The Psychic Barista

The Brown Bean Coffee Shoppe

— SAMPLE CHAPTER —

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Black Gold

WHEN SAMANTHA AND David opened up in the morning, they found a note from Marge taped to the register. The note said that a shipment of coffee beans had been delivered to the stockroom. David had ordered from a local importer so that the Brown Bean could provide its customers with the freshest ground coffee possible. He set up the register for the new day, while Samantha wandered into the stockroom to check out the delivery.

She entered the storage area and saw two bags on the floor marked “Café de Oro Importers.” Sam gasped as a translucent figure suddenly materialized, seemingly from behind the coffee bags. A gaunt man in tattered work clothes reached out toward her. Sam quickly backed away, reached for the switch, and flicked on the light.

The ghost disappeared.

Shaken, Sam returned to the front counter and busied herself with minor tasks, her mind wrestling with what she had just seen or imagined.

Later in the day, Georgiana arrived, and Samantha shared her strange encounter.

“The ghost of a farmworker, perhaps? But what was a ghost doing in a coffee bean bag?” Georgiana sipped on her latte, her brow furrowing.

“I wouldn’t say he was in the coffee bag, but maybe his spirit was somehow connected to it. The bag said it came from Colombia.”

Georgiana was thoughtful for a moment. “But why would he try to communicate with you?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Samantha replied.

“Do you think we should ask Detective Johnson?” Georgiana asked.

“What can he do about it?” Sam asked. “Whatever happened to this person, it was probably in South America.”

“You’re right. He probably can’t help. I wonder who would listen to us? And what would we tell them? We saw a ghost in a coffee bag?”

After Georgiana left, Sam returned to the stockroom, turned out the light, and waited. Slowly, the apparition appeared once more.

"Who are you?" she asked. She listened and thought she heard a whisper.

"Soy Carlos Mendoza," the voice said. "¡Ayúdanos!"

It then faded away, leaving Samantha bewildered and wondering what she should do. She called Georgiana's number, but the call went to voicemail.

When Georgiana returned the call, Sam shared the ghost's name and what she thought she heard it say.

"I think *ayúdanos* means help us," Georgiana suggested. "Let's run this by Detective Johnson. It's way out of his jurisdiction, but I still want to find out what he thinks about all this. Maybe we won't mention the ghost."

Later that day, Georgiana reached Detective Ronald Johnson at his office.

"Do you know anyone with connections to Colombia?" she asked. "Specifically, the coffee trade?"

"How so?"

Georgiana thought about how to answer.

"It's about a likely victim of something, maybe murder … in Colombia. The name is Carlos Mendoza. It has some connection with a local coffee importer, Cafe de Oro."

"I won't ask about your source, but the connection to coffee, I can probably guess. Let me see what I can do."

Georgiana could almost hear the smirk on his face as he said it. At least he wasn't dismissing the question out of hand.

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A quick online check on slave labor and coffee plantations by the detective revealed a surprising amount of information. The Brazilian government rescued eighteen workers in slave-like conditions in a raid of one of the most extensive coffee plantations. Further research revealed similar conditions in neighboring Colombia, which is the third largest coffee exporter behind Vietnam and Brazil.

Johnson sent a text message to Marco Rossi, an old friend at Interpol, the agency that primarily facilitates communication and cooperation between law enforcement agencies of different countries.

A few minutes later, his phone buzzed.

"Hey, Ron, I got your text. What's this about an unofficial inquiry?"

Ronald sighed. "Thanks for the call, Marco. I'm checking out a tip involving a possible crime victim connected to a coffee plantation in Colombia."

"Of course, I can't officially help you with this, but you might want to ask Customs and Border Patrol about an importer in your area, named Café de Oro. That's all I can tell you, and don't tell them where you heard it."

There was that name again: Café de Oro.

Johnson glanced at his watch. It was getting late in the day. He drummed his fingers nervously on his desk before dialing the number of another old friend from the police academy. Agent Mike Sanders was with the Georgia office of Customs and Border Protection. After two rings, a familiar voice answered.

"Sanders here."

"Mike. It's Ron Johnson. Got a minute?"

"Hey, Ron, long time, man. What's up?"

Johnson lowered his voice and glanced at the closed door of his office.

"I need to ask you something off the record. I heard through the grapevine that you were looking into a local coffee importer, Cafe de Oro."

There was a pause on the line. "Okay, shoot. But let's keep it unofficial."

"Right. What can you tell me about their operations in Colombia? I'm working on a tip about one of the plantations, and a guy named Carlos Mendoza who might be a victim of something."

Sanders sighed. "Damn, Ron. I can't give you specifics, but I will say this – that importer has had our attention for a while now. There have been serious … rumors, let's say, about their labor practices."

"Any way you could pass that name by the authorities in Colombia?"

"Officially, no. Unofficially, let me see what I can do. The South American coffee trade is lucrative, at least for the two giant companies that control half the world market. Those on top sometimes refer to coffee as black gold. While global consumption of coffee has doubled in the last twenty years, workers may take home very little, often working under the threat of violence."

"I appreciate it, Mike. See what you can find. I owe you one."

Unknown to Detective Johnson, his call to Sanders had already set the wheels turning. Word passed quietly from Customs and Border Protection to contacts in Colombia, and from there to the National Police anti-trafficking unit.

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Word got back to Johnson's contact at Customs and Border Patrol, and Johnson answered his friend's call.

"Hey, Ron," Sanders said. "I just got a report on that import company. Colombian officials tracked down the name you gave me and raided the plantation early this morning, about as remote a place as you'll find down there. Eighteen workers came out of it. Malnourished, scared, but alive. There's one hard part: a worker named Carlos Mendoza didn't make it. Died trying to escape, not long before the raid. The plantation was the principal supplier for Café de Oro, so we shut down their import operations here. I appreciate the tip."

"I'm glad it worked out, Mike, and thanks for the information. I have some people here who will be glad to hear it."

* * *

It was late, but Johnson made a call to Georgiana.

"You might be interested to learn that Customs and Border Patrol shut down the import operations of Cafe de Oro. It turns out they were connected to a slave labor operation on a coffee plantation in Colombia."

Georgiana could not hide her relief and joy. "I'm glad it all worked out."

"I'm sure Samantha has to be involved in this some way, so you can let her know what happened. The bad part is, they'll probably have to find a new supplier."

Georgiana could be heard chuckling. "I'm sure that won't be a problem. Thank you, Detective. It's always nice to hear from you."

* * *

After hearing Georgiana's news, Samantha walked into the storeroom. She flicked off the light and called out.

"Carlos, if you're here, we heard you. They've been stopped."

There was no response from the ghost, but somehow Samantha knew her message got through.

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