# An Arrogant Way of Killing

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## Episode 1: A journey to understand how a real-estate agent in the Philippines became the target of a criminal mastermind.

Jeremy Jimena had just started his shift when he found the body. At 6:30 on the morning of February 13, 2012, Jimena, a garbage collector in the Philippines, had set out with his driver on their regular route through Taytay, an industrial city an hour east of Manila. It had rained most of the night, and a light drizzle fell as they turned down Paseo Monte Carlo, a quiet road with no streetlights. Their first stop was a large vacant lot overrun by low shrubs, a green carpet of vines, and a scattering of banana trees.

The field wasn't an official pickup spot, but local residents often dumped garbage there anyway, and the collectors had informally added it to their route. There was a small pile of trash that morning spilling into the road: two large grain bags filled with waste and a bulging, rolled-up bedspread. Jimena hopped off the truck and approached the pile. When he leaned down and grasped the damp edge of the blanket, he saw a human foot.

Jimena dropped the blanket and ran, shouting to the driver, and the two of them left the truck and sprinted to the municipal headquarters, 200 yards away. There they told Ricardo Maniego, the local head of security, what they found. Maniego called the police and brought a long cord to rope off the area, like he'd learned in first-responder training.

Nearly four years later, in December 2015, I sat with Jimena outside the municipal headquarters. He is a small, wiry man with jet black hair and a wisp of a mustache. He looked off in the distance as he recounted the story, his eyes wide and mournful. He'd known right away that the foot was a woman's, he said, but couldn't remember much else. "I was shocked and disoriented," he said.

After he'd shown Maniego the body, Jimena had returned to his route in a daze. He never spoke to the police, he told me, and never learned who the woman was. But for years, he had dreamed of her every night. "She's screaming, asking me for help," he said. "Sometimes she is wrapped in a blanket. Sometimes it wakes me up."

I came to Taytay that afternoon because I believed that the woman Jimena had found was a small thread in a much larger story. Somewhere between a pile of American legal documents and a two-paragraph story about Jimena's discovery in a Philippine newspaper, I had noticed a hazy connection between the body and a man named Paul Le Roux, a South African who was reputed to be the most prolific international criminal of the 21st century.

The scant information I could find on Le Roux suggested his involvement in weapons shipments, gold smuggling, and online prescription-drug sales. But he was also a kind of phantom, reportedly captured by the United States Drug Enforcement Administration in 2012 and then disappeared to work as a valuable asset. My attempts to find out who Le Roux really was, and why the U.S. wanted so badly to keep him a secret, had led me from New York to Manila and then to this vacant lot, where I suspected that Le Roux's ghostly influence had once been manifest.

The investigative division of the Taytay police is housed in a neglected cinder-block building on the side of a hill in the town's historic district. I went there with a local Filipino-American journalist, Aurora Almendral, on the same day I met with Jimena. Almendral and I walked past a woman stapling Christmas decorations to the wall, through a pair of swinging doors, and into a cramped room with four officers' desks. An air conditioner rattled in the window, and three detectives pecked away on ancient-looking computers.

Almendral, who had been helping me since I'd arrived in the country two days earlier, tried to rouse one of the detectives and explain, in Tagalog, why we were there. (The Philippines' official languages are English and Filipino, which is a standardized form of Tagalog.) The chief of police had promised to show us where the body was found, but that morning he'd been called away by a kidnapping incident. The other cops, largely indifferent to our desires, had no idea when he would return. The original officer on the case, they said, had left the force and become a sailor.

While we waited, I stared at an oddly menacing police "Loyalty Pledge" that hung framed on the wall. "Remember that an ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness," it read.

