

**THE JALAPENO MURDERS**

By

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*Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.*

—Paul Gauguin

For Erika and Randy.

## PROLOGUE

HOMICIDE DETECTIVE LANCE CERVANTES sat in his unmarked car. The house across the street was a simple one-level structure with a grass-less front yard. There was a fig tree with barren limbs growing near the wooden fence. The August evening was balmy, pink clouds loomed above the rooftops. Lance rolled down his window, he could hear Mexican music blaring in the distance. A man came out to the front porch. He lit a cigarette and leaned against the railing.

Lance took off his sunglasses, he concentrated on the man's face—it was dark and narrow, vulpine-looking. He had black hair that grew over his collar. There was a tattoo of a cactus flower etched into his left shoulder. He wore a goatee; gold-hoop earrings were embedded in his lobes.

Quietly, deliberately, Lance reached into the glove compartment, he pulled out a glossy four by six photo. It was him, Vincente Delgado, Mexican national, wanted for murder and rape. It took Lance a hundred and four investigative hours to find Vincente. He had prowled the streets of Tijuana, he asked questions in Los Angeles, and now, finally, in the heart of Santa Ana,

California he had found his man.

Lance made a call on his radio. Swat Team member Randal Moore answered.

“It’s Vincente,” Lance said.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Is he armed?”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“Is there anybody else in the house?”

“He’s alone.”

“We’re coming in through the back. You cover the front. Give us five minutes.”

A kid on a skateboard rolled by on the sidewalk, carrying a boom-box on his shoulder.

Lance watched him rattle his way down to the end of the street. When he turned back, Vincente was gone, the porch was empty.

Lance panicked. His heart raced. He swung open the car door and with his Glock in his hand he dashed across the street.

Suddenly it happened.

Vincente was kneeling behind the fence. He held a Ruger twenty-two automatic pistol

in his hand. The shots sounded like firecrackers. Four of the bullets buzzed by Lance's ear, the fifth one caught him squarely on the forehead. Lance staggered and wobbled, he fell to the ground. It felt like a ball peen hammer had cracked his skull open.

Lance gasped for air. He looked up. The pastel clouds drifting in the sky were strangely losing their shape, fading away. Objects wavered and grew dark. He writhed and groaned, blood ran down his face.

He thought for sure that he was dying.

## PART ONE

### 1

LANCE TRIED TO steady himself. He leaned against the door and waited for the vertigo to pass. The way he saw it, he was lucky. He could have been driving on the freeway or walking up the stairs, instead he was standing in front of his office trying to slip the key into the lock.

His hands shook. Beads of perspiration gathered on his brow. Ten years had passed and still the affect of the bullet haunted him. On occasion he would lose his balance. His speech was slow and sluggish. His left eye was blind and his moods, they were unpredictable.

Lance turned the key. He put his shoulder to the door, it swung open. He wore aviator sunglasses and an L.A. Angels baseball cap. A Hawaiian shirt hung down below his waist, hiding his large, middle-aged paunch. Lance had gained ninety pounds over the years, his once sinewy six-foot frame was now grotesquely bloated.

He hobbled across the room, his left foot hurt. He laid his car keys on the desk, moments later he opened the blinds to the front window. Beams of Southern California sunlight poured through the panes, revealing the dust on the floor. Lance reached up and pulled the cord attached to the ceiling fan. A cool breeze began circulating; a whirring sound filled the silence.

Lance sat down at his desk, a notepad lay next to the phone. He fingered through it, looking at what he had scribbled in the day before. When he was young, before the shooting, his memory was perfect—lately he struggled to remember. Names and faces and dates eluded him. He needed to write everything down.

Recently Sara Mellon had been calling him asking for an update on her husband—Lance had promised to call her back but he had forgotten. Today he would let poor Mrs. Mellon know that Robert “Tex” Mellon was having an affair. Lance followed him down to the beach. He video-taped “Tex” meeting an attractive woman; he caught them kissing and holding hands while the surf pounded in the background.

*Another day in the life of a detective, Lance thought, I get to pry into personal lives since I don't have one of my own.*

The phone rang. Lance reached over to answer it. A residual dizziness made his fingers tremble. He paused before saying, “Cervantes Investigation.”

“Detective Cervantes?” the voice said.

“Speaking.”

“My name is Julio Alvarez, I'm on my way there.”

“Julio, who?” Lance said sluggishly.

“Julio Alvarez, we talked yesterday. Don’t you remember?”

Lance took off his baseball cap. He was bald. A huge scar ran the circumference of his skull. “Sure I remember, you’re in the market for a detective.”

“We have a meeting at nine o’clock, I’m two blocks away.”

Lance glanced at his notepad. He saw the name *Alvarez* written down in pencil.

“Yes, yes,” Lance said, “you called me yesterday just before I closed shop. You know how to get here, don’t you?”

“A left on Seventeenth Street, a right on McFadden.”

“You’ll be here in about ten minutes then?”

“Maybe sooner.”

“I’ll make us coffee,” Lance said.

“I don’t drink coffee, *senor*.”

It wasn’t long before Julio showed up. He was wearing a denim shirt and muddy work boots. His face was riddled with pockmarks. He was a short, squat man with stooped shoulders and muscular arms.

Lance reached out to shake his hand, that’s when he noticed that Julio had two fingers missing.

“Sit down,” Lance said.

There was nothing extraordinary about Julio, he was a common sight in the streets of Santa Ana. There were a million people like him. Mexicans who had crossed the border in search

of work, in pursuit of a better life.

“What can I do for you?” Lance said.

Julio’s eyes shifted from the ceiling fan to the sun-drenched window.

“I need help,” he said. “There’s a man killing us.”

“What man is killing who?”

“Troy Henderson, contractor. He hires Mexicans then kills them.”

Lance leaned forward, his head still felt groggy from the vertigo.

“Give it to me slow. How does he kill and why?”

“Accidents,” Julio said. “They suffocate in trenches, fall off roofs. My cousin Pedro got crushed by a cement truck. Why? He hates us. He calls us jalapenos.”

“Have you told the cops?”

“They say they’re accidents too.”

