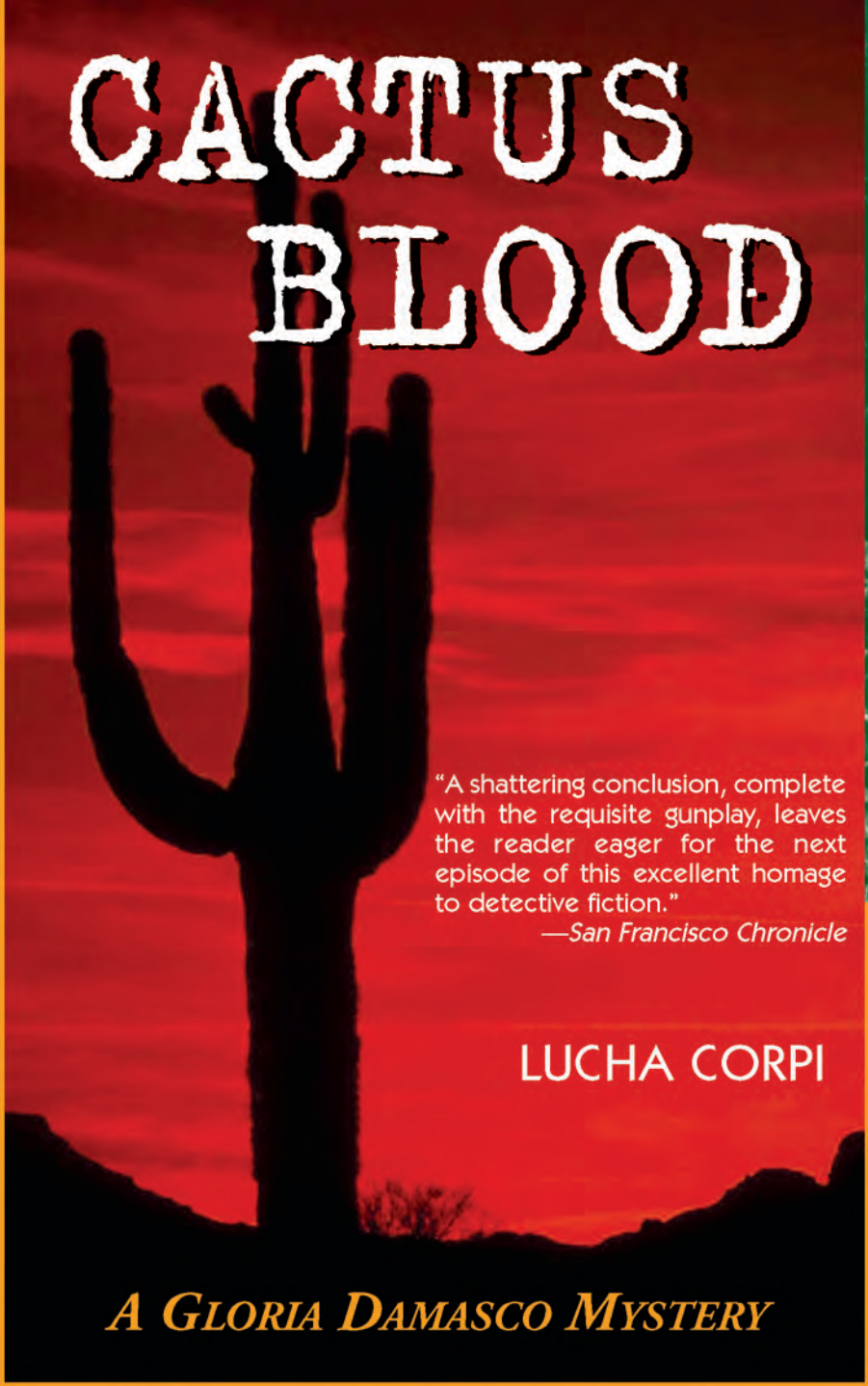
CACTUS BLOOD



"A shattering conclusion, complete with the requisite gunplay, leaves the reader eager for the next episode of this excellent homage to detective fiction."
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

LUCHA CORPI

A Gloria Damasco Mystery

By the author of *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*

CACTUS BLOOD

A Gloria Damasco Mystery

Lucha Corpi

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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L.C.

. . .we have been the foreshadows of your
dream
guided at times
by nothing more than instinct

Still
without our collective voice
yours would have remained
a soft cry
a whisper
in some indifferent stranger's ear.

I
for one
lay claim to have done only this:
provided the soil where your dream took roots.
Nothing else.

