

DEATH AT SOLSTICE

A GLORIA DAMASCO MYSTERY

"Corpi writes compelling detective fiction
with social issues integral to the plot."

—*MultiCultural Review*

LUCHA CORPI



By the author of *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*

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“Dark family secrets emerge and passionate sexual intrigues abound as the story builds with a complexity worthy of a Ross MacDonald novel. Woven through the narrative is the grim legacy of pesticide poisoning suffered by farmworkers in the [California] Central Valley . . . 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-Examiner Book Review*
on *Cactus Blood*

(please turn the page for more rave reviews)

“Gloria Damasco made her first appearance in Corpi’s *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, a mystery enshrouded in the Mexican-American communities of California . . . A tense plot laced with believable characters and historical facts.”
—Copley News Service

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“The second installment of a detective-mystery series featuring Gloria Damasco . . . [*Cactus Blood*] is dark and mysterious, with old Indian haunts and visions of blood and death . . . Hard to put down . . . An excellent mystery.”
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“Gloria Damasco is one of the most original characters in today’s mystery fiction. She’s tough, vulnerable, smart, and possessed of distinctive skills, not the least of which is her spiritual ability to *see*.”
—Manuel Ramos, author of *Blues for the Buffalo*
and other Luis Montez mysteries

“Corpi writes excellently.”
—*Hispanic magazine*

DEATH AT SOLSTICE

A Gloria Damasco Mystery

Books by Lucha Corpi

Crimson Moon: A Brown Angel Mystery

Palabras de mediodía / Noon Words

Featuring Gloria Damasco

Black Widow's Wardrobe

Cactus Blood

Death at Solstice

Eulogy for a Brown Angel

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is a work of fiction and it is not intended to reflect negatively on the reputation of any of the civil or religious institutions herewith mentioned.

PREMONITORY PREDISPOSITIONS

Neon light spilled from the kitchen into the hall. Sylvia Salvatierra and I hid in the office at the end of the hall. I took a place by the door. She crouched next to the desk behind me and called 911. Between short breaths, she blurted out her address. Her ex-husband was in the house. She had a restraining order against him. She pressed the “Off” button but kept the receiver in her hand.

Her rapid breathing made mine want to keep rhythm with hers. Soon I was hyperventilating. The buzz in my ears deafened every other sound. I gulped air and held it, then swallowed hard a few times. My ears popped just as I saw the shadow on the wall. I pointed my gun to the left of it and waited for Carl Salvatierra to come into my line of vision. A door creaked as it opened—the bathroom door since it was next to the kitchen. I signaled for Sylvia to be quiet. She crawled deeper under the desk.

Carl’s shadow loomed just outside the office door. I could hear his intense breathing and the soft clearing of his throat. I saw his gun first as he stepped into the room. Fear traveled up my spine to the back of my neck. I held my breath in. If he heard me, turned, and we both fired on sight, one or both of us would end up on a slab at the morgue.

A creaking noise made Carl glimpse the area around the desk. He stood in place, his head cocked in that direction. A couple of feet behind him, I still had the element of surprise. I blew air out of my mouth with every quick stride. Carl sensed my presence too late. Right behind him, I pressed my .9mm against his back, just below his left shoulder blade.

“Put the gun down!” When he didn’t, I repeated my command.

Carl’s head turned rapidly from side to side, looking for a way out of his predicament. “Don’t even try it! Drop it or I’ll drop you!”

I heard the sirens of the patrol cars approaching the Salvatierra residence. So did Carl. He put his weapon on the floor close to my foot. I shoved it away. I stepped aside with my gun still pressed to his side.

“Get down on the floor! Keep your hands up!” I pushed against him until he went down. “Spread. Arms and legs. Do it!”

Carl spewed a stream of expletives between alcohol breaths, some aimed at his wife but most at me. I pushed harder on his back until he was lying face down on the floor, his arms stretched out above his head. I brought every ounce of my weight down on his upper back, pressing my knees against his shoulder blades. I holstered my gun and then reached behind me for my handcuffs. The police sirens blared closer.

