powder from the corner of her sienna eyes and primped her mouth, the lip liner two shades darker than the magenta gloss to match her caramel complexion. *Always dress so you will not be mistaken for the help, mija*, she heard her mother saying. But no makeup could ever soften the Aztec hatchet of a nose buried in the middle of her face. She leaned to the peephole from the side, an old precaution, and hitched her breath.

She never expected to see Del Bragg with a priest in tow. But there beside him on the front stoop stood a stout cleric wearing a Roman collar, a rumpled raincoat turned up against a spitting drizzle, a silver halo of hair, and a cherubic smile. Complete with a folded umbrella at his side, he might have been G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown. She opened the door.

"*Buenos días, Señorita Selena,*" the priest said with a courteous bow. Panamanian accent. But he didn't look Latin at all, not with those rosy cheeks. "I'm Father Johnny Sullivan, the new pastor at Saint Mary's parish," he said. "Glad to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

She returned the greeting with the little curtsy her godmother taught her to do when meeting a man of the cloth. "How do you do, Father?" she said, ill at ease.

"Hey, Selena," Bragg said, ogling her up and down with his ice-blue eyes. "How the heck are ya?"

"Del, you haven't changed," she said.

Still muscular in his fifties, in a sport jacket too small for him beneath an open trench coat, he stood off to the side, chest out, facing

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her shoulder to shoulder at a safe distance, as agents are trained to do. He kept his leg stance wide with the gun-side foot back for balance. He carried a briefcase, not the usual M-4 he cradled when approaching someone's front door.

"You neither," Bragg said. "Still into the shoes, huh?"

She lifted her three-inch heel for a full effect. "Giuseppi Zanottis."

Bragg tugged up his trouser leg. "Sears Roebucks. Can we come in now? It's cold out here."

"Sure." She swung the door fully open.

"Nice place," Bragg said, elbowing past her and lifting his square jaw to survey the living room, as though searching it. "You sure you don't share it with what's-his-name — Steve?"

"Reed," she corrected him. "And no, he has his own place in Chicago. He stays in his brother's three-season hunting cabin when he's visiting out here."

"See, Padre?" Bragg said, shrugging off his coat. "I told you she was clean as they come."

The priest dropped his umbrella into the hallway stand. "I hope this isn't a bad time for you," he said while Selena gathered their coats.

"Not at all," she said. But was it ever a good time when a priest showed up unannounced at the door with an officer? The last time it happened, a spit-polished sergeant held his hat to his heart and announced *We regret to inform you that Antonio —*

"Naturally, you must wonder why I'm here," the cleric continued. "I'm sorry if my presence has alarmed you. *Perdóneme, por favor.*"

"There is nothing to forgive," Selena assured him, feeling the heat in her neck. Priests were better than cops at reading faces. She indicated seats in the living room, dropped coats in the study, and offered coffee. No one wanted any.

"Mr. Bragg thought it best for me to come to explain things first-hand, myself," Father Sullivan offered, settling into the couch and eyeing the collection of framed *santos* and *virgencitas* cluttering the end table.

"I thought this was about The Snake," Selena said.

"Yeah, Selena, it is, partly," Bragg said. "But something's been happening at Reverend Johnny's church that may be connected to The Snake. Go ahead, Padre."

The priest steepled his fingers. "You are familiar, I imagine, with *El Día de Los Muertos*? The Day of the Dead?"

"Of course," Selena replied. "Major Mexican holiday, November 2. My family always made a memorial altar in the house for our ancestors. My mother, aunts, and godmother spent days baking sweet breads and making the marigold garlands for it."

She decided not to mention she still kept the *tradición*. In the spare bedroom upstairs, she had set up the annual shrine with framed photos of her mother, her father, and her brother Antonio set on fringed linen, surrounded by potted mums, white votive candles, and a tray of sweetbreads and sourdough *pan de muerto*. She'd left a trail of marigolds from Antonio's grave to her home to help him find his way, as her mother made her promise to do.

"Then you also know of The Book of the Deceased kept in the church?"

"Same as the Book of the Dead, right?" Selena asked. "The ledger put out before All Souls' Day where people write the names of relatives who have passed away so they can be prayed for? Sure. I write in my mother's and brother's names every year." *Ever since Antonio died in that car accident in Germany. Drugs. Always drugs. Where was God then, Father?* "So what does this have to do with The Snake?"

