

The story begins with the murder of the bookkeeper of an apartment complex. It ends with five more killings and the unraveling of the largest act of criminal conspiracy and cover up in Southern California's history. Whoever engineered the murder wants to acquire the land under the complex, and has hired a killer to accomplish that goal.

Sultan Road

By David Celley

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DAVID CELLEY



Sultan Road

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CHAPTER ONE

Sultan Road wandered through mostly empty, dusty fields in a hardscrabble portion of Los Angeles County that was left behind while the area's abundant real estate growth ventured elsewhere. But it provided the perfect scenario for the largest act of criminal conspiracy and cover-up in Southern California's history.

At the Paradise Cove nightclub, about midway down Sultan Road near Sepulveda Boulevard on the Thursday night before Memorial Day weekend, a slender Asian woman on her way to the ladies room accidentally brushed past a much larger Latina. The larger woman turned around quickly. A few words were exchanged, and then the Asian woman continued toward the ladies' room, only to be shoved from behind onto the floor by the larger woman. The Asian woman got back up and stared at the Latina. A few more words were exchanged, and then the larger woman grabbed her, punched her, and pushed her into a nearby table. The fight continued with another Latina joining in, grabbing the Asian woman and pinning her arms behind her.

Within seconds, all eyes in the nightclub were focused on the women as they slugged it out. Then the crowd surrounding the combatants spontaneously surged toward the side door exit that led to the parking lot. The lopsided fight

continued with the hapless Asian woman beaten to the ground and kicked repeatedly. Suddenly, two men stepped into the middle of the fracas and pushed the assailants out of the way. One of the men announced that the victim was seriously hurt and needed to go to the hospital. In the middle of jeering and cursing by the two Latinas—along with some of the crowd—the two men carefully picked up the Asian woman and carried her to a pickup truck. They placed her gingerly in the truck's bay before driving off.

Just before eight o'clock the next morning, an office worker parked her car in the lot of the multi-story office building where she worked. She noticed a shoe protruding from underneath a branch of some bushes. As the shoe seemed out of place, she decided to take a closer look. When she reached down to pick it up, she let out a loud scream. The shoe was attached to the foot of a young Asian woman.

One of her office colleagues, who was on his way into the building, dashed over to see what had happened. She pointed to the shoe. Barely visible beyond the branch lay the mangled remains of a human body. Much of the female victim's torso had been smashed and crushed into a bloody mess. Only half of the victim's head appeared to be intact. The initial shock was unnerving to the woman. Even worse was the terrified look on the victim's face as if she had been abused or tortured before being bludgeoned to death. The colleague called 911, and the two remained at the scene until the police arrived.

The first responders cordoned off the area as a potential crime scene. A short while later, Detective Sergeant Carlos Aguilar of the LAPD Harbor Gateway Division arrived with

his partner, Officer Harry Lee. Although standing only five feet ten inches tall, Aguilar had a rugged and sturdy build. An eighteen-year veteran of the police force, he had worked homicide for the last eleven years. Even all he encountered during that time (plus five years of boxing as a middleweight) couldn't prepare him for what he saw. As he stared at the victim's remains, his mind was actively churning.

"It doesn't appear that the victim put up much of a struggle," Aguilar said, while Officer Lee stood nearby.

The office building was six stories high and had a layer of bushes that surrounded the ground floor interrupted by an occasional palm tree. Officer Lee made a careful search of the immediate area for a purse, wallet, or some other item that might identify the victim. Afterward he said, "I don't see anything around here that could be helpful in identifying her."

"The question now is whether or not this is the crime scene," Aguilar said. "Or is this just where the body got dumped?"

Harry paused for a moment. At six feet, he was slightly taller than Aguilar. He was an immigrant from South Korea who had been in the LAPD for seven years. His given name was Lee Har-won which he changed to Harry Lee. He had been in apprentice mode for a year and a half, as Aguilar's job included mentoring him. "I don't see any blood other than the spot where the victim's body rests," Harry said.

"Look under that car," Aguilar said as he walked over to a parking spot a few feet away. Harry could see some red spots that were barely visible under the front bumper.

“Go inside the office building and find out whose car that is,” Aguilar said. “If we can get it moved, we won’t need to have traffic division come out and tow it.”

As Harry went inside to look for the car’s owner, Aguilar crawled back into the bushes and examined the corpse. The victim was fully clothed although her top was mangled along with her torso. Aguilar noticed that the zipper to her slacks was partially pulled down.

A short time later Harry returned with the car’s owner, who promptly moved his car. Several spots of blood were revealed in the vacated parking space.

“We’ll need to call CSI to get samples of that blood,” Aguilar said. “They’ll also remove the woman’s remains without damaging any other forensic evidence. I want you to search the other side of this building to see if you can find anything that might be evidence as to who the victim was and how she got here. Whoever did this might have tossed her handbag into the trash or thrown it away somewhere.”

While waiting for CSI, Aguilar took a statement from the woman who had discovered the body. After finishing his fruitless search, Harry used his cell phone to make a few pictures of the victim. When CSI arrived and began their work, the two detectives returned to their office at the Harbor Community Police Station in nearby San Pedro.

