

C.M. Lance  
12059 Wedd St.  
Overland Park, Kansas 66213

(913) 461-1603  
Email: Mike@TheLances.info

## **Caribbean Layoff**

By C.M. Lance

### **Chapter 1**

Rural Kansas – Near Kansas City  
10:10 p.m. April 3

Cruise control locked on the speed limit, Steve Henning pointed the white Land Cruiser down the rural Kansas highway. He couldn't afford a ticket. The heated leather seats warmed up and a twinge of sadness stabbed. He needed to sell the SUV. It was the best car he'd ever had, but he couldn't afford the payments anymore. Who knew happiness was a warm butt on a cold, stormy evening?

A silvered hole in the blue-black cloud cover closed and swallowed the moon, just like his hopes for a comfortable future had vanished.

The highway was desolate. No vehicle lights visible ahead or behind. Rarely did lights pass on the other side. People with sense snuggled up to their fireplaces on cold stormy nights like this. Clouds, the moon, and distant lightning alternated between hiding and revealing brown grass and outcroppings of stratified rock in the broad median that separated two lanes in each direction. Trees weren't strangers in this part of Kansas, but they didn't hang out in gangs.

He fought to maintain a positive outlook, to avoid getting mired in a tar pit of depression. Sliding toward sixty years old, he should be looking forward to retirement, not desperate to find a job while he struggled to hold his marriage together.

As Steve approached a long bridge, headlights grew on the other side of the road. They appeared to be heading toward him. It must be where the median narrowed, an optical illusion.

The lights dipped out of sight. Reappearing, they bounded into the air, landing on his side of the road. Steve stamped on the brake, instinctively preparing for evasive action. Where will the headlights lead the vehicle? They pulled it across the highway and off the road at an angle. It passed as a large white flash in and out of his headlight beams. Missing the guardrail, it jounced down toward the creek.

It disappeared below the level of bridge. Headlights shimmered on the trees below before they winked out. He thought he heard a muffled crunch through his closed windows. He shut off the radio, opened the window on the passenger side, and listened. Thunder rumbled.

Steve pressed the accelerator and peered down into the creek as his Land Cruiser rolled across the bridge. It was too deep to see the wreck. There was no sign of lights.

He poked 911 into his cell phone as he got out of the SUV. He'd check for injuries while waiting for emergency services to arrive. There was no sound from his phone. He disconnected and redialed. Still nothing. Squinting at the phone, he saw the problem. "Shit. No bars." After running up the road, and then across to the median, there were still no bars. He shoved the phone into the pocket of his down vest.

Now what? Drive into reception range, but how far would he have to go? Someone could bleed to death down there while he drove around looking for cell phone coverage. As a licensed Red Cross instructor, he might be able to help. He couldn't leave the scene of the accident until he knew.

At the back of the SUV, he pawed through his emergency bag for the first aid kit and flashlight. The flashlight and batteries were under his leather gloves. He grabbed them too. Hesitating, he decided to leave the SUV hatch open with the interior light on. Maybe someone would stop and he could send them for help or maybe their cell phone would work.

Swinging each leg high, he stepped over the guardrail. Stumbling and sliding down the steep hill from the guardrail, he managed to stay on his feet until reaching the leveler slope of grass and rock leading down to the creek.

He jogged toward the white van pressed against two large trees at the edge of the creek. The trees, both over a foot in diameter, bracketed the front of the vehicle. Grass gave way to more rock. The sound of fast moving water growled from the creek, contrasting with the quiet of the wreck.

Steve approached the van from the left side. Over the top of the van, he looked up at the bridge looming thirty feet higher. It's lucky he saw the wreck when he did. No one up there would see it tonight.

Halfway along the length of the vehicle, the ground dropped toward the creek twenty feet below. The van tilted nose-down at a forty-five degree angle, the undercarriage rested on the point where the slope folded into a sheer drop. Rear wheels hung from the suspension to touch the ground. Only the trees prevented a plunge into the waters below.

Steve eased his way beside the van, hand on its side for balance as the grade steepened.

He ran through the steps he taught in his Red Cross first aid classes; look around, make sure the area is safe and check to see if the victim is conscious. Often rescuers rush in, turning themselves into victims. He analyzed other dangers; is the van secure; is it in danger of sliding into the creek? Sniffing the air, he smelled antifreeze, but no gasoline.

The driver's head hung out an opening smashed in the upper half of the windshield, his shoulders against the lower rim of shattered glass, under the dangling rearview mirror. Steve sucked in a steady breath.

Airbags hung from the dashboard and draped from the steering wheel, but the large victim was on top of them, as if he'd flown over them. He wasn't wearing his seat belt. Police lectures to his Boy Scout troop emphasized that airbags and seatbelts worked together. Was he thrown from his seat before impact?

He shouldn't disturb the driver; he might have a broken neck, but what if he needed CPR? "Damn." Steve had that training too and was the only one here.

Enough thinking. The driver needed help, if he was alive.

The driver's door wouldn't open. Steve scrambled back up the steep slope and hurried around the van checking doors. All locked.

Back at the driver's door, he eased down the slope to the tree holding the van suspended over rushing waters. A two-foot diameter sycamore, with peeling brown and white mottled trunk, crushed the bumper back on the left side. Bent out over the creek, it looked sturdy enough to support the van; he hoped. In another lightning flash, he saw that upstream rains churned the water below.

He placed a foot against the tree, and lunged up to place his other foot on the bumper. With one foot on the tree and one on the bumper, he leaned close. By the light of the flashlight, the one eye he could see was open. Not a good sign, but he had to check. He waved his hand in front of the eye. "Can you hear me?" No response. He hung the flashlight by its lanyard from his wrist, took off a glove, and felt for the carotid artery pulse. There wasn't one.

The glove back on, he reached in through the hole in the windshield to where the rear view mirror dangled. He twisted and pulled, breaking it off.

He held the mirror under the driver's nose. The mirror remained clear in the beam from the flashlight. The driver was beyond help.

Steve checked for other passengers.

He passed the beam across the passenger seat. Light flashed on what looked like a jumbled pile of small bricks on the floor and passenger seat. Holding the flashlight still, he looked closer. They weren't tiles or bricks. They were banded packets of money, and more spilled out between the seats from an overturned box.

## Chapter 2

Grand Prairie, TX  
11:52 a.m. April 3

Paco squatted on a wheel well in the back of the white van, away from darkened windows, anticipating the final delivery. Almost noon, it was spring, so the Texas heat wasn't oppressive — yet. Otherwise, after two hours closed up in here, he'd be melting instead of sweating.