> *If you must growl, condemn and*
> *eternally find fault*
> *Why! resign your position.*
> *And when you are outside,*
> *Damn to your hearts content.*
> *But as long as your a part of the institution,*
> *Do not condemn it.*
> *If you do, the first high wind that*
> *comes along will blow you away*
> *And probably you'll never know why.*

After some coaxing from Almendral, an officer named Abigail Del Monte agreed to pull the case file. She returned from a back room and proceeded to flip through it idly at her desk, as if trying to discern why I had flown 8,000 miles and then driven three hours in the Philippines' punishing traffic to visit a four-year-old crime scene.

Twenty minutes later,another detective, George Arada, wearing jeans and a denim jacket, showed up and suddenly the mood shifted. “You’re here for the Catherine Lee case?” he said. “OK, let’s go.” We offered our slightly beat-up rented van and driver for transportation, and Del Monte decided to join as well. We picked up Maniego, the local watchman, and drove over to the vacant lot.

Maniego showed us how he’d marked off the area back in February 2012. “The body was moved a little bit by the guy who picked up the blanket,” he said, officially. “I didn’t find out anything about who she was, because my job was just the immediate response.”

We walked over to an older woman selling drinks at a roadside stand next to the lot; she said she remembered that day, too. “I saw the body,” she said, “but it was covered up, so we couldn’t see who it was. Three streets down, somebody had been missing for a couple of days, so we thought it could be them.” Later, word came back from the cops that the body belonged to a real estate agent from another part of the country. When I asked what happened to the neighbor, the drink-stand woman said that the family of the missing person had been renters, and not long after they’d moved on.

I walked around taking photos, looking for signs that Jimena’s horrible discovery had somehow transformed this otherwise ordinary place. A group of young kids stopped to watch us, and I wondered if the incident had become part of their childhood lore. Whatever mark the body had left, I couldn’t see it. We piled back into the van, and on the drive back to the station I asked Arada and Del Monte whether they often encountered dead bodies in Taytay, a city of just under 300,000 people. “Sometimes over five in a month, but not over ten,” Arada said cheerfully. “It’s kind of a well-known place to dump bodies. Don’t tell the chief!” He laughed. The cases were difficult to solve, he said. The bodies were often mutilated or “broken up and stuffed in garbage bags.”

I asked if I could look at the case file, and to my surprise Del Monte handed it to me. Photos taken at the crime scene showed the body, unwrapped, lying facedown with its feet in the road, a crowd standing at the edge of the cordon.

The facts were spare: a team from the national police’s Scene of Crime Operations division had arrived at 7:50 that morning to examine the woman, who’d been found wearing a black jacket and jeans. An autopsy report listed the cause of “instantaneous death”: gunshot wounds under each eye.

The investigators had little trouble identifying the victim as Catherine Cristina Lee, a real estate broker from Las Piñas City, an hour south. She was found with her identification, as well as a Nokia smartphone, an Anne Klein wristwatch, a silver bracelet, and a pair of rings, gold and silver. She had not been robbed; there was no sign of sexual assault.

Deeper in the file, I discovered that I wasn't the first person to travel to the Philippines and ask questions about the body. On one page were handwritten notes from a February 2015 meeting with a special agent from the DEA's Los Angeles office, along with a copy of his business card. A follow-up report stated that two Americans had been arrested in connection with Lee's murder. One of the two, according to the notes, had confessed, claiming that a Filipino local had supplied the murder weapon and the vehicle used to dump the body. At the bottom of the page, someone had written: "Hunter ordered."

A few days after Catherine Lee's body was discovered, her husband contacted the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and requested that the agency look into her case. The ranks of local and national police in the Philippines are rife with corruption—"planting evidence is pretty much a regular occurrence," the country's former interior secretary Rafael Alunan told me—and the NBI has a better, though not perfect, reputation for integrity. The agency is required by law to take over cases at the request of victims' families, and often those requests stem from concerns that local officers have been paid off, or worse. In targeted killings, as the Lee case appeared to be, it's not unusual to hear whispers that cops themselves were in on the job. Contract murder is a thriving industry in the Philippines; having someone killed can cost as little as 5,000 pesos, or around $100. But police work pays poorly, and as much as 60 percent of the national police force lives below the poverty line. In 2013, Human Rights Watch documented police involvement in a death squad responsible for almost 300 killings over a six-year period in one city alone.