Logging in to his computer, Aguilar opened up the e-form that was used for filing a police report. A lot of routine details were required, and the two detectives filled most of them in. The exact location of the discovery of the body fell just outside of the LAPD’s jurisdiction as the building and

parking lot were actually just a few yards into the city of Torrance. To be sure about jurisdiction, Aguilar asked a colleague to verify if the spot was, in fact, outside of the neighborhood of Harbor Gateway.

“We found the body in a parking lot on the corner of Western and Carson streets,” Aguilar said. “It was in the bushes, about one hundred feet west of the main entrance to an office building. Since the body was badly mauled and no sign of a struggle was visible, we believe that the crime was committed somewhere else and the body was just dumped there.”

“Well it’s definitely on the border with Torrance,” the senior detective said as he looked at a computerized map of the area. “But if the crime scene was elsewhere and LAPD answered the call, you should mark it on the form that it’s in our jurisdiction. By the way, you said the victim was female. Any pictures of what the remains look like?”

“Harry took some pictures, but he’s not here right now,” Aguilar said. “I can tell you that the victim was a female Asian. She was beaten into a bloody mess.”

“The reason I asked is that we got a call about a big fight between two women last night at a bar called Paradise Cove down on Sepulveda. You should check with the bartender at that place. One of them might have been Asian.”

Following up on the senior detective’s tip, Aguilar and Lee visited the Paradise Cove nightclub just as it opened for the evening. Paradise Cove had its own building that was located in another large parking lot behind a much taller office building. The nightclub was set back from the street,

making it less noticeable to passersby. The heavyset bartender with a short beard, who had placed the call to the police, explained that the fight started when an Asian girl walked past a couple of Mexican girls and brushed against one of them.

“It started out innocently enough,” the bartender told them, “but words were exchanged and it escalated into pushing and shoving. I tried to get around from behind the bar to break it up. Before I could, some bystanders had pushed the whole mob out into the parking lot.”

Harry furnished a picture of the murder victim. “Did one of the participants look like this?” he said. The picture showed barely enough of the victim’s face intact to be recognizable.

The bartender looked at the picture and grimaced. Then he said, “I think so. I really didn’t get that good a look at her. We have security cameras, and you can probably identify her from them.”

Then Aguilar said, “What happened out in the parking lot?”

“I couldn’t tell. Everyone moved outside so quickly. That’s when I called the police. But our assistant manager might have gotten a look at what happened. I saw him go out the door following the mob.”

The youthful assistant manager was available, and the two detectives interviewed him as well. “I got outside right behind the big group of patrons who followed the three women into the parking lot,” he said. “They all stood around and watched these two Latina girls pummel the poor Asian girl senseless. I

started pushing my way through the crowd to try to break it up. Before I could get to the front, two other guys picked up the Asian girl off of the ground. They carried her away shouting to somebody in the crowd that they were going to take her to the hospital.”

“Did you get a look at the two, ah, good Samaritans?” Aguilar said.

“I could only tell that they were two Latinos,” the assistant manager said. “One was taller and had a ponytail.”

“Did you get a look at the car they put her in?” Aguilar said.

“I couldn’t tell. At that point, the crowd started to get rowdy. Some of the Asian and Mexican patrons were shouting, pushing, and shoving each other around. I had to devote my energy to restoring order until the police arrived.”

At this point in the interview, a bar patron who overheard the conversation spoke up. “They beat the loving shit out of that little Asian girl,” he said.

“Did you follow the fight outside?” Harry said.

“Sure did,” the patron, a crusty looking white male of about age sixty, said. “Like I said, they pounded the Asian girl down to the ground and then started kicking her.”

“Did you see the two men who took her away?” Aguilar said.

“One was a fairly tall Mexican, and the other one was shorter. The shorter guy didn’t look like he was from around here. I mean, he didn’t seem like your average, local Mexican.”

Aguilar stopped for a moment to size up not only the speaker but also the comment. He didn't want to discuss being socially correct, but he did need a better description of one of the participants. "You mean he didn't look like a 'cholo'?" he finally said.

The bar patron looked back at Aguilar and then said, "Yeah, he didn't look like a cholo."

"Did you see where they took the woman?" Harry said.

"They put her in the back of a gray pickup truck and drove off."

"Where was the truck parked?" Harry said.

The bar patron looked at Harry as if he were dumb. "Down at the far end of the parking lot," he said.

Then Aguilar said, "When you were in the bar, did you hear anything said by any of the other bar patrons about what lead to the fight?"

"No. But when the shoving began somebody said, 'Watch out, Lisa'."

"One of them was named, Lisa," Aguilar said. "Do you know which one?"

"No."

While the two officers were talking to the bar patron, the assistant manager brought out a compact disk of the security video sequences. Harry then said, "Did either of you notice if anyone made a cell phone video of the fight?" He had realized that the security video wouldn't show what had happened in the parking lot.

The assistant manager shook his head.

The bar patron said, "No."

Both detectives then walked outside to take a look around the parking lot. “I wonder if there was any forensic evidence,” Harry said. “This looks very cleaned up.”

