

With Intentions of Torture

By Michael R. Colangelo

El Anguila slid another knife from the drawer between the stove's burners. A single thread of thin black smoke rose from its blade and dissipated into the air. The trailer stunk of heated metal. An acrid, electrical burning smell that stung the back of Charlie's throat. He coughed and strained against the duct tape that *El Anguila's* goons had secured his wrists and ankles to the chair with. For his troubles, the ugly one with the Madonna tattoo across his back yanked his head back, and the other one, the Texan, flicked him across the Adam's apple with thumb and forefinger – hard. Charlie choked, and then coughed some more.

With effeminate flourish, *El Anguila* drew the first knife from the burner – the butter knife. Its steel glowed dull orange in the fist of his asbestos-clad glove, and he waved it in the air across Charlie's line of vision. The heat that radiated from the metal curled his eyelashes and tightened the skin at the corners of his eyes. This close, the scent of *El Anguila*, a mix of perfumed water and opium fumes, overpowered everything else in the kitchenette. It caused his eyes to water.

He'd "met" *El Anguila* two days previous at a Texas Hold 'Em basement poker tournament over in San Antonio. Charlie had cleaned him out - \$12,000 in less than fifty minutes. When it happened, *El Anguila* had been the joke of the room, trotting down the stairs in a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots, wearing his sunglasses indoors, flanked by his goons like he was important enough to warrant their presence. Charlie had enjoyed taking all of his money. Keyword: *had*. Now, tied to a chair in his own trailer, *El Anguila* wasn't very comical anymore.

"Look, I already spent the money," said Charlie. His voice trembled; a sheen of sweat broke out just beneath his hairline.

"So? You think dumping twelve grand in a loaded game of poker matters to me?"

It did, of course. Otherwise they wouldn't be there. No matter how blustery *El Anguila* got, his intentions of torture were quite clear. Charlie could tell when a guy was bluffing or not. *El Anguila* wasn't, not this time. A guy like him would probably torture him for hours – just because he could. Charlie would need to speak fast and speak well if he wanted to come out of this without a mass of scar tissue for a face. He needed to be careful. So careful.

"Look! I'd give it back if I had it," Charlie said. "I was so full of myself. I went and dropped it at the track. I lost it all, man."

That much was true – almost. The money was sitting with a bookie down just north of the Riverwalk, in a safe box no doubt. Charlie had let it ride on the Seahawks-Lions game, a twelve-point underdog spread. He'd clear \$180,000 if his gut was right. That was enough to get a car, an apartment, and far enough away from the city that he'd never have to look back. Of course, first he would need to survive *El Anguila*, and that situation wasn't looking too good.

"So?" *El Anguila* repeated. "I guess I'm out twelve grand. I'm going to enjoy exploring your pain this afternoon." He ran the flat edge of the knife along Charlie's shirt collar. Fibers burned and melted away in a flash of dancing blue flame.

"Wait! Wait a second!" Charlie quivered. *Don't panic. Don't panic.* "I can get it back! I can pay it back!"

El Anguila frowned and paused, his gloved hand poised the knife before Charlie's throat. "And how do you intend to do that? Not that I care, but I'm curious."

"I've got a payout waiting for me – ten grand. There's enough in my account to make up the difference. I'll get it back to you tonight!"

"You heard of *Allegro Mariachi*, Charlie?"

Allegro Mariachi – the S&M club – a gay one too. It figured. Charlie nodded.

"I'll be there tonight. All night. And I'll be waiting for you and my money." *El Anguila* backed away and threw the hot knife into the kitchen sink. It hissed noisily as the blade made contact with wet aluminum. "Later, Charlie." He nodded at the Texan, and on cue, the man placed a cowboy boot into Charlie's sternum, tipping the chair backwards and sending it crashing to the linoleum. Then they left, leaving him tied to the chair on his back.

The second knife continued to heat on the stove.

