

# THE ULTIMATE HAVANA

A WILLIE CUESTA MYSTERY



**JOHN LANTIGUA**

"A clear, forceful writer." —*The New York Times*

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“Lantigua gives us a fresh, clever cast in a taut and authentic tropical thriller.”

—Carl Hiaasen on *Burn Season*

“. . . another darkly gripping read.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Burn Season*

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JOHN LANTIGUA



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**For Elise O'Shaughnessy**

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Willie Cuesta, private investigator, sat slouched in a wicker chair, his bare feet propped on the windowsill in his Little Havana office. He stared at a small, green lizard that clung to the pane of glass hunting a mosquito in the corner of the casement. That window overlooked the tropical garden that Willie cultivated in his backyard. At the moment, the hibiscus were in bloom.

The gecko stood absolutely still. Every two minutes or so it darted forward an inch and then froze, so that it might take an hour to traverse that one pane of glass. Willie and the lizard had been roommates for several years and Willie had observed this methodical, painstaking and heartless hunting process many a time. It was as transparent as the window but very successful. The mosquito, Willie knew, was toast. The gecko always got his man.

Willie took a swig from a sweating bottle of Presidente beer and wished that he were as efficient as his roommate. The two of them had an unspoken agreement: Willie paid the rent, while the reptile was responsible for the mosquitos and the occasional housefly. The creature was keeping up his end, but Willie was falling behind. The phone wasn't ringing.

He watched as the lizard leapt forward and again went still. Overhead the ceiling fan turned. In the background, Oscar D'Leon, the salsa singer, crooned about taking a trip to Cali, a city in Colombia.

Willie sipped his beer. "Why don't we go to Colombia, lizard? Take a little vacation."

Given all the trouble with drug cartels and guerrillas, Willie could make a good living as a bodyguard in Colombia. With his

background as an officer in the Miami Police Intelligence Unit, he could demand top dollar.

Just then the phone rang, and Willie glanced at it expectantly, as if someone were calling from South America. He picked up.

“Willie?”

It was his brother, Tommy, who ran a Latin nightclub called Caliente on the border of Little Havana and Coral Gables. Willie served as chief of security for the business, which earned him a modest retainer.

“What’s up with you?” Tommy asked.

“The lizard and I are going to Colombia. We see opportunity there.”

A pause ensued.

“What the hell are you talking about? Don’t joke like that with Mama if she calls. You tell her you’re going to Colombia, she’ll kill you.”

Not far away, their mother ran a botánica where she sold a large selection of natural medicines and effigies of saints worshiped in the Catholic and Santería religions. Mama covered all her bases.

“Are you working on anything?” Tommy asked.

“Not at this very moment,” said Willie. And not at any previous moment in the past two weeks, although Willie didn’t mention that.

“Well, Cesar Mendoza called the club a while ago looking for you. He left a message on the machine. He says a woman friend of his may need your services. She has a serious problem. But he wants you to go see him first.”

Cesar Mendoza was a legendary figure in Cuban Miami. Blind since birth, he had developed his senses of taste and smell in the tobacco fields of Cuba and had become a world-renowned expert on fine cigars. Willie and Tommy’s father, a Cuban musician now deceased, had known Cesar in Cuba in the old days. Eventually they had both made it to Miami. Cesar, now almost seventy, ran his own cigar store, Tabacos El Ciego—The Blindman’s Cigar Shop—in the heart of Little Havana. Willie’s father had always purchased his cigars from Cesar. Later, when Tommy added a “cigar room” at his club, it was Cesar who acted as a consultant and supplied the stogies. He was an old friend of the family.

“Make sure you go see him,” Tommy said.

“I will. Don’t worry. Did he say what the serious problem was?”

“Not to me. Listen, you had another call too. From Amy. She said she’d try you later.”

Amy was Willie’s girlfriend—rather, his estranged girlfriend. He hadn’t heard from her in ten days, despite his repeated calls.

“I gotta go,” Tommy said. “I’ll see you later at the club and forget about going to Colombia.”

“We’ll see.”

Willie hung up, drained his Presidente, slipped on a pair of brown leather sandals, turned off the CD player and headed for the door.

“The trip is on hold,” he called to the lizard, who was still stalking his mosquito like a pointer dog.

## CHAPTER TWO

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Cesar's shop was located about fifteen blocks west of Willie's place, right on Calle Ocho, the main drag in Little Havana. Willie had grown up in the neighborhood and later worked there, first as a Miami Police patrol officer and then as a detective. On almost every block he had either assisted citizens in peril or busted someone. By now he knew everybody in the barrio—good, bad, and in-between.

