

THE LADY FROM BUENOS AIRES

A WILLIE CUESTA MYSTERY



JOHN LANTIGUA

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BY JOHN LANTIGUA



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of Michelle Urry,
the best friend a writer could ever have.

“First we will kill all the subversives; then we will kill their collaborators; then . . . their sympathizers, then . . . those who remain indifferent; and finally we will kill the timid.”

General Ibérico Saint Jean, governor of Buenos Aires, May 1976

CHAPTER ONE

On summer days I dress down—way down. This isn't just a question of comfort; in Miami it's a matter of survival. In July and August, people keel over at an alarming rate. I'm convinced that if you check with the medical examiner you'll find a pattern, at least among the guys. "Cause of death: suit and tie."

So on the morning in question I was in a long, faded tropical shirt, white linen pants, a pair of well-ventilated Mexican sandals, and amber-tinted shades.

It was early. In those summer months, if I have errands to do, I'm on the street before the heat hits. It doesn't matter what you wear, if you wait until noon, your brains will be braised in your skull.

But it isn't always easy to get up early given the hours I keep. In addition to running my own business—Willie Cuesta Investigations—I also serve as chief of security at a Latin nightclub owned by my brother Tommy. It's called Caliente—Hot—of all things. If I get out of there before four a.m., Wednesday through Saturday nights, it's rare. Consequently, emerging from bed before eleven a.m. is an act of heroism.

It so happens that this was a Monday. I was not only up by ten, but I had already watered the bougainvillea and gardenias out back. I was driving to the local Cuban supermarket to buy some breakfast and stock up for the week when my cell phone rang.

"Cuesta Investigations," I cooed into the phone. When you haven't had a client lately, you tend to coo.

"Is this Mr. Cuesta?" asked a woman speaking Spanish.

"Yes, it is."

"Mr. Cuesta, the detective?"

"Well, I was once a detective when I worked for the Miami Police Department. These days they prefer I call myself a private investigator."

"Yes, yes. That isn't really important." She was already demonstrating impatience, which isn't unusual for women in my life. "But can you help me find a person?"

"Possibly. Finding people is one of the principal services I offer. Who are you looking for?"

As basic as the question was, it was more than she wanted to divulge over the phone.

"I want to see you," she said. "I want to talk to you in person."

"Okay. Why don't you come to my office. I'm in Little Havana."

I'd have to go home and clean up a bit. I rent a second-floor walk-up on Southwest 8th Street, the main drag of Little Havana. My office occupies the front room and I live in the back, overlooking the gardenias and bougainvillea.

A sigh of dismay escaped her. "I'm only visiting Miami, Mr. Cuesta. I don't know the city."

"Visiting from Argentina, I assume."

"That's right, from Buenos Aires."

The accent was unmistakable. The Argentines speak a lilting Spanish, apparently influenced along the way by Italian opera. To me, an Argentine always sounds as if he or she is about to break into an aria.

"Well, I could meet you somewhere late in the afternoon, after it's cooled off."

She didn't like that idea. "No, no! I need to see you sooner than that, please. It is very important. Can we meet now?"

She was talking high noon in mid-June. But if I insisted on waiting, she would call another agency. I'd be left cooing at other prospective clients.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Miami Beach. We can meet at a restaurant called El Gaucho, on 71st Street. Do you know where it is?"

Unfortunately, I did. I said I'd be there.

"How will I recognize you?" she asked.

I described my outfit. "And I'll look hot," I said. "How about you?"

She hesitated, but for only a moment.

"I never look hot."

CHAPTER TWO

I took the Julia Tuttle Causeway across Biscayne Bay, which was always a dazzling ride. The surface of the water changed from day to day, depending on the cloud cover and the season. Right now it was an unblemished gorgeous green color, flat and smooth. It resembled an enormous table made of polished jade. Across the water, the white hotels and condo towers of Miami Beach floated a bit in the noonday sun, the way heat wavers above a sizzling tarmac.

Ten minutes later I turned onto 71st Street, the main artery in a part of town known these days as “Little Buenos Aires.” Even at an early hour you can tell you are entering the Argentine barrio because you catch the delicious scent of sizzling beef left over from the night before. The area is home to numerous steak joints, and the aroma hangs in the air for blocks around. The Argentines in Miami left behind the *pampas*, but not their propensity for preparing the best beef in the world. They had the Atkins diet down long before there was an Atkins.

I found a parking space, fed the meter, and drifted down the street toward the blue-and-white umbrellas that marked El Gaucho restaurant. Music spilled out onto the sidewalk. A brokenhearted Latin guy sang about how the lonely night spoke to his heart and how he hungered for the dawn of a new love.

I was walking by the umbrellas, wending my way toward the air-conditioned interior, when someone behind me said my name. I turned and saw a woman seated by herself under an umbrella.

“You *are* Mr. Cuesta, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Fiona Bonaventura. I’m the one who called you. You never asked my name.”