“I don’t see anything,” Aguilar said. “Somebody must have hosed the parking lot down afterward.”

“I wonder why there were no cell phones anywhere making a video or taking pictures,” Harry said.

“This place is on the border of some rival gangs—Mexican on one side and Asian on the other,” Aguilar said. “If anybody had made a cell phone video of a gang-related fight, they might face retaliation.”

“Do you think this was a gang-related fight?” Harry said.

“No, I don’t,” Aguilar said. “This doesn’t have the characteristics of a gang fight. But if the bystanders thought that it was, they wouldn’t have taken any pictures at all.”

“This doesn’t look like an ordinary bar fight,” Harry said. “I mean, with the crowd pushing it so quickly out the door and into the parking lot where the security cameras won’t see it. Two guys with a truck conveniently parked nearby step in and take the victim away. The crowd blocks the club assistant manager from getting a good view of events. All that seems like it was planned.”

“Good point. But what you’ve just recapped is not what usually happens in a gang fight.”

“If it wasn’t gangs, then what was it?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m concerned that maybe it was a professional hit.”

“If it was a hit, then why did an apparently innocent young woman get beaten senseless?”

David Celley

“To answer that, we need to first find out who the victim was,” Aguilar said.

CHAPTER TWO

It was after the holiday weekend when the morgue called Sergeant Aguilar to tell him that the victim from the nightclub fight had been identified and the autopsy completed. There was little in the way of evidence to go on. But using fingerprints, blood type, dental records, and the portion of the face that was still intact, the medical examiner identified the victim as Lisa Nguyen. The breakthrough after a long weekend of work came when the victim's sister filed a missing person's report that included a recent picture. Aguilar picked up the missing person's report and called the sister, Rachel Nguyen Tran.

"Mrs. Tran," Aguilar said, after introducing himself, "I'm following up on the missing person's report you filed about your sister, Lisa Nguyen."

"Yes, please tell me. Have you found her?"

Aguilar always spoke in a low-key monotone despite the circumstances. Because he was often in deep thought, he rarely let himself get excited over what he knew or had discovered. For this communication, a deadpan approach better served its purpose. "There's no easy way to say this," he said, "but we believe your sister was killed as a result of some type of criminal activity."

“Oh! Oh no! This can’t be true,” Mrs. Tran said, and Aguilar heard her crying. After a moment, she gathered herself together and said, “Lisa would never do anything illegal.”

“We don’t believe that she did anything wrong,” Aguilar said. “We don’t know for sure how she died, either. But our lab technicians have a body in the morgue and they believe it matches up to your report.”

“Oh, my God! Please don’t let it be so.” She continued sobbing.

After another pause, Aguilar said, “We will need you to meet us down at the morgue so you can confirm that it is your sister. And I want to say that I’m sorry for your loss.”

Aguilar and Lee went to the morgue, that was located in downtown Los Angeles, to speak to the examiner.

“She has twelve broken bones and several internal injuries, including a portion of her lung that spilled out through her rib cage,” the examiner said. “One side of the skull was partially crushed. She lost at least a quarter of her blood supply. Her ribs were crushed where her heart was located, and her heart and coronary arteries were mangled.”

“Is it possible to determine which blow was the fatal one?” Aguilar said, as they looked at the cleaned-up body.

“You can take your pick,” the examiner said.

“Her injuries are a lot worse than someone just beaten in a fist fight,” Harry said. “Was a weapon used?”

“There’s evidence of blunt force trauma especially to the head and torso,” the examiner said. “Just what was used I couldn’t be sure, but it was likely some kind of club.”

“She was carried away after the fight,” Aguilar said. “It looks like somebody tried to finish her off. Do you think that she was dead before she was carried away?”

“It’s impossible to tell,” the examiner said. “She might have received the fatal blow afterward. I just don’t know.”

“And you say she lost a quarter of her blood?” Harry said.

“At least that much,” the examiner said.

“I wonder where all that blood went,” Harry said. “We didn’t see very much where we found the body, and there wasn’t any at the nightclub parking lot.”

During this interview, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Daily Journal* entered the morgue and introduced himself as Jason Phillips. At age thirty, he was young for a crime reporter. In physical appearance he was also quite a contrast to the two detectives—tall at six foot four, slim, blond, with a beach going tan. He was wearing cargo shorts, sandals, and a T-shirt with a large print of a surfboard across the front. His hair looked like someone had set off a tiny bomb in it and blew it up in all different directions. In contrast, the two detectives were neat and trim with business casual clothes and their badges hanging around their necks.

He was polite—just as Aguilar and Lee were polite—and he explained that it was his first assignment for a major crime story. He extended his hand to each officer saying, “You can call me Jay.”

Aguilar was unimpressed with what he saw. But Harry looked Jay over more carefully as he didn’t understand why the newspaper would assign such an inexperienced reporter to cover a grisly murder.

“Please tell me how the victim was killed,” Jay said. He withdrew a notepad and pen from his backpack.

“We were just discussing that,” Aguilar said. He gave Jay a summary of what had transpired thus far in the case as they waited for the victim’s sister to show up.

