

ON HALLOWED GROUND

A WILLIE CUESTA MYSTERY



“A clear, forceful writer.”
—*The New York Times Book Review*

JOHN LANTIGUA

Edgar Award nominee and author of *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

Praise for the work of John Lantigua

“[In *On Hallowed Ground*], Lantigua’s gripping fourth novel featuring Miami PI Willie Cuesta . . . The fast-paced action is well matched by concise prose, making this a treat for Elmore Leonard devotees.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“*The Lady from Buenos Aires* is an extraordinary story that compels interest throughout. The historical background adds credibility to the plot, which itself is relentless. It is an exciting, frequently scary ride that Lantigua takes the reader on as Cuesta pursues his investigation. Reading this excellent mystery is time well spent.”
—*Mysterious Reviews*

“Nonstop action and an exciting ending make this a good crime novel.”
—*Library Journal* on *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“Even though the story centers on a politically volatile period in recent history, Lantigua never forgets he’s writing a mystery, not a polemic.”
—*Booklist* on *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“A solid story that moves briskly. Lantigua doesn’t just tap into Argentine history, he brings a new awareness to it.”
—*South Florida Sun-Sentinel* on *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“A thrilling novel of betrayal, layered plots and horrific secrets.”
—*The Midwest Book Review* on *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“John’s Lantigua’s mystery thriller deals with people from Argentina, the land of the tango and, more relevantly, a ‘dirty war’ in the late 1960s and early 70s during which the military picked up civilians and made them ‘disappear’.”
—*PalmBeachPost.com* on *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“This is a thought-provoking book. Lantigua keeps most of his characters in check and then wraps up all loose ends quite neatly.”
—*MultiCultural Review* on *The Lady from Buenos Aires*

“A clear, forceful writer.”

—*The New York Times Book Review* on *Burn Season*

“There’s trouble in Paradise—Paradise, West Texas—a small town beset by the oil bust, drug smugglers, and the Reverend Sam Dash. . . . Paradise becomes a real place in Lantigua’s hands, and the anger, fear, and faith that Dash creates in his downtrodden flock become palpable. Packs quite a wallop.”

—*Booklist* on *Twister*

“Lantigua is a journalist who has covered Central America; his knowledge and awareness are put to good use here, in a narrative as timely as today’s headlines.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Heat Lightning*

“Playing off the nightmare world of the illegal in an unfamiliar urban jungle against Cruz’s personal problems adds to the already gripping story. Cruz, in his flawed humanness, is a perfect hero for the 1980s and a worthy series character.”

—*Library Journal* on *Heat Lightning*

“Lantigua knows the Caribbean and Miami the way Chandler knew Los Angeles.”

—Paul Levine, author of *Solomon vs. Lord* and *Kill All the Lawyers* on *The Ultimate Havana*

“Tough-minded, big hearted. A first-rate mystery.”

—Laurence Shames, author of *Virginia Heat* and *Mangrove Squeeze* on *Player’s Vendetta: A Little Havana Mystery*

“Lean, wonderfully well-written. Lantigua brings you right inside his treacherous world of Latin America.”

—T. Jefferson Parker, Edgar Award winner and author of *Storm Runners* on *Burn Season*

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This book is for Ella Wilson Lantigua
and Lela LaBelle Lantigua

PROLOGUE

The moment the goons pulled up in that green van and the back door swung open, I should have known.

There's nothing else exactly the color of duct tape. I saw a small silver patch of it peeking from beneath a white towel on the seat, but didn't think anything of it at the time. Maybe they had a ripped seat or a leaky hose. What did I know? Anyway, it didn't register.

At that moment, I was sitting in full daylight, with a clear view of heavy traffic speeding by on the Florida Turnpike. I was parked under a palm tree in a service plaza, not far from law-abiding members of the public who were pumping gas. You don't think anything can happen to you in that congested a setting. Not usually anyway. I figured the biggest danger I faced was a coconut plummeting out of the tree and webbing my windshield.

On top of that, I thought I knew my role in the drama and that they understood it too. I was the bag man. Nothing else. I was there to hand over the ransom and hightail it home for a drink. *Finito*.

But then everything came apart. The goons were working from a different script.

The man who climbed out of the car and came to my window wore a red baseball cap and a fiendishly grinning rubber mask.

"Grab the money and get into the front seat of our vehicle," he said.

I did as I was told. That's when I noticed the St. Christopher medal that hung from the rearview mirror. These were kidnapers protected by the saints. It was all too Colombian for words.

The first fiend closed the door behind me and climbed into the back.

"Hand me the backpacks," he said.

I handed them over the seat and heard him unzip them. Then I waited for him to say the magic words: “Okay, get back in your car and drive away. Don’t look back.”

And go knock back a rum, Willie.

But that didn’t happen. Next I heard the distinctive ripping sound of the duct tape. A split second later, two sets of hairy hands came over the seat. One clamped me around the shoulders, and the other grabbed me by the hair, snapped my head back, slapped the duct tape over my mouth and shoved the towel over my nose. It was soaked in a chemical that blistered my nostrils and scorched my windpipe.