At the moment he was passing the house of Rui Pelayo, whom Willie had once arrested for running a cockfighting ring in his garage. Rui was a big, round-bellied Cuban man who wore his chestnut hair in a pompadour, so that it resembled the red coxcombs of his fighting birds. He was also renowned for his expertise with a straight razor, which he kept as keen as the blades that he tied to the claws of his roosters. Rui used the razor to collect payments from welchers, which had led to his downfall and landed him in jail. Every time Willie heard a rooster crow, he recalled Rui.

On the next block was the house of Venecia Santamaria, a dowdy Cuban lady who he had never arrested, but who ran a rough brothel on the Miami River, an establishment specializing in the Caribbean maritime trade. No law enforcement type had ever closed Venecia's operation. In fact, at one point she had been obligated to remain open because she had become such a valuable informant against narcotics smugglers along the river.

"It's amazing what some stupid sailors tell hookers in the throes of love, amigo," Willie was told by one of the cops on the case.

A couple of blocks further west sat Cesar Mendoza's place. Cesar was as much a character as the other two, although his activities were all legal, at least as far as Willie knew.

Willie parked in front of the shop, which featured gold lettering across the front window, TABACOS EL CIEGO. Cesar had run his business there for three decades, surviving many rough years and then prospering when the cigar boom hit in the nineties.

Just catching sight of the shop transported Willie back to his childhood and the pungent aromas in which his father had always drifted. In fact, whenever he entered the place, Willie felt Papi materialize next to him, like a being composed of smoke.

A slender, elegant man, Willie's father had played horns in Cuban orchestras around Miami. When he didn't have a *trompeta* or sax in his mouth, he was chewing on a dark stogie. Whenever he needed to stock up, he would pile Tommy and Willie into the old, black Buick and drive to Cesar's.

The first thing that hit you as you entered was the aromatic quality of the place. Cesar always had a cigar burning for himself, usually a thick, black *robusto*. He smoked only the best, or at least the best made outside of Cuba. Those aromas had seeped into the walls, which were paneled in mahogany and lined with shelves of open cigar boxes.

The other atmospheric touch was music. Cesar played tapes of Cuban cigar songs. At the moment, Willie heard a tune in Spanish about a witch who broke spells using tobacco and honey.

*Ojas de tabaco  
mezclado con melao  
para curar los males  
de envidia y pecao*

The place never changed much. For the two boys, Willie and Tommy, cigars had symbolized the mysteries of manhood. The brand names were romantic—Montecristo, Hoyo de Monterrey, Flor de Monte Carlo, Partagas and his father's favorite, Romeo y Julieta. The boxes containing them were works of art, embossed in gold, with colorful illustrations on the lids of beautiful women, dashing and powerful men, coats of arms or exotic tropical settings. When his father finished a box, his sons would fight for it, eventually filling

it with baseball cards, marbles and other invaluable holdings. Those cigar boxes had been the treasure chests of Willie's youth.

And the person who had supplied them to the Cuesta family was Cesar Mendoza, part Latin pirate and part wise man. Willie's father once said that Cesar could not only identify any of the dozens of brands of cigars made in Cuba just by taking a few puffs but could also pinpoint exactly where on the island the leaf had been grown, sometimes down to the individual grower. It was impossible to fool him. Cesar was a *mago* according to Willie's father, a magician.

But for young Willie, Cesar had also been the object of scary fascination. Willie knew no other blind people and he could only wonder what it was like to live in perpetual darkness. As an adult, and now a former policeman who'd processed countless crime victims, Willie found Cesar's blindness worrisome. Here was a sightless man running a business by himself, in a city full of violent felons. Miraculously, no one had ever hurt him; there seemed to be an unwritten rule that you didn't mess with Cesar Mendoza. But Willie wished it were a written law and also wished that Cesar would get an assistant with eyes that worked.

The old man, stationed behind his sales counter, was just hanging up the phone and Willie called out his name. Cesar turned in his direction, his sightless eyes hidden behind small, round, opaque glasses. "*Eres tú, Willie?*"

"That's right, Cesar."

The blind man came around the counter, deftly avoiding the display case, and held out his hand. He had owned the shop so long, he navigated it expertly.