“Can I have a look at the body?” Jay said.

“Be my guest,” Aguilar said. He led Jay over to the examiner’s table and pulled the shroud away.

“Oh my God!” Jay said. “That is just, like...awful.” He stared for a few minutes and then started looking a little queasy. “Thanks. I’ve seen enough for now,” he said.

Aguilar covered his mouth with his fist to stifle a laugh. Harry cracked a smile. “Are you...OK?” Aguilar finally said.

“Yeah, yeah, sure. I guess so,” Jay said. “I mean, I was, like, getting a little weak at the knees. I sure hope all the dead bodies I see on this job won’t look that bad.”

“Some will be worse,” Aguilar said with a small grin.

It was a short time later when Rachel Tran and her husband arrived. They were greeted first by the examiner, who led them over to the table where Rachel’s sister lay.

“I must tell you that your sister was traumatized and badly mangled when she died,” the examiner said. “It will not be a pretty sight.”

Rachel looked at her husband and took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s go ahead with it,” she said.

The examiner pulled the shroud away. Rachel seized up when she saw her sister’s body. She held her hands to her cheeks and staggered backwards. Her husband grabbed her shoulders and turned her away from the table. He pressed

her body close to his. She gradually regained her composure and took another brief look. “Yes, that’s Lisa,” she finally said.

Rachel’s husband led her over to a nearby bench to sit her down and help her recuperate. Aguilar went over to them and said, “I’m Sergeant Carlos Aguilar from the LAPD. I’m very sorry to meet you under these circumstances. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your sister.”

Rachel looked at her husband. With his nodding approval, she then turned toward Aguilar and said, “OK.”

Harry and Jay stood a few steps away but still within earshot. Aguilar began by explaining that Lisa was seen in a fight at the Paradise Cove nightclub.

“She was carried away by two unknown men from the parking lot, and her body was found in the bushes of an office building not far away,” Aguilar said. “We are treating this as a homicide. But we wonder how she came to be in the nightclub, and why she would get into a fight in the parking lot there.”

“I don’t know,” was Rachel’s response. She held her head in her hands as she sat next to her husband. “Lisa would occasionally go out clubbing, but she almost never went alone. The last thing in the world she would do is get into a physical fight with somebody.”

“Can we have her address?”

“Yes, of course.” Rachel recited Lisa’s address as Harry and Jay both took it down.

“Did she have any children or a husband?” Aguilar said.

“No. She was never married.”

“How about her job?”

“She worked at Renaissance Estates on Sultan Road, north of the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. She was the building’s accountant.”

“Did she have any problems such as angry or jealous boyfriends, drugs, gambling debts, large sums of money owed, or other similar issues?”

Rachel knew that the police were simply doing their job. But she became visibly upset by the idea that her sister might have been complicit in her own death. This pulled her out of her slump and she said, “Lisa was a kind, quiet, person who did not have a steady boyfriend. She was always careful with money, and certainly didn’t gamble or do drugs. She kept to her job and to herself mostly.”

“I see,” Aguilar said. “Did she have a group of friends that she hung around with?”

“Yes,” Rachel said. Her tired-looking eyes showed that she was worn out by the ordeal even though it was only late morning.

“I would like to get a list of her friends’ names and phone numbers,” Aguilar said. He gave her his business card. “You can email it to me when you have some time.”

“OK, I can do that.”

The examiner returned Lisa’s body to the storage drawer. Then he took the sister and her husband to the office to complete the paperwork to claim it.

On their way back to the parking garage, Aguilar turned to Jay and said, “Well, Newsboy, now you know all that we know about this case.”

“Thanks, Sergeant Aguilar. By the way, can I get one of those business cards of yours?”

Aguilar gave him one. “Now, don’t forget to use this,” he said. “Let me know anything you find out about this case no matter how trivial. Little things could turn out to be very important.”

“Oh, totally. I’m good at staying in touch. I, ah, like, don’t have my own business cards.” Jay wrote down his cell phone number and email address onto his notepad. He tore off the page and handed it to Aguilar. “That’s my cell number. You can reach me anytime—I always have it with me.”

“It would help matters if you would tell one of us when your stories hit the papers,” Harry said.

“Sure, I can do that.”

When they walked through the door of the building that led to the parking garage, Aguilar said, “Uh, Newsboy, just one question.”

“Yes?” Jay said as he turned back around.

“What is that thing sticking out of your backpack?” Aguilar said. He thought he already knew the answer.

Jay was momentarily puzzled. He had to figure out what it was that Aguilar saw. “Oh, you mean my skateboard,” he finally said.

“Your...skateboard,” Aguilar said.

“Hey, it’s, like, the way I get around a lot,” Jay said. “It’s faster than walking, and easier than running. See you soon, guys.” As they had entered the parking garage, he pulled the

skateboard out and began skating down to the end of the level where his van was parked.

Aguilar and Lee watched as Jay skated away. “So, the *Daily Journal* has sent us a bright, young, kid with a skateboard who is working on his first crime story,” Aguilar said.

“Do you think his youth will cause us some problems?” Harry said.

