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A San Francisco gypsy family makes its money from befriending elderly people, coercing them into including them in their wills and then killing them. Ruairidh Nicoll investigates

POISON

Fay Faron rests her arms on the steering wheel and points at a small, ageing woman across the street. "That's Mama Lama coming down the steps now," she says and then smiles. "Shall we follow her?" The private eye, head of the San Francisco detective agency, Rat Dog Dick, knows this street well. She has spent many a morning here rifling through the occupants' rubbish bins.

Faron believes murderers live in this house on San Francisco's 14th Street. Her two suspects are Angela Tene and George Lama, Mama's son. Their alleged crime is to befriend old folk, coerce them into signing over their houses, and then kill them. The police are investigating the claims, and have exhumed the bodies of four people to test for poison.

Angela inherited this house, worth US\$250,000 (about NZ\$385,000), from Nicholas Bufford. By no means a rich man, Bufford had paid off the mortgage over a lifetime of hard work. At the age of 87, his life was petering out just as the beautiful, dark-haired gypsy girl of 24 walked in.

Angela could not have been nicer and Bufford, devoid of close family, enjoyed the company. Within a few weeks she had taken him to the local courthouse where she joined him on the title deeds of his house, registering as his granddaughter. Two months later they were back telling the clerk there had been a mistake, actually she was his wife. It was true, the couple had married a few days earlier. It would not last long. Two months later he was dead and Angela named as the sole beneficiary to his estate.

But that was in 1984. In the next 11 years she would begin to date George Lama, private investigators would start to follow her, Lama's brother would become a police informant, government investigators would be called in to look at police corruption on the case and another five people would die. Back then, she was only just beginning to place the building blocks of a career in old men.



Angela is part of the Tene (pronounced *Tini*) Bimbo family, an arm of the million and a half strong, and very secretive, American gypsy community. The Tene family are originally from Eastern Europe but came to America at the turn of the century, settling around Boston and New York. Normally, gypsy crimes are non-violent, preying off the vulnerable in society by using fraud, but the Tenes have a history of stepping over the line. In the late 1920s the name appeared attached to King Tene, a renowned killer for the gangster Al Capone.

John Nicholas, a gypsy cop, says that gypsies are notoriously mean to those who reveal their secrets: "There are only two other gypsy cops in the US today," he says. However, they do not choose to give up the gypsy secrets. "If they did, they would suffer the loneliness of being ostracised from their families – as I have." Much of the gypsies' success is due to their ability to operate as a family in their crimes. This is certainly true of Angela. Not only is her boyfriend involved, but so is her brother and her mother.

Her mother was no slouch at this game, and must have given Angela her taste for older men. Her mother married a man who, at 89, was twice her age. It took him four years to die and leave her everything. At around the same time, she befriended and cared for another 89-year-old who left her US\$937,000 (NZ\$1,441,538) when he died. His last months were not pleasant; at one point a neighbour found him lying in his own excrement and shouting for water.

But Angela was the new generation and having been so successful with Nicholas Bufford, she began to consolidate her occupation. By 1985, she had a partner, George Lama, whom she had met in a local delicatessen. They would become lovers with a working relationship. Shortly after they met, George began buying the heart drug Digitalis – fatal in high doses – from one of San Francisco's more relaxed pharmacies. The owner of the store, Edmond Lim, said Lama had told him the



PARTNERS



Fay Faron: 'We're a television-type of agency'

Left: Operation Foxglove was named after the plant from which the poisonous Digitalis comes

drug was for his father – a lie: "I'm surprised," said Lim. "He just looked like a nice friendly guy."

But they were already beginning to attract attention. Fay Faron had been called in to look at the case of a woman conned out of her house by a gypsy – it was Angela's brother. The walls of Faron's office are covered with pictures from *Cagney and Lacey*, *Charlie's Angels* and *Magnum PI*. The windows give way to a yard where trains rumble into San Francisco's Amtrack depot. I ask why there is no picture of Jack Nicholson's *Chinatown* on the wall. "We're a television-type of detective agency," says Faron. "We don't aspire to being as slick as the films." Faron is blonde – of course – but wears jeans instead of a 1940s suit.

Soon after beginning her investigation, Faron began to see the hallmarks of the Tenes: "I did the preliminary research and said to the client, 'This is the tip of the iceberg, this guy is definitely a gypsy, and his mum's doing the same thing'." She did not yet know about the sister.