Willie shook hands with him. Cesar was a square-shouldered, solidly built man of medium height. If he hadn't been blind, he might have made a good middleweight. His complexion was olive, and Willie had no idea what color his eyes were. He had never seen them. Cesar wore a beard because, as he said, he didn't want to "feel" his ugly face every morning in the mirror. His hair was stylishly long, not because he planned it that way but because he never noticed when he needed a haircut. He wore an umber-colored *guayabera* with a small

leather cigar case stuck in the front pocket, big enough to fit about five smokes. In his left hand, he held a burning stogie.

Cesar was a graceful man, but by no means handsome. No one would have suspected on first meeting him that he had a wondrous reputation with women. Willie's father had long ago regaled his son with the blind man's extremely active romantic life, which Cesar himself had later confirmed, although only in general terms.

"There exist women for whom a blind man is irresistible," he told Willie. "It has to do with the sense of touch. I see them through my fingers. And there are women with lovely voices who may not be good-looking to other men, but who to me are classic beauties. I don't look for them, but they always find me."

Over the years, Cesar had alluded to affairs, even shared some reveries about his trysts, although he was always discreet, never mentioning names.

Now he pumped Willie's hand.

"¿Cómo estás, muchacho?" he asked in a voice left gravelly from so many cigars.

"I'm doing fine," Willie said. "And from the prices on your merchandise, I think you're doing the same." Willie was inspecting a display case full of carved, wooden humidors. Some of them carried prices that would have purchased a nice coffin.

Cesar turned to the display case and looked down as if he could actually see the merchandise. "It's all because of the big boom in stogies, Willie. It's been incredible these last few years. I keep the cigars affordable, but for some of the big spenders I keep articles like these. I give them a chance to spend their money. What can I say?"

But he didn't want to talk about that now. He took Willie by the elbow and led him to a long, black leather couch at the back of the store. It sat near a steel-doored storage freezer and was flanked by two tables, each equipped with a Havana Club ashtray, a cigar cutter and a lighter. A Persian rug lay before it. This was the tasting area and it was comfortable.



“Can I offer you a smoke, Willie? I have a very nice Macanudo here. A very sweet number.” Cesar couldn’t see colors, but he spoke in a colorful patois with a bit of an accent.

Willie accepted the gift, and Cesar clipped and lighted it for him.

“Well, now down to business,” Cesar said. “Or like the Americans say, let’s get down to the *neety greety*.”

“What’s going on, Cesar?”

The old man turned to him with those two perfectly round, black lenses.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, amigo,” he said, “but right now I’m afraid.”

## CHAPTER THREE

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Willie frowned, as if something disturbing were written on the old man's opaque lenses.

"Why are you afraid, Cesar? Tell me." In all the years they had known each other, Willie had never before heard the other man express fear.

"Oh, it isn't for me, Willie. I'm scared for a friend of mine, a very old friend named Victoria Espada."

The blind man pointed to a spot high on the wall, above the shelves of open cigar boxes. "Hanging up there somewhere is a poster of a young woman, a painting that once they put on a cigar box. That was her when she was young."

Willie saw it amid other cigar posters. The girl had pearl-white skin, raven-black hair, eyes to match, blood-red lips, bare shoulders and a full bosom above an off-the-shoulder white peasant blouse. She was pure, idealized Cuban exoticism.

"She's very beautiful," Willie said.

"So I've heard. That was Victoria when she was eighteen. In Cuba, when she walked down the street, I could hear men sigh. They fought over the right just to follow her around. Cigar makers competed to put her face on their cigar boxes. That's how beautiful she was. Her father was a well-known tobacco grower in the Pinar del Río region in Cuba, where they grow the best tobacco in the world. Before she was twenty, she married a man named Ernesto Espada, who came from a very old and respected clan of cigar makers."

Willie nodded. He remembered seeing the Espada brand name on cigar boxes in the old days. Cesar puffed and went on.

"Victoria was, in many ways, the crown princess of the Cuban cigar world, Willie. She led a life out of a fairy tale, full of nightclubs

and country club balls. She was pursued by young men who were heirs to the big sugar, rum and tobacco fortunes. She had it all.”

Willie drew on his Macanudo and exhaled luxuriously. “But the fairy tale didn’t last, I take it.”

Cesar shook his head. “No, it didn’t. The revolution came. Castro took over, and Victoria and her husband left Cuba. Like the other major cigar makers, Ernesto moved from place to place, both in Latin America and in Europe, trying to reestablish his operations. It was bad, Willie, an extremely difficult time, for all of us in the trade. Espada, he wasn’t as resourceful as some of the others. Things went very badly for him.”