At NBI headquarters in Manila, the Death Investigation Division was housed in a drab, tiled-floor room with the insipid fluorescent lighting that marks bureaucracies worldwide. On the wall was a whiteboard outlining agents' assignments, organized by nickname: "Cardinal," "Undertaker," "Mechanic," "Hitman," "Braveheart," "Snakedoc," "KGB." Almendral and I went there one morning to see an agent named Rizaldy Rivera, a garrulous cop with a waist-length ponytail and a talent for sharpshooting. A natural showman, he urged us to check out his videos on YouTube. (Later I did; the clips—including one in which he cuts a credit card in half at 20 yards with a handgun, aiming over his shoulder using a compact mirror—are impressive.) Most people called him Zaldy, but his nickname around the NBI offices, he said, was Slayer, bestowed after he lucked into three shootouts early in his career, one of which left a bullet in his thigh.

It was Rivera who handled the Catherine Lee case after her husband had requested that the NBI take over the investigation. "I cannot provide the real names of the witnesses, or their addresses and photos, in order to protect them," Rivera told us as Almendral and I sat in a pair of plastic lawn chairs in his cubicle, across a desk completely devoid of papers or equipment. Otherwise, he said, "I can probably answer any question that you want me to answer."

He started at the beginning, talking above the sounds of an NBA basketball game from a television somewhere just out of sight. Over the course of an hour, Rivera laid out everything he knew about Catherine Lee's murder. He spoke in the matter-of-fact style of a cop who had seen his share of vicious crimes. But at times, he sounded genuinely mystified that someone like Lee could end up a target.

In early February 2012, Catherine Lee received an email from a Canadian man living in Manila named Bill Maxwell. Maxwell said that he and his colleague, Tony, were looking to invest in real estate. They had searched online for a broker and found Lee, a well-known agent whose territory ranged throughout the southern part of the Philippines' main island, Luzon. A few years prior, she had served as president of her local chapter of the Real Estate Brokers of the Philippines. "She won several trophies and awards," Rivera said. Lee, who was 43 but looked younger, with a pixie haircut and a welcoming smile, "had good friends and made a good living," he said.

Lee worked from her home, an attractive house in an upscale community in Las Piñas. She and her husband had purchased it not long before, with the help of a particularly large commission she'd earned. Much of her business came to her over the Internet—enough, at least, that she would be unlikely to think twice about scheduling a meeting with a client by email. "She never bothered to check the background of these people," Rivera said. "That was her undoing."

Bill and Tony didn't specify what type of property they were looking for, only that they wanted a place farther south than Las Piñas; it could be commercial or residential, a vacation property or a ready-to-build lot, as long as it was a solid investment. For two days, she drove them from property to property, but the men weren't ready to commit. For their third outing, on the morning of February 12, Lee met Bill and Tony on the outdoor patio of a Starbucks in Las Piñas, not far from her home. They were joined by three other real estate brokers she'd enlisted to help with the search.

The Canadians arrived in a silver Toyota Innova van. Bill was around six-foot-one, with a beard and a prominent belly. Tony was clean-shaven and wore a baseball cap. The group drove to a gated community called Ponderosa, a former flower farm located 40 miles south of Manila, where they examined a lush lot available for residential development. For lunch they stopped at a nearby spot popular with the locals called Mushroomburger, where they were joined by two property owners Lee knew at around 3:30 p.m.

The group then traveled to another farm about eight miles away, in Cavite. They arrived at 4:30 and wandered around for an hour. When it was time to leave, the brokers and the property owners departed in one car; Lee joined Bill and Tony in the Innova van. Sometime in the next ten hours, Lee was shot four times in the head at close range, rolled up in a blanket, and deposited in a pile of garbage.

