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PROTECTED

CASE SEEN ON *GERALDO*

A DESERTED CITY PARK.
A VICIOUS KILLING FRENZY.

PURE MURDER



COREY
MITCHELL

L.A. TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Boys capable of murder . . .

“We gotta kill ’em. They know what we look like,” Peter Cantu repeated. It seemed as important to him as cleaning the cat box. Just something that had to be done, no matter how unpleasant it may get. Cantu turned away from Yuni and grabbed Elizabeth Pena. Joe Medellin and Efrain Perez walked up to Cantu and the bedraggled Elizabeth. Cantu grabbed her by the arms while the other boys grabbed her long legs. She barely struggled.

The three boys ambled down the not-so-steep hill and headed toward the nearby woods just north of the bayou. A footpath had been beaten down toward a large copse of towering pine trees. They looked like a bunch of delivery men schlepping a large dog-food-sized bag filled with wet cotton. Elizabeth’s body put up minimal resistance. She just undulated in an awkward motion as they carried her to the woods.

Just ahead of the foursome were Derrick Sean O’Brien, Raul Villarreal, and Jennifer Ertman. They were leading the teenager on foot past the bald spot in the dirt where Villarreal’s initiation had taken place almost an hour earlier, past the open forty-ounce bottle of Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull that one of the boys had dropped during the scuffle. Jennifer, unlike Elizabeth, struggled. She resisted O’Brien and Villarreal, who were much larger, stronger, and faster, but it was to no avail. They forcefully pushed her into the copse.

Strangler

Evil Eyes

Murdered Innocents

Dead and Buried

PURE MURDER

COREY MITCHELL



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For Kyle and Darrin Mitchell

You know what they say about brothers . . .

Prologue

Monday, June 28, 1993—5:00 P.M.

T. C. Jester Park

T. C. Jester Boulevard

Houston, Texas

“Where are the kids at?” the large man, with shoulder-length blond hair, asked the Texas state trooper as he walked along the side of the railroad tracks.

“Sir, you can’t go over there,” the trooper informed the man, who had already bounded over the side down a steep gravel incline.

“I came for my daughter, goddamn it!” the man screamed, barely glancing back over his shoulder. He quickly scooted toward the trodden circle in the grass where several Houston police officers had gathered. “No, man. Fuck you!” he screamed. The trooper slowly took off after the man, but he did not press the issue.

The large man picked up his pace as he darted toward the cluster of officers. “Does she have blond hair?” the livid father screamed at the top of his lungs. The sound carried through T. C. Jester Park like the crack of a shotgun blast.

“Is she blond? Is one of them blond?”

Randy Ertman had been looking for his fourteen-year-old daughter, Jennifer, since the previous Friday. Jennifer had gone with her best friend, sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Pena, and other friends to an apartment located on the northwest side of Houston.

Two officers stepped forward to cut Ertman off. One officer placed his hand up to prevent the angry man from advancing. The other officer told him he could not go any farther.

“I want to know if that’s my daughter, goddamn it!” he screamed at the police officers.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but you cannot go any farther,” one of the officers informed him again. “This is a crime scene and you cannot be here.”

“I want to know if that’s my goddamned daughter in there!” he screamed again, but to no avail. The officers were not budging. They would not let him through.

Ertman stared over the shoulder of one of the officers into the gaping maw of the nearby green forest. Towering pine trees hovered over the enclosed area, where even more police officers were located.

Word had leaked out that the bodies of two teenage girls were discovered in that enclosed space. Randy Ertman believed his daughter, Jennifer Ertman, may have been one of the two girls.

Randy Ertman had exerted a lot of effort to find his daughter over the prior four days. He contacted all of Jennifer’s friends to see if they had any clue where she might be. He printed up thousands of flyers and posted them from Galveston to Cypress-Fairbanks. He attended an anti-death penalty rally for convicted killer Gary Graham in hopes of getting the media’s attention to focus on his little girl.

When the call came in that there were two bodies found in the brush near the end of the tree line at T. C. Jester Park, Randy was speaking with newspaper and television reporters at his home in the Heights. He overheard the call on one of the reporters’ walkie-talkies. The semihysterical father looked at a cameraman from the local ABC-affiliate channel 13 news division, grabbed his news va-

keys, and shouted out, "C'mon! Let's go." Randy jumped into the van and made the cameraman drive. They tore out of there like a scorpion shuttling over scorching asphalt.

The news van pulled up to the scene, skidded to a halt in the asphalt, and Randy leapt out of the passenger door. He noticed a large crowd of onlookers had gathered behind the invisible barrier. He was disgusted by the people. They reminded him of hungry, circling vultures eyeing rotted carrion on a deserted highway.

Randy ran from the van, jumped over the police barrier, and made a mad dash for the cluster of police officers.

"Is it my daughter?" he screamed. "Is my daughter back there?" he yelled as he advanced forward.

Sean O'Brien, an eighteen-year-old African-American male, watched the insanity unfold. He saw the van pull up to the scene and witnessed the hysterical father jump out and practically tackle one of the police officers. When O'Brien heard the man ask if one of the victims was blond, he realized it had to be one of the girls' fathers.

O'Brien sheepishly grinned. He slowly turned around and walked away.