I called out to Sylvia to turn on the ceiling light and let the cops in. She crawled out from under the desk and stood up slowly. She stared at Carl and me in shock.

“C’mon, Syl, turn on the light.”

She didn’t. I had Carl already handcuffed when I glanced at Sylvia again. The gun in her hand was pointed directly at her ex-husband’s head.

Carl gasped and struggled to turn over onto his back. I felt as if my soul had suddenly flown out of my mouth with my breath.

“Give me the gun, Syl. You don’t have to do this. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Don’t try to stop me, Gloria,” she said coldly. But her hand was shaking. “I’ll never be free of him, not as long as he’s alive!” She waved the gun at him. “*Cabrón, a ver. ¿Cómo la ves ahora, gran chingón?* How do you like it now, son of a bitch!”

The screeching of tires on the pavement signaled the untimely arrival of the cops.

Carl finally managed to roll over. His eyes moved as if in slow motion from me to Sylvia. His spit gurgled noisily in his throat. His neck muscles bulged as he tried to cough it up. In a raspy voice, he finally managed a plea for his life. “I’m so sorry. I just want you back. I won’t hurt you ever again. I swear! I love you!”

Sylvia’s eyes narrowed, and she threw her head back. She took her finger off the trigger but didn’t lower the gun. Perhaps she was just enjoying for once that powerful feeling of being in con-

trol and had no intention of shooting him. But I couldn't take a chance, not with the cops about to break down the front door.

"Look at me, Sylvia. Syl, Syl, give me the gun. Don't throw away your good life. Don't trade it for his. He's not worth it."

A crashing noise told me the cops were in the house. If the cops saw the gun in her hand, if she made the slightest move, with all the adrenaline pumping in them, they might just shoot first and ask who, what and why later.

"Damn! C'mon, Syl, the gun."

Tears streamed down her cheeks. I slowly reached out until my hand was resting on hers. She let me take the gun without a struggle. I laid it on the floor away from Carl and set my .9mm next to it.

I reached out to raise Sylvia's arms myself, but she pushed me aside. Suddenly, she kicked Carl's face with all her might. He groaned.

I pulled her away and shook her. "Listen to me and listen good, if you don't put your arms up, we're dead. Do you understand me? Dead!"

I let go of her and raised my arms. She mimicked me.

"Over here," I called out to the cops. "We're okay. We have the suspect handcuffed."

Flashlights. Footfalls. Guns pointing and ready, the cops rushed in. I turned my head to the side to avoid being totally blinded by the lights. Someone flipped the ceiling lamps on.

"Move away from the weapons!" an officer commanded.

Sylvia and I did as told. Carl was very quiet, still lying on his side.

The officer came closer. I saw his badge, Sgt. M. Maciel.

"Who are you?" a second cop asked me.

"Gloria Damasco, private investigator. My license is in my jacket's pocket. This is my client, Sylvia Salvatierra."

The cop holstered his weapon, reached into my pocket and took out my wallet. "She's who she says she is, Sarge."

"There's a restraining order against this man, Carl Salvatierra." With my chin, I pointed at the guns on the floor. "He came after his wife with the Colt .38. The S & W .9mm is mine. My permit is also in my wallet."

The sergeant asked Sylvia to show him the restraining order. Sylvia looked around as if trying to remember where she had put it.

“Get it. Quickly,” I prompted her.

She walked to her desk.

Sergeant Maciel slid his right hand into a latex glove and helped Carl up. He held Carl’s chin between his index finger and thumb and looked closely at his bleeding nose and lips and his bruised forehead.

“Who did the damage?” he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“That bitch! My wife! She did it! I want her arrested!”

“She got you good, eh? We’ll get it all straightened out soon.”

Sylvia pursed her lips and shook her head, as she handed the sergeant the restraining order.

Maciel looked at the document. “Take him in,” he told the other cop, who immediately asked for my key to the cuffs. After restraining Carl with flex cuffs, he handed me mine, then walked Carl out while reciting his rights.

From the door, a woman officer reported there was no one else in the house.

“Mrs. Salvatierra, I want you to tell me what happened before your husband showed up and what happened here tonight. Can you do that?”