From "Dreamroots"
and "Dolores"
by Delia Treviño

in memoriam

Miguel Angel Corpi Aguirre
(1915-1971)

César Chávez
(1927-1993)

CACTUS BLOOD

A Gloria Damasco Mystery

Foreshadows

The sun had begun to set and a sliver of waning moon peered from behind a hill. The snake in front of me coiled up, rattled its tail and made two short, swift thrusts in the air—rehearsals for the longer, deadly strike. I backed away slowly, but a thicket of prickly-pear cacti behind me barred my retreat. The prickles drove into my right leg and shoulder, and my blood left its mark on the fleshy leaves. Clenching my teeth, I held back a scream. I sensed a presence behind me, but I didn't dare turn, for the rattler was now drawing closer.

I saw a clearing in the thorny thicket. Like the snake, I recoiled to gather strength. I jumped through the clearing an instant before the rattler lunged forward. I shivered at the thought that its fangs had passed a fraction of an inch from my ankle and stabbed the leaf at precisely the spot where my blood was still present. Rubbing my shoulder and leg, I worked my way carefully around a huge, old cactus.

That's when I saw her. The woman. Naked. Her arms stretched up, tied to the fleshy leaves. Her legs together, bound to the stem. A slumping female Christ with a prickly-pear cactus cross on her back, shrouded in blood, bathed in amber moonlight.

Ever since, she haunts my vigil and dreams. I know I will not rest until I learn for whose sins she was sacrificed.

One

Fields of Vision

It was Friday, October 13. With the first of seven games scheduled for the next day, the main topic of conversation in Oakland was the "Battle of the Bay," as fans called the 1989 World Series between the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants.

Justin Escobar and I were in his van, traveling east on Fruitvale Avenue, headed towards his office a few blocks away. On the radio, a sportscaster was interviewing Bay Area baseball personalities and fans trying to predict the outcome of the "Battle." My interest in the sport was due mainly to my late husband's and my daughter's passion for baseball. I enjoyed a game every so often, but I was too sporadic a fan to find radio talk shows about the sport intellectually stimulating. So I soon tuned out, and my eyes scanned Fruitvale Avenue then moved up the Oakland hills.

I was looking at the effect of the rust-colored, late afternoon sunlight on the hills, which made them glow as if they were on fire, when Justin took the call from Leo Mares on his cellular phone. Leo was a friend of Justin's and a liaison officer between the police department and the Spanish-speaking community in Oakland.

Justin lowered the volume and listened to Leo in silence. When he hung up, he made a couple of calls on his phone, but whomever he was calling wasn't available and he placed the receiver back on its base. He made a U-turn at the first opportunity and we headed back the way we had come.

"Where are we going? What's going on?" I asked. When I got no answer, I looked at Justin. His face was pale and his

gaze fixed. His hands clutched the steering wheel and his knuckles began to turn white. I didn't have to think long or hard to guess that the news he had just received wasn't good.

Something happened to my mother or my daughter and he doesn't know how to tell me, I thought. Adrenaline rushed through my veins and reached my heart in seconds, leaving in its wake the prickly sensation of fear on my skin. It was an irrepressible fear that quickly rooted in the soil of my conscience, already filled with sorrow and guilt. In the span of three years I had lost my father to cancer, my husband Darío to a heart attack, and my best friend, Luisa Cortez, to a bullet intended for me. I knew my extreme concern for my mother's and daughter's safety was irrational, but my fear seemed real at the moment and the only way to deal with it was to confront it.

"Who's dead?" I demanded, and my breathing quickened in expectation of his answer.

"Sonny Mares is dead," Justin finally said. He gave me a quick glance. Surprise more than sorrow nestled in his usually bright gaze. "Leo says Sonny killed himself." Justin repeated his last statement not so much for my benefit, but as if he himself were trying to grasp the significance of Sonny's action.

"Can't be," I said, then added, "I just saw him a week . . . " I stopped in midtrack when I realized how utterly meaningless my comment was. Disbelief and denial usually followed the news of someone's death. I knew those feelings well. But suicide always raised questions that no one—surely neither Justin nor I at that moment—could answer with any degree of certainty.

Ten minutes later we arrived at Sonny's apartment in Jingletown, near the small residential area where I had grown up in Oakland. He and some other artists had bought an old three-story building in partnership, and had converted

it into adequate working and living space for each of them. The coroner's wagon and another patrol car were pulling out as we arrived. A second patrol and a police van were parked a few feet up the street from us.

"Over here," Leo Mares called out as soon as Justin and I stepped out of the van. Sonny Mares had been four years older than Leo, with approximately the same height and weight, the same olive skin, light brown hair and eyes, and the same Pancho Villa moustache. At present the resemblance was uncanny. Anyone who didn't know them well could easily have mistaken one brother for the other.

"I'm sorry, *carnal*," Justin said to Leo as they hugged and patted each other's backs a few times. Both men cleared their throats, trying not to give in to the emotions swelling up in their chests. But the pain in Leo's throat refused to break up, and he coughed.

