

The Killing Of Chuy Muro

A novel

By Lance Mason

And Yaweh said unto Cain, "Where is Abel thy brother?"

And Cain said, "I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?"

And Yaweh said, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

— Gen. IV, ix-x

Chapter One

It was just on nine o'clock under a low, lemon moon, when the paint-faded Chevy coupe pulled into my brother-in-law's Signal station. Chugging out farts of exhaust, the hardtop braked, and I strolled across the oil-stained pavement to the passenger door, snapping my windshield rag. Chuy Muro, the driver, was alone, and I ducked my head in the window. Inside, the old low-rider, a '39 hardtop, smelled spicy and damp, a mix of Vitalis hair tonic and moldy upholstery, a couple Falstaff cans rocking around on the floor.

Chuy sported chuke threads—khaki pants and a plaid long-sleeve buttoned at the neck—and smoke rose off a spit-stained Pall Mall poking out between his picket-fence teeth. As I edged a little closer, elbows on the window frame, he reached a cut-down 12-gauge out from under the dash, rousting butterflies in my stomach the size of fruit bats. Then he laid the piece on the seat, no threat to me, just him showing off, part of his *pachuco* style.

A *mariachi* tune, all trumpets and accordions, spilled out of the Chevy's radio, but Chuy's voice grated over that music like a rusty saw.

"*Qué pasa, chico?* You see the Zunigas?"

Chuy's black-marble eyes roamed over my face, looking too smart for his fleshy, pockmarked cheeks. But he was right. The station squatted a block off Route 1, at A and Fifth Streets, the intersection of life for summer nights in Richland, I'd have seen these two *cholo* brothers if they'd been cruising around. And those eyes were looking for an answer.

"Earlier tonight," I said, "Victor going home from work a little after I came on, but they ain't been around since." I spoke in English, my Spanish weak, by choice as much as ignorance. A lot of the chukes thought I had the lingo because my best friend Gene would yak with a couple of them pretty regular. He wasn't the greatest at the old *español*, but they decided he was righteous just the same, which was good for me.

We respected Chuy, too, for who and what he was. We were cool, him and me, even if we weren't tight. Still, this was Richland. Chuy knew the lay of the land, and this was no United Nations meeting. He looked back through the windshield and studied the world. "Going home, huh?"

"Yep," I said, "just after six."

I had to wonder was that shotgun going to be a risk or a benefit to Victor and Freddie Zuniga? Had they crossed Chuy somehow, to do with money or a woman? Over honor, more likely, it seemed to me. Or maybe Chuy was just showing some *machismo*, part of his night-time, hard-ass style.

"Not home now." This wasn't him calling me a liar, just getting the facts straight. He must have been by the Zuniga house and they weren't there, meaning things were straight between them. If Chuy was laying to settle some trouble with them, he wouldn't go to the house, not then, not in our town, and he wouldn't tip his hand to me by flapping his trap about it.

I reckoned then that they were all in tight on some kind of action, and the weapon was just a symbol of mutual strength, of shared power. I had a close look at it lying there under Chuy's hand, A bitchen piece of hardware—the walnut stock cut halfway up to the

trigger guard, the butt curved to fit against your hip, and an oiled-wood forearm that held old, blued barrels cut off shorter than anything legal.

After a bit, it looked like Jesús “Chuy” Muro had seen—and said—what he'd come for. “*Amigo, no molesta sobre los Zunigas,*” he said. I shouldn’t bother about the Zuniga boys. “*¡Sta bueno. Hasta luego.*”

“Yeah, later, *hombre,*” I said, glad to be past any possible trouble.

Chuy and his machine slithered out of the lot and onto A Street, low and cool, with “*El Tortuga*” pin-striped in pink on the car's flat-black trunk. Hanging in the back window, shiny in the moonlight, was a blue-and-silver Playboys plaque, the local *Chicano* car club, some of them real bad-asses.

Alone then in the station, I took a long pull on the Dr. Pepper in my hand and felt the sour-sweet bubbles gassing out my nose. My broken back tooth zinged from the cold, and I started thinking about my life. It was near the end of summer, with football double-days starting up, so I had to decide between some roadwork and playing ball with Gene, or bodysurfing and making a run with him down to Mexico for a week. Since spring, I'd been doing night work at the station, earning extra bread so we might get down to Ensenada before school opened.

Gene and I were hitting the weights, too, and we'd heard Tony Yamashita and the Higgins brothers were bulking up using pills you could buy in any Baja drugstore. But Tony's uncle was a doctor, and he pulled us aside and told us the stuff could hurt our livers and make our nuts shrivel up. Still, I guessed a couple of weeks of the stuff wouldn't hurt me. This was years before any news stories about gym dope.

