

**UNDER A  
DESERT SKY**

*This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.*

“Under a Desert Sky,” by Loren Lockner. ISBN 1-58939-890-4.

Library of Congress Control Number on file with publisher.

Published 2006 by Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., P.O. Box 9949, College Station, TX 77842, US. ©2006, Loren Lockner. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Loren Lockner.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

# **UNDER A DESERT SKY**

**by Loren Lockner**



# Prologue

---

The finely boned, petite girl plunged breathlessly down the expensively carpeted mauve hallway before halting abruptly outside the double glass doors leading to the hotel director's office suite. Her tightly braided black hair, hanging halfway down her back, flung wildly from side to side as she searched for an avenue of escape. Elena froze suddenly, her pretty dark head tilted to one side, listening intently. Weren't those barely discernable muffled sounds the quiet even pad of approaching footsteps? The tiny, blue-uniformed maid desperately rattled the resort director's glass door, but it was securely locked and she had no time to search for the correct key hanging among the large bunch attached to her slim waist.

The young woman, called Lena by her friends, spotted the men's washroom only a few yards farther down the

## **Loren Lockner**

immaculate hall, just past a large potted palm. The small Latino girl bolted to the heavy oak paneled door, pulling the heavy brass latch downward, praying to the Holy Virgin that she hadn't automatically relocked the door after cleaning the expensively designed facility only one hour ago. Fortunately, the paneled door swung open silently, thanks to well-oiled hinges, and Elena darted quickly inside, easing the heavy door shut behind her. A short entrance hall decorated with full-length ornate mirrors edged in fancy gold designs depicting intertwining wine leaves gave way to the square facilities of the immaculate restroom. Shiny clean urinals lined the huge, tiled washroom's left-hand side, while porcelain sinks, surrounded by lovely stone gray tile, hung below huge gold-framed mirrors.

Hugging the back wall stood four spotless stalls and the lovely Hispanic woman hurried toward them. Which one, she debated, her dark eyes flitting between each of the four cubicles. Resolvedly, Lena picked the third stall, locking the gray metal door behind her before jumping onto the toilet seat, enabling her telltale feet to be tucked safely out of view. The terrified girl held her breath and listened intently. At first it appeared reassuringly still, but then she discerned a faint padding sound coming from the wide hall beyond the men's room. The prolonged strain and ensuing panic threatened to tumble Lena off her awkward perch as she realized they were indeed deliberately quiet steps. Worse yet, they were headed unrelentingly her way.

## **Under a Desert Sky**

Striving for self-control, Elena willed herself to keep still, pressing both sweating palms firmly against the cold painted metal of the stall's sides. She leaned her damp forehead upon the closed door and listened intently. All the nagging doubts the young woman had bottled up inside over the past few weeks threatened to overwhelm her and Elena chided herself for her enormous stupidity. She'd made the fatal mistake of so many poor and uneducated women; the error of determining that a rich man could free her from the restrictive dead-end of poverty, sparing her the same fate that had befallen both her mother and grandmother. All those pretty things Lena had so desperately craved suddenly seemed grossly insignificant, and, if the truth could be told, might lead to her premature death.

The faint swish of the nearly silent outer door's methodical opening made her freeze anew. Her pursuer's steps were slow and precise. Breathlessly, she counted those measured paces, knowing it took less than five to turn the corner of the small hall that led into the large square men's room. The murderer, who only twenty-four hours previously had seemed the perfect lover, stopped abruptly, and Lena sensed him peering into the seemingly empty room. Unable to hold her breath any longer, Lena forced herself to breathe through her nose, hoping he couldn't hear the desperately controlled inhalations. Her pounding heart thudded so loudly inside her chest that the tiny woman, who had desired way too much, was positive the stalker could hear its traitorous sound. Finally, and unbelievably,

## **Loren Lockner**

Elena discerned the soft shuffle of departing movements, and later the nearly silent hiss of the heavy outer door closing. Still, unconvinced, she waited, not trusting the rapidly burgeoning hope that he'd really and truly gone.

After two full minutes Lena finally relaxed and slowly placed first one black utility shoe and then the other upon the gleaming tiles she herself had scrubbed less than ninety minutes ago. Slim legs shaking and aching from the strain of balancing herself on the uncomfortable toilet seat Elena cautiously slid the metal latch left and swung open the door, simultaneously relieved and amazed at her escape.