Down the street was a safe house owned by the Mexican drug cartel he worked for, one of the many scattered throughout the southwestern US. This one was in a transitional neighborhood; transitioning downward from lower middle class. The number of foreclosed, unkempt houses spoke to the economic meltdown and escalating job loss. Extra traffic and activity went unnoticed among the greater troubles haunting the neighborhood.

Two hours before he entered this van, Paco performed as a cartel mule, transporting money and drugs, for the final time. He drove a different van when he made his cash and cocaine delivery to the safe house.

Today's money transfer was to fund the “Cash for Gold” money laundering operation. The cartel's accountants noticed when businesses started purchasing gold for cash. They saw it as the perfect scheme to convert illicit cash to gold. Esteban Medina, the head of the cartel was elated. “But, that's why I pay accountants *mas dinero.*”

Paco brought *Chorizo con Huevos, Empanadas,* and Coca Cola from a nearby *Taquería* for the safe house staff when he made his early delivery. He stayed around to eat it with them and wore his trademark duster. He wanted to be a familiar face and coat.

The schedule called for a last drop off shortly before noon. The cartel armored-car would arrive at one o'clock to pick up money assembled at the safe house. That left Paco a window of an hour.

After his morning delivery, he parked the cartel's van in a shopping center and switched to his two-year old black Cadillac Escalade. Back in the safe house neighborhood, he parked two streets over and two blocks down, leaving keys in the ignition when he climbed out. In this neighborhood, it would be gone in under three hours.

He walked a small dog he'd picked up at the pound yesterday. A man by himself prowling the streets might be noted and reported; not a man walking a dog. Once behind the stolen white van in which he was now sitting, he set the dog free to make friends with the dogcatcher again.

Old trustworthy, legendary Paco was about to take his pension from the cartel for him, Estralita, and the kids.

There were six men at the house guarding the goods, all armed. He needed them all together. If scattered around the house when he started, those furthest from him would have warning and ruin his chances.

As he watched, the last van came down the street, slowed, and pulled into the driveway of the safe house, driving to the garage in back. It was delivery number five.

Paco began preparing. He pulled on specially made shotgun harnesses to allow his two shotguns to hang below his arms under the coat. He was already wearing shoulder holsters for two pistols.

The shotguns were twelve-gauge automatics, based on the AA-12 Atchisson Assault shotgun designed toward the end of the Vietnam War. Able to fire 300 rounds per minute, it provided tremendous short-range firepower during ambushes, room clearance operations, and other close range combat situations. They were perfect for what he had to do. In fully automatic mode, they created a deadly curtain of buckshot.

As he finished preparing his armament, the delivery van pulled back into the street from the house and drove away. It was time. He put on his duster and buttoned the middle button, then grabbed cocaine he'd set aside earlier and inhaled it deeply. He needed the energy.

Cocaine began to fill him with a familiar sense of power. The van's side sliding door faced away from the safe house. He got out, reclosed it quietly, and then walked away from the safe house, to the end of the block. He crossed the street then turned back toward the safe house.

The safe house was a small, one story, red brick nineteen-fifty vintage. Some of the nearby houses had neighborly touches like chain link fencing protecting them from foot traffic on the front sidewalk. Three steps led to a covered concrete porch, which fronted the left side of the house. Graying shutters flanked the picture window on the right side of the house. A brick planter below sprouted dead junipers. Rumpled, heavily yellowed drapes guarded against light and curious glances from neighbors.

The driveway was two concrete ribbons separated by scraggly brown grass. It ran along the left side of house to the garage in back.

Arriving at the safe house, he raised his hands in front of him. "It's me, Paco, don't shoot." He kept his hands up and climbed the stairs onto the porch. Turning, he gestured at the van. "I think there might be someone in it."

Standing at the partially open front door, he saw one of the men pull the front window drapes aside to look at the van. He hollered in the door. "Away from the window! Don't look at them. Get inside."

Paco pushed the door open further and walked in. "Get inside, away from the windows. Everyone meet in the kitchen." He headed for the kitchen, keeping clear of everyone, not wanting anyone to bump into him and feel the guns, or even worse, have one go off.

Herman, a tall, muscular black was in charge of the crew. He followed Paco into the kitchen, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought there was something funny about the van across the street. It's been here since I left this morning. Raoul told me to check it out. He said if it's DEA they might be monitoring cell phones so stay off them. I can't tell if anyone is in the van. The windows are dark."

Four other men, one black, two Hispanic, and one white crowded into the kitchen. All had pistols. Two had assault rifles.

"We need to check it out; we need everyone here to make a plan. Is everyone here?"

Herman looked around from where he was leaning against the refrigerator and said "everyone except Pedro".

A voice came from the hallway. "I'm here."

Paco said, "Get in here so we can figure out what everyone needs to do". He turned to the window and moved the ragged, soiled curtain aside to look out at the street. In the window's reflection, he saw everyone was now in the kitchen. Pedro stood in the doorway. Two men with assault rifles were on either side of the door. They stood in a half circle facing Paco.

The kitchen was empty of furniture and appliances except for a folding card table, four folding chairs, and a refrigerator. The other black man pulled a chair out and sat down. A deck of playing cards was scattered on the table. An empty soiled rectangle on the linoleum floor outlined where the stove had been. A chipped and stained sink under the curtained window and cracked tan tile with brown grout completed the décor.

While looking out the window, Paco unbuttoned the single button of his coat, reached into and through the cutout in his right coat pocket. He wrapped his hand around the shotgun and laced his finger into the trigger guard.

He said to the window, "We have to figure out how to check out the van and what to do if there is someone in it." Turning, he raised the shotgun on his right through the coat, grabbing the forestock with his left hand as it came up and opened up on Pedro in the doorway and the two men on either side.

Four blasts in less than a second roared with the first two squeezes of the trigger. One round caught Pedro in the chest, blowing him across the hall. Paco swung the shotgun across the doorway as he held the trigger down. The next blast caught the man on the left and flattened him against the wall. Buckshot at close range inflicted terrible damage. He swept the gun back to the right. With the next squeeze, two rounds smashed the other assault rifle bearer against the wall. Paco continued to the right and squeezed the trigger quickly to catch Herman, whom he judged to be the most dangerous. Herman had his gun out, but not aimed. Two blasts of the shotgun smashed him against the refrigerator.

Four down and two to go. He dropped his left hand from the forestock of the shotgun as he turned to deal with the last two who were both reaching for pistols. A white guy was to the left of Herman and the black on the far left, almost behind Paco, was rising from the kitchen table. The white guy almost had his gun up when Paco squeezed the trigger again and hit him with two shots. One hit him in the gun arm, nearly ripping it off and starting a fountain of blood.