There were other stories about Mexico, though, of guys scoring with American babes down there, important stuff for two hairy-legged teenage boys to know. Still, we couldn't do any better with the chicks than making the football team, and Gene and I had one more year to work on that action before college, or whatever came next. We'd also talked about just blowing this stinkhole town, and we'd read parts of a famous book about two beatnik dopers driving back and forth across America finding out about life.

That's what we wanted to do, break out and find our own lives, the real thing. That meant some big decisions to make, with lots mixed in, and I couldn't figure it all out on my own, so Gene and I had made an agreement about doing it, and doing it together.

Then a voice clattered out of the dark. “Hey! *Señor Eduardo!* What's up?”

It was “Gene on the scene,” and a giggle hit my stomach, with a buzz running down my neck as he pimped across the lot in the hip-rolling, walk-and-talk sashay the splibs used. That's what the Blacks called themselves around us, *splibs*. “You patty boys need more splibs on your ball team,” they'd say. *Splibs, patties, chukes*—short for *pachuco*. Everybody used street slang to avoid talking about color.

“Hey, gas jockey!” Gene had on his red windbreaker and blue Levis, giving me his wide smile and devil-may-care shrug. “So, what's the happs, Mr. Ed? Any dollies cruise in tonight?”

“None for you, Regina, but Chuy Muro was here. He just drove out.”

Gene said, “Chuchi was here?” *Chuchi* or *Chuy*—both nicknames for *Jesús*. “What's that wild boy up to?”

“Looking for the Zunigas,” I said. “Had a cut-down 12-gauge on him.”

Gene flinched, eyes stretched open, staring at me like a little kid. Then he shook himself. “You bullshit artist. He didn't have a gun.”

"Fuck if he didn't. He showed it to me plain as day." We talked tough, but we were just kids.

"And he's after Freddie and Vic?"

"Nah," I said, "he seems cool with them."

"Then who?" Gene was jumpy.

"Don't know. None of my business or he woulda told me."

"That is fucked up, Hot Rod. He might be looking to kill somebody." Gene took life more seriously than I did.

"Scare 'em, more likely," I laughed. "Chuy ain't the killing type."

"You don't know that. Those Playboys don't fuck around."

"That's right, so I ain't calling the cops on him," I said. "I aim to stay cool with Chuy. Cool as I can be, anyway, with a chuke."

Gene looked away, unhappy with the story. "So, no babes through tonight?"

"They like their men tall and studly, Dudley." I had grown four inches since spring and was now taller than Gene. "Besides, Geno Reno, you ain't getting any this century."

He smirked. "You should write comic books."

I swigged the Dr. Pepper. "You working tomorrow?" We worked days in the lemon orchards.

"Hell, yes," he said, "making the big coin. Then his mouth and eyes started dancing. "Hey, did you hear Mandy O'Bryan broke up with Gary Turner?" We were both hot for this girl Amanda, so this was big news to us, and we chewed it over until Gene had to go.

"See you in the a.m."

I nodded. "Seven o'clock. Burgers at Topp's."

A salty night breeze drifted off the ocean a mile away, and Gene drifted off toward Fifth Street, feet splayed and shoulders hunched, his James Dean collar turned-up to the wind. Roy Orbison's voice crooned "Only the Lonely" out of the office radio, and part of me wanted to reach out in the dark and pull Gene back. Years later, I still recall that night, Orbison singing, what it meant, and Gene strutting across my memory like a living ghost of the time, our private secret still a part of who we were.

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We go through life with lots of secrets, some big, some small, and Gene and I had plenty of them. Shooting out Christmas lights with a BB gun, hiding fireworks from the cops, boosting shit from the hobby store, watching once through Danny Blackfell's bedroom window while he jerked off after the high school prom—things we kept to ourselves, especially about Danny, since you never knew when you might be in the same boat.

Gene and I went way back, before kindergarten, before we could pee standing up. We were tight as the hide on a horse, and reckoned nothing as weak-kneed or long-winded as an idea could come between us, back in that summer with all its secrets and the trouble they would bring.

Chapter Two

“There’s someone here wants to talk to you. You better come out.”

It was a Saturday afternoon early in that summer, my father yelling through the bathroom door. Pop had already knocked twice a couple minutes apart, and I told him both times I was still in the shower.

When you’re sixteen you still don’t know everything about taking a shower—how much shampoo to use, how long to use it, did you get your back clean, do you shave in the shower or at the sink, or do you shave at all? You can do a lot of things in the shower and, being all wet and buck-naked, you usually don’t want to get out until you’ve got them all done. I was still figuring out what to do and what not to do, and my father knocking didn’t make it any easier.

For the third time, I said, “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“It’s the police.”