I squirmed, fought and flailed, all to no avail.

The last thing I remember seeing was the St. Christopher medal I’d kicked swinging back and forth before my eyes like a hypnotist’s charm.

Then . . . bye-bye.

I was kidnapped.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a bit before ten a.m. on a clear, crisp morning in January when I roared over the last rise in the Rickenbacker Causeway, eased my foot off the gas and coasted onto cozy Key Biscayne.

The windows were down, and a delicious breeze blew out of the Antilles. Deep blue Biscayne Bay, calm and collected on each side of me, sparkled with pure winter sunlight. It was a gorgeous sight.

The Miami Seaquarium retreated in my rearview mirror. I left the Crandon Park marina behind as well, with its dense forest of masts. A lone sailboat headed out to sea—maybe to Martinique or St. Maartens or Maracaibo. Who knew? I wished them sweet sailing.

Moments later, I passed the bayside golf course. On the putting green closest to me, an electric-green iguana lay soaking up the sun. He looked like a miniature dragon but wasn't as fearsome as he appeared. When the next foursome arrived, he would go scrambling feverishly into the underbrush, ducking for cover. I called hello to him as well.

I felt good. I had a new client.

She had called early that a.m., before nine actually. My rattling cell phone, vibrating on the night table next to me, roused me from sleep.

“Is this Mr. Cuesta?”

I wasn't exactly sure who I was at that hour, but I answered in the affirmative.

“My name is Carmen Vickers de Estrada. I'm calling you from Key Biscayne. I want to know if you can take on a task for me.”

She was an elderly woman with extremely precise diction in Spanish.

“That depends what type of task you're speaking of, *señora*.”

“I’m talking about providing protection for someone who may be in grave danger.”

I reached over and eased an extra pillow under my head. It was much too early for grave danger, or any degree of peril, for that matter. But she was calling from Key Biscayne, and it was always good for the bottom line to have clients from the Key. It’s a posh part of town.

“Well, yes, I may be able to help you,” I said. “Let me ask you a few questions.”

She didn’t like that idea at all.

“No, let’s not do that. Let’s meet at the Ritz Carlton Hotel on the Key. Just off the lobby is a sitting room. I’ll see you there at ten o’clock.”

Despite the ungodly hour, the phone call was sounding better and better. The Ritz Carlton was the ritziest of hotels on the Key. I told her I’d be there and dragged my bones out of bed.

Now I was passing the Key Biscayne tennis stadium where I had once watched Agassi and Sampras slam it out under the lights. That night, cheers and groans had echoed over the open water. At that moment, the gates were locked and the place was closed, but I could hear echoes of those cheers as if they were for me.

As I said, the Key is one of the most affluent enclaves in all of Miami. The well-to-do residents have made their money all over the U.S. but also in Europe and, in particular, in the wealthier pockets of Latin America. I was driving into the good life.

On the Key, taxes are high, and the authorities use the proceeds to protect the lives and largesse of the locals. The community has a reputation for super-tight security.

They also spend big bucks on public beautification. Just a few weeks earlier, a late season hurricane of middling strength had come barreling out of the Caribbean giving Miami and the Key a good shaking.

In some neighborhoods like my neck of the woods, you still saw the ragged effects. But on the Key, there was almost no sign of the storm. The roads were perfectly paved and clear of refuse, the roadside vegetation was as thick and lush as a jungle and any damage to the high-rise luxury condos, the seaside mansions and the pristine shopping plazas had been repaired. Across from a day spa, a power

line sagged slightly, like a momentary variation on a stock market graph. But that was it.

I reached the Key Biscayne Ritz Carlton and turned in. The curving two-lane drive was bordered by a colonnade of royal palms about sixty feet tall. They had been through a lot of hurricanes, those palms. But like most old-line natives of Miami, they tended to bend with the wind rather than break. They had survived the blow beautifully, and the manicured lawns around them were spotless. The rich aren't like you and me. They weather the weather.

I pulled up to a guard shack and a gate blocking the way. I told the young Latin attendant, dressed in solid white, that I was there to rendezvous with a local resident, one Señora Carmen Vickers de Estrada.

The guard smiled at the name. "Ah, yes, Señora Estrada."

"Ah, yes," I said.

"She drove in just a while ago."

In Miami, you could always tell which Latin country was going through difficult times at any given moment. The security guards and parking valets tended to come out of the newest immigrant populations, the latest arrivals.

In the sixties and seventies, you threw your keys to a Cuban. In the eighties, it was the Nicaraguans who navigated the valet lots. The Argentines arrived in the late nineties. These days, many were Colombians, and from his accent, I knew this was one of them. A carhop from Cartagena.

The gate lifted. I proceeded around another curve and caught sight of the impressive Mediterranean palazzo some twenty stories high that was the Ritz Carlton. It was a particularly promising venue for a first meeting with a client.

My late father, a sometime jazz musician, used to play an old favorite jazz record of his, "Puttin' on the Ritz":

*Where Rockefellers walk with sticks,
or umbrellas in their mitts . . .*

Well today, they would do even better than a Rockefeller. They were getting Willie Cuesta.