Aguilar thought for a moment and said, “No, we won’t let that happen. Besides, it’s his first time with reporting on a crime like this. He might dig up information about this ugly case that will be useful to us. People will sometimes say things to a reporter that they would never tell the police.”

Harry continued to watch Jay skate away. “I hope you’re right,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In the latter part of any afternoon, Ben Williams would often make the short drive to see his daughter, who lived a few miles away. He usually stayed for dinner and sometimes took some laundry with him, since she had a washing machine and dryer in her garage. On this particular day, he got into his car and started up the engine. As he turned around to back out of his parking space, he saw a man standing directly behind his car smoking a cigarette. Ben waited for a moment to see if the man would move and then made a motion for him to stand aside. When nothing happened, he turned back around to get out and see what this person's problem was. To his great surprise, another man was standing right outside the car door blocking him.

“Whoa!” he said, through the rolled down window. “You scared the shit out of me, man. Say, what’s going on here? I’m trying to...”

Before he could finish that sentence, the man next to him brandished a pistol and aimed it directly at his belly. He then fired two quick shots that struck Ben in the upper stomach and chest. Ben slumped forward, banging his head on the steering wheel. He died instantly.

The man at the car window carefully tucked his pistol into the front of his trousers underneath his shirt. He then quickly

walked toward the back of the car. When he joined the other man, they both started running toward a gray pickup truck parked nearby.

While driving back to the precinct after answering another homicide call, Aguilar and Lee got a call that a murder had taken place at Renaissance Estates. Harry, who was driving, immediately exited the freeway and changed directions back toward Renaissance Estates. There they found out that Ben Williams had been shot to death in the driver's seat of his car. The first responders on the scene had cordoned off the parking lot where Ben's car was parked. After Aguilar and Lee examined Ben's position, the medical team moved the body from the front seat of the car to the ground a few feet away. The police officer on the scene showed the detectives a witness. Aguilar had Harry take the witness's information while he surveyed the crime scene further.

The witness, a Mrs. Alma Robinson, was a tenant at Renaissance Estates. She had been walking toward her building when the murder occurred.

"Mrs. Robinson," Harry said, "would you please tell me what you saw and heard."

"I was walking from the bus stop over there back to my apartment, which is over here," she said, pointing to the two locations. "Then I heard two pops, like firecrackers, or something, that came from over in this direction." Again, she pointed to where the shots had come from.

"Did you see anybody over there?" Harry said.

"I stopped and turned around to look as I thought it might be gunshots. There was two Mexicans standing next to that

car. One was behind it, and the other one was next to the window. Then they both ran away.”

“Did you see where they went?”

“They got into a pickup truck that was parked down there further near the street corner. Then they drove off somewhere.”

“Can you tell me what they looked like?”

“Well, they was both Mexican. One was taller than the other. They was walking. But then they started running really fast to get outta here.”

“Was the tall one standing next to the car or behind it?”

“Behind it.”

“Can you tell me what kind of clothes they were wearing?”

“One of them was wearing khakis. That’s all I remember.”

Harry then showed her the photo of Suarez. “Did the tall one look like this?”

Mrs. Robinson looked at the picture and said, “I didn’t see his face, but he had a ponytail just like that.”

“Did you notice anything else? Even something small can be important,” Harry said.

Mrs. Robinson thought for a moment and then said, “The one standing behind the car was smoking a cigarette and he threw it away when they left.”

Harry’s eyes lit up. “Thank you very much for your help,” he said. He then gave her his card and asked her to call him if she remembered anything else.

While Harry was talking to the witness, Aguilar was examining the crime scene. He noticed the bullet holes in the driver's seat. He further noticed that they did not exit the back of the seat and therefore were likely still inside the upholstery. With a thin bladed knife, he carefully pulled out the spent bullets from where they had lodged. He also found two spent shell casings and placed them all in evidence. Then he called LAPD central to tell them to relay to CSI that he had removed two bullets from the crime scene for the lab to examine.

With the tip from Mrs. Robinson, Harry walked behind the car and started searching for a cigarette butt. He checked the surrounding parking spaces on both sides. He checked underneath Ben's car in the back and the front but was unable to find it. He stood for a moment behind the car and faced the driver's side window. Then, as if he were attempting to reenact the killer's movements, he imagined how he would toss out a cigarette if he suddenly had to leave. He turned directly to his right and walked across a vacant parking space to the car in the next space over. Checking underneath near the rear tires, he found what he was looking for. Carefully, he picked it up with tweezers and put it into an evidence bag. He then walked back over to the driver's side of Ben's car, where Aguilar was still searching inside.

"What's that you've got?" Aguilar said, as Harry held out the plastic evidence bag.

"A cigarette butt," Harry said. "That witness said she saw a guy with a ponytail standing behind the car smoking a cigarette."

“Outstanding!” Aguilar said. “If we can get a sample of Suarez’s DNA, we can place him at this murder site.”

A short time later, the two detectives wrapped up their investigation and sent the evidence they had to the lab. During the drive to the lab, Harry said, “Didn’t you tell me just the other day that Newsboy said this man’s life had been threatened?”