Three hours later, having untied himself and cleaned up the trailer, Charlie found himself, hands buried deep in the pockets of his jacket, out the front of Perez's apartment – a shitty one-bedroom flat on the second floor of a strip mall complex. Perez, piece of shit that he was, told folks that he worked out of the home. Instead, he skimmed off bets to pay the telephone, gas bills, and the stripper tabs. Charlie was puzzled why a guy like Perez hadn't run into a guy like *El Anguila* yet. He wondered how a guy like Perez stayed alive and kept a pretty face conducting business the way he conducted business.

He crossed the street and slipped into the narrow stairwell that led to Perez's apartment. Slung over one shoulder was a black duffle bag. Inside, a roll of duct tape, a host of surgical tools, and a portable

blowtorch awaited his touch, and, more importantly, waited to touch Perez.

He ascended the staircase, carefully stepping over a sleeping homeless man in the upper corridor. He rapped on Perez's door – Unit 2.

There was the sound of movement within, a string of muffled curses were uttered, and then Charlie could sense Perez's presence behind the steel-reinforced door. He heard the peephole shutter swing up, and moments later heard the locks and deadbolts come undone.

Perez opened the door. He was small and graying in a wife-beater and a well pressed pair of slacks. He held a burning cigarette between a pair of yellowed fingers and regarded Charlie with black, too-small, too-closely set eyes. His face was a blank slate; impossible even for Charlie to read. He didn't recognize him, or pretended not to recognize.

"You remember me?" asked Charlie.

"Yeah," said Perez. He didn't move or gesture that Charlie was welcome back inside the apartment. He was already uneasy. It made sense. Typically, when a client dropped a large amount of money into his hands and came back later the same day, it meant they'd gotten cold feet and wanted their cash back. Or that the first visit was just to case the place and the second was the murder/rape/robbery portion of the transaction. Normally, Perez had Carlo on the couch for protection, but Carlo had met a girl and liked her company more than he liked Perez. Perez couldn't blame him for that.

"Can I come in?" said Charlie. Perez shook his head – no. Charlie wasn't welcome until after the game on Sunday, and only then if he actually beat the spread.

"Can I ask a favor, at least?"

Perez continued to stare, but Charlie caught something in his body language – the slight turn inward of his torso, eyes flashing nervously. He shook his head at Charlie once again and moved to shut the door in his face. Charlie, by reflex, blocked the swinging door with the blade of his foot, stepped forward, and swung the duffle bag underhand at Perez. The bricks he'd placed in the bottom of the bag did the trick. The bag crashed into the underside of Perez's chin, knocking him backwards, clearing the doorway. Charlie stepped into the apartment, sucker-punching Perez and then bringing the duffle bag crashing down across the top of the bookie's head. When Perez slumped forward, seized by a fit of coughing, Charlie unzipped the bag, grabbed the roll of duct tape, and tackled him to the cheap carpeting.

The struggle was over quickly. Perez was no match for him and in no time, Charlie had him bound by the wrists and ankles and writhing feebly on the living room carpet. Charlie stood and rubbed

the spot on his cheek where Perez had clawed him ineffectively with chewed finger stubs. He gave the old man a stiff kick in the ribs and had a look around the place.

It was a dump of course. Everything – furniture, kitchen appliances, and curtains were all at least thirty years out of date. Perez still had rabbit ears on the TV and a shag rug dominated the bedroom in vivid neon orange. Everything in the place was covered in a film of desert-dust and yellow nicotine residue. It was as if Perez hadn't left the apartment since the early 80's. When he paced back to Perez, the old man had stopped struggling and lay limp on the carpet.

"Where's my money, Perez?"

Perez remained motionless, so Charlie hoofed him a couple of more times in the ribs and took a second pass through the apartment. This time he tore into the place, opening drawers and dumping their contents on the floor, sweeping piles of dishes from kitchen cupboards, smashing lamps, and otherwise destroying anything he could get his hands on. When he was done, he stood over Perez and screamed in his face. Then he took the surgical case and blowtorch from the duffel bag.

"I got something you'll like! In the bedroom closet! You'll like it!" Perez blurted when he saw the tools, eyes-wide.