“How about Cal-OSHA?”

“The same thing.”

Lance kept staring at Julio, maybe he was telling the truth, maybe wasn’t, but it really didn’t matter, Lance wasn’t interested.

“I charge ninety bucks an hour, plus expenses. I ask for a four-thousand dollar retainer, have you got that kind of money?”

“No, senior.”

“I guess this meeting is over,” Lance said.

LANCE WATCHED JULIO make his way through the parking lot. Julio slipped into a old pick-up truck with a dented tailgate. Minutes later he made his way down the street.

Lance fished a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, he lit it, then he wandered back to his desk. He called Sara Mellon but no one answered. He had a passing thought of leaving her a message: *Hey, Mrs. Mellon, your husband is a two-timer, I saw him kissing on a beautiful blonde on the beach, I've got the video to prove it. That'll cost you an extra five-hundred bucks, ha, ha.*

Instead Lance hung-up. He was feeling pretty good a while ago but now his mood was souring. He used to be an even keeled guy, pleasant and friendly, it took a lot to upset him, now a fly circling his head could set him off.

His synapses weren't firing right, the doctors told him. It was a physiological phenomena. In essence, his brain had been scrabbled by Vincente Delgado's bullet.

That's another thing that irked Lance—illegal aliens. One of them had ruined his life. Most everything was going perfect until that day when Vincente smoked him with that twenty-two semi-automatic pistol.

Lance had worked his way up the law-enforcement ladder. He started as a patrolman cruising the streets of Santa Ana. After marrying his high school sweetheart, Carol Suarez, he decided to go back to college. He got his degree in business administration, that's when the promotions started to happen. First to corporal then to sergeant then lieutenant. When ol' Henry Beckman retired as homicide detective, Lance quickly applied. He got the job, after ten years on the force he was finally making a decent living.

People liked him, he wasn't a pushy, arrogant cop. He was born in the neighborhood, attended the local JC. He had grown up around Mexicans, he treated them with respect. When his fellow coworkers criticized the mass diaspora from south of the border, he defended it, he said that poverty made it necessary.

He raised his two sons, David and Edward, in Santa Ana. He was a Little League baseball coach, a scout master, a mentor for troubled kids—then came the bullet, the fire in his skull, the six months in a coma, four years in physical therapy, the disability pension and the addiction to pain-killers.

While in rehab he made the decision that he wouldn't give up. He got his PI license and went back to work.

*Lance Cervantes, Private Investigator. Surveillance. Background checks. Criminal and Civil Liability Cases.*

Those were the words stenciled on his window. He serviced ninety clients in the last two years. He made enough money to afford a condominium in Huntington Beach. He was proud that he could still function as a human being. He exemplified dignity and self-reliance, yet, he was still unable to forgive and forget.

Vincente Delgado sickened him as did Julio Alvarez. It was a phobia, almost.

*If you had been shot in the head by one of them, how would you feel?*

## 3

LANCE BROUGHT HIS own lunch, a soggy meatball sandwich and a bag of potato chips, he kept his Cokes in the refrigerator. He had been surfing the Internet looking for Doug Spellman, a flimflam man who had bilked a group of senior citizens out of their savings. Doug Spellman was a puke, he started his criminal career as a telemarketer, he soon learned that it was more lucrative lying to the elderly.

The Internet was an invaluable tool for Lance, it saved him leg-work. It wouldn't be long before Lance, with the help of a good search engine, stumbled onto something.

In the meanwhile meatball sauce dribbled down his chin, grease from the potato chips stained his fingers. A television set sitting on the filing cabinet trumpeted the mid-day news.

Lance's office was located in a tiny strip-mall off McFadden Boulevard. It had two large picture windows and a heavy iron door. A leather sofa sat against the wall. Two folding chairs sat in front of his oak desk and a reclining chair sat behind it. The place was austere and humble, unpretentious and simple, but to Lance it was a sanctuary.

He would lay on the sofa pondering his cases. He would doze off in the afternoons. He had dreams of the "old days" when he was a young homicide detective. He would think of his

wife, Carol, before the divorce. They had a good life, a nice home, a pair of handsome sons. They vacationed in Cancun in the winters, they had money in the bank. When the bullet exploded in his head all hell broke loose—life took a horrifying turn. His moods caused unrest, his disability was a burden, though he tried not to, he snarled and raged like a vicious dog on a leash. It was too much for Carol to handle, she left him for another man.

Lance took his sighted eye off the computer screen, he pensively sipped on his Coke. He knew he had a monster inside him seething with anger. I wasn't fair that an honest, decent man like himself should suffer the fate he did. He was doing his duty, ridding the streets of scum.

*Another accident took the life of a construction worker this morning, the television newscaster said. Antonio Valdez, father of two young girls, was electrocuted while working on a construction site in Santa Ana, California. He was operating a forklift when a six-thousand volt power line touched the roof of the vehicle. It's the seventh accidental death since March . . .*

Lance subconsciously caught the gist of the story. He looked up at the t.v. screen. The perfectly-coiffed newscaster went on with more details. She said that the contractor, Troy Henderson, had been fined by Cal-OSHA for similar incidents. *Thus far, no other fines have been issued.*

A glob of meatball sauce plopped on the desk. Lance scooped it up with his forefinger and guided it back into his mouth. It was interesting how this morning Julio Alvarez had come into his office claiming that the deaths weren't accidents. A coincidence? Maybe. Lance gave it a moment of reflection: *the s.o.b. needs an ambulance-chasing attorney, not a private dick.*

Waldo, Lance's long-haired tuxedo cat, suddenly jumped up next to the computer. He

bumped his head against Lance's arm. He was a mangy, bedraggled looking feline who showed up one summer wandering the parking lot. Lance took him in. He let him roam the office during the night.

The cat purred, unbridled love filled the tiny office. Waldo was Lance's friend, his companion, Lance never let him out of the office unless he was close by to supervise. If anything happened to Waldo, Lance would certainly loss it.

Lance smiled as Waldo nibbled at his meatball sandwich.

