

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Tatiana Pino's life as a target: poisoned at home, followed from church, cars set ablaze



Sergio and Tatiana Pino in an undated photo. CORTESÍA/ELAINE PALLADINO

When Tatiana Pino drove to church on a Sunday morning last month, federal agents say a man who'd been hired to follow her was close behind.

Ten miles away, an accomplice, Vernon Green, was parked in a truck outside her house with a gun, waiting for her return, agents said in charging documents.

After the June 23 services ended at Calvary Chapel Miami that morning, Pino drove back to her Pinecrest home alone. She was soon ambushed in an armed assault in a quiet Miami suburb in broad daylight.

As Pino pulled into her driveway, Green exited his truck and ran toward her, brandishing a gun, according to charging documents. Pino laid on the horn and floored the gas pedal, roaring into her backyard. After the commotion, Green fled — but not before pointing his pistol “inches away” from Pino’s adult daughter and ordering her inside, the documents allege.

For Pino, 55, the assault capped a five-year stretch of menacing and terrifying moments that friends say led her to a conclusion federal agents and prosecutors publicly confirmed last week: that her husband, the prominent Miami developer Sergio Pino, [was trying to kill her](#).



Tatiana and Sergio Pino in an undated photo at the Bath Club. *Miami Herald archives*

The 67-year-old businessman shot himself dead [on the morning of July 16](#) at the waterfront Coral Gables home the couple shared before their 30-year marriage ended in 2022, when Tatiana filed for divorce after doctors discovered fentanyl in her system. She left the hospital with a strong suspicion that her husband had been poisoning her, causing the health issues that had plagued her for three years.

It was an allegation she made behind closed doors in divorce testimony, but it also circulated in the Pinos’ high-powered social circle, a friend group that included U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, Florida Lt. Gov. Jeanette Nuñez and other prominent Miami Republicans. After police arrived at Tatiana’s home on June 23 to investigate the

gunman assault, multiple people spotted Rubio — whose wife, Jeanette, is close to Tatiana — among the friends there to offer their support.

Friends said the claims shared within the circle that Sergio was trying to kill Tatiana seemed too extreme for some, making last week's [disclosure of an alleged murder-for-hire plot](#) a moment of vindication for those who had suspected the worst.

“There was a lot of skepticism,” said state Rep. Alina Garcia, a Republican candidate for Miami-Dade elections supervisor who was friendly with both Pinos. “Sergio is a man who did a lot of good things.”

Investigators have now arrested nine men they say were recruited for the murder-for-hire plot orchestrated by Sergio. When FBI agents last week released charging documents against some of them, the papers included the statement that Tatiana “had been poisoned with fentanyl through the tampering of her prescribed medication.”

[READ MORE: ‘He just pointed a gun at me’: 911 call from Tatiana Pino’s house shows daughter’s terror](#)

The documents also alleged that Sergio was behind multiple scary moments for Tatiana since the divorce began.

For instance, the night before Tatiana Pino and her daughter Alessandra [were threatened at gunpoint last month](#), FBI agents said two of Sergio’s hired assailants had followed Tatiana to Key Largo, where she was meeting friends at the Baker’s Cay Resort. Security footage showed that while she was inside for a group dinner, the Dodge Ram that Green would use for the driveway ambush the next morning was in the Baker’s Cay parking lot, according to charging documents.

“This complex investigation was like a puzzle where some of the most important pieces were not fully in place until a short time ago,” FBI agent Jeff Veltri said in a June 17 press conference.



U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida Markenzy Lapointe, left, talks to reporters as FBI Miami Special Agent in Charge Jeffrey B. Veltri, right, stands by during a press conference to address developments in the Sergio Pino murder-for-hire investigation at FBI Miami Headquarters in Miramar, Florida, on Wednesday, July 17, 2024. Jose Iglesias jiglesias@miamiherald.com

Sam Rabin, Pino's criminal lawyer, said he could not give substantive responses to questions from the Miami Herald for this article, saying only, "The matters you reference are beyond any information or evidence I encountered during my representation of Mr. Pino."

After Pino's suicide, Rabin declined to address the FBI's allegations directly but said in a July 17 statement: "Although I have not seen any of the evidence that the government claims to have, the narrative that they are putting forth is contrary to the person and character of Sergio Pino."