PART I

PURE HELL

JENNIFER ERTMAN

Chapter 1

Jennifer Ertman was born on August 15, 1978, to Sandra and Randy Ertman. The Ertmans were ecstatic at the birth of their child because they were not sure if they would ever be able to conceive since Sandra was on the wrong side of thirty-five.

Baby Jennifer was the Ertmans' own personal little miracle.

Sandra described her only child as "real sensitive, modest, funny." To her mother, Jennifer was "more child than teenager." She still seemed to act more like a young girl than a budding teenager. "She liked to play. She had a baseball card collection." Her father also said she developed a good sense of humor at an early age and that she had "the best laugh."

Her mother spoke about how Jennifer tended to act younger with the kids in her neighborhood than with her friends at school. "She would ride her go-kart or bicycle down the street. She used to pull her wagons down the street with Ishmael, a boy down the block that she grew up with, and his family."

As Jennifer got older, she kept her more childlike side out of view from her high-school friends. "When she went to school, she didn't let her friends know that she did that at home. She tried to act more like a teenager."

The Ertmans added that she was always a good kid. "We were firm with her when she was growing up," Randy recalled. "We taught her to never lie, cheat, or steal, and to treat everyone with respect." Randy added, "As long as she never lied to me, I didn't have to worry. She never lied to me, so I never had to worry."

The couple refrained from spanking her. Randy recalled yelling at her only three times in her entire life. He felt he never really had to raise his voice to her. "We only had one child and we spoiled her, but she had rules and she had to live by them."

Jennifer was always a very modest girl. She loved to swim; however, she was not thrilled about displaying her body in front of others. Her mother remembered, "In the summertime when she was swimming, I bought her big, baggy cover-ups to put on over her bathing suit when she got out of the swimming pool." Jennifer loved to swim, but she did not like to prance around in front of the other poolgoers. Her mother said she would even wear the cover-ups in the swimming pool.

Jennifer also wore long, baggy denim shorts that came down to her knees whenever she lay out by the swimming pool. She stayed away from short shorts. She also never wore a sleeveless shirt. "She was dressed for comfort," her mother declared, "and she dressed baggy because she didn't like anything too tight."

Jennifer was also not too big on boyfriends. "She had friends that were boys," her mother clarified, "but she did not have any boyfriends." Jennifer still seemed to retain some of her younger-child mentality when it came to boys and girls. "She didn't like boys to touch her at all."

Jennifer was proud to be a virgin. Indeed, it was her intention not to surrender her virtue until she met the right man and married him. Her virginity was her badge of honor and something she was determined to keep until the moment was perfect.

Sandra had noticed certain changes in her daughter in the previous months. To her, it seemed as if Jennifer were slowly breaking out of her little-girl phase and beginning to grow into being a teenager.

Jennifer used to wear barrettes in her hair all the time; however, she had begun taking them out so she could mimic the hairstyles worn by some of the actresses on the popular nighttime soap opera.

Beverly Hills, 90210. It's what all the girls at Waltrip High School were doing and she had decided was time to fit in.

Jennifer also began to wear more jewelry. She had her ears double-pierced, and on top of one earring she had tiny diamond studs. She wore tiny dime-sized hoop earrings on the bottom. She also wore two long gold rope chains, one with the letter *J* on the end. The young girl also wore a total of eight rings on her fingers, including two *J* rings and one *E* ring.

Jennifer also began to put on makeup, even though her parents assured her she was beautiful without it.

Despite her newer leanings toward more mature decorations, Jennifer also wore a Walt Disney Goofy watch, which was a gift from her parents from the previous Christmas.

She was not entirely ready to give up her childhood.

There was another overt sign that the Ertmans' baby daughter was growing up. When she turned thirteen, she asked her parents for her own set of house keys. It was not for sneaky ulterior motives. The Ertmans had two doors in the back of their home. One was the regular door and the other was a door made of metal burglar bars, which were necessary because they lived on a nice street in one of the lower-quality areas of the Heights.

Jennifer wisely said, "Mom, can I have my own keys so I don't have to keep bothering you?" Sandra believed her daughter had proven she was responsible enough, so she had an extra set of keys made for her.

The Ertmans also purchased a unique gift for their daughter that showed she was quickly growing up: a pager.

Jennifer received a Southwestern Bell pager for Christmas in 1992. Sandra was reluctant to give it to her at first. During the '90s, pagers had a stereotypical connotation as a tool for drug dealers. Jennifer insisted she wanted one because it was a way to keep in touch with her friends. This was before the mass proliferation of cell phones. Sandra and Randy discussed the issue with Jennifer, and the couple decided that because Jennifer was now attending Waltrip High School, she would not be in the Heights area, where they lived, as much. The family agreed it would be a smart purchase, so they bought her one. Sandra actually felt better about it because now she knew she could get in touch with her daughter much quicker in the event of an emergency.

Thursday, June 24, 1993—4:00 P.M.

Ertman residence

East Twenty-fifth Street

Houston, Texas

Sandra walked into her daughter's bedroom. Jennifer was getting ready to visit her best friend Elizabeth Pena. Sandra glanced at her daughter, who was standing next to a mirror, brushing her hair. She was amazed at how much her daughter had grown, and she was proud of what a wonderful person she was turning out to be. Jennifer made straight A's in school, had nice friends, never got into trouble, and loved her parents.