*You little bandit, you're the only friend I've got.*

## 4

IT WAS LATE in the afternoon when Lance wrapped it up. He had spent a couple of hours on the World-Wide Web looking for Doug Spellman. The information was scanty, it led to dead-ends, though there was something about an investment company by the name of *The Spellman Brothers*. It was located in Sacramento—tomorrow he would delve into it deeper.

Around three he got a hold of Sara Mellon. As gently as he could he broke the news to her: *Your husband has a girlfriend, they had a tryst on the beach. I have the video as evidence. Where do you want to go from here?*

Sara broke out sobbing, it unnerved Lance. He didn't like to hear women cry. He held on to the phone as she gasped. *What was she expecting, husbands roam as do wives. It was the way of the world.*

Minutes later he filled Waldo's bowl with food. Waldo was sitting up on the windowsill licking his paw. On departing, he scratched Waldo's head.

The traffic on McFadden Boulevard was getting heavy. Clouds were moving in from the ocean. He cupped a match in his hand and lit another cigarette. With a limp, he made his way down the sidewalk.

He saw a man standing by his '91 Mercedes Benz, he looked familiar. Lance touched his Smith & Wesson .38 five-shot J-Frame that he carried in his waistband. It was a small gun that was easy to hide and comfortable to carry.

The man stepped forward, it was Julio Alvarez. He held a white envelope in his hand.

“Senor Cervantes can I talk to you?”

“I’m on my way home,” he said. “Call me in the morning.”

“Have you been watching t.v.?” Julio said. “A friend of mine died on a construction site. It was on channel nine.”

“Too bad. Give his family my condolences.”

“I’ve got the money,” Julio said. “Four thousand dollars, enough for the retainer.”

Julio tossed the envelope on the hood of Lance’s car, it made a loud thud.

“I’ve got too many cases already. I’m up to my ass in work.”

“Please, Senor Cervantes, I collected the money from the other men. We need your help real bad.”

“Not interested,” Lance said.

“They told me you were a good cop. That you were born in the neighborhood. That you cared about the people.”

“Who told you that?”

“My cousin. You pulled him out of a burning car. He never forgot.”

“That was a long time ago. Things have changed. For one thing somebody put a bullet in my brain.”

“I’m sorry, señor, but it wasn’t my fault.”

Lance reached over and picked the money off the hood. He handed back it to Julio. “I didn’t say it was. Here,” he said, “keep your money. I’ll sleep on the offer. Like I said, contact me in the morning.”

## 5

LANCE STOPPED AT The Iron Mule for a drink. It was a biker bar not far off the freeway. The bartender was a board-shouldered ex-marine who had done his time in Iraq. He had a green snake tattooed around his neck. His name was Matt Patterson, he had fought in Fallujah, he had piece of shrapnel buried in his skull. He got along well with Lance, they had a couple of things in common. They had suffered head injuries and they both took Vicodin to ease the pain.

Lance ordered a beer, a Coors on tap. Pool balls clacked in the background. Two burly bikers wearing leather vests and beards were boisterously playing a game of eight-ball. The music of choice was hard rock.

Matt wiped the bar. His eyes were calm and drowsy-looking. The flicker of the neon lights reflected off his shaven head. He watched Lance polish off the Coors.

“Want another one?” Matt said.

“Why not?”

Matt poured Lance a new mug.

“What’s up in the detecting business?” Matt asked.

Lance licked the foam off the beer. “Same ‘ol, same ‘ol. People running amok. Husbands cheating on their wives. Wives looking for revenge. There’s a whole population of crazy people out there.”

“And I fought for them,” Matt said.

“Was it worth it?”

Matt gave Lance a weak smile. “You tell me.”

Lance took another drink of beer. “Hell no. A soldier’s sacrifice is never appreciated.”

“How about a cop’s?” Matt said.

“Same thing. You know what happened to the guy who plugged me in the head?”

“What?”

“He disappeared into Mexico.”

“No joke?”

“That’s the way life works,” Lance said, “everything is half-ass backwards. Look at Iraq. We became the bad guys for getting rid of Saddam.”

“I know what you mean,” Matt said. “What is evil is called good and what is good is called evil.”

Lance glanced up at Matt, he studied his blue eyes and cleft chin. Matt was young, in his mid-twenties. Though he had seen the ravages of war, he still had a gentle disposition.

There was a rumor circulating about Matt which hadn't been substantiated—people said that Matt was a Christian. After he had returned from Iraq he took up Tae Kwon Do and weightlifting in an attempt to take his mind off the sour memories. He drank and dabbled in drugs, he even had a brush with the law, an assault and battery charge. It wasn't until he started reading the Bible that he began to settle down.

Matt wasn't your overt evangelical, he never spoke publicly about his faith. But every once in a while something Christian would slip through.

“How many sand fleas did you smoke?” Lance said.

“I never counted.”

“I heard that the battle of Fallujah was a living hell.”

Matt looked down at the polished bar. “That it was.”

“What's up with those Muslims, anyway? What's their gripe?”

Matt thought it over for a while. “They're lost. They've been totally possessed by the devil. I've never seen anyone so full of hate. A fellow soldier tried telling a Muslim about Christ, the guy literally blew up. Spit flew out of his mouth, he turned purple, his eyes popped out of his head. They way I see it, he was overcome by an unholy spirit.”

“What about the politics? Isn't the war about our so-called imperialism?”

“That's a myth,” Matt said. “it's really about Islam. My belief is that this War on Terror is preordained. We're really in a spiritual battle between Powers and Principalities.”

“No shit,” Lance said. “Where did you come up with an idea like that?”

“The Bible. Haven't you ever read the Bible?”

Lance took a head-tilting swallow of beer. He craved a cigarette. He came into the bar for the sole purpose of feeling the soothing effect of the alcohol, to escape his pain. He wasn't there to listen to proselytizing, in fact, Lance had a vile distaste toward anything religious. He didn't know why, maybe because his father, an ardent Catholic, was always cramming Jesus down his throat.

"Can't say I ever have," Lance said.

"You should." Matt replied. "It's a wonderful book."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for it."

"The wisdom and the hope in the Bible is profound. It changed my life. I don't think I could have exorcized my demons without the Lord."

"What demons?" Lance asked.