This got my attention. Were they out in the hall with my dad? I figured I knew why they were there, and was too big any more to climb out the bathroom window. “Okay, I’m coming.”

In about a minute and a half I was out of the shower, dried, and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. When I opened the bathroom door, the hall was empty.

“Eddie?” It was my dad out in the living room.

I walked down the hallway to meet him, and then across the living room toward the front door, feeling like James Cagney walking to the electric chair in *Angels with Dirty Faces*. I’d had a few brushes with the law, but they’d all been minor, and there had never been any reason for them to come to the house before. Although we didn’t know it then, all the big stuff still to come was months away.

With his back to the open front door, my father stood looking at me, his eyes twisted and ready for trouble. Over his shoulder, I could see a cop, all polished brass and blue-black uniform, standing fifteen feet away against the green of the grass. He was eyeing me, probably figuring out where he could put two quick .38 slugs if I made any trouble. Three or four feet out from the door, I jumped. Off the step, where I couldn’t see him until now, was another cop. He had his right hand on his pistol butt, left thumb in his belt, standing there like a poster-boy for cop recruiters.

“Edward Henley?” Cops like to sound official when they say your name. I’d find out more about that later.

I was polite. “Yes, sir, that’s me.”

“Come out here, please. I want to talk to you.”

“Can’t you talk to him here?” My dad was sticking up for me and I was probably too stupid to realize it.

I put my hand up. “That’s OK, Pop.” I started down the step, trying to act grown up. My father let me go, wanting to stop me, I think, but wanting to see me as a man.

Neighbors were slowing down out on the sidewalk near the street, or standing in their yards watering flowers, looking over at us. Where we lived, a black-and-white in your driveway and cops on your front porch drew a lot of attention.

The cop near the step started backing up. Now both of them had a clear field of fire on me in case I decided to make a run for it. I got to the edge of the grass and stopped. The first cop stopped. His badge said *Ofcr D. Phillips*.

“You own a dark green Ford station wagon?”

“The Ranchwagon? Yeah. Gene Taylor and I own it together.” We'd bought it really cheap off Donnie Crowe's old man, and Mr. Taylor helped us get insurance.

Now the cop got very sure of himself, talking as if reading off a shopping list. “That car was reported at the scene of a major disturbance in La Colonia today, Garcia and Fifth, a gang fight involving a large number of individuals. One individual is in critical condition in the hospital with a head injury that may be fatal.” He pinned me with a .50 caliber stare. “What do you know about this, Edward?”

Both cops looked at me, scowling more and more because a little smile had worked itself into my face and I couldn't get rid of it. They didn't see anything funny and were pissed off that I did. Nothing cops hate more than you enjoying yourself at their expense. But as soon as they'd told me what was up—this gang fight business—I relaxed. I felt warm and cool at the same time. They were after the wrong guy—wrong guy, wrong place, wrong time. Gene and I had been out of town that day in the Ranchwagon, so both of us had an alibi and so did the car. The problem was, if I told them the alibi and showed them the proof, Gene and I could have gotten arrested for another crime.

This happened just before Fourth of July, fireworks season, with the whole county looking to outlaw fireworks, to help prevent fires and some fools from blowing off their fingers or going blind. But there was one town nearby, Moorefield, where you could still buy them. Not like in Mexico, with firecrackers and cherry bombs and real stuff that exploded, but kid's junk that made noise and shot out fire and different colored smoke. We'd rather have had the exploding stuff, but we couldn't get down to Mexico just then.

Moorefield, about thirty miles from Richland, had big "rah-rah America" fireworks booths set up alongside some farm fields, with people from Rotary and the Elks Club raising money for charity, probably for people who went blind from shooting off fireworks. So Gene and I drove out there, spent eight or nine dollars on sparklers, Piccolo Petes, roman candles, and so forth, and then cruised over to the Moorefield A&W for root-beer floats. We had to find some place in the car to hide the fireworks because if the county sheriff or the Richland cops caught you, you could be in deep shit for smuggling or delinquent acts. So we decided to be very sneaky and hide them all under the seat. And that's what we did, parked in the A&W, hid the contraband under the back seat, and drove back to Richland, sweating like hell the whole way, waiting to get busted. Couple of Einsteins.

So by the time the cops showed up at my house, Gene and I had already pulled off *The Crime of The Century*, and I had just been in the shower cleaning up to go out with him that night. We were going to go to the drive-in movies and, there in the dark, with no cops around, sneak the fireworks out from under the seat and divide them up. So now the cops had me in a squeeze play between third base—the fireworks—and home plate—attempted murder—and they didn't even know it.

