

REMEMBER MY FACE

A WILLIE CUESTA MYSTERY



JOHN LANTIGUA

“This intelligent, timely novel is sure to win Lantigua new fans.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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Summary: "Willie Cuesta, former Miami Police Department detective turned private investigator, is relaxing at a beachfront hotel when he receives a call from an immigration attorney about a case. He's reluctant to leave the view—of the sea and several bathing beauties—but Willie can't afford to turn down work. He agrees to travel to central Florida to search for Ernesto Pérez, an undocumented farmworker who has disappeared. His family is worried sick because, though he had been calling and sending money home regularly to Mexico for years, he hasn't been heard from in three months. In Cane County, Willie discovers a healthy agricultural industry, a large migrant population picking the crops and a heavily armed, anti-government militia. Willie quickly discovers Pérez isn't the only undocumented worker to go missing; several have disappeared, though their illegal status means no one has bothered to investigate. As he digs into the case, several suspicious characters surface: Narciso Cruz, who is responsible for smuggling in the undocumented workers willing to do the backbreaking labor for minimal pay; Quincy Vetter, a local landowner who has imposed his anti-government sentiment county wide; and Dusty Powell, a drug dealer who has contributed to several heroin overdoses in the area. And there's the very beautiful daughter of a farm owner who wants salsa lessons . . . is someone setting him up? When people he talked to start turning up dead, Willie knows he's onto something big—and dangerous. But is it related to the local drug business? Or the anti-government lunatics? When his investigation leads to a piece of property near the Everglades, Willie Cuesta finds himself playing cat-and-mouse with several armed men intent on putting an end to the case—and him!"—Provided by publisher.

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*For my family—children, spouses,
granddaughters—with love.*

CHAPTER ONE

Willie Cuesta lay on a chaise lounge on Miami Beach staring out to sea. It was late afternoon and many of the people near him had turned their lounges around so that they faced west, working overtime on their tans. They were sun worshippers, while Willie was more of a sea worshipper. His favorite time at the beach was twilight, when he could watch the fading light slowly turn the water from bright aquamarine to gorgeous shades of jade and then to a dusky steel blue. And he liked tracking the ships as they made for deep water too, wondering just where they were heading—the Bahamas, Barranquilla, Barcelona?

Willie reached into the small cooler next to him, pulled his open beer out of the ice, and took a taste. The chaise lounge belonged to a seaside hotel called the Caroline, where Willie sometimes did undercover event security. He wasn't on duty at the moment, so he could sip a beer. He wore a shirt imprinted with palm fronds over a bathing suit so that he blended in with the crowd. It was an arrangement that worked well for both him and the hotel's owner. Willie got a nice place to drink a beer during his off-hours and the hotel could count on a private investigator—a former Miami PD detective—to be on the scene, just in case trouble erupted among the beach-blanket set. So far, calm sailing.

He uncrossed his ankles and re-crossed them the other way, his bare feet dangling off the end of the lounge. He was just over six feet, slender, angular. His hair was jet black and swept back, his face long with prominent cheekbones, his eyes a light brown with flecks of green, often narrowed in a squint. Part of that was the sun, but it was also the world around him, which required careful scrutiny. His

old police colleague, Fanny Cohen, called him the Cuban Clint Eastwood. “Except he’s cold blooded and you’re hot blooded, and you’re not all that tough.”

He took another sip of beer, watched a pair of particularly lovely ladies sashay along the surf line, and then his cellphone sounded. On the screen appeared a local number he didn’t recognize. He assumed his business voice.

“Cuesta & Associates, Investigations and Security.” Truth be told, there were no associates, only Willie, although he did hire freelancers like Fanny from time to time. Would-be clients didn’t need to know that.

“Is this Willie Cuesta I’m speaking to?” a woman asked

“Yes, it is. How can I help you?”

“This is Abbie LeGrange. I’m an immigration attorney here in Miami. You were recommended to me by another attorney, Alice Arden. I believe you’ve worked with her. She said you might be able to assist me with a case.”

She spoke in the clipped tones of someone who charged by the hour. Willie charged by the day, but he answered in kind.

“Yes, I know Alice. I’ve handled a lot immigration work for her. And, yes, I might be available for an assignment, depending on what it is.”

“Can you come to my office at six p.m.? I’m at 2020 Biscayne Boulevard.”

Willie’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t wild about moving, having to abandon his seaside reverie, unless he smelled a paying assignment. He took a pull from his beer before replying.

“You’ll have to give me at least a hint what this entails. No sense wasting your time and mine if we’re not a match.”

Ms. LeGrange hesitated, but only briefly. “Let’s call it a missing-persons case. Missing persons plural.”

“Missing persons? Have you gone to the police?”

“My client can’t go to the police.”

Willie frowned. “Why not?”

“That is not something I want to discuss over the phone.”

Willie soaked that in. Working for people who couldn’t or wouldn’t go to the authorities could mean a lot of things. Maybe they were *malditos*—bad guys. On the other hand, they might just be peo-

ple who didn't want police poking around their personal business. Lots of folks fit that description.

"Just who is it that's missing? And what do you mean by plural?"

"As I said, I'll explain it all when we see each other. I think it will be worth your while. I can't afford to waste my time either, amigo. What do you charge?"

"Well, that depends on what I have to do."

"Fine. We'll talk that over when you get here too."

Willie crunched the numbers of the conversation. Truth was, he couldn't afford to turn down work, or even the possibility of work, not at the moment.

"So, I'll see you at six?" the attorney asked.

A pelican had landed about fifty feet offshore and was preening itself. The two lovely ladies he'd noticed earlier had taken seats in the sand nearby, also preening themselves. But duty called.

"I'll see you then. Text me the address, please."

"Will do."

He disconnected, drained his beer, tucked the empty bottle back in the cooler, got up, slipped into flip-flops and trudged across the sand in the direction of the hotel to change clothes. The hotel guests who had already retired to their rooms had draped their bright beach towels over the railings of their balconies. They hung like semaphores. Were they signaling calm seas or rough sailing? Willie would find out soon enough.