"The demons of hate, bitterness, despair. The same demons you're grappling with."

Lance glared at Matt. He didn't like what Matt had just told him. He finished the rest of his beer then slowly stood up. "I gotta go. It's not that I don't find your conversation engaging."

"Is it something I said?" Matt replied.

"Religion isn't one of my favorite subjects."

Matt leaned over the bar. He locked eyes with Lance. "I'll pray for you, brother. And remember, God loves you."

Lance took the back streets home, he had a passing thought of getting on the freeway but the five o'clock traffic was murder. He past strip malls and car dealerships, he had the bad luck of hitting all the red lights on Beach Boulevard. He felt restless and anxious, the thing was, he

shouldn't have mixed Vicodin with the beer.

He felt an attack of vertigo coming on. He thought of pulling the car over to the side of the road but as quickly as the dizziness manifested, it disappeared.

Being blind from one eye was another burden. He had to turn his head almost completely around in order to see the traffic on his left side. He bumped into things. The DMV almost didn't renew his license. He had once been an expert shot, now he had a fifty-fifty chance of hitting the side of a barn.

*Crappy Mexican, if I ever see him again I'll tear his nuts off.*

The light turned green. Lance pressed down on the accelerator, he popped open the sunroof, a salty ocean breeze brushed against his face. He always suspected that Matt was a Jesus freak. Not long ago when he sat at the bar he overheard Matt tell another patron why he had decided to work at the Iron Mule: *Jesus hung out with tax collectors and sinners, that's a good reason not to stay away from bars.*

Lance had shut the door to spiritual possibilities a long time ago. He had done what his father had told him not to do—he had hardened his heart.

Roberto Munoz Cervantes was a postman, he loved to fish and hunt, he was a tall masculine specimen who had won his son's admiration. When Lance was twelve his mother, Dolores, died of ovarian cancer. It traumatized the family. During her battle his father lost his internal strength. He didn't take Lance hunting and fishing anymore, instead he grabbed hold of God and clung onto Him for dear life.

Lance was disappointed, he missed the forays into the mountains, the smell of gun

powder, the camaraderie. It was after his mother's passing that Lance's father started taking him to church. The occasions were somber and confusing for a kid of twelve. His father had changed; he was no longer a man's man, he no longer hunted and fished—he spent his time sitting at the dining room table reading the Bible.

*Without God I'm absolutely nothing, he once told Lance.*

Every night it was a different verse, every night it was communal prayer. Lance couldn't understand how such a strong man like his father had suddenly become so weak.

*Believing in something you can't see doesn't sound right, Papa.*

*Don't harden your heart, son.*

Lance turned left on Pacific Coast Highway. The cars were pouring out of Seal Beach. He eased his way in front of a Volkswagen bus filled with surfers.

Ten minutes later he pulled into his drive-way. He heard Herman, his chihuahua barking from inside the condo. He parked his car in the garage and slowly ambled through the door. The place was airy and sunlit, there were windows everywhere. A tattered leather couch sat in the living room. A flat-screen t.v. dominated the family room. The front yard was the blue Pacific.

Herman jumped at his legs. The dog yapped and barked. His voice was demanding and shrill. Lance scooped up in his arms, "Come on, pal, let's grab a beer and sit out in the terrace, I've had another lousy day."

## 6

THERE WAS A kid and his dad flying a kite along the surf. The kite was agile, it flipped and flopped in the breeze. A pair of joggers ran steadily along. A fat woman and her brood of four kids laid sprawled on a blanket. Herman was settled pleasantly on Lance's lap, his ears erect, his nose wet and alert. Lance sipped his beer, number four and counting. Earlier he had heated two large slices of pizza in the micro, the taste of pepperoni still lingered on his tongue.

With his forefinger, Lance scratched Herman's head. Herman looked down from the terrace at a pitbull being walked by a shirtless man splattered with tattoos. Herman growled, his throat gurgled, he bared his teeth. Lance grabbed his snout and shook it. "Down boy, you're over-matched."

The beer and the Vicodin were now easing Lance into a peaceful mood. The stress melted away. The hiss of the ocean lulled him. His mind drifted through a labyrinthine of disjointed thoughts: *His divorce was messy but he had won. The equity bought him the condo. What did Carol see in that bastard she married anyway? An effete school teacher, a pansy wearing thick glasses . . .*

Another drink of beer. Another jogger huffing by.

*I like animals, they're my pals. I've given up on people, they're lousy, useless things. Animals are loyal, they appreciate you. I wonder what Waldo is doing? Sitting up on the windowsill, preening himself. What a frigging good cat. Sits up on my desk while I'm working on the computer. Scours the office for mice . . . don't forget the cockroaches . . . and the lizards.*

The cell phone chirped. Lance pulled it out of his pocket. Herman jumped off his lap and scurried into the kitchen to dine on leftovers.

“Hello,” Lance said.

“How’s it going, son?”

It was his father, a phone call from him was a weekly ritual. He lived in Santa Ana on Ross Street. He was seventy-five years old but still fanatical enough to facilitate Bible studies in his living room.

“Fine. Enjoying the evening.”

“I was thinking about you,” he said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“I got a call from your sister yesterday. Sara, your niece, is graduating from UCLA. She was thinking about inviting you.”

“Don’t think I can make it, Pop. I’m buried in work.”

“Any new cases?”

“A few. I got a crazy offer this morning, I don’t think I’ll take it though.”

“Why not?”

“Personal reasons.”

Lance knew he shouldn't have opened his mouth. Every time he used the word *personal* it gave his father a reason to pry.

“Give me a hint,” his father said.

“Nothing. I shouldn't have brought it up.”

“Are you drinking?” he asked.

“A beer or two.”

“That's going to kill you, son. You gotta get off those pain-killers too. I've been praying for you. We've gotta go to church together one of these days. It's not good for you to be living alone.”

“I'm doing okay, Pop.”

“I don't think you are. I can hear the self-pity in your voice.”

“Get out of here,” Lance said.

“It's true. You're probably sitting there alone with that crazy chihuahua on your lap. You're no doubt wallowing in sorrow. It's not good for a man to be isolated. How about joining in on a Bible study? I got one planned for tomorrow night.”