Rivera pieced together Lee's movements from interviews with her husband and everyone she had encountered that day, as well as information found on her laptop and phone. From her friends and a security guard at the gated community, he gleaned enough of a description of the two men to generate a pair of sketches. But when it came to the actual identity of the assailants, he hit a wall. "It was very hard to check with the immigration bureau in the Philippines," Rivera said. "Because Bill Maxwell and Tony, the names were fictitious."

As for physical evidence, there was little to go on. The Toyota van had no plates, although the security guard was able to supply the number from the van's temporary registration sticker, given to newly purchased vehicles. When Rivera tried to trace it back to a Toyota dealer in Manila, nothing matched. He concluded that the car was probably rented and the number faked. Without the van, there would be no fingerprints, hair, or fibers.

One aspect of the crime stood out to Rivera: Lee had been shot under each eye, with what forensics had determined was a .22-caliber handgun. "In our experience," he said, "if you shoot a person dead, you don't normally use a low-caliber firearm." Hit men in the Philippines, he said, typically used "Armalite weapons, hand grenades, or a .40-caliber pistol. This is one of the few times that I discovered that the caliber was a .22 Magnum." To Rivera, the weapon said something about the crime, namely "that it might be a type of signature killing."He believed thatLee's death was not a crime of passion but a professional murder committed by someone looking to send a message. "That's an arrogant way of killing, putting two bullet holes beneath the eye," he said. "That's not how you normally execute a person."

During his investigation, Rivera came across the case of a female customs agent killed in a similar manner. That case stalled, however, when the victim's family declined to cooperate with the authorities.

After a few months, Rivera's case dried up, too. Other murders required his attention. But like Jimena, he was haunted by the brutality of Lee's killing. "I couldn't sleep soundly at night. I was thinking about that case," he said. "But the fact is, I cannot just proceed without solid evidence."

For three years the file languished, until April 2015, when Rivera got a call from the U.S. embassy. The DEA had some information regarding the Catherine Lee case, an embassy liaison said. Almost two years earlier—18 months after Lee was murdered—the DEA had arrested a former Army Ranger who had been working in private security overseas. That arrest had led them to Rivera.

In July 2013, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, covering Manhattan, filed a sealed indictment charging Joseph Hunter, a 48-year-old decorated former U.S. soldier, with conspiracy to murder a law-enforcement agent. More specifically,

Hunter stood accused of forming a team of international assassins to take out a snitch and a DEA agent on behalf of a Colombian drug cartel. On September 25, Hunter was captured in a raid on a safe house in Phuket, Thailand, and extradited to the U.S. Two members of his alleged assassination squad, for which he'd accepted résumés over the Internet, were picked up simultaneously in Liberia as they prepared to carry out the hit. The fourth and fifth were caught in Estonia on charges of arranging a drug deal. When I read the unsealed indictment a few days later, the whole thing sounded as if it were concocted by a dramatist with a flair for international intrigue.

In a way it was. The DEA's entire operation was a version of what's called a reverse sting—or, in more common terms, a setup. The "Colombian drug lords" were paid informants playing well-rehearsed roles. The snitch and the DEA agent didn't exist. The "safe house" had been wired for sound and video. For months the DEA had been stringing Hunter and his team along, arranging small gigs like guarding drug shipments in the Caribbean before springing their trap.

When the Department of Justice announced Hunter's arrest, a wave of media coverage followed—not least because Hunter's nickname in the field had been Rambo. After the headlines died down, the case embarked on the long slog toward trial. Federal cases often take years to wind their way to a jury, and very few ever make it there. Ninety-five percent end in a guilty plea, because even the best defense lawyers rarely have the wherewithal to face the power of a federal prosecution—particularly one with the kinds of resources that had been brought to bear on the Joseph Hunter case.