Sylvia began to talk about the circumstances that forced her to divorce her husband. She was crying hard. Amid hiccups, sobs and sniffles, her speech was often unintelligible. Maciel asked the woman officer to stay with her.

I walked the sergeant through the scene, trying to be as accurate as my distressed memory allowed me.

Back in Sylvia’s office, the sergeant walked to the desk, leaned on it and proceeded to review his notes.

My body was as stressed as my mind, but I didn’t feel the pain yet. I was sure I would be aching when the adrenalin level in my blood stabilized. “I’m getting too old for this,” I said under my breath, thinking the sergeant couldn’t possibly hear me.

“Maybe it’s time to quit.” Maciel gave me an unexpectedly sympathetic look when my eyes met his.

“Not ready,” I said.

“Not enough punishment yet, eh?”
“No other passion to take its place.”
Maciel gave me a complicit grin.

Sylvia was in no condition to be by herself, so I called her brother and mother. She held tightly onto my arm until they showed up.

“We owe you. Big,” Sylvia’s brother said.

“I hope not,” I joked.

“Not to worry. We’re good. Check in the mail next week.” He led Sylvia out.

I drove to the Oakland Police Department to sign my deposition and pick up my gun and ID. During a break, I called my partner and husband Justin Escobar, who atypically insisted on coming to the station. I told him I’d parked in the Convention Center garage and would call and meet him outside the OPD.

Two hours later, I walked out of the Oakland Police Department exhausted. All my muscles ached but I was hungry.

Justin arrived on foot. He didn’t ask for a report. He just held me in his arms, then massaged my neck and shoulders. I breathed in the familiar odor of his skin. Comfort and then desire replaced the pain.

“I have a surprise for you. It isn’t far from here,” he said.

We walked to the Downtown Marriot Hotel a few blocks from the OPD and next to the Convention Center on Broadway. Justin took a room key out of his pocket as we entered the hotel.

When the door to Room 1045 opened, I saw a table draped with a white tablecloth, two covered metal platters, two crystal wine-glasses and a bottle of wine already uncorked. “How did you manage all this?”

“I can be very persuasive. Plus it pays to have a cousin working as a chef here. Hey, I wasn’t going to let my *chiles en nogada* masterpiece go to waste. And until we can get away for a honeymoon, this’ll have to do.”

My mouth was watering even before I took the lid off the platter. Justin was a great cook. But more than that, he was a lovely man and a great lover, though he probably would object to the “lovely” qualifier.

After we finished our meal, he called Dora, our partner at Brown Angel Security and Investigations, to let her know where we were. He laughed, handed me the phone and began to take off his clothes. I was unsuccessfully trying to keep my eyes off him. I barely paid attention to what Dora was saying.

“Who called?”

“Your sister-in-law—remember?”

I perked up. “Is something wrong?”

“No, everyone’s okay. First thing I asked. She just wants you to call her ASAP. She wants you to look into a matter for a friend of hers, and yours, too.”

“Did she say who?”

“A Lula Marie Ariz . . . tegui. It didn’t sound urgent so I told sis-in-law that you probably won’t return her call till tomorrow morning.”

“That’s good. *Gracias*.”

“*De nada*. And, hey, about tonight, I’ll give you the same advice I just gave Justin. Do the blackberries and French cream thing!”

I could still hear Dora’s wicked laughter when I hung up. But my attention had shifted to the flickering candlelight and the sound of water in the bathroom. I stripped, walked in and into the wet arms of love.

Justin and I checked out of the Marriot as the sun was barely visible above the Oakland hills. At the Convention Center garage, we got into our respective cars but took off in different directions. Instead of taking the Downtown Loop and I-580 home, I drove down Harrison, then around Lake Merritt. The rosy golden morning light of that Friday, June 17, 2005, was so beautiful. My mind drifted for awhile. I gradually focused on my vision of Carl Salvatierra’s inert body lying on the pavement in a pool of his own blood. Only problem was that Carl was alive, facing arraignment that morning, a trial or a deal with a district attorney, and perhaps some jail time down the line.

