



SECRETS & LIES
David Meza was expecting a child with girlfriend Taylor Langston (top) and sleeping with Jake Merendino (right). "David found ways not to be seen in public with Jake," says a friend.



DEADLY LOVE TRIANGLE

A KILLER'S DOUBLE LIFE EXPOSED

Male escort David Meza seduced millionaire Jake Merendino then murdered him for cash to set up his other life—with his pregnant girlfriend
By **CHRISTINE PELISEK**

Jake Merendino seemed to be living the American dream. The 51-year-old Texas millionaire had just purchased a luxury condo in Rosarito, Mexico, and was planning to celebrate his good fortune with expensive champagne at a romantic restaurant alongside his 23-year-old boyfriend, David Meza. So when Mexican police found Merendino's body at the bottom of a ravine with more than 20 stab wounds and his throat cut just two days later, on May 2, 2015, his family was at a loss as to how a seemingly charmed life could have ended so brutally. "He was the kind of guy who would do anything for you," says his cousin Bud Merendino. "We couldn't think of anyone who would want to hurt him."

Police didn't have to look far to find out. Federal authorities arrested

Merendino's boyfriend Meza for the murder, alleging he killed his lover so he could inherit his \$3 million estate, including the new \$273,000 oceanfront condo. Their investigation further uncovered that Meza was living a shocking double life—and had a pregnant girlfriend at home. In February that girlfriend, Taylor Langston, pleaded guilty to a conspiracy charge for lying to authorities about Meza's whereabouts on the night of the murder; she is serving a 21-month sentence. Her plea helped a San Diego jury convict Meza in May of Merendino's murder. Though Meza maintains his innocence and his attorneys argued there was no physical evidence linking Meza to the crime, he is expected to be sentenced Oct. 23.



Those closest to Merendino say the Beaumont, Texas, millionaire's generosity and trusting nature made him an easy mark. Adopted as a child, he used the vast fortune he inherited from his late parents, both Exxon Mobil employees, to enjoy life and lavish gifts on his friends and family. He met Meza when he hired him as an escort through an online ad while vacationing in San Diego in June 2013—and was smitten by the "adventurous, young sports fan" who went by the porn name Mario Romo. "He bought him sports cars and motorcycles," says Merendino's pal Donna Armani Pineda. "David didn't want for anything."

It seems Meza wanted more. In the months before the murder Merendino made Meza the beneficiary of his condo and wrote up a will on hotel letterhead in December 2014 leaving him his vast fortune. "David didn't just want a new car," says Bud. "He wanted everything. And the only way to get it was to kill him."

At the same time Meza was romancing Merendino, he was also in a long-term romantic relationship with the 20-year-old Langston, who claimed

'HE THOUGHT HE COULD GET AWAY WITH THIS AND INHERIT EVERYTHING'

—DONNA ARMANI PINEDA, MERENDINO FRIEND

she believed her boyfriend was only working as Merendino's bookkeeper. According to investigators, Meza began complaining about his job in early 2015, telling Langston "it would all be over very soon." They also allege he had told friends that Merendino was dying of either cancer or heart problems. Though Merendino's friends were suspicious of the younger man's motives, they had no idea their friend was in any danger. "David was much younger and very handsome, so part of me worried that he was a gold digger," says Merendino's friend Bo Bendana. "But I never thought it would turn violent."

As police closed in on him, Meza eventually admitted to having lured Merendino to the murder site with a story of being stranded on the road and of robbing Merendino of his condo key and stereo equipment. But he insisted he left him alive when he returned to San Diego that night. Authorities countered that Meza's cell phone records placed him in Mexico until nearly 4 a.m., giving him ample time to carry out the savage killing.

For Merendino's friends and family, his senseless and brutal death is haunting—and they are left with questions of what his life could have been. "He was one of the most giving people you'd ever meet," says Sheila Stevens, Merendino's cousin. "To be murdered in the way he was murdered, I don't have an adjective for that. It was horrendous." Adds friend Chuck Hart: "I loved his love of life. He was so looking forward to the next chapter." ●

SCRIBBLED WILL
After Merendino's death, Meza presented a new will, handwritten on hotel letterhead, that was signed by Merendino in 2014, leaving Meza everything Merendino had.



(PAGE SHOT) U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE (WIL); GAVELTON PUBLIC RECORDS