On December 21, , however, a reporter at *The New York Times* named Alan Feuer broke a strange new detail in the case. Hunter, he reported, had been working for a mysterious cartel boss named Paul Le Roux, who had once commanded a criminal empire of incredible power and scope. Le Roux had been arrested in 2012, Feuer revealed, and was now working for the U.S. government as a closely held confidential informant. By December 30, the *Daily Mail* had declared Le Roux "the most successful criminal mastermind you've never heard of."

This second wave of press coverage preceded a pivotal motion in the case, filed by Hunter's lawyer in Manhattan. It argued that the indictment against Hunter should be dismissed because the sting operation had been initiated by Hunter's former boss, referred to by the government only as a confidential witness, or CW-1. Hunter had participated in his alleged crimes, the motion asserted, because he believed that his boss would kill him if he did not. The U.S. government's use of a criminal as vicious as CW-1, the filing asserted, "shocks the conscience."

Anyone paying attention now knew that CW-1 was Paul Le Roux. His name, however, remained redacted in every court filing. Any case files that might exist detailing Le Roux's own arrest were sealed.

Then, four weeks later, Hunter suddenly pleaded guilty. There would be no defense that he had acted out of fear of Le Roux, no unmasking of his boss in court. Indeed, there would be no trial at all. Over the course of 2015, all of Hunter's codefendants pleaded guilty, along with five defendants in a related methamphetamine-smuggling case. Their files were sealed and shelved, the guilty parties dispatched to federal prison or awaiting their sentence.

I'd been following the case largely through court documents. In the spring of 2015, as the trail on Le Roux went cold, I decided to reread everything that had been filed, thousands of pages across more than a dozen cases. Despite the secrecy surrounding Le Roux, it turned out that a great deal of information had been lodged in those documents. There were, for instance, scattered transcripts of recordings taken of Hunter and his team—two former German soldiers, a Polish ex–military sniper, and a fellow former American serviceman—from microphones hidden in the safe house in Phuket. On those recordings, Hunter can be heard preparing his team members to carry out jobs for the supposed Colombians. Hunter refers to killings-for-hire as "bonus work." (In the transcripts that follow, the abbreviation "U/I" stands for "unintelligible.")

> Hunter: There's a uhm… there's a bonus for you [U/I] assassination so if you're interested in that, you can do it. If you're not interested and you don't want to do it, but there's big bonus money. I don't, I don't know [U/I] I say big, but it's like for [U/I] it's twenty five thousand and if it, if it's [U/I] depending on the threat level, the price goes up.
>
> Male 3: Good.
>
> Hunter: So you guys have a problem with that?
>
> Male 3: No.
>
> Hunter: So there's plenty of bonus for us. So you guys are in?
>
> Male 1: Uhm-hum.

Hunter refers to his boss as "Benny," or sometimes just "the boss," and says that he pays up to $25,000 "for the bonus rate." Hunter boasts about the kind of bonus work he's done in the past or paid others to do—crimes that, as I read through the filings, didn't appear to be part of his prosecution by U.S. authorities. "That one year, we killed nine people," he says at one point, adding: "We only hurt bad people. Right? Everybody that stole money, or conned the boss or whatever…. These are all wrong people so you don't have to worry about hurting innocent people."

Even from Hunter's casual bragging, I was astonished by the scope of the criminal activities his boss seemed to have enlisted him for.