"Dad's taking you over to Elizabeth's," Sandra informed her daughter. It was usually her mother who drove Jennifer everywhere. "I'm going to go over to Apple Tree to pick up some groceries."

"Okay, Mom," Jennifer acknowledged while continuing to brush her hair.

"I love you, honey." Sandra walked toward her daughter. "I'll talk to you later." The mother leaned over and gave her daughter a peck on the cheek.

"I love you, too, Mom." Jennifer smiled as her mom exited her bedroom.

Sandra felt safe about letting her daughter go out for the night with friends. Jennifer had her pager and also cash in her purse. Her mother always left \$35 on Jennifer's dresser every Thursday for allowance. Jennifer also received the same amount on Sundays and she always kept a \$10 bill in her pants pocket in case of emergency or if she needed to call a taxicab. Sandra made sure her daughter knew that if she ever needed a ride home, all she had to do was get to a pay phone and call her parents. They would come get her—no matter the situation.

Sandra left her home feeling upbeat. She knew her daughter was a good girl and knew how to stay out of trouble. Randy marveled at how close the two ladies in his life were. He watched as Sandy and Jenny communicated more "I love you's" without verbalizing them. They shared a unique and special bond that only a mother and daughter could experience.

Jennifer and her dad left fifteen minutes later.

Randy dropped Jennifer off at Elizabeth Pena's house on Lamonte Lane, approximately four-and-a-half miles away from their home. Jennifer did not lean over to give her father a kiss good-bye. She had recently gotten out of the habit due to embarrassment, being a teenager and all.

"Be home by midnight," her father reminded her.

"I will, Dad. I love you." Jennifer said good-bye.

"I love you, too, honey," Randy responded as he drove off. The self-described overprotective father did not like to leave his daughter on her own; however, he knew she was growing up.

ELIZABETH PENA

Chapter 2

Elizabeth Christine Pena was born on June 21, 1977, at Memorial Hermann Northwest Hospital, Houston, Texas, to her parents, Melissa and Adolpho “Adolph” Pena. Melissa was eighteen years old at the time and Adolph was twenty-one.

Melissa’s water broke the night before and Adolph rushed her to the hospital. At 2:00 A.M., after several hours of waiting, the nurses informed Adolph he could go home and get some sleep. Surprisingly enough, less than two hours later, he received a call that his first child had been born with no complications.

“That was one of the most precious times of my life,” Adolph recalled. “That firstborn child. There’s nothing like the first one.” He described his immediate attachment to his daughter as “pretty special.”

Adolph and Melissa used a baby-name book to select “Elizabeth.” They were an ecstatic young couple looking forward to sharing their lives and love with their baby daughter.

The Penas had met just over two years before. Adolph, whose parents and grandparents grew up in San Antonio, Texas, moved to Houston with his parents in 1975 after his dad received a better job offer. He was the only child left in the house and the three of them packed up and moved southeast to Houston.

Soon thereafter, Adolph went to a Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young concert at Jeppesen Stadium, the former home of the Houston Oilers football team and also the University of Houston Cougar college football team. There he met an attractive white girl named Melissa Moore. The two hit it off as friends and promised to get together after the concert. One thing eventually led to another and they found themselves in love, married, and with child.

The Penas lived a quiet, relaxed life in their quaint home on Lamonte Lane, in northwest Houston. Their home was located on a pine-tree-lined suburban street less than a quarter of a mile away from Stevens Elementary and less than half a mile away from T. C. Jester Park, with its clean bicycle paths and shade trees for people who sought exercise.

Adolph described Elizabeth as a “normal little kid who loved to play out in the backyard and swim in her little plastic swimming pool.”

Elizabeth was two years old when she was joined by her little brother, Michael. As brother and sister grew older, they fought constantly about the silliest things. Michael picked on Elizabeth, and she told on him. They always seemed to be at each other’s throats, even though they loved one another tremendously. They shared a bedroom for ten years and slept in bunk beds together.

Adolph laughed when he talked about how Elizabeth and Michael used to fight. “It was always some piddly bullshit stuff. ‘Oh, Mom, he’s looking at me’ or ‘Oh, he’s touching me.’ Just piddly, silly kind of stuff. Just bullshit, like brothers and sisters do.”

When the two oldest children became teenagers, they “kind of went their separate ways,” according to Adolph. “He got into basketball and baseball. She couldn’t stand PE. She didn’t like sweating. She was into her things. So, finally, they quit fighting with each other.”

According to Adolph, Elizabeth was still very much a girly-girl. She loved to dress up and look good. It was apparent early on that she was a beautiful little girl. All of the Penas’ friends and family members would comment on what a lovely young lady Elizabeth was from an early age.

Elizabeth had very curly hair and loved to have it fixed up, but she hated having her hair washed. Her father and mother used to wash it in the sink and Elizabeth would scream at the top of her lungs while she was doused in water. No one knew why, but it became a source of humor for the entire family.

When Elizabeth was almost ten years old, the Penas welcomed their third child into the fold—a baby girl named Rachael. Elizabeth immediately took to Rachael and constantly doted on her little sister. She adored Rachael and did everything she could to help her mother take care of her.