Raymond Rafool, Tatiana's divorce lawyer, said this week that Tatiana was not granting interview requests.

Investigators said the plot against Tatiana Pino lasted five years, starting with poisoning in 2019 and ending with the gunman in her driveway.

In that time frame, the question of whether Sergio Pino was capable of harming his wife divided their social circle, friends of both said. Some close to Tatiana suspected early on that Sergio was behind her mysterious illness. Others in their orbit found it hard to believe the developer would hatch such a brazen plot.

Two close associates of Sergio's said it took [the FBI's June raid](#), in which agents first searched Sergio's home for evidence, and the revelations that followed for them to start seriously believing the accusations.

"I am amazed about the allegations against Sergio," one of them said in an interview days before the second raid where Sergio Pino took his own life. "I cannot comprehend it. If part of it is true, what would possess him to do these things? ... The whole thing is insane."

TRAPPINGS OF WEALTH

In divorce testimony, Tatiana said she and Sergio began dating while she was a senior at South Miami Senior High School, where she graduated in 1987.

She was a Future Homemakers of America member who kept a prayer journal and worked the cash register at her parents' neighborhood grocery store.

He was 12 years her senior and recently separated from his first wife. A rising star in Miami's real estate development world, he was cutting his teeth in a plumbing supply business he'd started with his father years after the family emigrated from Cuba. He was a regular at Tatiana's family's store, which was near his office.



Tatiana Linares in a 1986 South Miami Senior High yearbook photo, during her junior year. *South Miami Senior High yearbook*

Tatiana's parents, both Cuban immigrants, had some reservations about their daughter's new boyfriend, an older man who was in the midst of a divorce with two young children, she later recalled in a divorce deposition. Their courtship included trips to the Bahamas on Sergio's yacht and trips to Vail, at a time when, according to divorce records, his annual income topped \$1 million. He surprised her one night shortly before their wedding with a white Lexus.

After dating for about five years, Tatiana, 23, and Sergio, 35, married in a religious ceremony in front of hundreds of guests on May 2, 1992. Following a honeymoon at the St. Regis hotel in New York, the couple moved into a seven-bedroom waterfront house in Coral Gables that they sold six years later for \$2.4 million. They had two daughters, who are both in their 20s now.

As the years went on, Sergio founded Century Homebuilders, a company that would become the largest Hispanic-owned homebuilding group in the country. He would go on to become president of the influential Latin Builders Association and to lead lucrative commercial and residential projects throughout the region. Although he had scrapes with law enforcement as he amassed his wealth and built his reputation as a successful businessman, philanthropist and political donor in Miami-Dade County and beyond, he always managed to come out the other end largely unscathed.



Sergio Pino, president of Century Homebuilders, at the site of the residential community Century Park in West Miami-Dade on March 16, 2001. Hector Gabino *Staff*

In 2017, according to divorce filings, Tatiana discovered Sergio was having an affair with Nancy Pastor, who was then, according to her LinkedIn profile, marketing director of Century's Midtown Doral [residential complex](#). Pastor, 55, did not respond to a request for comment this week.

The discovery, which came after friends said Tatiana received an anonymous letter, did not end the marriage. Instead, the couple went to counseling. "I still wanted to try to work it out," Tatiana Pino later said in a deposition.

It would take an emergency visit to a Baltimore hospital after 30 years of marriage before she filed for divorce.

SHAKING, FAINTING, FOAMING AT THE MOUTH

In depositions, Tatiana Pino said her health began to take a mysterious nosedive in 2019 that baffled doctors. She started feeling nauseated and experienced strange tastes in her mouth. Then came episodes of shaking, fainting and even foaming at the mouth. In 2020, doctors were alarmed enough that they installed a pacemaker in her chest.

“I thought I was going to die,” she testified in a December 2023 deposition in her divorce case, describing a string of hospital stays that never produced a diagnosis, much less a cure. Doctors suspected heart issues or possibly epilepsy.

The illness dominated her life, with Tatiana describing a typical day where she would wake up in the morning and sit on the couch, just waiting for symptoms to flare up again. At one point, she was taking antidepressants to cope with the stress and frustration.