“No, thanks, Pop.”

“Tell me why aren't you taking the case?” he suddenly asked.

“It's a long story.”

“I've got plenty of time.”

“It has to do with a Mexican.”

“What about a Mexican?”

“A bunch of them are getting killed on construction sites. A guy named Julio Alvarez waltzed into my office. He says they’re not accidents, but murder.”

“You believe him?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t looked into it.”

“Maybe the guys is telling you the truth. It’s your duty to find out.”

“No thank you. Mexicans aren’t my favorite people. What do I care if they’re thrown off a bridge.”

“For godsakes you were raised among them. Where’s this bitterness coming from, son?”

“You know from where, Pop.”

There was a deep silence. Lance knew that his father was preparing so say something Biblical, he always did when he wanted to sound wise. Ever since his wife died, Roberto Cervantes was a walking concordance. A verse here, a verse there, always applicable to the situation. Lance waited for the quote, it was either coming from the Sermon of the Mount or from Proverbs.

The pause was long. Lance wondered if he wasn’t experiencing a dropped call.

“To err is human, to forgive divine.”

“Who said that?” Lance asked.

“Alexander Pope.”

“Who in the hell was that?”

“A poet.”

“Was he Christian?”

“Probably. The point is, hatred is killing you, son, it’s warping your spirit. I know taking a bullet to the brain hasn’t been a Mardi Gras for you. I see your suffering every time I look into your eyes. But you can’t blame the whole Mexican race for what one slime did to you. You gotta let it go one of these days.”

“What for?”

“It’s divine, okay.”

“I gotta go, Pop. It’s getting late. I got a long day tomorrow.”

“Lance, give it a try. Read a verse or two out of the good book.”

“What are you, my bartender?”

## 7

THAT NIGHT HERMAN SLEPT at the foot of the bed, his ears flicked, his throat wheezed. Lance tossed and turned for a long time. Around midnight he got up and opened a window, the splashing of the waves were better than counting sheep.

It was twenty minutes later that Lance slipped into a restless slumber, his dreams were vivid and memorable.

*He was walking through a Mexican neighborhood. The streets were crowded. There was a fat pinata swaying from a tree, children were swinging at it with stick. Vendors wheeled their carts down the sidewalk. Up ahead a crowd was gathered around a man on his knees tossing dice against a wall. Lance dispersed the crowd, that's when the man angrily stood up—he pointed a long-barreled pistol at his head. Lance froze. His heart boomed, he wanted to run, but couldn't. His legs felt heavy, his feet were anchored to the pavement.*

*The man's face was indiscernible, out of focus.*

*"You're dead meat," the man said.*

*That's when Lance saw him, every detail: the gold front tooth, the bent nose, the ratty*

*goatee, the two earrings, the scar on the forehead—the homicidal glint in his dark eyes.*

*“Don’t shoot!”*

*There was the sudden crackling of the gun. Lance felt pain rip through his skull. He started falling into a vortex of darkness. He reached out, but there was nothing to hold on to.*

That’s when he felt a dampness on his face.

Herman stood over him, licking his chin. Lance heard himself sobbing, fear took his breath away.

He sat up. He saw his hands shaking.

Groggily, Lance slipped out of bed. He padded across the floor in bare feet. He opened the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and with a great sense of urgency, he swallowed two more Vicodins.

*Thank God for painkillers.*

## 8

THE NEXT MORNING Lance knew that something was wrong.

The bathroom window had been pried open. There were muddy foot prints on the floor, the desk had been rifled through. The computer was missing and so was the television.

*But where was Waldo?*

Lance felt panic coming on.

Frantically he looked everywhere for the cat—under the desk, behind the door, in the bathroom. He called out his name.

Lance dashed outside. He jogged through the parking lot in search of Waldo. He glanced under cars, behind bushes, he rummaged through the trash bins. He stuck his head into *Mona's Beauty Haven* and asked the hairdressers if they had seen him. No one had.

He paced the strip mall collaring strangers and associates. He found a ladder and climbed the roof—he found a pair of old shoes and a frisbee.

Finally he sat down to think.

*The burglar must have scared him. The poor cat must have been bouncing off the walls.*

*I hope he's not hurt.*

Lance lit a cigarette. His moods fluctuated—anger, sorrow, depression.

*I don't know what I'll do if I lose that cat. He's my friend, my side-kick, we've been through a helluva lot together.*

“Is he yours?”

Julio Alvarez was standing in the doorway. He was holding Waldo in his arms. Waldo's tail was swaying, there was a sheepish look on his face.

“Godsakes, where you'd find him?”

“He was running through the traffic, he almost got hit by a car. I seen him climb a tree, I pulled him down.”

Lance felt like kissing Julio, instead he snatched Waldo out of his arms.

“Thank you. I thought I would never see him again.”

“He's special to you, isn't he?”

“Very much.”

“So was my cousin, so are my friends.”

Lance instantly got the message. “I guess you're here to talk about the case. Sit down, let's see what I can do.”

## 9

THE CORPORATE OFFICE of Henderson's Construction was located in an industrial district off the 5 freeway, in the city of Anaheim.

It was two in the afternoon when Lance made his way down there. He spent the morning itemizing his losses, he figured his t.v. was worth fifty bucks, his computer two hundred and Waldo, priceless.

A young female police officer from the Santa Ana PD took the report. Lance didn't know her but she had heard about him.

Lance was a semi-legend, most everybody in the police department knew about the infamous shooting. Lance had been a *cause celebre* ten years ago. The neighborhood and various police departments across Southern California had raised nearly three-hundred thousand dollars to pay for his medical expenses, a lengthy article was written about him in the *Orange County Register*. People were good to him, they showed generosity.

The cop, Sandra Gomez, tried to sound optimistic. "It was probably a dope fiend looking for a quick score. We'll check the pawn shops, it won't be long before we find your stuff."

"Sounds good," Lance said.

"Handsome looking cat," she said, glancing over at Waldo.

“Thanks.”

“It’s been nice meeting you, Mr. Cervantes, I wish the circumstances had been better.”