“She just thought that was the neatest thing,” Adolph recalled of his oldest daughter’s fascination with the newest addition to the family. “She thought the world of Rachael.” By the time Rachael turned four, Elizabeth had already taken her under her wing and loved playing with her.

Elizabeth was a decent student in school. Her father believed she was “intelligent, but lazy. She did what she needed to do to get by. As far as books were concerned, she would do what she had to do to pass. One of those types of people.” Elizabeth was not interested in excessive studying or making the honor roll. According to Adolph, she was only a C to C-minus student. She was more interested in enjoying herself, looking pretty, and making lots of friends.

The older she got, the more everyone noticed her. She grew into a stunning, thin young girl, with long, dark hair. She was one of the most popular girls in each of her schools from Oak Forest Elementary to Stevens Elementary.

Her parents would not let Elizabeth attend F. M. Black Middle School, even though it was located just three blocks down on Lamonte Lane. Her parents believed there were too many bad things going on at Black, so they sent her to a private Catholic school.

Her father even warned her about “men of all ages.” He told her that most men were only interested in one thing and that she should always be wary of their intentions. He told her that since she was so beautiful “men would try to take advantage” of her and that she should not “trust anyone” and “always be aware of your surroundings.”

Adolph did not mind if his little girl had a boyfriend; he just wanted to make sure she was friends with the boy for a long time before they started dating, “Just like me and her momma did.” He worried about his little daughter having sex and getting pregnant.

While Adolph fretted about his daughter’s blossoming into a woman, Melissa Pena could still see the little-girl quality within her oldest daughter. She described Elizabeth as “fun-loving, goofy, silly, liked to talk on the phone, sweet, gentle, and kind.” Elizabeth was “young and carefree,” with no plans.

“She thought she had a full life in front of her,” Melissa recalled.

According to Adolph, Elizabeth had always been a good kid until she turned fourteen. “She started hanging out with the wrong crowd. A bunch of crazy little kids. She didn’t give a damn about nothing. She wasn’t using any drugs or drinking any alcohol. She just kind of liked to get into trouble. Never went to jail. Never in trouble with the law.” Adolph did not think the kids she hung out with were bad; they just seemed bored with life. “There were no gang members, no drug dealers, no rapists, no killers. They were just bored and lifeless.”

This had been why the Penas enrolled Elizabeth in St. Pius X Catholic private school, located in downtown Houston. This turned out to be a bad move, as Elizabeth got into even more trouble. She was removed from the private school after only six weeks. She also had her first sexual relationship with a boy during this time frame.

“I don’t know what it was,” Adolph recalled, “but something about her from the age of fourteen to fifteen just went a little wild. She just seemed to want to get into trouble.”

Elizabeth took out most of her teenage rebelliousness on her parents. “We would argue with her about coming home late or staying on the phone too long or for hanging out with the wrong type

people.” Elizabeth would retaliate by running away from home twice.

“She’d sneak out the window and go to somebody’s house,” Adolph mused, “and I wouldn’t find out about it until the next day. I’d be like, ‘Where in the hell they at?’”

Elizabeth usually ran away because she was upset with her parents over something trivial. “She had gotten pissed at us and went and stayed with this one gal over at her house. She was harboring her friends like two or three days.” Adolph ran into the girl’s father out in public and said to him, “Dude, do you know you can go to jail for harboring a minor? All you had to do was tell me, ‘Hey, your girl’s over here.’”

After Elizabeth was kicked out of St. Pius X, she was devastated and determined to start anew. She thought about the types of people she hung out with and came up with an insightful realization—she truly only had three to four friends she knew she could count on to help her out, no matter what.

One of those friends was one of her newer girlfriends, Jennifer Ertman. Even though Jennifer was more than a year younger than Elizabeth, she would prove to be a positive influence on the older girl. Jennifer did well in school, obeyed her parents, and made plenty of friends as well. Elizabeth followed her new friend’s lead and began to turn her life back around.

“I don’t know what happened to her,” Adolph recalled, “she was a totally different person. When she turned fifteen, she just straightened up her act.

“I don’t know what somebody said to her or what she had seen but she turned back into a little princess. She started doing well in school. She totally turned herself around all by herself. It was kind of odd,” Pena marveled.

The Penas were very happy Elizabeth befriended Jennifer. “She was an extremely good kid,” Adolph recalled. “I can’t imagine her being bad, with a dad like Randy.

“Jennifer was a little doll,” Adolph continued. “Every time she’d come into the house, she would make it a point to come over and say, ‘Hello, Mr. Pena,’ even if I was in another part of the house. She was a very, very polite young lady.”

Jennifer and Elizabeth both attended Waltrip High School and had recently completed the ninth grade. The year at Waltrip with Jennifer by her side was the best year Elizabeth had spent in ages. Her grades were improving, she pared down her friends to those who truly cared for her, and she met a young boy with whom she fell into teenage love. It appeared as if things were back on the right track for Elizabeth Pena.

For the last few years, Adolph and Melissa would take the family to Florida for a week to ten-day vacation. It was all about fishing and sunbathing. The boys went fishing, the girls went sunbathing.