Out of everything in the apartment that Charlie could have smashed, tipped over, dumped out, or broken through, he had somehow missed the bedroom closet door. He remembered with a dim, primal awareness that he had spotted the narrow, plywood door built of horizontal wooden slats while tearing Perez's curtains into worthless strips of cloth, but he must have forgotten it caught in the moment of gleeful destruction.

He went back into the bedroom and pulled on the closet door. It held fast, so Charlie balled his hands into fists and pistoned his arms, crashing through the cheap balsa paneling. There was no money inside, but there was a girl. She was tied to the narrow steel coat rack by her wrists – naked.

Perez, or somebody, had wrapped her tightly in shrink wrap. The plastic wound about her ankles, up her legs and past her hips, across her breasts and around her upraised arms. Under the distorted plastic, bruise patterns shimmered a fresh purple on old, faded yellow. A strip of duct tape had been slapped horizontally over her mouth, and her blue eyes fluttered open at Charlie and pleaded with a mixture of fear, pain, and surprise. The closet was otherwise empty.

Blonde hair, blue eyes, trendy barbed wire tattoo patterned around one bicep. Probably some sort of shooting target inked on the small of her lower back too. She certainly wasn't a local, probably a tourist. Drugged, kidnapped – now used as a sort of interchangeable

currency on both sides of the border. She was fresh too, and lucky. The prettier the girl, the shorter the lifespan, in Charlie's experience.

Carefully, he propped her on one shoulder and undid the nylon cord that secured her to the rack bar. That's why Perez didn't want to let him in. He placed her on the mattress where she flopped and wriggled like a fish. He climbed onto the mattress with her and pinned her in place by straddling her hips.

"Shhhhh," Charlie warned. "Or I'll put you back in the closet."

She went still, but Charlie could feel her muscles tense like coiled steel beneath him. He hesitated and wondered if freeing her was a good idea. It probably wasn't. Maybe Perez was into this kind of thing, and she was really a pro. Maybe if he cut her loose, *he'd* wind up in the closet. But still, there was a certain look in her eyes; a certain way the sheeting bound her that made Charlie doubt she and Perez were co-conspirators at any level. Besides, consensual or not, she was probably worth roughly twelve grand, maybe more.

He gripped the plastic wrapping with both hands and tore her loose. Freed, she kicked at him and then bounded off the mattress, curling up fetal on the floor. He prodded her with his foot, and she released a wracking sob, pushing her face farther into the carpeting. Sighing, he turned and exited the bedroom, careful to shut the door behind him. There just wasn't enough time to dispense counseling advice right now. *El Anguila* and his hot knives lay heavy on Charlie's mind.

He returned to the living room and booted Perez. "Where's my money, Perez?"

Perez gestured back towards the bedroom with his head. "There's your money. I bought her. I got nothing until Monday, when the bets come in."

Charlie shook his head and picked the blowtorch from his bag. He reached into his pocket and found his Zippo. "Friday's too late, Perez."

He lit the torch. "This part is going to suck."

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They drove along the highway in silence. Charlie was at the wheel, his left hand heavily bandaged, its fabric clotted with blood. He'd managed to keep Perez alive for forty minutes, then the scalpel had slipped, and he sliced himself from palm-to-forearm, ending the festivities rather abruptly. Beside him, the girl from the closet stared out the passenger-side window. She wore Perez's clothing – an ugly yellow-green collared shirt and a pair of brown trousers circa 1980.

Her mouth silently counted each telephone pole that they passed on the side of the road.

They'd be arriving at *Allegro Mariachi* soon, and although Charlie didn't have *El Anguila's* cash, he hoped she'd suffice in its place. It hardly mattered, he suspected that *El Anguila* didn't much care who was tied down to that kitchen chair.

There was a saying, a literary quote maybe by Shakespeare, about paying with a pound of flesh. Charlie was never much of a reader, but he sure did gamble.

He turned on the radio and reclined in the car's seat. The ride might as well have been a comfortable one. Comfort was important. The chips on the table weren't made of plastic this time. All in, as they said – possibly for the last time.

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