In February 2022, one of the couple’s daughters found her collapsed on the floor at the Cocoplum house, her face purple. About a month later, Tatiana went to Baltimore for an emergency appointment with a national epilepsy expert at Johns Hopkins University.

Blood work revealed a surprising diagnosis: significant levels of fentanyl, the potent opioid painkiller drug, in her system.

In a 2023 divorce deposition, she recalled her train of thought at the time: “There has to be an investigation. Because I was certainly not taking fentanyl.”

Her Hopkins doctors didn’t explicitly suggest foul play, but they urged her not to return to her old surroundings.

She moved out of the Cocoplum home she shared with Sergio and would file divorce papers that April.



The Cocoplum home of developer Sergio Pino in the Cocoplum area of Coral Gables, Florida, on Tuesday, July 16, 2024. PHOTO BY AL DIAZ adiaz@miamiherald.com

After she left, Tatiana said the symptoms that plagued her for three years vanished shortly after coming home, friends said. That was when she realized her marriage was “irretrievably broken,” she said in a divorce deposition.

Sergio wasn’t in Baltimore for the appointment that led to Tatiana’s suspicions. Instead, two of Tatiana’s confidantes — her younger sister Aurora Linares and best friend Lisa Lorenzo — had flown with her to Maryland.

The trip was another point of tension between Sergio Pino and Lorenzo. She had been sharing her suspicions with friends that Sergio was harming Tatiana since ambulances had rushed to Lorenzo’s house for a violent episode of food poisoning at a November 2019 “[Friendsgiving](#)” party that guests concluded was caused by Brussels sprouts that Tatiana brought.

Since then, Lorenzo had been aggressive in pushing the Pinos to seek better medical expertise to get to the bottom of Tatiana’s health problems — an effort that reportedly annoyed Sergio. One person familiar with a phone conversation

between him and Lorenzo ahead of the Johns Hopkins visit described him as questioning the need for the out-of-state consultation.

“He wanted to know why they were taking her all the way over there when she had good doctors at home,” said the person, a friend of Tatiana’s who did not want their name used.

Garcia, the state representative, said the friction between Lorenzo and Sergio Pino was well known.

“There was a war between him and Lisa Lorenzo,” Garcia said. “I truly believe that because of Lisa Lorenzo, Tatiana is alive.”

Lorenzo, who has had Tatiana [as a guest](#) on her “Faith with Friends” podcast, declined an interview request but said in a statement: “Jesus alone is responsible for Tatiana being alive. He’s protected her at least a dozen times.”

Tatiana filed for divorce on April 19, 2022, and purchased a six-bedroom home in Pinecrest for \$4 million the following month.

The house would be a target of the alleged plot a year later.

MULTIPLE ARSONS AND A HIT-AND-RUN

Michael Dulfo didn’t know Tatiana Pino at the end of 2022, but his iPhone had a photo of a piece of paper with her Pinecrest address written on it, according to investigators.

He lived in the same Miami apartment building as Bayron Bennett, a part-time employee of Sergio Pino who would help prepare the food and drinks when the couple was still married and heading out on Pino’s yacht, the 71-foot Century Star.

Investigators said that sometime in the second half of 2022, Bennett recruited Dulfo for a plot against Tatiana Pino and Linares, her sister.

Linares woke up sometime after 3 a.m. on Aug. 12, 2023, to see the family's Chevrolet Silverado engulfed in flames. A home surveillance camera picked up someone fleeing the scene.

As shocking as the sight was, it was also familiar. A year earlier, on July 2, 2022, investigators said someone snuck up to the home and set two other family cars aflame shortly after 3:30 a.m.

As the case against Sergio Pino and his alleged henchmen came together, investigators obtained records for Dulfo's cellphone. They found he had been using it in the area near the sister's home on July 2, 2022, around 3:30 a.m., and again around that time on Aug. 12, 2023. They also found that in the hours before the 2023 car arson, Dulfo had nearly a dozen calls with Bennett, and two more in the hours that followed. (Attorneys for Dulfo and Bennett, who have both pleaded not guilty, did not respond to requests for comment from the Herald last week.)

The alleged arson plot targeted Linares, who was both a defender of her sister and a nuisance to Sergio as the couple's marriage faced strain over his infidelity in its later years.