“I was coming back from Florida and everybody was just happy. The kids were in the van. I looked up and saw my beautiful girl in the rearview mirror and thought to myself, ‘What would happen if I didn’t have these kids?’” It was a fleeting thought that Adolph had never had before. As quickly as it came into his mind, he shook it out. He looked up into the mirror and caught his daughter’s attention.

“I love you, sweetie,” Adolph told Elizabeth.

She smiled. “I love you, too, Daddy.”

RAUL VILLARREAL

Chapter 3

Thursday, June 24, 1993—3:00 P.M.

Villarreal residence

Chapman Street

Houston, Texas

Seventeen-year-old middle-school dropout Raul Villarreal sat around the house of his parents Louisa and Omar Villarreal. Being unemployed had become a common occurrence for the young man. As a result, he was forced to live with his parents, where he did not have to pay rent or do many chores. The Villarreals lived in a quaint but poor neighborhood, and the family needed every penny he could get his hands on.

That did not stop Raul from asking his mother for a quarter so he could go play video games down at the local convenience store. His mother agreed and gave him the change. Raul bolted out the door and headed over to the store, where he planned to kill some time playing his favorite video game, *Street Fighter II*, the popular sequel to the combat-fighting game that reinvigorated arcade-style video gaming.

Raul Omar Villarreal was born on September 25, 1975, in Houston, Texas. He was the third child behind twin sisters, Laura and Elizabeth, who were born one year earlier to his parents.

Raul was a healthy baby born into a relatively poor family. His father, Omar, worked as a repairman with a specialty of fixing refrigerators and air conditioners. He never brought home much money, but always had food on the table for his kids, a roof over their heads, and was always there for them when they needed him. Louisa was a stay-at-home mom who doted over all of her children equally.

What the Villarreals lacked in finances, they made up for in how they treated their children, which would later include three more. Omar and Louisa made sure the kids were clean, well-fed, and they also stressed the need for a good education and a strong belief in religion.

The Villarreal family led a normal, unspectacular life. Omar worked, Louisa looked after the kids, the family attended church, the kids went to school, and they played sports. All fairly normal and routine for kids growing up in Houston, Texas.

The Villarreals had a nice but small white wooden house located on Chapman Street. The house was practically encaged with burglar bars on all the windows and all the doors. It was not uncommon for a van to be parked on the tiny strip of grass between the front of the house and the narrow street.

The Villarreals made friends with their neighbors, joined in on barbecues with them on the weekends, and frequented the Trinity Baptist Church, less than two miles away from their home. Raul first attended church when he was six years old and pretty much went every Sunday.

Raul was not exactly the world's best student in elementary school. He managed to get by, but he struggled with many of his classes.

After elementary school, Raul was somehow allowed to graduate to Marshall Middle School, located less than two miles away from his family's home. He did very poorly and was retained twice during his academic career. In other words, he flunked out of two grades, which he was forced

repeat.

When he was thirteen years old, Raul met Pastor Rudy Sanchez, from the Trinity Baptist Church. Pastor Sanchez had known the Villarreal family for a while. He knew Raul was a very polite, obedient, and quiet young boy who usually came to church every Sunday, sat quietly in the pew, and was respectful toward the setting for the invocation of Jesus Christ. Pastor Sanchez also knew Raul made his “commitment to Christ” when Raul was twelve years old.

Pastor Sanchez noted Raul was also consistent with his appearances in Sunday school after each sermon. He was usually quiet, attentive, and a good listener. He never got into trouble with his teachers or the other Sunday-school attendees. He was well-liked by his peers, even though he was very quiet.

Trinity Baptist Church had more than six hundred parishioners at the time. Despite the large numbers, Pastor Sanchez made it his personal mission to get to know and help as many of them as he possibly could. He took a particular interest in the Villarreal family when Omar Villarreal became sick. Since Omar was the sole breadwinner in the family, Pastor Sanchez was worried about the financial well-being and how it would affect the family emotionally.

To help out, the pastor visited the family on a periodic basis to see how they were making ends meet. Every time he visited the Villarreals in the tiny wooden home, Raul answered the front door.

“Hello, Raul,” Pastor Sanchez greeted the boy. “Are your parents home?”

Raul usually would not say anything, but simply nod his head affirmatively. He would scoot back to open the door and wait until the pastor stepped inside. Too shy to say anything, Raul slipped away from the front room. Within seconds, Louisa Villarreal would enter the foyer and greet Pastor Sanchez.

Raul usually scampered off, back into his room.

When Pastor Sanchez did see Raul in the Villarreal home, he described him as “quiet and respectful of his parents.”

Pastor Sanchez always enjoyed his visits with the Villarreal family. He could tell that all six of the children were loved. When the pastor would visit, he spent the majority of his time chatting with Louisa, since Omar was “a very quiet man.”

Unfortunately, Pastor Sanchez’s ministrations did not solve the Villarreals’ problems. Omar’s downtime from work cut into what little financial budget the family had. As a result, Raul used to go to school in less than pristine clothes. He was embarrassed to be seen by other kids at school, who teased him for his pauper’s wardrobe, he claimed.

In February 1991, at age fifteen, Raul approached his mother. He told her he no longer wanted to go to school. He was tired of the taunts and he wanted to do something about it. He begged her to let him quit so he could join his father and earn extra money for the family.