> Hunter: When we did it, we did it all. We, we hand grenaded, threw it, hand grenaded the people's houses. We ah… not kidnapped a guy, but we conned him to come with us. We put him in the ocean, shot at him; he gave us the money back ah… assassinated people. Ah, what else we did? We smuggled gold. We smuggled weapons. Ah… We took weapons from Jakarta to the Philippines on the ship.
>
> One time I went to Sri, Sri Lanka to buy hand grenades. We have guys in Somalia buying weapons that are making an arm… they were. They was making a army in Somalia because we were gonna invade an island; Maldives just… You can't make it up.
>
> Male 3: Yeah.
>
> Hunter: Not even in a movie. This is real stuff. You see James Bond in the movie and you're saying, "Oh, I can do that." Well, you're gonna do it now. Everything you see, or you've thought about you're gonna do. It's, it's real and it's up to you. You know how the government says if you work through the government [U/I] we don't know you. Same thing with this job. No different right? So, that's how it is. Same thing you do in the military except you're doing for these guys you know? If you get caught in war, you get killed, right? Unless you surrender if they let you surrender or if you get you know, the same thing. This is… Everything's just like you're in war [U/I] now.

Here was an American ex-soldier, assisted by other Americans, acting as part of a rogue military-spy operation on behalf of an international criminal figure who, prior to December 2014, the public had never heard of. "El Chapo" Guzman, head of the Sinaloa cartel in Mexico, was by this time a famous figure worldwide. The notorious Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout, arrested in a sting in Thailand and convicted in 2011, had been the subject of magazine articles, and a Nicolas Cage movie was based loosely on his exploits. But judging from the brief flurry of stories about Le Roux and the fragmented contents of the case files, he seemed to have a criminal appetite more voracious than either of them. In one *Times* article, a DEA agent called Le Roux "Viktor Bout on steroids."

A surveillance photo of Le Roux, taken in an airport in Rio de Janeiro, surfaced from a Brazilian newspaper; it was purportedly the only image of him ever published. It's a grainy shot of a doughy white man in a royal blue polo, with what appears to be tousled bleach-blond or silver hair and a darker, trim beard. He wears a slightly amused expression and, with the photo blown up, almost looks as if he's winking at someone.

The thing that eventually led me to the Philippines was practically a footnote in the federal indictment against Hunter. Based on the recordings, prosecutors believed that Hunter "had in fact previously committed acts of violence for pay—including, among other things, arranging for the murders of two female real estate agents." An afterthought to the case

itself, the detail had lodged in my brain when I first read it back in 2013, and I kept returning to it. Why had international assassins for hire, working for a man with a worldwide criminal network taken the time to murder two real estate agents?

One of the murders, it turned out, was easy enough to understand. In the transcripts, Hunter described hiring a pair of hit men to kill a customs broker who'd failed to make good after accepting a bribe. "I guess that they had some kind of business with [the boss]," Hunter says in one transcript. "They get stuff through Customs right? They paid her and she didn't do it." After putting her under surveillance at home, unnamed assassins hired by Hunter discovered that the broker also worked as a real estate agent. They asked her to show them some rental properties, Hunter recounts, selected the best one at which to leave a body, and then asked to see it a second time. "They didn't even go inside. They shot her at the door. Left her there, but it was raining that day so … there was no people out," Hunter says. "They did it perfect no problems."

Hunter then goes on to describe the killing of the second real estate agent, one that, by his standards, didn't go as smoothly.

> Hunter: I had two guys, two other guys that wanted bonus work. They did the job, but they did it sloppy. I fired them. I sent them back home.

In mid-summer of 2015, three DEA agents met with Agent Rivera at the Death Investigations Division. "How can I help you guys?" Rivera told me he'd asked them. Rivera walked them through what he'd learned about the case, using a PowerPoint presentation to recap the investigation's key points. When he finished, Rivera asked them jokingly, "From one to ten, how would you rate my investigation?" Everyone laughed. He asked them why they were looking at the Lee incident. "For the U.S. government to be interested in the death of Catherine Lee, it means something," he said. "The Drug Enforcement Administration of the U.S. is a powerful organization. It handles global drug issues. So, in my mind, I can surmise that the death of Catherine Lee might have been connected to a drug cartel."

When I visited him later that year, Rivera pulled out an iPad clad in a red case and tapped open the presentation. "Probably I can show you this, but not all," he said, emphasizing that the witnesses would be in extreme danger if their identities were made public.