The traffic was marginal on the way to Anaheim, Lance played the *Laura Schlessinger Show* on the radio but he wasn’t listening, instead he was thinking of how he would approach Troy Henderson. He could say that he was a private eye investigating the accidents but that would be an instant red flag. Everybody would start covering up. He could say he was a cement finisher looking for employment, if he got hired, he could work the case internally.

*But who would hire a gimp? Besides, he didn’t know crap about concrete.*

Lance lit a cigarette, he was looking for the Harbor Boulevard off-ramp. He eased off the gas, he found himself behind a wad of cars heading for Disneyland.

He came up with another idea, he could say that he was a contractor from San Diego who dealt in cheap labor. He could say he knew men who were willing to circumvent the union, who were willing to work for cheap wages and no benefits. He could say his name was Tito Hernandez, “employment liaison”.

Lance chuckled to himself, the idea sounded good. Construction bosses were always out to save a buck, besides, if this guy Troy Henderson was truly bumping off illegals, then what better way to cull new victims than from a *coyote*.

Lance turned left on Harbor Boulevard, he drove another five miles before making a right on Benson Avenue. He past fast-food restaurants and cheap motels. People were strolling on the sidewalks heading toward the Happiest Place on Earth. He drew in a lung-full of cigarette smoke while looking for a side street by the name of Sutton. His mind drifted for a while. He understood

that this case, if he was to call it that, was flimsy at best—the only reason he was he was half-heartedly investigating was because he thought he owed Julio Alvarez a favor.

Julio had saved Waldo from certain doom, that made Julio a worthy client in Lance's eyes. It didn't mean that he had given up his pathological distaste for Mexicans, it only meant that one good deed deserved another. There was something else, the four-thousand dollar retainer sitting in his bank account added to his motivation. If he didn't solve the case, he would still come out ahead. He felt no loyalty toward Julio, no professional obligation, he was getting paid so he had to at least go through the motions.

Lance found the address he was looking for, it was a nondescript warehouse at the end of a cul-de-sac. A pair of pick-up trucks were parked near the front door. He pulled his Benz next to a Dodge Ram. He stepped out of his car—he tossed the cigarette to the ground then smothered it with the heel of his shoe.

A blonde, heavy on the mascara, sat at the reception desk.

"I like to talk to Mr. Henderson," Lance said, feigning a Mexican accent.

"What about?" the blonde said.

"Cheap labor."

The woman broke into a grin. "What do you mean, cheap labor?"

"I can get him a crew, way below union wages. Just let me talk to him."

The blonde's blue eyes fluttered. Apparently she was considering Lance's proposition. Maybe she liked the sound of cheap labor? Maybe Lance had showed up at the right place at the right time?

“I think he’s busy, but I’ll check.”

She picked up the phone and buzzed Troy Henderson’s office, in the meanwhile Lance took inventory.

There was a door across the way that led to the yard where the equipment was stored. Mounted deer heads were on display all around the room. The music on the radio was country western. The most striking thing was a Confederate flag that covered the rear wall like a fine piece of tapestry.

“He’ll see you, just walk through that door.”

She pointed to the other side of the room. Lance strolled in thinking that things had suddenly become interesting.

**10**

IT WAS POSSIBLE, even highly probable that Troy Henderson was a murderer. In the fourteen years that Lance worked as a homicide detective he had encountered plenty of killers. Lots of them were punks, teenage gang members who blew each other away on a whim. One night there were five drive-by shootings, four bodies ended up in the morgue.

Then there were other categories, murders that had nothing to do with gang affiliations. The motives varied: Infidelity, a botched robbery, a drug deal gone bad, sex, money, Lance worked them all.

When he first started his career Lance thought that all murderers were alike. In his mind they were freaks that could be spotted miles away. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Lance discovered that most killers appeared to be normal. They held jobs at grocery stores, they were teachers, lawyers, students, housewives, they were rich, poor, fat, ugly and

beautiful. Some of them were silent killers who eased their victims into the after-life with poisons and drugs, others were violent—they stabbed, mutilated and desecrated the bodies. Some vehemently denied it, others proudly confessed it.

Murder was a funny business, each killer responded differently to his or her act of homicide. Some showed guilt, others were cold and dispassionate.

Killing had its own logic, it's own rationale, it was a solution to a problem that couldn't be solved any other way. In Lance's opinion, murder was a black void in the human heart, a void that was dark and malevolent, a void which few people discovered, but when they did, the fall was precipitous.

It was Lance's father who told him the story of Cain and Abel—it was a tale of sibling jealousy. God accepted Abel's sacrifice but refused to accept Cain's. It angered Cain, it rankled his soul, he loathed the fact that God showed favor toward his brother Abel—the only option was murder.

Lance pondered the story for days. Why had God caused a rift between the brothers by accepting one sacrifice over the other? Shouldn't He have treated them equally, that way preventing the possibility of murder?

It was only when Lance became a homicide detective that he stumbled upon the answer: Murderers had no respect for the living, it was that simple. They lacked love, compassion, forgiveness, they were disconnected from the miracle of life. Murder was an act of hate. An act of anarchy and violence. If Cain had loved his brother he would not have killed him. Was that God's fault or was that Cain's? Once Lance stared into the eyes of a sociopath. He was a seventeen-year-

old boy. He had done away with his mother and father. Nothing registered. There was no warmth. Blank. Darkness. The Void.

It was the same look he saw in Troy Henderson's eyes as he stepped through the door. Behind the haughty grin there was the Void—Lance recognized it.

“Whatta you got for me boy, cheap labor?” Troy said.

Lance stood in front of Troy's desk. “Your secretary told you?”

“She keeps me informed. Sit down . . . I didn't catch the name?”

“Tito Hernandez.”

“Tito, tell me what you know.”

Lance sat down, he asked Troy if he could light a cigarette. Troy nodded, in fact, he lit up a cigarette too.

Troy had a narrow nose, a feminine nose, his eyes were a soft pale blue, the smoke from the cigarette hovered above his head. His chin was square, his ears were a little too large for his oval-shaped face. He was clean-shaven. He had a slight Texan drawl. He wore a short-sleeved shirt that showed off his forearms and biceps, a gold Rolex watch sat on his left wrist.