Louisa was mortified. She did not want her son to quit school. She had always stressed the importance of a good education, and even though Raul had been kept back twice, she still believed he had what it took to succeed in school and in life.

Raul won the argument. He informed his mother he was done. He was dropping out of school.

He was only in seventh grade.

Louisa was crestfallen. She visited Pastor Sanchez to see if he could provide counsel to young Raul, but it was too late. Her boy was determined to make a living and contribute to the family. Nothing was going to stop him.

Raul also stopped going to church around the same time. He gave no explanation why.

Raul began to work with his father repairing air conditioners and refrigerators. It was very labor-intensive work, which he did not enjoy. He did, however, like the paycheck that came with the work. He would readily give up 40 percent of it to his parents every payday.

Louisa continued to stress the importance of a good education and convinced her son to take the

GED, a battery of five tests that a person can take to earn the equivalent of a high-school diploma. Raul had the opportunity to participate in a tutoring center to prepare for the exams; however, he failed to complete his studies and never even took the tests.

Raul felt no need, as he was making the beginnings of a living and he enjoyed the money.

He was, however, getting very bored with his social life. He began to hang out with his cousin Eddie Sanchez, whose mother was sister to Raul's father. Raul and Eddie were almost the same age.

The cousins used to spend a lot of time together when they were little, because they lived with just a few blocks of one another. That changed when Eddie's parents moved to another part of Houston, which was more than twenty minutes away. Eddie was only six at the time. As a result, he was unable to drop by as he pleased and see his cousin. The two became less close over time; however, they occasionally attended Trinity Baptist Church together. Eddie stopped going to church when he was only eight years old.

As the boys got older and were a bit more mobile, they got back into the habit of spending time together. Practically every weekend, the cousins made sure they got together whether it was sitting around a picnic table eating barbecue, catching the latest football game on television, or spending the weekend down at the beach in Galveston. The cousins had reignited their relationship and became much closer. They even went on a couple of double dates together.

Eddie dropped out of school one year after Raul had. He never took his GED, either—something the cousins had in common.

Eddie trusted his cousin implicitly. He never worried about Raul being around his common-law wife, Rene Spinks, and her young child from a previous marriage. Eddie and Rene would have another baby when Eddie was only sixteen. Eddie had no problem letting Raul hang around his wife or his two kids when he was not around, because he believed his cousin was a solid, safe, nice guy.

Raul was nice enough that Rene suggested to her sister, Kate Dickson, that she go out with him. The couple hooked up, but it was not meant to be. According to Eddie, Kate wanted to date more than one guy and had no desire to be tied down. She even told Eddie that Raul was almost too nice and that she wanted "somebody more aggressive."

Kate described Raul as a "perfect gentleman" who never cursed in front of her. She also said he was too shy and had not even attempted to kiss her. In the end, after only three weeks, she found Raul to be too boring and dumped him. According to Eddie, Raul did not seem too bummed about it. Luckily, the failed relationship between Raul and Eddie's common-law sister-in-law did not adversely affect the two cousins' relationship.

Raul had struggled in school and he struggled in relationships with the fairer sex. He was also bored with manual labor and wanted something different. He spoke with his mother about her new vocation. She was attending nursing school at the Polytechnic Institute, along with two of Raul's sisters. She convinced her son it would be a wise move for him to join them. He took her up on the offer. He informed his father he would be quitting the air-conditioning business and enrolled in nursing school.

Raul enjoyed the work and he even enjoyed spending extra time with his mother and sisters. He did not make many friends while in nursing school, electing instead to eat lunch and spend most of his break times with his family.

The majority of his fellow nursing students found him to be pleasant, hardworking, and relatively quiet. They tended to like him, but were not close to him.

There was one exception. Andrea Flores, one of his fellow students at the institute, befriended Raul in September 1992. She, too, hoped to become a nurse.

Andrea described Raul Villarreal as calm and easygoing; she noticed he made good grades. She claimed he got along well with everyone at Polytechnic Institute.

The nursing program lasted only four months. Raul had no problem with the curriculum, showed up for classes, and was an eager participant in all variations of training. He passed the program with flying colors.

Raul, along with his two sisters, his mother, and Andrea all received their nursing certificates on January 15, 1993. It was one of the proudest days in his young life.

Unfortunately, landing a job was a completely different story for Raul. He went through all of the usual channels to seek out a nursing job, but he always came up empty-handed. No one would hire him. His sisters were hired. His mom got hired. Andrea was hired, but no one would hire Raul Villarreal.

Raul's state of unemployment led to a deeper state of depression. He was finished with school, jobless, and had no girlfriend. He felt unwanted and unneeded. He went from helping his family buy food and clothes to having to wear worn-out, out-of-style clothes.

Raul sought out new friends to help break up his monotony. The main person he hung out with was a young boy, roughly Raul's same age, named Efrain Perez Jr. According to Eddie, Efrain and Raul lived on the same street when they were younger and had known each other for nearly five years. Eddie noted that despite the fact the Perez family had moved away from the neighborhood, back in 1988, Efrain and Raul still managed to hang out together. Eddie described Efrain as a guy who "liked to hang out on the streets."