She was right. It was a minor instance of miscommunication, although it hadn’t been the only one. Over the phone she had told me that she never looked hot. Well, there wasn’t a bead of perspiration on

her, but she was still way above room temperature from my point of view.

In her mid-forties, I'd say, she was wide-shouldered and slim-hipped. She wore light weight gray slacks, a pink silk blouse, and a tasteful silver necklace that had the looks of a family heirloom. Her skin was as pale as cream, her wavy hair was jet black, the eyes were the deep blue of the southern Atlantic, and her full lips were painted a reddish, brown hue. She was an Argentine Ava Gardner. Elegant, cool . . . hot.

She gestured me toward the chair across from her.

I hesitated. "Why don't we go inside and get out of this steam bath?"

She batted her eyes once and didn't move. "I just came from Buenos Aires where it is quite cool this time of year, Mr. Cuesta. I like the heat." She pulled out a chair for me.

I don't get paid to argue with prospective clients, so I took my seat. Propped across from her in my tropical duds, I looked more like her cabana boy than a professional investigator.

The waitress walked over. The Argentines make a perfectly acceptable beer named Quilmes, but it was much too early. So after she asked for iced tea, I ordered a lemonade.

"How did you get my name?" I asked.

"I found you listed in the telephone directory. It said you speak Spanish and that you are an expert in international investigations."

And that was true. During my last years in the Miami Police Department I served in the intelligence unit. My job was pursuing foreign criminals whose careers had brought them to Miami. They included both common crooks and political operatives. I handled quite a few extraditions and visited a variety of Latin countries. Miami was one of a handful of American cities that had a need for its own FBI *cum* CIA, and I'd been part of the local unit.

"Yes, I've worked international cases. So who are we looking for?"

She went into her purse and pulled out a faded color photograph.

"This is my sister. Her name was Sonia."

The woman in the photo appeared to be about twenty, although the shot had been taken a long time ago. She had long, black, straight hair and the same dairy-fresh skin as the lady sitting before me. Where she was different was in the eyes. They were darker, deeper, and more somber. But she was still quite beautiful.

"You said her name *was* Sonia."

"That's right. She's dead."

"I'm sorry. So who is it you're looking for?"

“Her daughter.”

“Do you have a photograph of the daughter?”

She shook her head. “No, unfortunately I don’t.”

I frowned. “What’s her name?”

“I don’t know that either. You see, I don’t know for sure that my sister ever had a daughter. She may have had a son, and there’s a slight chance the child didn’t survive at all.”

I flicked my eyebrows, as if it had all come crystal clear. “I see. You want me to search for someone who may not exist and maybe never existed.”

“Possibly.”

I brightened. “A piece of cake. I handle this kind of case all the time. I’ve found Tinkerbell, the Tooth Fairy, Big Foot. It’s my specialty.”

The lady across from me wasn’t amused. Her beautiful eyes narrowed.

“I’m not crazy, Mr. Cuesta, and this isn’t a laughing matter.”

We didn’t speak again until the drinks arrived. I sipped mine and gave the waitress a chance to move away.

“I wasn’t laughing,” I said. “I’m just easily confused. Why don’t we try it again and start at the beginning.”

She put down her tea and tapped the photo with a long, red fingernail.

“My sister was twenty-one years old, a university student in Buenos Aires, when she joined the political movement against the military government in my country. That was more than twenty years ago. It was a dangerous thing to do, Mr. Cuesta. Military intelligence agents had a history of kidnapping the enemies of the government and sending them to secret detention centers and torture facilities.”

She glanced up and I nodded. “Yes, I remember what went on. It was in the newspapers here in Miami.”

“My sister was married, and her husband Mario was a leader of the movement at the school. She became pregnant and was eight months along, just as the kidnappings increased. My father had once served in the civilian government. In fact, he had been an assistant cabinet minister for foreign relations. Through old contacts he received word that the government wanted to grab Mario. The family decided that Mario and Sonia should go into hiding until the danger passed.”

I glanced at the photo of the dead girl. “I assume they didn’t hide well enough.”

She shook her head. "The place wasn't the problem. A small apartment was found for them. They were the only ones hiding there, and they moved to it in the middle of the night. Only the closest friends and family members knew where it was, but none of us went, afraid we might be followed. Mario and Sonia never left it. They had plenty of food and didn't need to move.

"But just three days after they took refuge, government agents showed up, kicked in the door, put hoods over their heads, and dragged them away. Neighbors told us later that the agents went right to the apartment. They seemed to know exactly where Mario and Sonia were."

She paused and I sipped.

"What happened then?"

"Mario was tortured and murdered within hours. His body, what was left of it, was found much later buried near a military installation outside the city."

"And your sister?"

"Sonia was taken to a separate secret detention center. A naval facility right in Buenos Aires. Another student who was captured and tortured at the same time saw her there that same day. He lives here now. He and others have told us that Sonia was put in a special section for pregnant prisoners. From the stress of being captured, she went into early labor and gave birth. She was eventually disappeared. You know what it is to be disappeared, don't you?"