He was anywhere between forty-five and fifty years old—Lance guessed that Troy was a sportsman. He probably hunted and fished, he might even play golf, he kept in shape by riding a bike or working out daily in the gym. He raised his eyebrows when he spoke, the expression on his face was cold, calculating and condescending.

Lance did his best to explain himself. He told Troy that he was out to save his company

money. He knew men who were willing to work for non-union wages—times were tough, the economy was rotten—in his phoney Mexican accent, Lance struggled to sound sincere. He could see that Troy was skeptical.

Troy smoked while gazing at Lance. He rubbed his chin. His skin under his crewcut was sunburnt a dark red.

“Where are these men from?” Troy asked.

“Mostly Mexico.”

“How’d you get in contact with them?”

“I’ve been doing liaison work for years.”

“What do you mean, liaison work?”

“I’m a sub-contractor.”

“You mean you’re a coyote.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Lance said. “These men need work, they have families to support.”

“How you gonna fix it with the business agents and ICE?”

“I have my ways.”

“Which are?”

Lance broke out in a devilish smile. “Money solves a lot of problems, if you know what I mean.”

Troy leaned back in his chair. He took a long drag from his cigarette. “Do these men have construction experience?”

“Of course,” Lance said.

“What kind?”

“Just about everything.”

Troy said, “I put in a bid for a demolition job, I might be able to use a couple of guys next week. But I gotta know more about you,” Troy said.

“Like what?”

“Are you a cop?”

“Why would I be a cop?”

“They’ve been snooping around lately. We’ve had some accident. Did you hear about them?”

“No, I didn’t,” Lance lied.

“I’ll tell you what. Give me some time to think it over. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

Lance said, “My men are good workers, they won’t give you any trouble.”

“Yeah, yeah, I believe you. Just call me back in a couple of days.”

## 11

*HE MIGHT TAKE the bait, he might not,* Lance thought.

*I did my part, I've given Julio Alvarez his money's worth. If Troy agrees to hire my men, I'll go into phase two of my plan.*

In the meanwhile, Lance drove back to his office, there were two voice messages on his recorder. One of them was from Sara Mellon. In a teary voice she said that she no longer needed his services, she knew enough about her husband to start divorce proceedings. If there were any more charges, to please bill her at her PO box address.

The other message was from Julio. In a beseeching sort of way he asked Lance what he had found out about Troy.

Lance turned off the recorder, that's when the headache started to happen. From the base of his skull to his temples a throbbing pain flared up. He rode it out for a while, hoping that it would disappear on its own. Minutes later he got struck by vertigo. His stomach felt nauseous—he stumbled into the bathroom where he vomited.

He was used to being dizzy, he had happened numerous times. He held on to the wall. He wandered over to the couch, he laid down. He didn't know how long it was before the front door swung open.

"Mr. Cervantes, are you all right?"

Lance sat up. He saw a good-looking woman in a police uniform.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"You look pale."

"It's my normal color."

Officer Sandra Gomez took him by the elbow and helped him stand up.

"Let me get you some water."

She poured a glass out of the water cooler and put it to his lips. He drank slowly, painfully, he swallowed thirstily.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Vertigo. Nothing to worry about. I get it all the time."

"Will a cool towel help?"

"Maybe."

She found a towel in the bathroom, she soaked it in the sink. She brought it over and placed it on Lance's forehead.

"Lay down."

He gazed into her brown eyes. "What brings you here?"

"We found your property."

“You guys work fast.”

“Like I said, it was a couple of junkies. Come on, sit down.”

Lance eased himself back on the couch.

“Thanks, for finding my stuff.”

“No problem.”

Lance tried to get up.

“Lay still.”

“I’ll get over it.”

She stood in front of him. She gently swiped the sweat off his bald head with the wet towel.

“What brings these attacks on?”

“A bullet to the brain,” he said.

“I heard about that. How long has it been?”

“Ten years. Sometimes it feels like it happened yesterday.”

She sat next to him. “Did they ever find the guy who did it?”

“Nope, never.”

“People still talk about you on the force. They say you’re a hero. I mean, you’re trying to take care of yourself. You’re still working, some people would roll over and die.”

Lance took the towel and wiped his face. “If I did, who in the hell would take care of Waldo?” he said.

“You want me to come back later—I get off duty in an hour.”

“What for?”

“Just to check up on you. To see how you’re doing.”

“I can’t say no to a pretty girl.”

“All right then. I’ll bring your stuff in. Just lie there and rest.”

12

“I TALKED TO him,” Lance told Julio.

“What did he say, Senor?”

“That I should contact him in a couple of days. He says he might have work for two guys on a demolition job.”

“If he says yes, what happens?”

“I’ll send somebody in. Somebody who knows undercover work.”

“What do you mean?”

“Obviously we have to get information from the inside.”

“How will you do that?”

“I’ll put a plant in. Somebody who looks, smells and talks like a Mexican.”

“What kind of evidence will he be looking for?”

“Anything and everything. Maybe somebody knows something. Maybe somebody will

be stupid enough to brag about the murders. People like to do that, they want everybody to know what a perfect crime they've committed."

"I want to thank you for taking the case," Julio said.

"No problem, but let me put it this way. I can't make any promises. In cases like this if the police department says they're accidents, then they probably are. They investigate it from every angle. How the subject died. The cause of death, et cetera. Cal-OSHA does the same thing. I'm just taking your word for it that the accidents were intentional."

"They were," Julio said.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Everybody knew their job, they have been doing it for long time. My cousin, Pedro, was always careful that the trench he was digging was well supported. They gave him some cracked beams, they crumbled under the weight of the dirt. Nobody rushed to help him. The same thing with the man who fell off the roof. Somebody pulled the nails out of the gangplank." Julio paused for a second, then said, "How long did you talk to Senor Henderson?"

"A few minutes."

"When you get to know him, you'll see I'm not lying."

"What do you mean?"

"He's loco, he's not right. He's a friendly man one minute, a *diablo* the next."