With only one hand on the shotgun on the right, the recoil of the second shot knocked it from Paco's hand, but he'd already swung the coat out of the way and grabbed the shotgun on his left. He pulled it up, planted the butt against his hip, and fired left-handed, unloading three shots into the last black man at the same moment he fired his pistol at Paco. Paco felt the pistol bullet pluck at his coat as his shotgun blasted the other in the groin, chest, and face as its barrel climbed, shredding him as it knocked him into the folding card table, which collapsed to the floor under the weight. Playing cards fluttered down. A red mist and the acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air.

Paco stepped over to the wounded man bleeding on the floor. His motion slowed as Paco stepped over. He pulled out a pistol and shot the man in the head, twice.

Paco's wheezing breath filled the echoing silence. He looked at the body of Herman crumpled on the blood stained linoleum. He felt a twinge of remorse. Not a friend, but he'd known him for years. "Sorry, man. It's for family."

Although gunshots weren't unheard of around here, neighbors would call the police. He had to move. At the van he'd left on the street, he jumped in and backed it rapidly to the house, down the driveway, and around to the back, slamming on the brakes with a squeal. He was short

of breath and perspiring heavily. Recently, the smallest exertion left him short of breath, but this was worse. He felt weak, dizzy, and had trouble catching his breath. He crossed his arms on the wheel and put his head on them. When he looked up there were colorless spots in front of his eyes. Leaving the van running, he pulled on the door handle and lunged with his shoulder at the driver's door to open it. As he got out, he muttered "For Estralita."

Boxes of money and drugs were stacked in the otherwise empty laundry room at the back door. He pushed the lip of the two-wheel dolly under a stack of three boxes and then lifted two off other stacks to place on top. He rolled the dolly out the door, shoved the boxes into the back of the van, and returned for more. He made seven more trips, grabbing boxes of money and boxes of cocaine. On one trip, he threw the shotguns, duster, and harnesses into the back of the van. After loading the last box, he leaned forward and put his hands on the floor of the van, gasping raggedly through his mouth. He shut his eyes, but dizziness forced them open again.

Pushing himself erect with an effort, he started to shut the van's back doors but stopped. He thrust his hand into a box of drugs and dragged out a powder-filled baggie before shutting the doors. Walking around to the driver's side of the van, he supported himself with his right hand against the van. He saw a curtain fall back into place in the house next door. He had to hurry. No need to back up, he placed the van in gear and drove to the front of the house. Looking around carefully he pulled into the street.

As he made his second turn toward the freeway heading north, he heard sirens in the distance.

### Chapter 3

Mexico City

9:45 p.m. April 3

Esteban Medina, head of the Medina cartel, slammed his hands on the desk and screamed “*Que?*” His lips drew back from his teeth in a snarl and the chair he shoved back as he rose slammed into the shelves of artifacts behind his desk. A rare pre-Columbian pot fell to the thick carpet but didn’t shatter. As he stalked toward him, the messenger who had delivered the news of the raid on the safe house dropped to his knees and raised his hands in supplication. Perhaps it saved his life.

Esteban slapped the messenger in the face and turned back to his desk. Fear was a good management tool. He gestured dismissal and barked “*Fuera*”.

The messenger scrambled to his feet and left muttering, “*Gracias a dios*”. When Esteban was angry, others were often injured.

Again seated at his desk, Esteban thought of next steps. The raid meant someone knew about his operation. It was a major glitch in the, until now, smooth running Cash for Gold program. A bigger issue was the demonstrated lack of respect towards his organization. His power functioned on fear more than greed.

He had spies in all major US enforcement agencies and he’d received no word of the raid. He phoned one of those worked out of the Dallas FBI office. Switching to excellent but accented English he said, “There was a raid this morning in your area. Do you know who did it? Was it an official operation?”

“Hang on.” After a few moments, Esteban heard a door close, then, “I heard it was your organization. Is someone at war with you?”

“Perhaps, millions in drugs and money was stolen.”

“Then it wasn’t anyone in law enforcement. That much money would already be in the news media if it were. The bigwigs want press coverage for raids that result in seizures of that much. It helps justify funding requests. The gossip is that it’s a squabble between cartels. It was a massacre. There were lots of bodies, all in one room.”

“We will find out.” He disconnected.

Loss of the money was an issue, but with the amount of money the cartel generated, it wasn’t a large one. The loss of his employees' lives was the cost of doing business. There were plenty of others. However, disrespect had to be punished, or others would attack. Only strength ruled.

#

One of Esteban Medina's best informants was DEA agent Juan Medina. Born in a US hospital to first generation illegal immigrants, Juan was a US citizen. As a citizen, he'd leveraged

his intelligence, hard work and affirmative action programs to win scholarships to UCLA. Graduating at the top of his class with a degree in Public Policy, specializing in Drugs and Crime, he joined the DEA. They valued his bilingual capabilities. He spoke English with a Southern California accent and Spanish like a Mexican.

Juan made a name for himself as an investigator. He combined above average intelligence, an intuitive flair, and dogged determination. He specialized in the Medina cartel. He enjoyed the irony of the same last name. His success as a DEA agent hadn't helped him, however, to achieve the type of lifestyle he desired. He'd continued his education, earning a masters degree part time while he continued working.

However, he was dissatisfied. He wasn't going to get where he wanted through study and hard work. Dealing with the cartel, he saw what good lifestyles were like. No government salary was going to get him there. A little over two years ago, he found a girl he wanted to start a family with, but she chose to marry a rich real estate executive instead. Soon after, he sent a message through his informant network; he wanted to talk privately with Esteban Medina.

When he finally met with Esteban, he made it known he wanted to retire early in a comfortable style. If Esteban made it happen, Juan would be a conduit into the DEA's plans.

Juan's investigations had been putting pressure on the cartel. To turn him into an asset would be a major coup. They reached an agreement after Juan demonstrated good faith. He exposed an undercover agent in the cartel's operations. Esteban picked up the phone and gave orders in front of Juan to kill the undercover agent. Juan shrugged. He had expected it. It generated the first of a string of deposits to Juan's offshore retirement fund.

Juan demanded a clear communication directly to Esteban with no go-between. The communication channel had done well by both of them. Juan was building up his treasured offshore retirement fund. The value of his information to the cartel was enough to create rumors in the DEA that there was a mole in the organization. The Medina cartel was always one step ahead of them.

#

After considering options, Esteban call Juan. There was no answer, and he left no message, but he knew Juan would see the incoming number and call him back soon.

Juan called back within fifteen minutes.

They never used names on their calls. When Esteban answered, Juan said "Yes?"

"Did you hear of the incident with my operation in Grand Prairie, Texas?"

"I just heard of it. Word on the street is they retired all on-site operatives. Was anything taken?"

"Mostly money, some product. The people aren't important, but lack of respect is. Do you know who did it?"