With her case finished, Faron handed over what she had found out to the police, but people who had dealings with the Tene family kept contacting her: "I put myself in the position where people affected by this had a sympathetic ear. They kept coming to me and giving me additional information and I kept telling the police." As more information came in she was able to piece together the story; from the mother, to Angela's ill-fated marriage to Nicholas

Bufford and on into the future.

The first crucial bit of information came from the cop she was dealing with on the case. He told her that he was hearing other rumours of this family's crime spree. "He said 'We've got somebody calling in, an informant, who says his brother is involved with a gypsy and he has heard them laughing about what they are doing to these two old men, taking them food every day, poisoning them and how they are going to die'." The gypsy was Angela Tene and the informant's brother was George Lama.

Between 1989 and 1993, Angela and George picked out three more men, all in their 90s, whom they started visiting and taking food. The couple's name soon appeared on the deeds to the men's houses, their bank accounts, their wills and, in one case, a Mercedes. Digitalis, although none were prescribed the drug, was soon to be found in their blood. According to the informant, Angela was not only feeding these men, but also having sex with them – but only to make their hearts pound a little faster.

When the informant called me, the telephone line crackled. George's brother Jerry was speaking from a telephone box a few thousand miles away. He was angry at having to be on the run and furious that there were still people free on the streets who could and would, given the chance, kill him. He is hiding from not only his brother but a crooked cop whom he is responsible for exposing in connection with the case.

"My biggest mistake was not turning my brother in at the beginning," said Jerry. "I kept my mouth shut until I realised my brother was starting to use the same methods on my mother (Mama Lama). I strongly feel that my own brother poisoned my mother – my mother ended up in hospital with

a heart attack – and later we found out that without her knowledge he had put her own house into joint ownership with him." Why would he do such a thing? "It's called greed. Money, money, money."

Luck was beginning to run out for Angela and George. In 1991, one of the men they had courted told police that he thought his new friends were trying to kill him. Just before his death (from heart disease) he changed his will taking Angela out and putting in some distant relatives in Norway. Another of the victims, or "clients" as the couple referred to them, was found to have Digitalis in his bloodstream and was moved to a safe house. The third died in 1994 but his nephew gained control of his US\$1.2m (NZ\$1.8m) will. With the evidence already in the hands of the police, witnesses prepared to speak in court. With the exhumed bodies providing evidence, the case should have been wrapped up. But it is not. Angela and George still freely walk the pavements of San Francisco's Sunset neighbourhood.

After receiving information from Faron and Jerry Lama, the police set up 'Operation Foxglove', named after the plant that provides Digitalis. But while the suspects backed off realising the heat was on, the case has gone nowhere. Not only has the police department contaminated evidence, but it has had to launch investigations into some of the cops involved. Acting on information from Jerry Lama, one cop was accused of tipping off George and Angela. The cop denied the charges but resigned a week before his tribunal was due to start. "I fear him," said Jerry. "I just cost him his pension."

Police also allowed Jerry Lama to be present when two other witnesses involved in the case were interviewed, immediately ensuring none would testify. And in the most bizarre



IT'S PEAK HOUR.

twist of the whole story, a former sheriff's deputy turned private investigator walked into the detectives' office at police headquarters and either took or was given (accounts vary) the chronology of the case, a 40-page document detailing all the evidence and giving the names of the confidential informants. What did he do with this? He registered it with the Writer's Guild in Los Angeles in the hope he would get a movie deal.

The San Francisco Police Department refused to comment on the case, on which they have a media blackout. None of the Tene family would talk, and calls to their attorney's office were not returned. Both Faron and Jerry Lama now believe that corruption in the police force has let the murderers get away: "In my experience with the San Francisco Police Department they are either totally incompetent or they're on the take, and I can guarantee you they are not incompetent," said Lama.

Faron is disgusted at the inaction that means she still sees members of the Tene family on the streets she walks. She can't bear the fact that all these old men have been taken advantage of and the police do nothing. She sees the police as waiting for the victims to die and the cases to close by themselves. "I can't believe we live in a city where serial murder is just ignored," she said.

But it seems to be the case across America, where reports on the Tene killings have brought other instances into the open. Other cases have emerged as far away as New York where one family was denied access to their dying father – by a wife they never knew existed. Each family tries to keep the details of the tragedy secret, embarrassed at what they see as their own lack of interest until it was too late. The son of one victim said that he had been reading the paper and received a jolt: "I just saw the name Tene and I thought 'oh God'."

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Peak and before you know it, it's Peak Hour. **MISTY PEAK**

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