At Johns Hopkins, Linares had taken control of the medicine Tatiana brought with her from home and turned them over to law enforcement after they flew back into Miami, according to multiple friends familiar with the events. Charging documents said the federal Drug Enforcement Administration launched an investigation into the alleged poisoning several months later, in July 2022. That was about a year before the FBI said it started its probe of Sergio Pino in the fall of 2023.

The friends also relayed that Linares played a role in sinking Sergio's ongoing effort in the spring of 2022 to prove that his affair with Pastor was over. Linares told Tatiana that she had seen Sergio at Pastor's home around that time, a moment that came ahead of Tatiana filing for divorce, according to a recent filing by her lawyer.

Linares was “the same sister who saw [the] Husband at his girlfriend Nancy Pastor’s house before the filing of the divorce and consistently sticks up for Ms. Pino,” Tatiana’s divorce lawyer wrote in a July 5 court filing that referenced the arsons.

Linares declined an interview request from the Herald, citing the ongoing investigation.

Along with phone records, federal investigators used license-plate readers to piece together times when Tatiana Pino was stalked ahead of attacks. Law enforcement can tap an existing network of the devices, which are placed on top of traffic lights and keep a running log of license plates that pass by. Investigators can search the data to look for specific plates.

Using the plate readers, investigators zeroed in on Aug. 30, 2023, the date of a hit-and-run Tatiana Pino reported at her Pinecrest home. A Chevrolet Silverado registered to Dulfo was driving south on U.S. 1 at the same time that Tatiana was on the road heading home, according to a criminal complaint. Minutes later, she pulled into her driveway and a Home Depot truck parked outside went into reverse and slammed into her vehicle before zooming away, an incident recorded by a home-surveillance camera.

Investigators said Edner Etienne was the one driving the truck, and both he and Dulfo were at the Coconut Grove Home Depot earlier that day when it was rented. They also said Dulfo sent Etienne \$200 on Cash App less than an hour after the truck attack. Hours later, investigators said Dulfo tried to send another \$800, but the transaction didn’t go through.

Federal agents questioned Bennett in March and said he confessed that “he was asked to seek out individuals” to commit arson and a hit-and-run in the plot against Tatiana Pino.

Garcia, the state lawmaker, said that after the hit-and-run, she and other friends were increasingly convinced that Tatiana was in danger. Garcia said she placed calls to Pinecrest Village Manager Yocelyn Galiano to flag the incident for police and urge extra patrols around Tatiana’s house.

“I told her the seriousness of what had happened and how concerned we were with Tatiana’s safety,” Garcia said.

Nuñez, Florida’s lieutenant governor, also was active in getting local authorities to recognize the gravity of the truck collision. Jason Cohen, Pinecrest’s police chief, said this week that Nuñez called him shortly after the truck incident to brief him on the history of threats against Tatiana Pino, including the poisoning allegations and the torching of her sister’s cars.

“She wanted to make sure I was aware of the incident and that there was a history,” Cohen said. “For us to take it a little more seriously than a hit-and-run.”

He said it was a Pinecrest detective who tracked down the source of the rented Home Depot truck by cold-calling locations in the area. Shortly after that, he said, FBI agents took over the case.

RED HERRINGS BEFORE A RAID

Sergio Pino didn’t just recruit men to terrorize and harm his wife, investigators said: Part of the alleged plot was making himself look like a victim, too.

Five weeks after the divorce case started, he called 911 to summon police to his Cocoplum house with a terrifying tale: a drive-by shooting in one of Miami’s wealthiest neighborhoods.