Raul's mother did not like Efrain. She claimed he only came over to their house twice since 1988. Each time, she did not want her son to have anything to do with him. Whenever Efrain showed up in her front yard, Louisa would yell at her son to come inside the house and reiterated that she did not want him playing with Efrain.

Louisa and Raul would run into Efrain when they went out grocery shopping as well. Every time she saw Efrain, she later warned her son he "was not doing very well," and insisted that Raul better be careful because Efrain was "always getting into trouble."

Louisa said of Efrain Perez, "He was on a bad path." She heard he was mainly interested in making a name for himself out on the streets. "I had heard about his fame," Louisa warily recalled.

There were still many people looking out for Raul Villarreal's best interests. One was family friend Benitas Arias. She knew Raul since he was thirteen years old and described him as "a peaceful person." The older woman trusted Raul well enough that she would leave him alone with her own daughter who was a year older than Raul.

Arias became close enough to Raul and friendly enough with the Villarreals that she would invite Raul over to spend the weekends at her house. She never had any complaints about the young man and thought he was a "nice boy."

Another adult authority figure who took a keen interest in Raul Villarreal was Pastor Guillermo Tamez, from the Living Work Church.

From his days of being a fellow parishioner at Trinity Baptist, Pastor Tamez had known Raul since Raul "was just a baby." Tamez enjoyed the Villarreals' company and was especially fond of Raul. He kept up with the family over the years and liked to hear updates about the boy as Raul got older.

Tamez often met Raul at church and would talk to him about his life, especially when Raul was between fifteen and seventeen. The pastor sensed Raul was troubled and he wanted to be there to help him on his path. He had great faith in Raul and believed he simply needed additional support and guidance. "He was interested in him" and wanted to "try and help him out because the boy lacked self-confidence."

Tamez would sit and counsel with Raul on a one-to-one basis at the church. He eventually spent some time at the Villarreal household, where he would talk with Raul and the rest of the family.

Tamez feared Raul's boredom would lead him down the wrong path of bad choices. Top of the li

was joining a gang. The pastor had seen too many kids' lives forever damaged by their association with gangs. He wanted to steer Raul away from that dead end.

Tamez feared that route for Raul because he knew the young boy was book-smart, but not street-smart. The pastor described the young boy as "a follower, not a leader." He added that Raul was not "a hard-core person."

Tamez was also somewhat critical of Raul's father and his relationship with his son. He claimed that the father "did not pay enough attention" to Raul. He also lamented the fact the boy had to purchase his own clothes with his own money.

Pastor Tamez could not tell if what he said to Raul had actually sunk in.

Apparently, it did not.

Raul's boredom led him down an even more destructive pathway: drugs and alcohol. Raul's mother found out he was sniffing inhalants to get high—specifically, Texas shoe-shine, which is a local-brand shoe-shining spray that contains toluene. She also found out he had been sniffing for quite some time ("Texas shoe-shine" is now slang for huffing inhalants.)

Raul was referred to a drug-and-alcohol counselor by a gentleman named Tommy Acosta, who worked for the Chicano Family Center, which helps low-income families.

Raul's counselor, Norberto Torres, definitely agreed Raul was a sniffer. Instead of Texas shoe-shine, however, Torres believed the young man's inhalant of choice was Freon, which was more readily accessible because of his father's air conditioner repair service. Raul denied sniffing Freon or anything else. Torres informed Louisa Villarreal that it was quite common for sniffers to deny any wrongdoing.

Raul's problem worsened, according to his mother, so she decided to take drastic action to save her son. With Torres's guidance, they hoped to stage an intervention to help Raul with his drug problem.

On Wednesday, June 23, 1993, Torres arrived at the Villarreal home at 3:00 P.M. to plan out strategy with Mrs. Villarreal. They all agreed to meet at the Houston Recovery Campus at 3:30 P.M., on Friday, June 25, in two days. Louisa Villarreal prayed she could convince her son to go with her to meet Torres and help him with his drug problem.

The next day, Raul strolled up to the convenience store and saw his good buddy Efrain Perez in the parking lot working on his family's truck.

"What up Junior?" Raul inquired of his friend, using the name Perez most often went by.

"Fixin' this piece of shit ride, bitch," Efrain responded. "What the hell you up to?"

"Just killin' some time. Gonna play a little *Street Fighter*. Whoop me some ass." Raul laughed.

Efrain Perez nodded toward Raul, then stuck his head back under the hood of the truck. Raul headed into the store to get his game on.

EFRAIN PEREZ JR.

Chapter 4

Efrain Perez Jr. was born on November 19, 1975, in his grandmother Eusebia Guerrero's home on East Monroe Street, in Brownsville, Texas, to Maria "Louise" Perez and Layo Guerrero, whose name strangely was not included on his son's birth certificate.

The couple lived in the tiny, cramped quarters of a ramshackle pink wooden-framed house. The family employed the services of a midwife to birth baby Efrain. His arrival in the world was greeted by his one-year-old sister, Gabrilla, who was also born in the Guerrero home.

The excitement of a newborn was short-lived, however, as Louise and Layo, who were constantly fighting about something, decided to go their separate ways.

Louise packed her bags, took Efrain and Gabrilla with her, and moved out of the Guerrero household. The relocation was not too dramatic, as they literally moved just one block away.