The DEA agents confirmed that Rivera's hunch had been right: Bill Maxwell and Tony weren't the men's real names. They were not Canadian, nor did they live in the Philippines. The DEA related to him their suspicion that they were two , 41-year-old Adam Samia and 47-year-old Carl David Stillwell, who lived in the small town of Roxboro, North Carolina.

The DEA agents had arrived in Manila with evidence from Hunter's email and the recordings taken at the safe house in Thailand. Hunter, it seemed, had used his network of defense-contractor contacts as a mercenary-recruitment service on behalf of his boss. Sometime in

2011, the U.S. was prepared to allege, he had pegged Samia and Stillwell as potential hires for bonus work. “Boss says you are on standby until the other guy is ready and you guys will come here together for Ninja stuff,” Hunter wrote Samia in the fall of that year, according to the prosecution’s filings. “We want you guys, but are just waiting until you and your partner can get on the same time table.”

By early December, Hunter reported back to the boss via email that the travel dates were set for January. “Adam will be leaving on the 8th and will be here on the 9th and the other guy will leave on the 10th and be here on the 11th. The WU”—Western Union, according to court filings—“of $1,625 goes to Adam Samia Roxboro, North Carolina USA.”

The plan was for the pair—whom Hunter referred to as “Sal” and “J.T.”—to fly to Manila, take taxis to a predetermined location, and get settled. The instructions were almost absurdly detailed, given the trip’s ultimate goal. “The taxi should cost like 220p with the tip,” Samia passed along to Stillwell on January 9. A few weeks later, Samia emailed Hunter an update, mixed with a chipper plea for additional cash:

> *Hey Bro we are going to need some OP funds ($3000.00) we both are just about broke we have spent all are money on finding a place to live, the car, phone load, food, taxi’s looking for a place to live, internet, stuff for here an more. I got them to throw a bed an ac so the boss does not have to buy them trying to save were I can!*

Hunter, meanwhile, was requesting the necessary weapons for the job from the boss: “1 MP5 SD,” a semiautomatic rifle, along with “1 Rifle Silenced with optics” and “1 .22 or 380 Pistol Silenced.” Hunter set his charges up with more money, along with the weapons and a laptop bag “modified to hold the tool for concealment.”

By February 2, the DEA believed, Samia and Stillwell had begun tracking their target, following her car and staking out her home from a hardware store across the street. “She goes home there,” Samia allegedly reported to Stillwell, “but [is] always out of the house.” At some point not long after, they finally made contact with her and started looking at properties. Hunter, as he would describe it later in taped conversations, had given them detailed instructions on how to proceed with the hit: Get her into a car, drive a quarter-mile down the road, shoot her with a silenced handgun, and wrap her in a blanket.

“What these guys did, they didn’t listen to me,” Hunter says in one recorded conversation. “They went to all these different houses with her, where there was people living in the houses. So every house they went to, people saw them together. They saw their faces. They saw the real estate agent. So they went… They did this for like three different days. So like one hundred people saw them.”

One hundred may have been an exaggeration, but Hunter was right that enough witnesses had seen two men with Lee that Rivera could generate sketches of them.

> Hunter: So I got them on the plane. They were Americans so I got them back to America and then ah, I, I never… I didn't give them anymore work because they put everyone in danger. I told them "You know how they would get caught? If the police and the Philippines was smart and not lazy, all they had to do was take the witnesses to the airport and look at each picture [U/I] of the foreigners and, and then that's "Oh, that's the guy!" Then they have his… they have his passport, his photo, right, but the police in the Philippines aren't smart and they don't… they're lazy. They don't do nothing. So those guys were lucky.… You got to use your brain in this job.

According to the DEA, on February 14 Samia and Stillwell emailed their expenses to Hunter. On the 27th, Samia let him know that "JT is rolling state side the 29th of FEB, I am heading out the 6th of March, I will drop [off] the car the 5th." They wired their payments home and caught flights back to the U.S.