"No. The local police assume it was either an internal job or another organization. They notified us because of product in the house, but local police are handling the case because of all the deaths. It isn't high priority to us. I know the people were from your organization. There wasn't a large amount of product found and the victims are low profile. I guess we are in agreement about that."

"They took over thirty million."

"Oh... That raises the profile."

Through first hand experience, Esteban knew Juan was the best investigator he could find. "I don't care about the money, but they must pay. I need you to find them and punish them."

"I can try, but I don't know if I can get assigned to what looks like a minor internal

skirmish.”

“No. I need you to find them.”

“Believe me, I'd like to help, but my value to you depends on keeping a low profile which I'm not ready to jeopardize. I can't retire; my retirement account hasn't matured yet.”

Esteban's growled. “I need this done. I'm moving up your retirement plan. I'll deposit two million in your account today. You can have half of the money you recover. I don't care about the money. It's about respect. I want them destroyed”

Juan was silent for long moments. Then he said “Half of thirty million?”

“Half if you recover it.”

“You realize if I do this for you, I'll have to leave my organization. My activities on your behalf will raise issues and suspicion. There are already rumors about a mole in the organization.”

Juan paused. Esteban was a dangerous man to push, but now seemed the time if there ever was one. “Of course, if I leave, I won't be able to continue to provide information to you. If I find them, and can't recover what they've taken; my retirement plan will still be underfunded.”

Juan heard rage in Esteban's voice when he responded. “What do you need?”

“Another three million if I find them, plus half of whatever I recover.”

“Done, that problem is resolved.”

“I'll call you after the money is deposited in my account.”

“Give me an hour.”

They disconnected and Esteban put his accountants to work. Forty-five minutes later Juan called back. “OK, I have it. I will begin immediately. I can find whoever took it, but I'll need two men who can follow orders and handle dirty work.”

“I'll have two of my best men call this number. The ones I have in mind are smart enough to follow orders, but they are big and very mean. They hurt people for me. They are yours until you are done. Find who did this and punish them.” Esteban disconnected.

## Chapter 4

Still laboring for air, Paco drove the white van north, toward Estralita's home near Kansas City. He would follow lesser-traveled highways from Dallas, past the Lake Texoma dam, then through small Oklahoma and Kansas towns.

A Walmart supercenter provided cover for him to change to the license plate he'd stolen the last time he was in Kansas City. When done, he sat in the driver's seat for three minutes trying to catch his breath. He'd been up for almost thirty-six hours, running on nervous energy and cocaine.

Recovering slightly, he began the eight-hour drive to Estralita's, paying careful attention to the speed limit. It wouldn't work if he were stopped for speeding with the money and guns in back.

He reached into the baggie of cocaine in the passenger seat and took a pinch of the powder, put it to his nose and sniffed it in. Between the cocaine and energy drinks, he could make it to Estralita's.

He planned to pick up Estralita and drive north to Canada. Canadians had good healthcare.

#

Paco began as street muscle for the Medellin cartel forty years ago. Jorge Medina recruited him in Colombia for his size, strength, and reflexes. Jorge first saw Paco playing soccer on the streets in Bogota and wondered why a man was playing with kids. Paco towered over the rest of the kids. He reached his full growth of six feet two inches by the time he was fourteen. Afterwards he filled out impressively, packing more muscle on a heavy frame. Sixteen-year-old Paco was playing goalie, covering the goal space between two broken down, rusting cars like a large predator. Jorge thought of a jaguar.

Jorge's offer came at the perfect time for Paco. Estralita, the sister who raised him, had to leave Columbia. Estralita, six years older than Paco, took care of young Paco after their parents and two other siblings died in drug wars. With no skills, but possessing an attractive face and a voluptuous body, she sold herself to raise money to house and feed the two of them.

The man who found customers for her and beat her when she didn't make enough money to support his habits made the mistake of beating her in front of sixteen-year-old Paco. Paco had a nicked and dented cricket bat he found in a trash heap outside the Bogotá Cricket Club. He slept with the bat and carried it with him, dreaming of when he would be a cricket hero, wearing a brilliant white uniform and performing heroic feats like those that he saw through the hole in the fence at the Cricket Club. When Estralita's pimp beat her, Paco went into a rage and beat the pimp to death with the bat. Estralita, fearing reprisals, fled Bogotá leaving Paco.

For a first assignment, Jorge aimed Paco and an older enforcer, Enrique, at a trio of farmers selling raw coca leaves to his rivals. Cornered in their cardboard, tin, and rotting board shack; the farmers pulled out machetes. The machetes were big knives to Paco. The cricket bat

had served him well in neighborhood brawls.

Jorge's instructions were, "Get their attention, rough them up; break some arms, maybe a leg. Teach them that they do business with us and nobody else."

Before he went, Paco sampled, for the first time, some of the cartel's prime cocaine. He felt all-powerful. Instead of spawning fear, the machetes angered him.

Enrique looked at the machetes, and then at his knife, and Paco's cricket bat; and ran. Paco never noticed. He rushed the three former sugar cane farmers, turned cocaine entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, for them, they never used machetes against something that struck back.

What started as an assignment to convince farmers to do business differently ended with three dead bodies. Enrique crept back in time to witness Paco chopping up the last farmer with a machete. Hearing Enrique enter, Paco whirled; his bloody visage and fierce stare driving Enrique back. A spray of blood covered Paco's face, arms, and clothes. Some of it was from a slice on Paco's cheek.

Enrique's tale, which left out all mention of his running at the first sign of machetes, was the start of Paco's reputation. The machete scar across his face added to his status.

Young Paco feared he'd be in trouble for killing the suppliers, but Jorge said, "If they're dead, they can't give us the stuff; but they won't give it to those other guys either". He gave Paco a smile. "The message is 'work with us or you end up dead'. I like it. Good job, hombres."

The experience stamped the first lesson into Paco's forming psyche about the benefits of violence on behalf of the cartel.

Jorge rose within the cartel and brought Paco along. Paco developed expertise with many weapons including knives, handguns, rifles, shotguns, and machetes. Without the rule of law on their side, the cartel depended upon vengeance and violence. Paco enforced Jorge's rules and was his bodyguard.

Jorge foresaw that the Columbian government, backed by US weapons, money, and men, was going to crush the Medellin cartel. He moved to Mexico and took over distribution organizations falling apart along with the cartel. He brought Paco along.

As primary bodyguard, he saved Jorge's life at least three times. The third instance involved an attack by the Federal Police which Paco foiled by killing four police officers with the high-speed automatic shotgun he favored. Paco carried the injured Jorge out of danger by throwing him over his shoulder and, with shotgun blasting, charged through the gap left by the police he'd killed. Paco's reputation continued to grow.