The only two Chicanos at the police academy, Justin and Leo had met and become friends in 1975. Before he decided to become a private investigator, Justin had accepted a job with the San Jose Police Department while Leo had taken a position in the Oakland Police Department's Community Services Division. Seeing that his hope for advancement to homicide detective, or for bringing about any change in the department's attitude towards people of color, was nil, Justin had left the police department after only five years of service. But he and Leo Mares had remained good friends and had helped each other out professionally from time to time. I was beginning to get the feeling this might be one of those times.

Justin pointed at me with his open palm, and with a scratchy voice said to Leo, "Do you remember Gloria Damasco? She's my new associate."

"Of course," Leo said as he stretched out his hand to shake mine. "We met at your friend Luisa's funeral." He

paused. I could sense his pain in his trembling, sweaty palm, and in the way his voice thinned over the word "funeral."

My heart went out to him. "I am now learning to live with my loss. I pray you do, too," I offered as condolence. He nodded and shook my hand again.

Carrying a heavy case that looked like a plastic tool box, a uniformed female technician stepped out as we entered the apartment. Justin handed me a pair of latex gloves, then joined Leo, who had stopped at the door to talk to the lab tech officer—M. Holstein, according to her name tag. "Unless the coroner says otherwise, there is no evidence of foul play so far," Officer Holstein told Leo. "But I'll have more for you later on." Forcing a smile, Leo nodded.

"Any preliminary report on the cause of death?" Justin asked.

Officer Holstein glanced at Leo. When he gestured his approval, addressing Justin, she said, "Unknown substance, orally introduced, most likely self-administered. That's the coroner's preliminary report."

I left Justin, Leo, and Officer Holstein talking in the hall and stepped into Sonny's flat. The two floors above us had served as storage for a paper company. The downstairs space, Sonny's flat, had housed the offices and had been divided into two smaller open areas with no set boundaries between them. The first section comprised the living and dining quarters and a small kitchen area. The second, a working area, was occupied by bookcases along the wall, a desk and a chair. Next to the chair was a table with a computer, a printer, a phone and a FAX machine. A drafting table, a reading chair with a pile of books next to it, a VCR, and a console TV completed the room. A third section, the only area separated from the rest by walls, was Sonny's bedroom and the bathroom next to it. The large windows, which ran the length of the outside wall in the living and dining areas, provided natural lighting for the flat.

Through the windows, a patio and chalk garden enclosed by a tall wooden fence were visible in their entirety.

I was immediately drawn to the working area, as I noticed that the TV was on. Soundless images flickered on the large screen. "Odd," I said under my breath. "Why would Leo or Officer Holstein turn on the TV and then leave it on?" But it wasn't a regular TV program, I soon found out. It was a video-taped documentary. Of what? I asked myself as I gazed at the screen, trying to figure out what was going on.

Tall, gruff, thick-set men, some shirtless, others wearing vests over hairy chests, hard hats and heavy work shoes or western hats and boots held bunches of grapes in their hands and taunted or gestured with their arms at either the cameraman or someone behind him. Their mouths spewed grape seeds, as well as spit, slurs and lewd words that even with the sound off came across loud and clear.

These vociferous men looked like the wild chimpanzees I had recently watched in a *National Geographic* program, which, feeling threatened, ran towards the camera but stopped at a safe distance from it. They flapped their arms, made shrill sounds, and gnashed at the photographer to give the impression that they surely were fearless beasts, determined enemies to be reckoned with.

The boisterous, aggressive behavior of these men made me curious. Why the bravado display? What could this film have to do with Sonny's suicide? I slipped my latex gloves on, found the remote control, rewound the tape, pressed the play button, then turned up the volume. The men's vicious insults slapped my ears. "C'mon! C'mon!" they yelled. "You're just a dirty Mex'can! A fucking commie! You're not an American! You're a slimy commie!"

Suddenly, the cameraman swept around and focused on the action going on behind him. I could no longer see the belligerent men, although I could still hear them. Then I saw the

object of the goons' hostility: a small, dark man flanked and followed by hundreds of other men and women. The camera zoomed in for a closer view, and César Chávez, surrounded by members of the clergy and other official-looking people, came into the field of vision. He headed a picket line of men and women—farm workers and strike sympathizers, carrying the-black-eagle-on-red United Farm Workers' flag and banners bearing the image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*.

The camera refocused on the men. The Teamsters, I thought, as I paused the tape. This was a film about the United Farm Workers' strike. Back in 1973, I remembered, the teamsters had been brought in by the grape growers at sixty-five dollars a day per man to break the farm workers' strike.