Had I been able to avert the tragedy forecast in my prophetic dreams this time? Prior to the night before, I had never been able

to save anyone whose life, in my visions, was fated to end. It bothered me no end to see what fatal blow destiny had in store for someone yet be unable to prevent it. But that was the nature of this dark gift, this extrasensory prescience in me—*la otra*.

Most people did not understand what clairvoyance was. My visions weren't a tidied bunch of related scenes laid out, like a classic story, in a linear narrative. They varied from images to smells and sounds that bombarded my dreams. My subconscious somehow sorted them out and stored them until, if ever, I worked on a related case.

Talking with some of my poet friends over the years, I realized that poets, without being aware of it, also went through a similar process as mine. All the incongruent elements of a poem were already present at various levels of consciousness or the subconscious. In the poet's case, the outcome was the poem. In mine, the results were not so easily discernible, not even for me.

Although at times I still doubted the legitimacy of my dark gift, I seldom allowed myself not to act on a vision. I pushed myself to do the necessary legwork to solve its cryptic warnings, regardless of its outcome. It was the only way to keep my twin psyches in check, my split spirit in harmony.

What would happen when I entered the darkness of another recurring vision plaguing my dreams more and more often? Two pairs of black eyes watching me in the night; a phantom horse and the horseman on him; the redolence of gardenia and rose and candle wax in the night air; the black curls and sweet face of a boy toddler searching for his mother; an animal's growl; a place of worship by the water's edge, steeped in the suffering of people; the voice of a woman saying, "Find this place and you'll find me." Would I survive being trapped in a body of water unable to free myself before my breath bubbled totally out of me?

I shuddered and tried to concentrate on the dawning of a new day, one more day out of a watery grave, I prayed.

At home, Justin was in the breakfast nook that was filled with the smell of oatmeal and cinnamon and the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. He skimmed through the newspaper and circled headings and subheadings of articles he wanted to give a serious reading later. He was passionate about criminal investigations, global

warming and related ecological issues, and about jazz and photography.

“Another mountain lion in Morgan Hill found resting on a tree branch in someone’s backyard. We invade and upset the ecology of their habitat, but the big cats are the ones who get killed. And then we put them in a compound to protect them. With the *Bushits* in power, we’ll soon have no clean habitat for humans either.”

“Yep. The Bush way of dying,” I said as I glanced at the headlines about the war in Iraq and the imprisoned so-called terrorists in Guantanamo Bay. I wasn’t feeling very hungry. I sipped my coffee, then went into the shower.

“Not much to do at the office. Why don’t you take the day off?” Justin piped in through the slit in the bathroom door before leaving.

“Maybe, after I finish my errands.”

“Later, then.”

I slid into a pair of tan Levis, a striped brown shirt and brown joggers. I looked up my brother Ernesto’s phone number. He and his family had relocated from Sutter Creek to Stockton, and I didn’t know their new phone number by heart yet. Until recently, my brother had worked for Lula Marie Blanco Ariztegui, managing her Oro Blanco winery in the California Shenandoah Valley.

My mother, my daughter and I had met Lula Marie a few times. She took a liking to us, and we reciprocated. She was well-read, and she and I shared a passion for literature. About five-feet-four, light-skinned with tiny freckles on her nose, she was always the perfect picture of petite elegance; her wavy strawberry-blonde hair, always smartly cut, complemented the hazel of her eyes. Witty, she laughed at her own foibles and contradictions as much as anyone else’s, but she never crossed the line between good fun and sarcasm or contempt for anyone. Yet underneath her gentle wit and nature lay a very capable business mind.

Lula Marie and her sister, whom I’d never met, also co-owned the Oro Viejo winery near the city of Sonora. My brother still did the Blanco sisters’ taxes and took care of other matters for them, but he no longer managed the wineries.

After a brief chat on the phone, my sister-in-law got down to her reason for calling me. “Something is going on with Lula Marie. She sounded strange, *muy preocupada*, when we spoke yesterday. I asked her about it, but she wouldn’t tell me what exactly is bothering her. She talked only about some missing jewelry, family heirlooms.”

“Why not call the local cops or sheriffs?”