There was no time to scream or pray. Elena's black eyes widened in mute recognition of her killer. His own dark eyes remained as cold as the knife that suddenly sliced unmercifully at her neck, even though Lena stretched her hand out in a hopeless plea, uttering his once-welcomed name. Oddly enough there was no initial pain, only a sudden gush of warmth at her throat. She felt herself falling as a strange horrifying numbness overtook her unresponsive limbs. When the shapely uniformed girl hit the hard cold tiles, Elena was oddly aware of tiny crimson droplets splattering his expensive dark leather shoes. The floor became increasingly icy to the dying girl until at last a huge wave of darkness mercifully took her last breath away.

The unrepentant man reached for a paper towel and slowly and deliberately wiped his knife clean, folding the switchblade deftly before removing his thin latex gloves and shoving them and the knife into a large black trash bag.

## **Under a Desert Sky**

He shrugged off the long white lab coat he'd worn especially for the occasion and carefully bent and wiped the splattering of blood from his expensive Italian shoes with a clean sleeve of the coat and stepped away from the widening pool of blood, gazing for a moment at the small, still body that had given him so much physical pleasure.

The coat was soon carefully deposited in the garbage bag and the murderer stepped gingerly around the deepening red puddle to quietly move out of the men's room, pausing before the ornate mirror in the hall to adjust his silk blue tie and smooth back his damp hair. He cautiously turned off the light switch with the cuff of his still white shirtsleeve, which had miraculously avoided any encounter with blood. The killer glanced down at his gold Rolex and noted the time, which read just after one in the morning. A much-deserved rest was in order and this time the outer oaken door creaked shut with an awful finality.



# Chapter 1

---

When Nicole Lewis walked through the swinging doors of the Palm Springs Police Department on this Monday morning, right after the fourth of July weekend, she nearly collided with Otto Presman, the department photographer. Her coffee sloshed and the bag holding Dusty's favorite jelly donuts hit the floor with a muffled thud.

"Sorry," Otto threw over his thin shoulder as he raced by. Amy, the plump redheaded desk officer and dispatcher, leaned over the high counter and flashed a sympathetic grin.

"I wouldn't be getting too comfortable Nicole, since it looks like you'll be heading out again in just a minute."

"Really?" asked Nicole picking up the crumpled sack and grimacing at the sad shape of the squashed donuts inside. Hopefully Dusty wouldn't notice the condition of the besmeared sweet bread.

## Loren Lockner

"There's been a homicide at The Desert Sky Hotel and Golf Resort. Captain Hernandez is gathering the task force together as we speak," the busty redhead announced with relish.

Nicole frowned and hurried through the busy, over-worked department to her large gray metal desk. Laden with paperwork as usual, it appeared relatively neat considering the caseload she and Bud had taken on over the past few months. A recent photo of her brother's happy family smiled up at her, bright and cheerful in its Navajo print frame. Nicole smiled back, looking forward to seeing her little niece Carrie in a couple weeks while enjoying the damp coolness of San Diego. She squared her shoulders and scanned the busy squad room. The homicide and vice task force, of which she was a part, reminded her of a chaotic scene from one of her favorite reruns, *Hill Street Blues*, with its constant noise and harried personnel scurrying about the hectic department. Nicole placed the two hot coffees gingerly near her healthy philodendron and tossed the tan shoulder bag onto her gray desk chair while checking for Dusty Morant.

Dusty's cluttered desk was empty and Nicole frowned at the small pile of empty candy wrappers mixed among the piles of projects her colleague currently worked on. Although his computer hummed and an energetic Elvis screensaver gyrated over the dark monitor, Dusty was nowhere to be found. Nicole finally pinpointed Dusty and the rest of her small unit massed in Captain Hernandez's too cramped of-

## Under a Desert Sky

fice. She grabbed a pen and pad, and bringing the donuts and coffee with her, tapped on Jerry's door before entering.

"My donuts," chortled the portly Dusty, a wide grin spreading across his freckled face. Nicole smiled and tossed him the white paper sack, hoping once again that her overweight friend didn't mind squashed donuts, and placed the styrofoam cups on her superior's neat desk.

"Glad you could make it Nicole," stated her slim Captain without rancor, glancing at his watch. Jerry Hernandez always managed to look calm and under control, no matter what the situation, in his pressed white shirt and dark brown suit with its coordinated pale beige and gold silk tie. Jerry in turn assessed her slim form dressed professionally in an understated tan suit with a yellow chemise peeking underneath and nodded. Nicole's delicate oval face remained serious but her steady blue eyes indicated she already knew what was going down.