“That’s right,” Aguilar said. “Newsboy said that his source heard Brendon Millwood tell somebody in a phone call to kill Ben Williams.”

“Doesn’t that mean that we have our guy? A threat come true is no coincidence.”

“We can’t arrest him over that. But we sure can have nice, long talk with him.”

After sending their evidence to the lab, the two detectives drove directly to Millwood Property Management and intercepted Brendon Millwood as he was wrapping up business for the day. They dispensed with formalities by only presenting their identification. Then they crowded Millwood in his office standing in front of him as he sat at his desk.

“Mr. Millwood,” Aguilar said. “We’d like to have a little talk with you. Another person connected with Renaissance Estates was murdered this afternoon.”

Millwood appeared to be caught off guard. “Oh, Really? Who was that?” he said.

“Ben Williams,” Aguilar said, after a slight hesitation.

Millwood also hesitated before posing another question. “So, what do you want me to do about it?” he finally said.

Aguilar took Millwood's response to be flippant. He motioned to Harry to shut the door to Millwood's office. "Ben Williams was president of the Harbor Gateway Community Housing Corporation," Aguilar said, still in his trademark, low key-monotone. "That's the company that owns Renaissance Estates. He was shot while sitting in his car in the project's parking lot."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," Millwood said blandly. He started to pack up his briefcase.

"That's the second person connected to Renaissance Estates who was killed in the last thirty days," Aguilar said. "The other one was Lisa Nguyen, the accountant. Do you not see a pattern of some kind going on here? The accountant is killed, and then, a few weeks later, the president of the holding company is killed. Seems like more than a coincidence, don't you think?"

"I had nothing to do with either of those killings. I just manage..."

"But you do have plenty to do with Renaissance Estates, don't you?" Aguilar said, both interrupting Millwood and raising his voice.

Millwood stared at Aguilar. "I'm the managing agent of Renaissance Estates," he finally said. "I run the place, not Ben Williams or anybody else affiliated with the Harbor Gateway Community Housing Corporation. Yes, as a matter of fact, I do have plenty to do there."

"Then you can tell me why payments made by Renaissance Estates to the South Bay Neighborhood Association were greater than the amounts that had been

invoiced,” Aguilar said. His voice was now almost a shout. “And you can tell me why the checks for these payments were cashed by the bank, can’t you? After all, you do run the place and, therefore, you should know the answer.”

“Look, I don’t know anything about payments being made,” Millwood said, his voice trembling. “That was Lisa’s job, not mine.”

“There has been a lot of cash flowing over to the South Bay Neighborhood Association from Renaissance Estates,” Aguilar said. “The kind of money that can’t be tracked in an accounting system. Does that mean that they have a slush fund?”

“You’re asking the wrong guy,” Millwood said, bobbing and weaving around Aguilar’s verbal thrusts. “You should be asking *them* if they have a slush fund.”

Harry then brandished a copy of a check for over fourteen thousand dollars from Renaissance Estates that was made payable to the South Bay Neighborhood Association. At the bottom was Millwood’s signature.

“Isn’t that your signature?” Aguilar said.

Millwood looked at it. “So, I signed a check,” he responded. “What does that mean?”

“It should mean that you know what that check was for, shouldn’t it?” Aguilar said.

“The bookkeeper hands me checks to sign that are over two thousand dollars. That’s in the bylaws.”

“And you sign them without knowing what they are for?”

Millwood's was fidgeting with a pen and perspiring profusely. "All right," he said. "That's it. That's enough. I want to talk to my attorney."

Aguilar picked up the telephone receiver from Millwood's desk and handed it to him. "Call him," he said.

Millwood's attorney met them at the precinct and advised his client to say nothing at all. The detectives continued to badger Millwood about the murders, the checks, and what he knew about a slush fund at the South Bay Neighborhood Association. After a while of giving no answers, Millwood was released.

Later that evening, the lab report was posted to the LAPD's confidential database. The report showed that the markings of the bullets matched those retrieved from two other unsolved murder cases. Both those cases had ties to the South Bay Neighborhood Association and involved the same gun.

"Now we know where the gang's headquarters is," Harry said.

"Ben Williams was shot at about four in the afternoon," Aguilar said. "South Bay Neighborhood Association closes up for the day at about five. Maybe the killers haven't been paid yet."

"I think that means we're heading over to South Bay early in the morning," Harry said.

"I think you're right," Aguilar said.

On the chance that Ben Williams's killers would turn up at the offices of the South Bay Neighborhood Association to get paid, Aguilar and Lee drove to Torrance at six thirty in

the morning and staked the place out. Again, they parked strategically in order to observe who walked through the office door, as well as minimize their own presence.

Time passed, and they watched as the employees walked through the front door one at a time. Then Harry said, “Wasn’t Napier the money man of this operation?”

“That’s right,” Aguilar said, his eyes firmly fixed on the building’s entrance.

“Well, since he’s been arrested, why would the killers come back here to get paid? I mean, there must be somebody else filling that job.”

“That’s a good point. Somebody else has to pay them—either here or someplace else.”

“How do we know that the new moneyman even works here?”

“We don’t. But we do know that the money is in there. It’s our only lead right now.”