Jorge's death, not surprisingly, happened when Paco was away. Jorge's son, Esteban, took over the organization so smoothly; it was as if it had been pre-planned. After Jorge's death, Paco transitioned to function as a trusted mule, moving drugs and money.

When anyone threatened his cargo, he fell back on his weapons skills. But at fifty-six years old, he didn't know whether his reactions would continue to be there when needed. Forty years was a long time to keep in fighting trim.

#

Estralita called two months ago with bad news; she was dying. Cancer was spreading through her body. She and her husband didn't have insurance and were using up their life savings on cancer treatments, which weren't working.

When she left Columbia, she snuck into the US. Friends and relatives helped her. She worked cleaning peoples' homes, offices, and hotels. She met and married a cook who dreamed of opening a Mexican restaurant. While he cooked, she continued to clean.

She and her cook eventually moved to Kansas City to open a restaurant with a cousin in

Lenexa. Not known as a hotbed of Mexican cuisine, they filled the gustatory niche by tailoring it to Midwestern tastes. The restaurant grew successful; so successful Estralita quit cleaning except for her family.

Paco often came to visit her and his nephews. He was disappointed when he couldn't interest his nephews in cricket, but they excelled at soccer.

News of Estralita's cancer devastated Paco. In her early sixties, she should have many years ahead to play with grandchildren. Paco wanted to make sure she would have the best medical care possible and he wanted a good future for his nephews.

Paco had been undergoing the introspection people go through as they feel their mortality drawing closer. It often draws people closer to religion — as if cramming for their final exam. Paco began to rethink his life. He had no retirement plan, no health insurance. Most people in his line of business never needed them; a pre-purchased cemetery plot was more realistic.

Estralita was the only family he had and she was in trouble — but what could he do? He had no savings and the legendary Paco had a bad back and knees. When he got ready the morning before the money run, it took an hour of creeping and creaking before he could walk without supporting himself on the furniture and walls as he moved to the bathroom, got dressed and fixed coffee in his hotel room.

He forced himself to move so he wouldn't be late on his big day.

#

Paco drove the van through North Texas and into Oklahoma. About twenty-five miles inside Oklahoma, he stopped on the side of the bridge that crossed the Blue River. He sat for a while breathing deeply, preparing. He never had to prepare to get out of the car before.

Once outside, he walked to the back of the van, opened the doors, and reached in for a large burlap bag. The shotguns went into the bag along with the Texas license plates he'd removed. A bungee cord went around the bag. He waited until no traffic was visible and then quickly walked to the bridge railing and threw the bundle into the middle of the river. He wouldn't need them in Canada. Shotguns were too much trouble to smuggle. He'd keep the pistols. Back in the van, he was panting again from the small exertion. He grabbed another pinch of cocaine; pulled onto the highway and continued north.

Rolling down the highway, he was still short of breath. His labored breathing was making his chest hurt. He was very tired. He took a pinch of cocaine every hour.

He stopped again for gas. Stepping from the van, Paco brushed white powder from his face, shirt, and pants. He trudged inside and laid two fifties on the counter. He waved his hand over his shoulder "White van, fill up". Back outside he went through the gasoline ritual; flap, cap, nozzle, trigger squeeze. He stared at the unresponsive nozzle. "Damn." He turned to select a grade. He leaned his forehead against the van while it filled. Returning inside for his change, he snatched up a hotdog along with cans of Red Bull.

Four and a half more hours to Estralita's. He rethought his plan. He couldn't stay with Estralita. The cartel may already be after him. Some knew about Estralita. He'd take her to a motel where he could sleep. He'd been awake for over forty hours.

He popped the top on a Red Bull, took another pinch of cocaine, part of which drifted down to dust his clothes. He shifted into drive and steered back onto the road.

He had to get his cargo of money to Estralita. It was their future, Estralita's medical care and his ticket out of the drug business. He'd been in it for too many years; his luck wouldn't hold forever. The drugs in back would keep him going until he could quit them. The money would be enough for Estralita and the kids.

Driving grew harder. He couldn't get enough air. He was sweating. He wanted to sleep. When the buzz wore off, he caught his eyes drooping closed. He kept taking pinches of powder. His right arm ached. He rubbed it as he drove. Must be sore from the shotguns.

It was dark before he turned west after passing through Overland Park. He was within thirty minutes of Estralita's when the arm pain intensified and spread to his shoulder, neck, and chest. Doubled over in pain, fingers like talons clutched at his chest. Agony made him oblivious when he pulled the van to the left. It ran onto the shoulder, dipped down in the middle of the median, then shot back up on the other side; flying for moment. It landed on the wrong side of the road, running at an angle toward the far shoulder. He barely registered lights coming toward him.

There was no seatbelt to keep the bounce out of the median from throwing him out of his seat. Hauling on the steering wheel, he pulled himself back toward the seat then had to push on the wheel to wrench the van left. He slid out of the seat onto the console again. The guardrail passed within inches. Everything moved too fast. A low wall of rock appeared in his headlights. He pulled the van back right.

Searing, tearing pain gripped his chest and arm. Paco moaned as a bounce slammed him against the dashboard. Two trees materialized in the headlights. One hand on the steering wheel, he saw that the van pointed between them. He stretched his leg to stop, missed the brake pedal, stabbed the gas instead. The van rotated downward as the ground dropped away. Paco floated off the console. Suspended in air, his hand clutching the steering wheel was the only thing anchoring him.

Everything sped faster as the van tried to squeeze through a too small opening. His last impression was the rear view mirror rushing at him. There was no chance for Paco to have a last thought about Estralita. No more pain; the world winked out.

## Chapter 5

Rural Kansas – Near Kansas City  
10:15 p.m. April 3

Steve was stunned, staring at the money bundles lying in the front of the van, as thoughts about how much they needed money raced through his head. Even a few thousand would help.

He looked at the dead driver, took a deep breath, and looked skyward. Steve had mixed religious feelings. He believed in God, but not in organized religion. Nothing he could do except offer a prayer.

He climbed down from the front of the van and scrambled up the steep hill. The locked rear doors had windows. Steve looked around for a rock, easily found in Kansas. He picked one pointed on the end like a football. He smashed the glass and unlocked the door.

Resting on its undercarriage, and tilted nose-down into the creek, the van's back bumper was three feet in the air, rear tires hanging from the suspension, barely touching the ground. He climbed up on the bumper and lifted the door. It was like hefting an old-time outside cellar door with a tornado on the way. He heaved it aside.