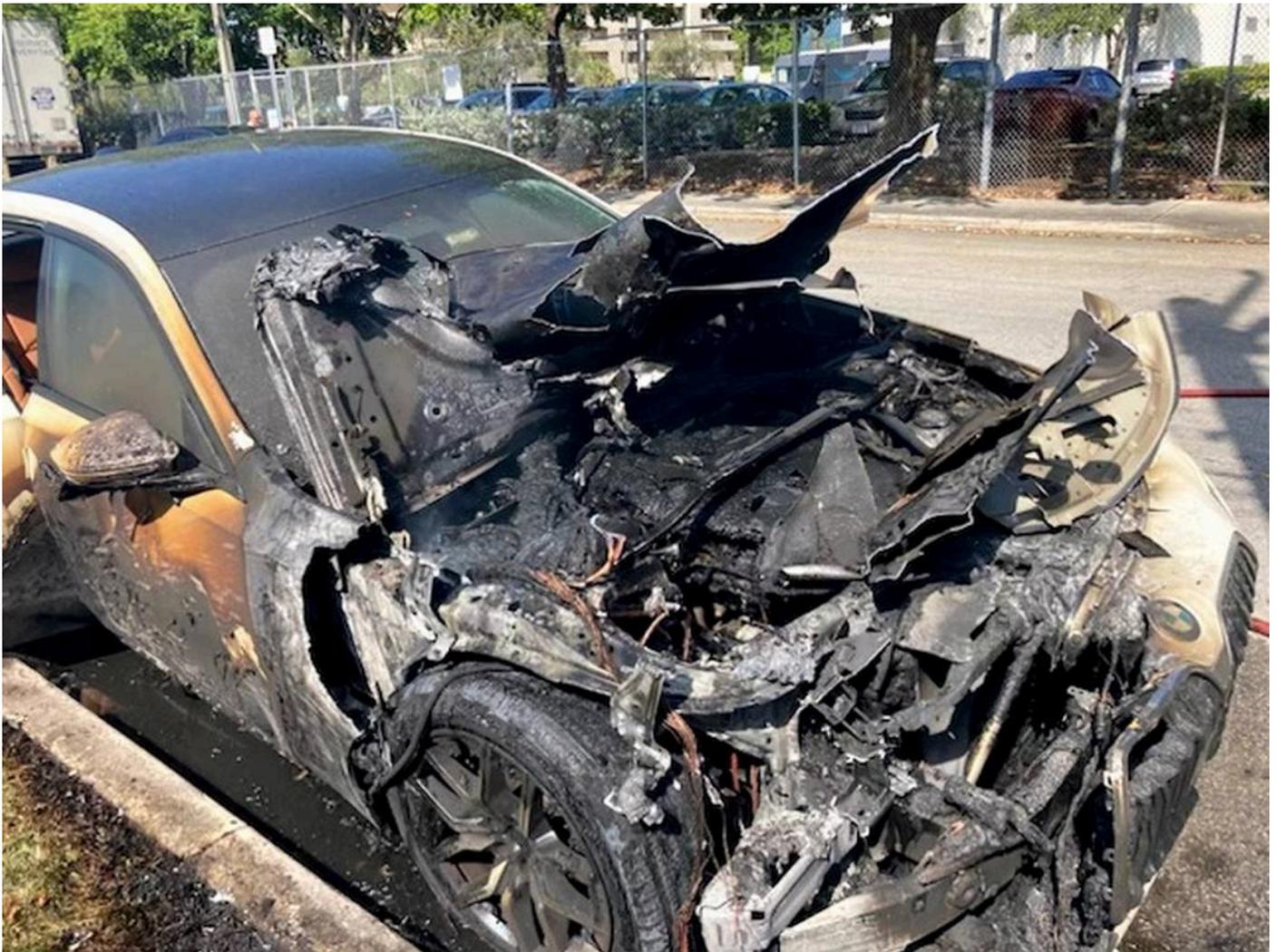


Sergio Pino reported a drive-by shooting at his Cocoplum house on May 22, 2022. *Courtesy of Frank Quintero Jr.*

Coral Gables police did find a bullet on a step and saw damage on a window from the apparent gunshot, according to a police report from the May 22, 2022, call. He also told officers about his recent divorce and said the drive-by followed a threatening call from someone stating: “You better settle with your wife.”

It was just the first of several examples that Sergio Pino shared of being menaced during the divorce. He testified that somebody vandalized his BMW in 2022 when it was parked in Doral and that police had responded to another BMW of his being torched in 2023.

Intercepted communication between two of the men charged in the plot against Tatiana Pino later showed them exchanging photos of one of Sergio's BMWs. In charging documents, agents wrote that their investigation had found Sergio Pino hired individuals to “burn his own car” on the same date Pino reported his torched BMW. They said he also solicited people to “shoot at his property.”