The old man stopped and seemed to study the cigar in his hand.

“The fact is, Ernesto began to drink rum,” he continued. “He drank a lot, like a fish, and a few years later he committed suicide like a fish.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the family has a house here in Miami, on the bay, a house called *Bahía Azul*. One day he walked into the water and began to swim until he was too far out to make it back. He left his young wife, Victoria, with two infant children: twins, a boy and a girl. The Espada brand name was finished. One of the great cigar dynasties of all time was dead and Victoria was left to swim on her own.”

It was clear, by his tone, that Cesar disapproved of what the late Ernesto Espada had done.

“What happened then?”

The blind man shook his head. “Victoria lived off family money. When it was gone, she rented out their big house and now they live in a smaller residence on the property. She has never remarried and has sunk almost completely into isolation. She isn’t a well woman. A few amigos like me stay in touch, but that’s all.”

“And her children?”

“They both continue to live with her. It is a very close family. The closest I can think of, and you know how close Cuban families are. That’s why I called you, because now her son is missing. His name is Carlos. She can’t find him. Nobody can.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“About two weeks.”

Willie puffed his cigar and shrugged. “People take off all the time, Cesar. I saw it when I was on the police force. After a while they come back.”

Cesar shook his head brusquely. “This is different, Willie. The kid has been in real bad shape lately. For years he has wanted to revive the Espada cigar brand and to make it the finest cigar around, in honor of his father. But they don’t have the money to do that. Since the boom started, many of the old cigar families are doing very well. Even newcomers who don’t know the business make money, sometimes buckets of it. But Carlos’ family was left behind. He works as a salesman for a cigar company, but he isn’t very good at it. He doesn’t have that kind of personality. He’s serious, like his father was. Nathan Cooler, the manager at Great American Tobacco, keeps him on, but only out of loyalty to the family. Carlos knows this. He feels like a complete failure. He came to see me not long before he disappeared and told me he had to get money and get it now.”

“There’s nothing wrong with ambition, Cesar.”

“It depends what that ambition is. The kid sounded like he was ready to rob a bank, or something else illegal, Willie. He was desperate. Then he disappears without a word to anyone. It’s driving his mother to an early death, and I want to help her. I want you to find Carlos. Sometimes I’m psychic, and now I feel that something bad could happen to him.”

When a guy like Cesar told you he was psychic, you didn’t argue. He looked like one of the old, blind oracles from the Greek plays in high school English.

“I’ll go talk to them.”

“You should be very careful with the mother, Victoria. She’s a woman who has suffered a lot. Any mention that her son may be deeply disturbed or mixed up in something illegal will only drive her farther away from reality. It’s better to talk to the daughter when you have a chance.”

The phone rang and Cesar shuffled off to answer it. Willie stood up with him. As he waited, Willie saw a white stretch limousine pull up in front of the store. It looked like an ocean liner sailing into view. The chauffeur, a big guy dressed in a black coat with gold buttons, jumped out and opened the rear door. A man emerged—blond, thirties, wearing an aquamarine caftan with gold fringe, sandals and

amber-tinted sunglasses. Speaking of Greeks, he looked like an ancient god, wearing shades.

He waited by the car door and two women climbed out. Both wore extremely brief red shorts, even briefer bikini tops and white sandals. One was black, the other a tawny-skinned Latina; both very young, slim hipped and big breasted. They linked arms with the man in the caftan and cruised into the cigar shop. Cesar was just hanging up as the customer called to him.

“Mendoza, it’s your lucky day. It’s me, Richard.”

Cesar turned so that his right ear faced the man. “Is that you, Mr. Knox. I guess it is my lucky day.”

“Do you have my special stogies?”

“They came in yesterday.” Cesar padded off toward the refrigerated locker at the rear of the store. He came out seconds later pushing a dolly with two large cardboard boxes on it. Knox and his two bookends met him at the front desk. The girls inspected Willie up and down, decided he looked all right, but not worth as much as their boy in the caftan, and they held on that much tighter to their prize.

Knox ripped open one of the cardboard boxes and removed a wooden cigar box. On the lid was engraved, “Richard Knox—Private Collection.” He undid a brass hook, looked inside, picked one cigar, passed it under his nose, smiled and put it back. Then he produced a gold credit card from inside the caftan and slapped it down on the counter so Cesar could hear it. Willie was witnessing a phenomenon of the cigar boom. It was quite something.