True, Gene and I hadn't been in the rumble in Colonia. The chuke-and-patty wars from the *bracero* problems hadn't really broken out yet, and this turned out to be just a Mexican fight, but with all the race stuff going on around the whole country and a few things starting up in our town, the stage was set for some big political trouble. We didn't

care about any of that so, of course, we didn't go near that sort of shit over in Colonia. Because it *was* going on, though, the cops could throw their weight around and come to our house in an all-white neighborhood (well, we had one Mexican family in the middle of the block and one down on one corner), trying to tie Gene and me to a possible murder rap when we weren't even in town.

Anyway, it wasn't true, but how could I prove it? The truth was our best alibi, but telling the truth would probably get us arrested for buying the fireworks. One thing you learn as a kid is never to give grown-ups too much information. They'll use it against you. I hadn't fully figured out cops at that point, but I figured some of them were grown-ups, so the best thing was to tell the truth when it was safe, when it helped you, and lie about everything else.

"It wasn't us," I said to the cop. If I could ever have believed anything in the world, it was that that cop knew I was telling the truth. He could see it in my face, and I could see it in his. I knew what I said was completely true, and he must have known I knew it, because the look on his face said that whatever he thought he knew wasn't enough to prove Gene and I had done anything. "We weren't anywhere near Colonia today. I don't know whose car they saw, but it wasn't ours." Complete conviction. A dead-nuts cinch.

That was already more than I ever expected to be able to say to a cop and feel good about, and something came over me that told me it was time to button my trap. Next came the lamest thing I could ever hope to hear a cop say, even on TV or a Ronald Reagan movie.

"Okay, Edward, if it wasn't you, that's okay. But if it was you, you better come with us now because we're going to get you anyway."

Where do they get this shit? Obviously, this bull had watched too much "Riot Squad" or "Dragnet" on TV. Who teaches cops to say "Blah, blah, blah, we're going to get you anyway..."? I almost laughed right in his face, partly because it was such a dumb-ass thing to say, and partly because I realized I had just escaped some big trouble and still had the fireworks. It's a good feeling when you realize you just got away with something cool and the man's got nothing on you.

I looked at the cop very friendly. "Well, it wasn't us, like I say. We were out driving around and doing other stuff in the car today, but we weren't anywhere near Colonia or any fights."

The heat had been sandbagging me, or trying to, but now they'd embarrassed themselves and they knew it. When they saw I knew it, too, they got pissed, really pissed, looking back and forth at each other, at their hands and shoes, but not at me or my old man.

"We might be back," the first one said, and he and his buddy left. That was it, and I never heard another word about it or why they came to our house. Maybe somebody had said they'd seen our car just to make trouble, or maybe another station wagon was there that looked like ours. Maybe somehow the Peeping Tom stuff had got out and the cops were just giving us a sort of warning. Who knows with cops?

My old man was worried as hell. As I came back up the steps he said, "Why'd they come here? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I don't know why they came, Pop. No, we didn't do anything. They said there'd been a fight in Colonia and somebody got hurt."

“Well, why'd they come *here*? What did you have to do with that? Were you there?”

“They said somebody saw the Ranchwagon there and turned us in. But it wasn't there, and neither were we. It wasn't us.”

My dad looked at me very worried. “Are you sure? You weren't there.”

I gave him a big smile. It was a true smile, but there was more behind it than he was going to find out. “Yep, I'm sure. Gene and I were in the car a long, long ways from Colonia.”

“Where? Where'd you go?”

“Somewhere else. Up near Moorefield.”

“Moorefield? Today? What were you doing up there?” I know now my old man only had my own best interests at heart, but at the time it was a pain.

I gave him the universal kids' answer. “Just messing around.”

Gene and I went to the Skyview drive-in that night and split up the fireworks. In the papers the next morning was a story on the fight in Colonia, so the cops weren't bluffing about it, and that kid died. We weren't there, but Gene still took it pretty hard while I let it slide—part of our differences. Funny how things work out.

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So that was the first small square-off between me and the cops that year, but it wouldn't be the last. Also, it wasn't the finish of trying to tie us to gang fights and the chukes. If I had realized what was coming, I would have turned in me and Gene right then for smuggling the fireworks, and maybe kept us off the streets. Maybe I would have had a normal life and a different story to tell.

On the night of the Fourth, Gene and I went out to watch the big town celebration. Some of the farmers let you park on the edge of small fields where they hadn't planted that season. The city shot off red, white, and blue skyrockets down near the beach, and the burning colors and arching smoke trails reflected like fiery rainbows off the blue-black water of the ocean. We sat in the car, ate hamburgers and strawberry malts, and invented names for the best explosions. We saved our own fireworks for another night. As a kid, you wanted to have the means to get people's attention from time to time.