A pile of file boxes at the front of the cargo area pressed against the front seats. They were the just like the boxes he used to carry personal possessions home after his layoff. He eased down the sloping floor to the pile of boxes. He lifted the top from a box and turned the flashlight beam into it. Full to the brim with money, the packets on top all had twenty-dollar bills. He picked up a packet and fanned through it — all twenties. Digging down, he found more packages of twenties.

Steve jerked to a stop when he heard tapping. His head whipped around looking for the source of the noise. When it increased in frequency, he realized it had begun to rain. He exhaled and pulled another box out of the pile.

It was full of plastic baggies of white powder. On TV, they tasted it, but he had no idea what it should taste like. His familiarity with drugs extended to painkillers after a minor knee operation. He shoved the box aside.

How much was money and how much drugs?

He pulled the tops off three more boxes. Two contained bundles of hundreds and the other had fifties. There were twenty to thirty boxes. Hefting a box, Steve guessed they weighed fifty pounds each. Quick math said 1,000 to 1,500 pounds; easily what his SUV could carry.

Steve rocked back on his heels, torn with indecision. Their future was bleak. The job market sucked. Their retirement savings were dwindling and weren't nearly enough. He feared he and Jen would end as little better than street people, if they even stayed together.

When He and Jen were talking, it was an ongoing argument about money.

He surveyed the scene with those depressing thoughts providing a humming background.

The driver was dead. It had to be drug money. Money like this didn't go with baggies of powdered sugar. It wasn't a fund for orphans or old folks.

His conscience told him to call the authorities, but what would they do with it? He and

Jen could do as much good and do it for people they cared about.

If he took it, what happens if the cops show up before he's done? What would they do to him? What would a drug cartel do to him? He looked at his gloves — no prints. Would the cops know anyone had even taken anything? Would the cartel tell? Not likely. How could they track him?

He had to stop dithering. He could debate with himself until sunrise. Nobody was going to give him anything. Hell, they'd taken his future, first his pension and then his job.

His only hope was for what he could get on his own.

He climbed out of the van and jogged through the cold rain to his SUV. The road was still quiet. He pulled forward past the guardrail and then backed around it and across the steep rocky ground down to the rear of the van.

The interior lights dimmed after he shut the driver's door and hurried to the back of the Land Cruiser. Headlights shut off automatically just before he opened the rear hatch. He didn't want light alerting passing traffic to stop. No one had shown up when needed. It would be his luck for help to appear now.

Steve opened the hatch and the interior light blossomed. He remembered there was a setting to turn it off even if the hatch was open. He flicked the switch shutting the lights off, his flashlight now the only illumination.

His heart was thudding, adrenaline charging his movements. His hands shook. The cold rain didn't help. He'd never done anything like this.

Turning from the SUV, he climbed over the van's bumper, out of the rain. The boxes were in disarray; piled against the front seats. Money spilled out of one that had fallen on its side. He pulled boxes away from the pile and checked to see if they contained money or drugs. Those with drugs; he shoved to the side of the van.

He pushed boxes with money up the metal slope of the van floor through the stream of water that ran down from the open doors. At the rear of the van, he rested the boxes on the edge of the floor and the bumper where rain pattered on them. After balancing four boxes of money at the rear of the van, he crawled up and jumped out to load them into the SUV.

After the first boxes were loaded into the SUV, he hiked himself back up into the van for more. Driven by nervous energy, he was going as fast as he could; shoving fifty-pound boxes up the rain slick, forty-five degree incline.

When he crawled up to unload the second set of boxes, the van shifted with a groan. Steve grabbed the doorjamb, ready to jump before it slid into the creek. It stopped and Steve dropped down. There was a scraping sound as the van tilted again. At the front of the van, he peered through the rain at the trees and creek. The trees still looked solid with the van pressed against them, but the water was now less than a foot from the front bumper. Balanced like a teeter-totter, it hung over rising water.

The van held steady when he climbed back in. But, when he started to climb out to transfer the next set of boxes into the SUV, the van shifted again with a creak. Steve cringed, waiting for it to fall or for the rushing water to sweep it away. The van held steady as he got out.

He began loading the boxes into the SUV. He heard the hiss of a car running through the rain on the bridge above as he lifted the third box. He dropped it. He hadn't seen approaching lights. He didn't move. The sound of the car faded in the distance.

The breath he didn't know he'd been holding came out in a whoosh. He slumped against the van. Panting, his chest heaving, he told himself he didn't need a heart attack. Deep breaths. Calm down. He pushed himself away from the van and squatted to retrieve the money that had

fallen out of the box into puddles of water. He stuffed it back in and lifted it into the SUV.

When finished transferring the money, he was soaked and shivering as much from nerves as from cold rain. Two more cars passed on the road above while he worked. Each time he froze, scarcely breathing, waiting for the cars to stop; but they continued. The last time he almost quit, thinking he had enough and the risk was too great, but there were only a few boxes left. When done, twenty-two wet boxes were in the SUV with seven drug boxes shoved to the side of the van.

Steve surveyed the boxes he'd piled to the side of the van, then pulled himself up into the van and roughly shoved them against the front seats. He pulled tops off a few to create more disarray. Couldn't have a wreck with boxes neatly stacked to one side.

The bundles of money were still lying on the floor in front of the passenger seat. He started to crawl forward for them, but stopped. He'd taken too much time already. Don't be greedy. Get out of here.

He'd been trying to ignore the body in front, but he looked at the driver one last time, wondering who he was. He pulled the man's wallet out of his rear pocket and stuck it in his down vest's pocket, before he turned and climbed out of the van. He shut and locked the van's doors; hoping the broken glass in the back of the van looked natural.

Back in the SUV, he put its four-wheel drive into low and pulled forward; concerned about getting stuck in the rain with the extra weight. The ground was hard and mostly rock where he started, but it would be soft close to the road. He needed to build momentum on the hard rocky ground and keep rolling steadily. "C'mon, about 200 feet to the pavement. Do it for me baby." He patted the dashboard, leaning forward, providing psychological support.

He drove past the end of the guardrail, stopped on the paved shoulder and looked around before he pulled out. A halo of lights brightened the crest of the hill. As the SUV pulled onto the highway, headlights appeared at the top of the hill. They rapidly overtook the SUV as he accelerated.

The Kansas Highway Patrol cruiser passed him. As it passed, it slowed briefly. The officer looked back at him, and then pulled away. Continuing to accelerate, Steve's heart sped up to keep pace.

He continued home. He didn't believe he'd left any evidence.

## Chapter 6

Rural Kansas – Near Kansas City

10:40 p.m. April 3

Steve reflected on the long drive home that drawing pleasure from tonight's loss encapsulated his life. He was returning from competing in a small, semi-rural Taekwondo tournament when the money literally crossed his path. The tournament didn't have every belt represented and Steve lost to the black belt he'd drawn, two levels higher than his third degree red belt.