"I'll see what I can do to pick his brain."

"If you need more money, I can get it," Julio said.

"Don't worry about that. I'll keep you posted, I'll keep you up to date on anything new."

“Gracias, Senor Cervantes. I mean for helping us.”

“De nada,” Lance said, hanging up the phone.

## 13

SHE CAME IN wearing jeans and a bright red blouse. Her black hair was combed into a sweeping ponytail. She wore a vermilion lipstick and a touch of eye shadow—she came in while Lance was setting up his computer—she looked alluring and absolutely sexy. Lance figured she was probably divorced, he was wrong. Sandra Gomez was single, in her late thirties, she loved being a cop and had no intentions of getting married.

She came from a law enforcement family. For three decades her father was an East L.A. cop, her brother, the police chief of Albuquerque, New Mexico. When she set eyes on Lance, compassion welled up inside her. He was a fellow officer, he had taken a bullet while on the line of duty. The way she felt about it, Lance and her were kindred spirits.

“Doing better?” she said.

“Oh yeah,” Lance replied.

“You need help with anything?”

“How about fixing my plumbing?” he joked.

Waldo jumped off the windowsill. He pranced over and rubbed his head against Sandra's leg.

"Look at that," Lance said, "the little bandit likes you."

Sandra picked him up. She cuddled him in her arms.

"Where'd you find him?"

"In the streets. It was amazing he wasn't taken for a wok."

Lance laughed at his own joke. His belly jiggled, his face turned red, it had been a while since anyone had paid him a social call. His office was nothing less than a garret, he spent lots of time there alone. Gazing over at Sandra, some old unfamiliar emotions started to stir—it was nice of her to show some concern, he could see that she was trying her best to be helpful. The best part, she was a looker. Her dark eyes glinted, her lips were full and sensuous, a classic beauty mark sat on her left cheek.

*If I was ten years younger and a hundred pounds lighter.*

Meanwhile Sandra scratched behind Waldo's ear, his eyes drifted back into his head in sheer ecstasy. She found it charming that an old battered cop like Lance showed a liking for cats. Most men she knew were into Pitbulls and Rottweilers, not felines. She wondered what made Lance tick? She had heard that Lance was a cop's cop, when he was patrolling the streets he was known to be shrewd. He was well-read and athletic too—he played for the Santa Ana PD baseball team and some people said he could have turned pro if he had wanted to. Sandra had once seen a photo of Lance as young homicide detective, he was movie-star-handsome. His hair was dark and full, his physique was straight and tall, everything about him exuded a swashbuckling masculinity.

Sandra wondered what caused his marriage to break up, it could have been the head injury, maybe his drinking. She wondered what shattered his spirit. She could see that the bullet had disabled him physically but by the look on his face, something else was broken inside him too. Though he had a sense of humor, he seemed distant and sad.

She scratched Waldo one last time then let him leap down to the floor. She watched Lance tinker with the computer—she saw the horrid scar that ran from the front to the back of his head. It must have been an experience, she thought, a hellish experience. *No wonder he's bitter, no wonder he's sad.*

“You like being a P.I.?” she asked him.

“It keeps me busy,” he said.

“Why do you keep your office in this neighborhood? You run the risk of being burglarized every night.”

“I have a love-hate relationship with Santa Ana,” he said. “I was born here so I have a sentimental attachment to it. But then I hate what it’s become.”

“And what’s that?”

“A Third World ghetto,” he said. “Things are getting worse, year after year.”

“It has gotten pretty bad, hasn’t it.”

“Nobody is putting the brakes on illegal immigration. It seems like anybody from anywhere can hop over the border. They bring their poverty and their diseases and their criminal mentality.”

“The guy who shot you, was he illegal?”

“You betcha.”

“It must eat you up inside.”

“If he was standing in front of me right now,” Lance said passionately, “I would do him extreme bodily harm.”

“I don’t blame you,” Sandra said, walking over by the window, “but I got a slightly different perspective. Most of these people are good. They just want to make a living. I think my grandfather got into this country illegally. He was originally from Zacatecas.”

“You’ve got the right to your opinion,” Lance said.

“Where are your ancestors from?” Sandra asked.

“It depends on how many generations you’re talking about. Originally my family was from Spain. My grandfather is twenty times removed from Miguel del Cervantes. You’ve heard of Don Quixote, haven’t you?”

“Sure, the windmill novel.”

“That’s my lineage,” Lance said.

“Do you have a literary bent too?”

“I like to read.”

“I heard they called you the Professor when you were a homicide detective.”

Lance laughed. He quit tinkering with the computer just long enough to give Sandra a smile. “You seem to know a lot about me,” he said.

“You’re famous all over town.”

“So famous that a construction boss would recognize me?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I picked up a case yesterday, a case you might find interesting.”

Sandra sat down on a chair near the window. Waldo jumped off her lap and started prancing around the office. “Tell me about it.”

“Have you heard about the Mexican construction workers accidentally being killed on construction sites?”

“I think I saw something about it on the news.”

“According to my new client, they aren’t accidents. They’re being murdered by an xenophobic boss. He’s throwing them off roofs and burying them in trenches. I met the guy yesterday, he impressed me as a redneck.”

“Oh yeah, I remember,” Sandra said, “there was a team of detectives sent out to Anaheim. There was nothing there that warranted an investigation.”

“That’s what I told my client, but he’s convinced otherwise.”

“Did you take the case?” Sandra asked.

“Barely. My heart’s not in it, but I’m doing the guy a favor.”

“What’s the name of the construction boss?”

“Troy Henderson.”

Sandra leaned forward. Her obsidian eyes sparkled. “That name sounds familiar, I just can’t place it.”

“They mentioned it on television,” Lance said.

“No, it wasn’t on t.v.. I had contact with somebody by that name, a couple of years back.”

Lance peered over at Sandra. "Let me know when you figure it out."

"Hey," Sandra said, "how would like some help with the case?"

"What kind of help?"

"Anything. I'll be your Dr. Watson to your Sherlock Holmes. I'll feed you information from the homicide division."

"I might need a plant. Know anybody?"

"Oh yeah, I know plenty of people," she said.