Captain Hernandez's special homicide and vice unit consisted of two uniformed officers; Nancy Williams, a trim, efficient blonde woman of twenty-nine, and her partner Lee Gianotti, a graying, gregarious career officer in his late fifties, who spent much of his free time teasing the younger members of the squad about their lack of experience compared to his thirty-odd years of service. The hefty Dusty's official title was Police Sergeant, but he spent the majority of his time ensconced in front of his computer squirreling out all the subtle information regarding people and events that everyone else seemed to miss. Occasionally, he com-

## **Loren Lockner**

plained to the captain that he didn't see enough action and Jerry would assign him to a few days with one of the two teams. Usually a couple days outside the station cured Dusty of his yearnings for several months. Nicole's partner, Bud, leaned against the wall as he sipped coffee and listened intently to his captain.

"I've just sent Otto out to take photos and help cordon off the area. The forensics team will meet us there. Hotel security has shut down the executive wing until we arrive." Jerry didn't notice Nicole's lifted eyebrows recollecting her sudden encounter with the department photographer, and continued. "Bud, you and Nicole lead on this. Nancy and Lee, hook up with the coroner and the hotel management at the scene. Dusty, I want all the information you can muster regarding the resort and its tenants and we'll meet back together at 9:30 a.m. and try to piece the details together. Mr. Zachary, the hotel's top executive, will meet us at the scene. I want quick action on this homicide since the Mayor has already called, wanting to know if this murder is somehow race related." The phone blared and as Captain Hernandez took the call Nicole's tall partner beckoned to her.

"Come on 'pard'," ordered Bud. A muscular Hispanic-looking man in his late forties; he had a penchant for rock and roll and motorcycle racing. She followed him out of the Captain's office and tweaked his thick ponytail.

"You understand what's happening?" he asked, poking at Dusty in front of him who turned and grinned, powdered sugar frosting his upper lip. Bud put his hands up as if to ask

## Under a Desert Sky

where his donut was and Dusty shrugged, pointing at Nicole accusingly who shook her short chestnut curls sadly.

"Sorry Bud, you know Maggie has strictly forbidden you to have any more of those greasy donuts and I don't want to get on her bad side. And, as for the case, it's a homicide at The Desert Sky. I got that tidbit from a *very* reliable source." Bud smiled at Nicole's reference to Amy, who invariably knew everything first, and gazed dejectedly at Dusty who placed the coffee and half-eaten donut on his desk out of Bud's reach.

"Who's the victim?" asked Nicole, hoping to distract him.

Bud checked his notes. "Female, Hispanic, late teens to early twenties and a housekeeper at the hotel. Not sure of much else except she was found in the executive men's room with her throat cut. She's probably an illegal, thus explaining our Mayor's justifiable concern after the Rodriguez incident."

The Rodriguez incident was a hate crime perpetrated by some teen-aged neo-Nazi types who had waylaid a young illegal citrus worker out in the desert and proceeded to hang him from a date palm. He and Nicole had broken the case less than two months ago and personally, Bud hoped this crime wasn't somehow related. The senseless act had affected both of them more than he cared to admit, so he watched Nicole's countenance carefully. Her pretty, calm face stared back at him, appearing far younger than her 31 years. A straight, slightly freckled nose rested below steady

## **Loren Lockner**

blue eyes and her shoulder-length thick tawny hair was styled in a practical, but attractive under-turned style, trying its best not to curl. Nicole carried herself straight-shouldered and proud, even though she measured a fairly tall 5'8" in her stocking feet. In deference to her job and height she wore low-heeled tan pumps that were also a great deal more comfortable than their dispatcher Amy's ankle-breakers. Soft-spoken and efficient, often head-strong and pugnacious, and totally, always unashamedly honest; Nicole still believed she and Bud could make a difference in the multi-cultural desert region she'd come to love so much. Bud adored her and those too-rigid shoulders, but he couldn't resist a light-hearted jab.

"A bit overdressed for the occasion," he added cheekily, hoping to get a rise from her, knowing full well she'd bought the smart tan suit only this weekend during the holiday sales.

"I thought I was going to be happily working all day on the Monroe investigation. The way things are going I'm going to have to take another holiday just to finish up all the paperwork!"