Steve's length at six-foot-three, hand speed, and strength almost evened up the match over the smaller, more experienced opponent. Before the match, Master Lee told him a good big man could beat a good small man. Steve didn't think it was worth reminding him about the large dimple David had put in Goliath's forehead. Buddhists didn't spend time on Bible study.

He drew more pleasure from how his kids had performed tonight. Not really his children, they were three of the kids he trained. When he restarted Taekwondo a year ago, he began helping Master Lee with younger students as he had years ago when his son and his friends took up the sport. He'd spent six years as a scoutmaster for the same reason; he liked working with kids, getting the best out of them, watching them develop.

When Master Lee learned that Steve lost his job, he approached him with an offer. In his clipped dialect he said, "You good with kids. If you take young class, I make you instructor. I don't pay, but you take lessons for free."

"I accept, but it's not much different from what I'm doing now."

"Yes, few more students. If I lose you, I must find another instructor or let students go. They like you, you like them and you good teacher. It let me work on advanced students."

The kids were a pleasure. The parents were the trial. Last week when Bobby Mercer, Sr. was again critical of Bobby Jr., Steve invited Senior to join him on the mats to demonstrate what he criticized. When he declined, Steve suggested constructive criticism needed proper technique demonstrated immediately. If he didn't want to demonstrate, he should discuss the problems off-line with Steve, not in front of the kids. Bobby's dad hadn't been to practice since. At the match tonight, he was subdued.

Besides the kids, the only good thing about being out of work for the last six months was Steve's new found physical shape. More time for Taekwondo, bike riding, and weight training had him in better shape now than in his early forties. If he weren't in shape, would he have had a heart attack as he felt he might tonight?

His physical endeavors helped him work off the frustration of the continually disappointing job search and growing friction in his marriage. Even aches and pains from his workouts were enjoyable. They made him feel alive, even though, as he found, with age, they

healed more slowly.

Age. A recent interviewer said he was surprised at the amount of experience someone Steve's age had. It was a way of saying he must be older than he looked. He decided to remain politically correct and not invite the interviewer to consider having intercourse with himself.

Steve was fifty-seven. Old enough to start collecting Social Security in a few years, not that he wanted to. Not after what the economy had done to their savings. Now both of them were out of work.

His wife Jen had been a lawyer for the Women's Abuse Clinic. Judging by her paycheck, she obviously wasn't in it for the money. She first worked at the Clinic as a volunteer counselor, but saw continuing need for legal support. Four years ago, she went back and finished the law degree she dropped out of when they married and she got pregnant.

Jen became the clinic's only full time lawyer, spending half her time helping the women and half recruiting other lawyers to provide pro bono support. When funding dropped, the clinic let her go. They would depend upon the lawyers Jen recruited.

If only their marriage would survive the job losses. Now they both were out of work, and risked losing their home. With mounting financial pressures, Jen and he found almost any excuse to argue. Steve knew he nagged her too much about spending, but money seemed to run out like a faucet; the mortgage, the cars, college loans they'd gotten for her and the kids.

She felt guilty for leaving the women behind. Steve was shocked last week when she snarled, "If you still had a job, I could continue helping at the clinic."

Steve lost his temper and said, "Yeah great, you donate your time as a lawyer while we lose the house. The women may need you, but you have responsibilities to this family that come first. We both need to look for paying jobs. Not just me."

The argument hadn't gone well. She blamed him for letting her charges down, and he could have been more tactful. Trained as an engineer, unfortunately, tact hadn't been in the curriculum.

It was only their latest argument. She spent a lot of time talking to her friend Marge, a noted divorce lawyer. Steve hoped Marge was a pacifying influence. Marge had good balance and was his friend too, but... optimism was hard to maintain. They had to weather this; he needed her. Her artistic and loving nature balanced his rational, practical nature and her sense of humor matched his so well. Half the money was hers of course, but he'd give it all away if they could be as they were before.

#

Steve pulled into the garage and covered the boxes in the back of the SUV with a tarp. He wouldn't hide the money from Jen, but he had a lot to figure out, such as dealing with his guilt for taking it, before he told her. He felt a rush of shame, inundating a feeling of joy, pulling him in two directions.

She had an interview tomorrow. If he dumped all this on her in the morning and it messed up her head as bad as it was doing to him, how could she function?

He wasn't functioning very well; soaked, chilled, and with thoughts churning. Take some time to think about how to explain it to Jen. What are the next steps? Start with figuring out how much money there was and make a plan.

Quietly entering the house, still shaky, he fumbled around for a glass, filled it from the tap and chugged it down; then filled it again and drank another. He was dry as a bone from exertion. Before slugging down the third glass, he poured aspirin tablets into his palm, wishing he had sleeping pills. He'd have trouble sleeping tonight. He washed the aspirin down.

He opened the bedroom door slowly to minimize noise. Jen was asleep with a book lying across her belly. Avid readers, they both frequently fell asleep at night in mid-chapter. Maybe that was old people's replacement for sex. Bozo, his Scottish Deerhound cracked an eye from where he was stretched out like an area rug on the carpet and then shut it when he saw it was Steve. Elf, Jen's Papillion raised his head from the bed with his oversized ears perked forward, and let out an undersized growl; but relaxed when Steve shushed him.

Steve shed his wet clothes, dried off, and changed to pajamas in the master bath. When he climbed into bed, Jen didn't stir. He settled into bed ready for a long restless night, but his weary body overrode his churning, mind and he fell asleep.

## Chapter 7

Grand Prairie, Texas

9:45 a.m. April 4

Within hours of Esteban's call, Juan Medina landed at DFW airport to investigate the scene of the drug and money heist. He learned from local police that witnesses had seen a large Hispanic man exit the house shortly after a series of gunshots. A neighbor watched him load boxes into the back of a white van with dark windows. He departed a few minutes before the police arrived.

While Juan interviewed witnesses in Grand Prairie, a call came in about a white van towed out of a creek in Kansas. It had dark windows. Drugs and cash were in the van along with two recently discharged pistols. It was a single vehicle wreck. The dead driver was a large Hispanic male.

Juan booked a flight to Kansas City that afternoon. He arrived in time to visit the morgue. He believed he recognized the victim, but wanted a second opinion. The two men Esteban had promised him, Hector and Edgar, would arrive in Kansas City a few hours later.

Edgar worked with Paco Rojas and Juan took him to view the body early the following morning. "Yeah, that's him. Paco Rojas. Man, I thought the *cabròn* was indestructible. It's weird he died in a car crash. Half the *policia* in Mexico couldn't kill him and they tried lots. Everyone figured he'd die in a shootout. That guy is a legend."