“Exactly. *Lo mismo que le dije*, but she says that she called the cops. Apparently they haven’t done much about it. So I suggested that perhaps you could look into it for her. I know you’re very busy . . . and this is an unusual request.”

“Yes, it is, but not because you’re asking. I wouldn’t want you to be caught in the middle of misunderstandings . . . of a mess. In my business it’s better to deal directly with the client. I wouldn’t know in this case who my client is.”

“Lula Marie, *claro que sí*. As a matter of fact, she agreed and asked me to call you on her behalf. I wouldn’t ask you to share your findings with me.”

“I know. I’m just curious. Why do you think she didn’t just call me directly?”

“My question also, and I’m not sure what the answer is. Lula Marie is so friendly and open, but she has a problem asking for help. She’s done so much for us and never once asked for anything in return. To tell you the truth, Gloria, I’m really worried about her. We saw her last week. You know she drinks a couple of glasses of wine with dinner at most. But she was drinking a lot. Then she told me about this . . . jewelry theft. I have the feeling that there’s more. I know it’s a lot to ask, but could you at least go see her, talk to her?”

I sighed, knowing that I could not disregard my sister-in-law’s plea. She was family, and her concern for Lula Marie was genuine. “Tell you what. I’ll drive up to her place today. I can be there sometime between three and four. Would you mind letting her know since you already talked this over with her?”

“Happy to. *Gracias, cuñada*.”

I called Justin to tell him about the new developments, although I knew that he, as always, would want me to decide whether or not to take the case.

“Are you taking any hardware?” he promptly asked.

“Yes. 9,” I answered, giving as little information as possible.

“Good. Take good care, *amorcito*.”

Justin was a bit too cautious on the phone, whether mobile or land line. Although our behaving like Maxwell Smart and Agent 99 tickled my funny bone, I well understood his reason for being wary of someone listening in. Our van and office had been bugged before by a fed. But after the 9-11 terrorist attack and with the re-enactment of the Patriot Act, no person of color was safe from suspicion or surveillance.

At the Oakland airport on his way to Carson City, Nevada, for a client, Justin had already been discreetly questioned by a U.S. marshall posing as a fellow traveler, simply because of Justin’s dark skin, curly hair, black eyebrows and black mustache. An armed national guardsman had kept watch over him until he boarded the plane with the marshall in his wake. Still, anyone listening on the phone would easily guess what our coded chat was all about.

I turned my attention back to my list of errands and checked off those that required immediate attention. The trip to the California Shenandoah Valley, where Lula Marie Aríztegui lived, would take me a couple of hours with good traffic. I was looking at a return trip home very late that night. It made sense to come back to Oakland the next day instead. So I packed a bag with some toiletries, black and blue jeans, a nightshirt, plenty of cotton socks and undergarments and a pair each of black soft-soled sneakers and hiking boots.

I grabbed my outdoors light jacket, which had plenty of pockets, although I was sure I wasn’t going to need it. The summer solstice was only a few days away, and the temperature in the Shenandoah Wine Country was at least fifteen degrees above the mild sixty-eight in Oakland. I changed into a linen skirt, a sleeveless shirt and my wedge sandals.

Copies of Brown Angel Security and Investigations standard contract landed in my briefcase. Extra clips for the .9 mm, a pair of additional cells for the dry-wet flashlight, my compass and night and day vision binoculars went into the “hardware” bag.

All this attention to detail before a business trip always made me feel emotionally spent. Like traveling again with a baby, I

thought, during a minute's rest. I filled a thermos bottle with the remaining coffee in the pot. I called my mother and my daughter and left messages telling them I was on a case and not to call me on my cell phone unless it was urgent.

Preparations completed, I loaded everything into the Volvo's trunk. After taking care of postal and bank errands and an in-and-out trip to the courthouse, I stopped to have lunch at Merritt Restaurant and Bakery.

At ten past one, I was on I-80 East to Sacramento. Past the state capital, I took Highway 16 heading east toward Plymouth and the Sierra Nevada foothills. I had no idea what trouble awaited me at my destination, but I was determined to enjoy what I could of the trip to California's legendary Gold Country.