Louise made a go of it alone. She took care of Efrain and Gabrilla, kept her place up, and also worked a job as a housecleaner. On the days when she had to go to work, she relied upon Efrain's grandmother Eusebia to watch after her baby boy and girl.

Their stay was short-lived, for Louise met a young man named Ismael Castillo and married him. The new family moved, this time eight blocks away from the Guerreros, into a tiny wooden house with two rooms for the children, a master bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen.

The distance made it much more difficult for Eusebia to stop by and babysit. She had to take the city bus to get to the kids' new home. She also worked a demanding job packing shrimp and it became physically harder for her to take care of her grandkids.

Louise, however, was eventually forced to send her son off to live with his grandmother and aunt. Efrain spent several years there and grew quite attached to both ladies.

Efrain was very fond of his aunt Doria Elia Casias. She lived in Rio Bravo in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and Eusebia used to bring Efrain and Gabrilla to visit her once a month. They would also make return visits for special holidays, such as Easter and Christmas. Doria loved the children as if they were her own.

Efrain and Gabrilla were ecstatic to find out Aunt Doria would be moving to Brownsville on New Year's Eve, 1981. Efrain was only six, but he knew Doria was coming to live with them and he could see her as often as he liked.

But by 1984, Louise sought out better employment opportunities in Houston and took Efrain and Gabrilla with her. Four years later, when Efrain was a young teenager, he wanted to move back to Brownsville and live with his grandmother. Efrain asked his mother if he could and she agreed.

This routine between Houston and Brownsville was a continuous scenario. Trying to keep up with how many times Efrain moved back and forth between Brownsville and Houston is nearly impossible.

While he lived in Brownsville, Efrain attended Resaca Elementary School, home of the Mighty Chiefs. He went through grades one through six, on and off. He was always a very good student, was actively involved in school, and had plenty of friends. As he got older, he became interested in music and joined the school band. Efrain also stayed out of trouble and hung out with some of the better kids who made good grades.

In 1989, when Efrain was fourteen, he attended Cummings Junior High School, also in Brownsville. By eighth grade, he was enrolled in an honors course for every subject except reading. Eduardo

Martinez, his earth science teacher, remembered Efrain as a good student who never got into trouble and never missed a single class. Martinez recalled Efrain's two best buddies at the time were Pe Lopez and Tony Chavez. They were both bright students and good kids.

By February 1990, Louise wanted her son to come live with her again in Houston. Aunt Doria, however, did not want her nephew to go. It was the beginning of the second semester of eighth grade at Cummings for Efrain and she wanted him to have more stability. She was afraid that another abrupt upheaval would damage him. Furthermore, she felt as though Efrain was her own son and did not want to surrender him. She and Eusebia had made sure that Efrain was taught to respect and to obey. They also taught him manners, gave him a curfew, and made sure to discipline him when he got out of line.

Doria knew, however, she had no choice. Efrain was forced to withdraw from Cummings Junior High and transfer back to Houston yet again.

Eusebia was not thrilled about the prospect of Efrain leaving, either. She worked hard with him and believed he would turn out to be a good little boy. She was afraid another move would throw him off the right track.

She prayed for her grandson that he would make a seamless transition and not get mixed up with the wrong crowd.

Efrain was sent to Marshall Middle School upon his return to Houston, but was transferred after only two weeks to Hoffman Middle School. According to James Royster, Efrain's English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, Efrain was a "bright student" who hung out with the kids from his class. All of the ESL students were Hispanic and came from another school called Shotwell Middle School. Royster believed Efrain always hung out with the Hispanic kids because he was more comfortable around them.

According to Royster, Efrain and his new buddies used to walk confidently through the school corridors side by side. Despite Efrain's seemingly intimidating presence, Royster declared he never saw the young man engage in aggressive behavior with any of the other students. He also believed Efrain was more than able to make decisions for himself. He was definitely not a follower.

Despite Efrain being a bright student, he started to get into trouble at school. According to Royster, he recalled having to break up a fight in the school hallway one day between Efrain and another boy. Royster was not sure what happened, but he came across the two boys swinging wildly at each other. Both boys were cursing and throwing punches.

Royster grabbed Efrain and pulled him off the other boy. Despite Efrain's rail-thin stature, he put up serious resistance to his teacher.

"I had to get him into a different area to settle him down," Royster recalled. "I had a tough time getting him settled down."

Efrain met another young boy in his same grade, named Joe Medellin, who was also part of ESL. They became close friends.

In September 1991, Efrain graduated from Hoffman Middle School to Eisenhower High School. Assistant Principal Greg Colschen's most relevant memory of Efrain is that he skipped too many classes. Colschen was surprised, because he knew Efrain had done well in middle school, but now he seemed like the teenager was "uninterested in school." Colschen called Efrain into his office numerous times to discuss his absenteeism, but Efrain never gave him any good reasons why he was cutting class. Colschen did note that Efrain had been spending more time with a group of kids from the Heather Glen Subdivision, including Joe Medellin and another boy, named Peter Cantu.

Colschen attempted to contact Efrain's parents to discuss their son's truancy; however, he was never able to reach them. He even wrote and mailed the family certified letters, which were ignored.

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