Juan talked to the sheriff. "Please make arrangements for ballistics tests. The guns may have been used in a felony in Texas yesterday. This could be more than a simple single vehicle accident. I need the results fast. If you can't do it, I'll use DEA resources."

The sheriff looked affronted. "We'll get 'er done. I'll shoot for tomorrow"

Outside Juan asked Edgar "What would Paco be doing in Kansas?"

"I don't know man. Wait. I think he had family here. Somethin' about a restaurant."

Edgar shook his head. "Give me some time to think about it. Y'know, the person who knowed him best was Carmen Esposito. Maybe she remembers."

With that information, Juan soon tracked down Paco's sister, Estralita, in Lawrence, Kansas.

#

Juan Medina watched as Hector removed the apparatus from the old woman. He let her slump forward against the ropes that tied her dead body to the kitchen chair. The smell of scorched flesh made Juan nauseous. It was strange, as if the woman wanted to die. Anyway, Hector accommodated her. It was obvious before she died that she didn't know anything about her brother, Paco, stealing Esteban's money and cocaine. Too bad, it seemed like a good lead.

Juan had to admit Hector knew his business. The apparatus he used looked cobbled

together, but it was very effective. Estralita screamed, cried, cursed, and even bit Hector. Hector assured Juan that the equipment didn't kill her. It wasn't for killing. It was for intense pain. If she died, it was something else, like her heart.

Juan didn't waste time while he waited for the ballistics report. His instincts told him he was on the trail of the money. If ballistics placed Paco in Grand Prairie at the heist, it would confirm his gut feeling.

The time of death was tentatively set at 10:00 p.m. Paco could possibly have driven from Texas to Kansas and dumped the money somewhere on the way, but it wasn't likely. First, the timing would have been very tight. Second, if he came for his sister, wouldn't he bring the money instead of hiding it somewhere? Third, there was the broken rear window in the van. Why would one rear window break in the crash? In addition, there was the glass on the ground at the crash site; it didn't seem reasonable that the glass would shatter and splatter inside and *outside* the van.

Scratch marks on the floor of the van were consistent with boxes dragged with glass underneath. Some of the boxes of cocaine had embedded glass and lacerations on the bottom. How would glass get under the boxes in a wreck? The local yokel cops said they didn't pull the boxes out of the van and waited for the DEA.

The van had been sitting in the creek bed long enough for someone to take its cargo after the wreck. But, how was he going to find them?

He told them to dust the van for fingerprints, but didn't expect positive results. When they thought it was a single vehicle wreck, they disregarded chain of evidence cautions. It was now sitting in the impound yard. He'd be surprising if anything turned up. He mused that perhaps someone was snorting the evidence. With news of the possible connection with the Grand Prairie attack, everyone in the sheriff's department had gotten serious. Unfortunately, it came late.

A break in the case came at the crash site. Juan asked to talk to law enforcement officers who had been working the area that night. Juan interviewed all the sheriff's deputies who had been on duty, and then Juan asked about others. The sheriff gave him a blank look. "What others?"

Juan looked at him levelly. "Doesn't the area fall into other jurisdictions besides the county?"

"You mean like the surrounding cities?"

"There are surrounding cities, Highway Patrol, Girl Scouts; I don't know what other jurisdictions. That's why I'm asking you." Juan gave him an irritated look. The sheriff looked abashed as he left to contact other agencies that might be involved.

#

Juan was poking about at the site, when a highway patrol officer walked down the drainage slope. "I'm Patrolman Ramacher, I understand you want to talk to me?"

Juan looked up, smiled, and extended his hand. "Hello officer, I'm Investigator Medina with the DEA."

Ramacher looked around the area with a quizzical look. He had a much better view than Juan. Ramacher was six-feet-eight inches tall; towering over Medina's five-eight.

Juan explained, "There was a wreck here last Friday night. The wreck contained drugs and money. I understand you patrol this section of highway. I'd like to know if you noticed anything at all in the area late that evening, around 10 p.m."

"Hey, I'm highway patrol; the wreck was down in the creek. It wasn't visible from the

highway at night.”

“I understand. What I’m looking for are any memories of a car or truck parked along the shoulder or off the shoulder nearby, or anything else you might remember in the area that night.”

Ramacher looked at Medina then looked up at the bridge, lips pursed. He nodded. “There was something. My patrol brought me by here.” He pointed up at the bridge. “About 10:30-11, I saw a white SUV pulling onto the highway just about here.”

“A white SUV? Any more description than that?”

“Yeah.” Ramacher gave Medina a shy look. “I’m a big KU basketball fan. I played there — a little — mostly warmed the bench and was practice fodder. But I still follow them. I have season tickets and go to all the games here and as many out of town as I can. The reason I remember the car was it had a UCLA front plate.”

“UCLA?”

“Yeah, it stuck in my mind because UCLA was in the final four when KU won the NCAA title. I was surprised to see a UCLA license plate here in rural Kansas.”

“Besides the UCLA plate and that it was white, do you remember anything about the SUV — make, year?”

“It was one of those Toyotas or Lexus SUVs, the top of the line. You know, rugged but luxurious. Land Cruiser or LX470. I don’t remember the number. All the model years look similar. I can’t tell you the year.”

“It was pulling onto the highway near here?”

“Yeah, I came over the hill back that way” he nodded to the right, “and saw it in front of me. It was accelerating, pulling from the shoulder by the guardrail onto the road. As I passed it, I slowed down, looked over, and saw the UCLA license plate. It kept going so I did too.”

“You saw it despite the headlights?”

“I saw it as I passed, before the headlights hid it.”

“I would guess that UCLA license plates aren’t very common around here?”

“No way, this is KU country. We won the NCAA recently.”

“Congratulations, that’s three. It will only take eight more wins to catch UCLA.”

Ramacher looked down at Juan with a frown. Juan gave him a toothy smile. “I graduated from UCLA.”

Ramacher nodded, a sour look on his face. “Anything else you need from me?”

“No, your information is appreciated. I’ll follow up on it. Thank you.”

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As patrolman Ramacher toiled back up the drainage slope, Edgar came out from under the bridge. Juan asked, “Did you hear about the license plate and car make?”

“Toyota or Lexus SUV with a UCLA license plate? Yeah.”

“All the tracks in the mud make it hard to tell what happened here. Some of the tracks here don’t seem to match a wrecker and a police cruiser. An SUV would fit.”

Edgar looked around at the ground. “You might be right.”

“We need eyes on the street. Put word out to the drug network. A \$10,000 reward to anyone who finds a Toyota or Lexus SUV with a front UCLA license plate and identifies the driver. You and Hector get the word out.”

“Those guys are coin operated. For that money, if it’s here, they’ll find it. Hell, for that money, I might find it.”