Luisa, Darío, and I had supported and participated in one way or another in the UFW's 1973 grape boycott. Sonny Mares and his best friend, Art Bello, who were also Luisa's fellow poets, went a step further. They made the 1973 strike their exclusive personal and political commitment. Was Sonny watching this film before he killed himself? I couldn't figure out what, if anything, this film had to do with Sonny's death on Friday, October 13, 1989, sixteen years after the UFW's grape boycott. I decided, nonetheless, to watch the rest of the video tape.

As I hit the play button again, the filmmaker shifted perspectives. Since his field of vision was wider and unencumbered, I surmised that he was filming from a higher structure, perhaps from the roof of a van or a camper. The camera focused on a number of helmeted cops bearing the insignia of the Kern County Sheriff's Office on their sleeves. They were peacefully arresting striking farm workers and putting them into large buses to transport them to the county jail. But a minute later the scene drastically changed. The same sheriffs were suddenly macing and dragging, beating and choking

Mexican American men and women with their sticks while they battered the farm workers' spirits with a barrage of dirty slogans. "Beaners, Frito-banditos, greasers" were among the least vicious.

As if they had been thrown personally at me, the racial slurs thundered in my ears and pierced my heart. A visceral anger rose slowly from deep within me and hit the walls of my throat. I hadn't felt such impotent rage since the 1970 Los Angeles National Chicano Moratorium march and riot, when the police had attacked us as we peacefully assembled. "Stop! Stop!" I heard myself cry out, softly at first, then louder. "You're killing them!" I yelled as I had done back in 1973, when Luisa, Darío, and I had witnessed first hand the deputies' brutality.

I sat on Sonny's reading chair and for a few seconds relived that sweltering summer day when all of us marched behind the coffin of a field laborer brutally beaten and dragged, then left to die in a ditch by Kern County Sheriff's deputies. Before that summer of 1973 came to an end, a second farm worker died. Many others were seriously injured by either teamsters or deputies. A Mexican American family's home went up in flames. And thousands of farm workers ended up in jail.

A sudden change of scene in the film caught my attention again and brought me back to the present. I wiped my tears as I wondered who had filmed or edited this documentary—if that's what it was. What was his intention in patching together all this material with no narration to help the viewer along? As I watched the perspective shift again, it occurred to me that this film might be only a personal document. Was it Sonny's personal record of past struggles and glories?

The camera's eye was now sliding over vineyards and fields. It finally locked on the graceful flight of a seemingly large bird. An eagle, I thought, or a hawk. Given the field of

vision and the angle, the camera had to be on the roof of either a building or some other tall structure.

In the distance, three people—one of them a woman, I guessed—seemed also to follow the bird's flight down to the pole of a high-wired fence. As the camera closed in, I realized the bird was one of three turkey vultures. "Unusual," I reflected as I realized I had never given any thought to vultures and had no idea if it was natural to find them at that particular place. The other two buzzards perched on top of a big cylindrical container stamped with a large decal of a skull and crossbones inside a fiery red diamond. Since it was a table-grape farm, I surmised the tank contained a pesticide or some other deadly inert agent. I watched the vultures spread their wings to take in life-giving sunlight before devouring something behind the tank. "How chillingly fitting. Death's inert agent and its beneficiaries, side by side," I said as my mind grasped the filmmaker's intention. Through his vision, my eyes also lingered over the gruesome scene.

Seeing the vultures keep vigil, the cameraman must have reached the same conclusion I just had, for he kept scanning the area. Through his eyes, mine were ever observant of the slightest shadow or the smallest mass. The three people who had seen the bird fly had had the same idea and also seemed to be heading for the tank. Whatever the buzzards watched lay hidden behind something the camera couldn't peek through.

A large shadow was reflected on the ground, cast by someone just outside the narrow field of vision of the close-up lens, and the filmmaker followed it up to a large man walking away wearing Levis, a plaid long-sleeved shirt, boots, and his long hair loose under a big Indian hat. The man turned briefly to look over his shoulder toward the tank and the vultures, then stepped up his pace to a trot as if someone pursued him.

The camera retraced the man's steps back to the tank to find the pursuer, but no one was following him.

The three vultures perched on the hazardous tank, still in dead calm. In some bizarre way, the filmmaker and I found solace in the peacefulness of the scene, in the split second of truce between life and death. But not for long.

The explosion of the tank was so unexpected that the camera jumped as high as my stomach and heart, and the hand holding it quivered for a few seconds before regaining control. For the first time, I heard the filmmaker speak. Although I had expected to hear Sonny's voice, instead I heard Art Bello say, "He did it! That S.O.B. did it!" I could hear the tremor of fear and excitement in his voice while his eyes and mine watched the burning, which neither the tank nor death's winged beneficiaries survived.