Then around eleven thirty, a woman walked out of the front entrance with a briefcase.

“Does that woman look familiar?” Aguilar said.

“Yes, but I don’t remember from where,” Harry said.

“She’s the lady who controls the money in the safe.”

“And she’s carrying a briefcase full of it somewhere,” Harry said as he started the car.

The woman got into her car and drove toward the parking lot exit. Casually, the two detectives followed her car, being careful not to crowd her, but keeping her in plain view. She led them to a public park that was quiet on this workday

morning. She got out of her car with the briefcase and sat at a nearby picnic table. She started reading a magazine, apparently waiting for someone to show up.

Harry parked their unmarked police car on a side street near the park's entrance. Aguilar could view the woman with the briefcase through binoculars. Harry was poised to photograph the transaction using a digital camera with a powerful telephoto lens. A short time passed, and then a gray pickup truck came down the street and turned into the parking lot. It parked in an angled space next to the walkway that went around the park. Out jumped two Latinos, one thin and of medium height, and the other taller with a ponytail. They walked over to the woman sitting at the picnic table. After a short conversation, they received the briefcase. Suarez, the one with the ponytail, opened it, and Aguilar could plainly see stacks of bills packed neatly inside. Harry clicked a dozen or more photos while this took place.

Aguilar quietly said. "Start the car and move up slowly. Don't catch anybody's attention."

Harry put his camera onto the back seat and drove into the parking lot. At just the same time, the conversation at the picnic table came to an end, and the two suspects started back toward the pickup truck. Harry then pulled the car a few feet behind the truck and blocked it in its parking space. Both detectives got out of the car with their pistols drawn while Aguilar shouted, "Police!" The man with the briefcase stopped a few feet in front of the truck. He looked directly at Aguilar, providing him with a clear view of the mysterious

man he'd been after. The shock of black hair and droopy eyes made an immediate imprint on Aguilar's mind.

Ignoring the shout, Suarez continued to the truck and slid into the driver's side seat. The man Aguilar now knew to be "El Puma" was carrying the briefcase with the money.

"*Baja el malentin!*" Aguilar told him. *Put the case down!* "El Puma" slowly bent down and placed the case upright on the ground.

Suarez had not closed the truck driver's side door yet when Harry shouted, "Get out of truck, now!"

Suddenly, Suarez slammed the door shut making a loud, distracting noise. Instinctively Aguilar turned his head toward the sound. "El Puma" quickly pulled a pistol out of his waistband and aimed it at Aguilar, who was caught out in the open. "El Puma" opened fire, sending two bullets directly into the car door behind Aguilar. Just as Harry opened fire at Suarez, Aguilar immediately dashed behind the trunk of the car for cover. "El Puma" fired again at Aguilar while he was running, hitting the closed rear door. From behind the car Aguilar started shooting at his assailant, nicking him in the leg, and the two men continued to exchange gunfire.

While Harry continued to shoot at the driver, Suarez started the truck and put it into reverse. He raced backward, slamming into the detectives' car and knocking Aguilar on his backside. "El Puma" reacted quickly to this distraction and pitched the briefcase inside the truck's bay. He dove head first into the bay, as Suarez switched gears to go forward. Aguilar got back to his feet and shot at him several more times. Bullets zinged back and forth, hitting the car, the

pickup, the park's public toilet building, and a nearby palm tree.

Harry also fired again several times trying to hit Suarez, who had ducked down as he drove away. Suarez drove over the curb and onto the park's walkway to get around the detectives' parked car. He bounced back into the parking lot directly into the line of fire of both detectives. Aguilar loaded another magazine and fired eight more times, and Harry fired another five shots. Again, bullets ripped into the driver side door, through the open window, and into the siding that went around the truck's bay. Remarkably, none hit either of the suspects. The pickup raced down the parking lot to the street and turned right.

The detectives got back into their car to give chase. As they turned to go back toward the exit to the street, the woman who had brought the briefcase backed out of her parking spot and blocked their way. Harry pounded on the horn, and Aguilar shouted out of the passenger window at her to get out of the way. She slowly pulled her car forward down to the exit stopping there momentarily. Right behind her Harry blasted on the horn again, and Aguilar shouted until she finally turned right and pulled out into the street.

Once on the street Harry sped the car out from behind her and they raced past her to chase the pickup, that by now was approaching the entrance to the 405 freeway. Aguilar picked up the radio handset and called for backup trying to get a helicopter to join the pursuit. Within a few moments the freeway traffic had slowed the pickup down, enabling the detectives to gain on it. When Harry pulled behind the truck,

“El Puma,” lifted one arm above the bay’s back gate and fired a shot, bouncing off the detective’s windshield.

“Ease up!” Aguilar said. “We can’t have a gun battle out here on the freeway.” Harry slowed down and let the pickup gain more distance. Then they both saw that it was heading down the transition road to the eastbound lanes of the 105 freeway. They followed it but lost it momentarily in the freeway traffic on the 105.