Rivera introduced his DEA visitors to the witnesses he had interviewed about Lee's last days. The agents showed them photos of the two Americans, Rivera told me, "mingled with seven or eight different photos of seven or eight different individuals, to check if the witnesses recognized or could identify the picture." Five witnesses picked out the same men, Rivera recalled, saying, "'Yes, this is the guy who rode with us.' 'This is the guy who rode with Catherine Lee.' 'This is the other guy who was with Catherine Lee the day she was last seen alive.'" Rivera said that after those sessions, one of the DEA agents faxed a report back to the States. The next day, Samia and Stillwell were arrested in Roxboro.

Local media reports described the pair as well-liked local guys who ran a small gun-paraphernalia company together.They traveled to gun shows to market accessories of their own invention, including a bra that doubled as a holster, called a Bosom Buddy. Agents seized over 150 weapons from Stillwell's home. But aside from a few pictures on Samia's Facebook page showing him brandishing and firing a variety of weapons—the kind of gun love that wouldn't raise an eyebrow in most rural communities in America—they did not otherwise give off the impression of being international assassins. "Just knowing that these people have been in our community," a neighbor told reporters, "I never would have guessed it." The day after their arrest, the pair were transferred to New York to be prosecuted alongside Joseph Hunter. Both have pleaded not guilty to murder-for-hire, among other charges.

For his part, Rivera seemed pleased with the arrests, but he also expressed frustration about his own continuing investigation. The agents had told him about the Filipino who allegedly supplied the weapon and vehicle, but he still didn't have enough information to track them down. He pointed out to me that the NBI hadn't gotten any credit for the arrests of Samia and Stillwell, while at the same time suggesting that such credit was unnecessary. "We were not included. We were happy about that, it's no problem with us. We have nothing to gain with being famous."

It did seem odd to me, sitting in a cubicle at the Death Investigations Division, that the U.S. government would put this much effort into prosecuting two Americans for a murder of a Filipino woman outside Manila. Why not just extradite the pair to the Philippines, where the crime occurred, and hand them off to the NBI? Perhaps it was related to something more fundamental about the case that I still didn't understand: Why was Catherine Lee important enough to fly two men across the world and pay them $70,000 to kill her?

It was because of "the Mastermind," Rivera told me. "He is in U.S. custody." Rivera would only identify this Mastermind at first by alluding to his role as the head of a powerful crime syndicate. But he did tell me the motive behind the murder. Rivera said that the Mastermind had enlisted Catherine Lee to purchase vacation property in Batangas, a coastal region south of Manila. He had given her money, at least 50 million pesos, or almost $3 million. "But the deal never materialized," Rivera said, "because the person who Catherine Lee instructed to do the verification of the land, to arrange the deeds and everything, went off with the money."

That person, some kind of fixer Lee worked with, had also been killed, Rivera believed. "The body was never found," he said.

And then the Mastermind had ordered Lee's murder, too.

I asked him if he would tell me the name of the Mastermind, and at first he demurred. He did have a name, he said, but he didn't want to say it. "Maybe it's an alias."

"If I tell you the name that I think it is, will you tell me if that's the person?"

"I will confirm," he said.

"Paul Le Roux."

Rivera slammed his fist down on the table, then held my gaze for several seconds in silence. "Hey, they did not inform me that," he finally said with a smile that was hard to read. The DEA, he said, would "neither confirm nor deny it." Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. "This Paul Le Roux," he said, "is a very badass guy." He widened his eyes. "A bad guy," he said again. "That's it."

**Update:** On March 6, prosecutors released a bombshell motion in the case, claiming that Carl David Stillwell retained cell-phone photos dated the day of Catherine Lee's murder—photos that "appear to depict, among other things, a white van similar to the one in which (according to witness accounts) Lee was murdered and a wounded human head."