"Yes. It means no body was ever found."

"Exactly. Many families never know for sure if their loved one is alive or dead. In the case of my sister, we know. A document was later found at the detention center, a list of prisoners who had been executed. They were injected with drugs, placed on airplanes, and dropped into the ocean. The sharks were the coconspirators of military intelligence and made sure that the bodies would never be discovered. My sister's name was on that list."

I winced. I'd heard before of that Argentine practice for prisoner disposal, but it still was difficult to absorb. There was a surgical neatness to it, with the sharks as the surgeons.

And despite all the years that had passed, I could see it remained difficult for Ms. Bonaventura to recount. She paused and I didn't press her. To watch a woman so obviously well-to-do and sophisticated tell such a terrible story caused a deep sense of dislocation. These sorts of things weren't supposed to happen to anyone, but especially not to peo-

ple who looked like her. Not in Argentina, not anywhere. I'm sure she felt the same way.

"What happened with the baby?" I asked finally.

"The same thing that happened to many other babies. My sister wasn't the only woman captured while she was pregnant. In fact, the government put a special policy in place. The women were allowed to give birth, and then they were eliminated. The other inmates at the prison would hear the newborn child cry but never see the mother again, or the child for that matter. The infants were given away to military families or other individuals with government connections."

"Is that what you think happened with your sister's child?"

She nodded. "Yes. Those persons raised the babies as their own. The children were never told about their true mothers or fathers. But in a number of cases, the real families, especially the grandmothers, have used DNA evidence to identify the children and claim them.

"We also know that some of those people who ended up with the babies escaped Argentina. They did it in order to avoid being accused and have the children taken away from them. They went to various countries. I believe that the couple who took my sister's child may be in Miami."

I kept nodding. I did that a lot when I wasn't quite sure what to say. I had heard the story of the Argentine babies. The "children of the disappeared" was what they were called, a strange phrase that made them sound like the offspring of ghosts—which in a sense they were. I'd never met anybody caught in the middle of that awful story. The thought left me momentarily speechless.

Fiona Bonaventura broke the silence.

"She was my only sibling, Mr. Cuesta. Her death broke the hearts of my parents. They both died shortly after. I have been searching for her child ever since."

She stared deep into my eyes, or rather, let me stare deep into hers.

"Who are these people who you think have the girl?"

"Their names are Manuel and Felicia Navarro."

"Do you know where they might be?"

"I know exactly where they are." She mentioned an address nearby on a street named Marseilles.

That surprised me. "How did you find them?"

"It wasn't I who found them. It was a friend of mine who was visiting here. She was walking down this very street in front of us, 71st Street, when she saw the child. She had known Sonia and was startled

by the resemblance. She was also aware of what had happened to my sister, knew of my search, and thought right away, 'That could be Sonia's child.' She ran home and phoned me in Buenos Aires. I found a flight and came right away."

"Have you seen the girl?"

She nodded once. "I have. Yesterday, I went to that same spot where my friend had seen her. I waited for almost four hours and I spotted her. She is apparently studying somewhere because I saw her get off a bus with books in her arms. That was at five-thirty.

"I followed her to a building near here, watched her enter an apartment, and I read the names on the mailbox. After a while she came out again to speak on her cell phone. From across the street, I watched her again."

"And?"

Her eyes narrowed as if she were peering into a great distance.

"It was as if I were seeing my sister again, Mr. Cuesta. Not just the way she looked, but the way she moved, her expressions, her mannerisms. Everything. It was like seeing Sonia. I'm sure it's her child."

Of course, if you'd come all the way from Argentina, maybe you saw what you wanted to see. But she did have a look on her face of someone who'd seen a ghost, a ghost whom she loved.

"Did you try to speak to her?"

She shook her head. "No. Of course I wanted to very badly, but it might alarm her. Also I didn't want to warn those people who have her."

"So what do you want me to do?"

She leaned forward. "I need you to find out who they really are and where they come from. I want you to prove that the child is not really theirs, that they took Sonia's baby after she was born at the detention center. I need you to get her back for me. I also want to know if they were involved in my sister's death, because if they were, I want them put in prison."

I raised my eyebrows. "That's all?"

"Yes."

She didn't catch the irony.

"That will probably take a few days to accomplish, and I can't promise anything."

I told her my daily rate, and her face went even more pallid. She bit her lovely lips, and her accent had even more aria in it than usual.

"I'm here with my husband, Mr. Cuesta. He didn't want to make this trip to Miami. He always opposed the political activities of Sonia

and Mario and believes that we will never find any child. I am refusing to go on with life, that's what he says to me. It is his money that I am using to pay you, and he is losing patience. Please do what you can in a few days."

She transformed those dark blue eyes into pools of woe. They were like patches of Biscayne Bay, and I was like a stiff with a chunk of concrete chained to my foot. I jumped in and sank right to the bottom.