Sergio Pino reported that his white BMW was set on fire on Sept. 7, 2023, in front of an apartment building on the 800 block of Northwest 43rd Avenue in Miami. Courtesy of Frank Quintero Jr.

Friends of Tatiana said that weeks after the attack by the Home Depot truck, she received an anonymous letter with the apparent purpose of making her feel threatened and giving her someone to suspect other than Sergio. The letter told her to “Watch Out” for a nephew of Sergio’s who the friends said clearly had no role in the plot against Tatiana. Charging documents cite a threatening letter Tatiana received in the fall of 2023 but do not say it mentioned the nephew.

There is also no reference to the time Tatiana Pino was publicly accused of being a drug addict in an anonymous post on an obscure Spanish-language website, another apparent obfuscation.

Weeks after she left Baltimore with doctors' advice not to return home, an article published on a website called [ABCNoticias](#) cast Tatiana Pino as a drug abuser. With no sources cited or writer identified, the article claimed that Tatiana had been admitted to the hospital because of an apparent fentanyl overdose and that it was "not the first time this has happened." The item also tried to put the blame on Lorenzo, stating "it is possible that her friend was the one who supplies her with the drug." One reason cited by the publication: The friend's "attitude in the hospital was permanently confrontational and argumentative."

After allegedly hiring men to shoot at his home and torch his own car, Sergio also tried to suggest Tatiana's sister had set her own car afire.

In his divorce deposition in late 2023, he was asked who might be responsible for the vehicular arson outside the Linares home. "If I have to think of anybody who would burn her sister's car, if I have to guess, I guess it was her," Sergio said, according to the transcript. "Knowing them, knowing them. That's a guess. I'm not accusing her of anything."

Sergio also waved off the allegations against him in the deposition, including a question about whether he was involved in the Home Depot truck attack, which happened the same day as a key hearing in the divorce case.

"I don't do those things," he said in the Nov. 15, 2023, testimony.

The time period overlapped with when federal agents said Sergio was assembling the second team of men to kill Tatiana.

One of the men now charged with murder-for-hire, Fausto Villar, did roofing work for Sergio, according to prosecutors. In May, Sergio Pino submitted paperwork with the Miami-Dade Clerk of the Court listing Villar's wife's roofing company as the contractor handling the re-roofing at his Cocoplum house, a project that was still underway when agents went to arrest him on July 16.

In charging documents, investigators said Villar told an old prison buddy in October or November 2023 that a wealthy man had "contracted him to kill his

estranged wife.” Villar said the man had told him his wife wouldn’t settle for \$20 million and was pressing for half of the mogul’s fortune.

Charging documents said the prison buddy, Avery Bivins, recruited another defendant, Clementa Johnson, to assemble the team for a plot that eventually had Green pointing a gun at the Pinos’ daughter at Tatiana Pino’s home last month. Investigators said they used cellphone data to place Johnson outside Tatiana’s home and church on the morning of the attack by Green, who was captured on surveillance cameras in a Dodge Ram truck waiting for her return. Two days before that attack, investigators said, Villar and Sergio Pino were on the phone together nine separate times.

After he was arrested by federal agents, Johnson confessed to recruiting Green for the plot and said the two of them had followed Tatiana to Key Largo on June 22, according to charging documents.

An attorney for Bivins declined to comment on the case, and attorneys for Villar and Johnson did not respond to emails from the Herald. Green’s lawyer said he plans to put forth “a vigorous defense.”

As the FBI closed in on Sergio, Bivins spoke to agents on July 12. Three days later, agents listened to a call he had with Villar. The FBI had raided Sergio’s house for the first time weeks earlier, and Villar told Bivins he couldn’t get any more cash from Sergio. Charging documents said Villar had previously promised \$300,000 for killing Tatiana — \$150,000 for the hit and \$150,000 if it went “undetected.” Charging documents said only \$75,000 changed hands before the June 23 ambush in her driveway.

In charging documents, investigators said the date of the ambush wasn't random, as the Pinos neared a divorce-court hearing set for mid-July: "Law enforcement learned that Villar provided a deadline of June 24, 2024, to kill Victim 1, to ensure that she could not make the next divorce proceeding between her and Pino."

Miami Herald staff writer Jay Weaver contributed to this report.

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