“This is where we need a helicopter,” Aguilar said. He tried again to get a helicopter to join the pursuit. At that point, they’d spotted the pickup again. It had gone off the freeway onto Prairie Avenue and disappeared into the Inglewood-Crenshaw District. They exited and continued after them combing the area searching for the gray pickup truck. They checked the area north of the freeway to no avail. Then Harry said that they might have gone south after exiting the freeway. With the helicopter and other police cars now involved in the search, the two detectives turned south toward Hawthorne and Gardena. But after a thorough street by street search of that area, they found no trace of the gray pickup truck or either of its occupants.

The helicopter and other police cars continued searching the area south of the freeway. But the two detectives started making their way northward to expand the search zone. As they cruised up Crenshaw Boulevard for another look, suddenly Aguilar shouted, “There they are, going the other way!”

In that area, Crenshaw Boulevard was a divided parkway. They were in the middle of a block when Aguilar saw the

pickup. They were also seen by Suarez and his partner as the pickup began to speed up in the opposite direction.

“Cut across the middle!” Aguilar said.

With many car horns honking, Harry drove up onto Crenshaw Boulevard’s parkway and down onto the other side. They were now half a city block behind the pickup, that was turning right onto Century Boulevard.

Aguilar radioed in the new location of the assailants as they gave chase by going westbound on Century. Within minutes they became bogged down in traffic since Century Boulevard was undergoing construction. When they reached an intersection with a traffic light, Aguilar spotted the truck on the other side of Century as it pulled into the parking lot of a Target Store.

“They went into the Target parking lot,” Aguilar said. “Pull through the intersection and turn left in front of those cars!”

“With his emergency lights flashing and horn honking, Harry cut in front of the cross traffic, causing several cars to slam on their brakes to avoid a crash. A few curse words were uttered, but luckily there was no collision.

Thinking they might be able to trap the fugitives in the busy parking lot, the detectives turned into the fire lane next to the store. A moment later, they saw the pickup traveling away from them on the far end of the parking lot.

“Down through the parking lot and then to the left!” Aguilar said, as he saw the gray pickup turn the corner around the end of the building. Harry turned down the parking lot lane, but they immediately got halted when a car pulled out of

its parking spot and another one waited to claim it. Showing his badge, Aguilar shouted out of his window trying to get the car to move out of the way. It took a couple of precious minutes, but they were finally able to pass by. Carefully, Harry managed to squeeze the car out of the parking lot avoiding the jam. By the time they reached the end of the building, the gray pickup was gone.

“Damn it!” Harry said as he banged his fist against the steering wheel. “Where in the hell are the helicopters?”

“They have to fly back around downtown to avoid the flight path of the airport,” Aguilar said.

They both looked right and left to be sure that the truck was not still in the lot somewhere. “Back over this way!” Aguilar said pointing to the left.

Harry drove down the fire lane, but he had to slow down to avoid hitting shoppers who were walking to and from the store’s entrance. The detectives got to the end of the building but did not see the pickup anywhere.

“All the way down to that street!” Aguilar said.

They drove down to the end of the parking lot to get a view of the street in both directions. There was still no sight of the gray pickup.

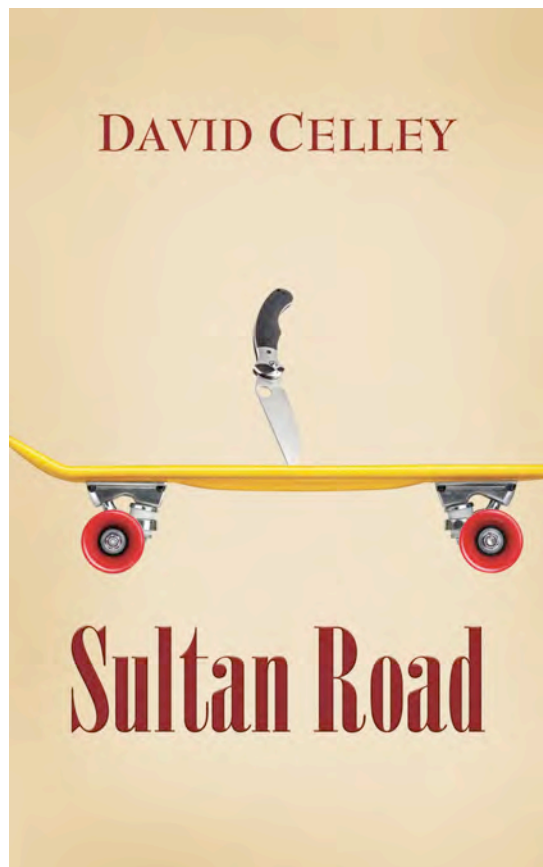
“Check it row by row,” Aguilar said.

A thorough search of each aisle of the parking lot took them twenty minutes and turned up nothing. Aguilar again reported his status and the last sighting of the gray pickup to the support command. Then they sat and waited. An hour later, the helicopter reported that it had made no sighting of the truck and was returning to its base.

SULTAN ROAD

Seeing that the chase was over, Aguilar said, “All right, back to the precinct.” He let out a deep sigh as he spoke.

When they made their way back to the freeway, Harry said, “We must be the first cops in history to lose two serial killers in a Target Store parking lot.”



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