"He's coming to that," Bragg said. He fidgeted. His shoulder holster bulged against his blazer.

"I did not recognize some of the names written in the church's Book of the Deceased," the priest said, "since I have been here only since August, when Father Brian retired. You knew him?"

"Yes," she replied. "And Father Ray."

The priest shook his head. "A very strange case. You had a part in it?"

She held up her thumb and index finger, nearly pinched. "*Un poquito*." Just a little.

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Bragg inspected his fingernails. “Can we get on to this case?”

“*No hay ninguna prisa, Padre,*” Selena said quietly. “*Tome su tiempo.*” There’s no need to hurry. Take your time.

Bragg wrinkled his nose, annoyed as usual when Selena spoke Spanish in his presence. He’d never bothered to learn more than *show your hands, get down, and you’re under arrest.*

“I read the police report in the newspaper and the obituaries religiously,” the priest continued, forcing a little smile. “Very unhappily, that is how I often learn someone in the parish is in trouble with the authorities. I noticed that some names in the newspaper were names in the Book of the Deceased.”

He stopped. Looked for a reaction.

Selena tilted her head. “What’s so unusual about that?”

“The names in the newspaper — names of men who were murdered — appeared in the Book of the Deceased *before* they were dead.”

Bragg butt in. “Put another way, when the names were written in the book, they weren’t dead yet.”

“Are you sure they are the same men?” Selena questioned. “Latino names can be — well, so similar. And undocumented immigrants use many different names to stay hidden.”

“I am aware of that,” the priest said. “But I noticed that the men turned up dead in the exact same order they were listed in the book. That’s when I went to the police about it.”

“That’s how I got involved,” Bragg said. “County sheriff’s department ran a HUMP card for each name and that generated a ViCAP alert in our office since the names matched ones in our database. As soon as I checked AFIS to confirm identities, I called the locals.”

The priest gave a little shrug and a smile. “I’m afraid I don’t speak your language.”

“Sorry, Father,” Selena said. “He means that Sheriff’s deputies filled out a form with the names and submitted them to an FBI computer database called the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program.

It looks for patterns in unsolved homicides, to see if any are connected. Agent Bragg checked the names with the FBI's Automated Fingerprint Identification System."

"And that's how I knew for sure nearly everyone listed in that book had a run-in with The Snake at some point. You know: an enforcer makes off with a stash for his private use, a runner turns into an informant. Sheesh, I paid them better than he did."

"It's a hit list," Selena whispered.

"Looks like it," Bragg continued, brow lowered, unaccustomed to being interrupted. "Clearly, he's peeved, although why he'd warn them in advance of a hit and give them time to scoot is beyond me."

"It intimidates them and enhances his reputation," Selena said. "And they prove how *macho* they are by staying, not running. No *Latino* would lose face that way. So who is on the list?"

"I brought the book," Bragg said, bending to his briefcase. "You'll recognize the names. Here, put these gloves on."

Selena tugged on the cotton gloves as Bragg lifted out a plastic evidence bag holding a cloth-bound book. It looked like an over-size accountant's ledger, hunter green with a tan leather trim. Selena took the labeled bag, unzipped it, slid the book out, and laid it across her lap. She pinched the black satin bookmark and opened to that page.

The left side for the previous year was filled with two columns of handwritten names below a stylized Old Testament Scripture passage: "*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.*" On the right side, the current year's names were penned, by different hands, below a New Testament verse: "*Jesus Christ is the firstborn of the dead.*"

Selena traced her index finger down the list. Along the way were family names in groups of three or four, bearing the same surnames — deceased parents, grandparents, siblings: James Fletcher. Esther Fletcher. Toby Fletcher. Sam Millard. Sadie Millard. Sandy Millard. Henry, George, and Vivian Castlebaum. Jan Stemke. Laura Stemke. Everett Wilson. Then there were the last nine names, all Latino, all

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different. They were scrawled in the same aggressive majuscule with oversize capitals.

Victor Velásquez
JJ García
Pinky Lee Hernández
Juan José López
Franky Rodríguez
Roberto Batista
Eddie Castro
Oscar Orozco

“Now you see why you need to be part of this,” Bragg said. Selena bit her lower lip as a chill slithered up her spine. The last name in the list was hers.