“There you go, Mendoza. Ring me up.” The blind man felt for the card.

“That will be twenty boxes at two hundred fifty dollars each, Mr. Knox.”

“*Muy bueno*,” said Knox in bad Spanish with an equally bad accent. He leaned toward Willie and whispered conspiratorially. “I smoke real Cubans myself, but I give these away for business. A cigar box with your name on it isn’t a bad business card, now is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Willie agreed. The girls each rewarded Willie with a smile for the correct answer, the exact same smile.

Cesar processed the credit card, his fingers reading the lettering to get it right side up. Knox looked around through his amber shades.

“Have you decided to sell me this place, Mendoza?”

Cesar smiled at his own fingers. "Oh no, Mr. Knox. What would I do?"

"You'd run it for me." Knox turned again to Willie. "I've offered him a lot more than the place is worth. I also proposed a limited partnership and he said no. The only option I have is an unfriendly takeover. Organize his customers and make him sell. Then I'd start a chain across the country. 'Blind Mendoza's Stogies,' with his face on the door."

He laughed and Cesar was chuckling, although only halfheartedly. "You won't do that to me, Mr. Knox."

Cesar laid the credit card receipt on the counter, and Knox signed it with a flourish and retrieved his card. Then he waved to his chauffeur, who marched in, picked up the two large boxes and lugged them back to the luxury liner.

"Always a pleasure doing business with you, Mendoza."

*"Igualmente, Mr. Knox."*

Knox turned on a sandaled heel and headed for the limo. The girls turned with him and twitched out. Willie watched the limo sail off.

"Just who is Mr. Knox?"

"He's an attorney and a businessman. Communications. Internet. That kind of thing. And he's a big cigar connoisseur."

"A connoisseur of females too."

"I didn't see them, but they smelled good. Like coconut oil."

"They look like panatellas, Cesar, long and lean."

Cesar, always the ladies' man, smiled. "Lately, Mr. Knox has also gone into the cigar business. He became partners with Don Ricardo Tirado, who makes Tirado Cigars. Mr. Knox put money into the company. It's good for Don Ricardo. And Mr. Knox has still remained loyal to me."

Willie looked down at the credit card receipt for five thousand dollars. "Yes, I'd say he's very loyal."

Cesar agreed. "I told you, Willie. There are days it rains money in this store. By the way, you shouldn't take any payment from Victoria Espada for your services. I'll pay you."

They negotiated terms and Willie gave Cesar a day rate lower than usual. He also got the name and address of Victoria Espada.

"She's there now," Cesar said.

“Call her and tell her I’m coming.” Willie gazed up at the old poster of the woman. He wondered if she looked anything like that now. She was forty years older. He could only hope.

“We’ll see each other soon, Cesar.”

“So to speak, amigo. So to speak.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Willie caught the South Dixie Highway, cruised past Coconut Grove, then headed east toward the bay. It took him into a neighborhood of junglish vegetation and rambling houses on the edge of the land, houses that had survived decades of hurricanes and tropical blows of every degree.

He found the address right on the water. The property sat behind a low stucco wall that was almost totally taken over by kudzu vine. He saw two buildings: one a large, two-story mansion and the other a smaller house that looked like a guest cottage or servants' quarters. They were both finished in pink stucco, although the paint had been allowed to fade and chip.

Kudzu had also covered those walls and seemed to be holding the structures together. Around the houses were planted a few wind-blown fruit trees, limes particularly and some sea grapes, all of them twisted by onshore breezes. The grass looked like it hadn't been cut in a couple of months. All in all, the place was grand, but a bit abandoned, a kind of tropical haunted house.

Willie drove through an open gate and took the gravel driveway. He reached a young, blonde woman with a ponytail, wearing a black halter top and camouflage-colored shorts. She was washing a black jeep next to the big house. A German shepherd lay nearby.

"I'm looking for the Espada property," Willie said to her out the window.

"This is it."

"How about Mrs. Victoria Espada?"

"Oh, they don't live here in the big house. We rent this place." She pointed to the smaller house, which sat closer to the water. "They live over there."



Willie glanced that way. The structure was cut off from the rest of the property by an untamed ficus hedge. The house faced the water, with its back to the main residence. It had its own driveway and a large black Cadillac, at least fifteen years old, was parked there.

“Are they home?”

“The mother and daughter are almost always home, as far as I can tell,” the young woman said. “They don’t leave this property too often. It’s like they’re afraid if they leave, they won’t know how to get back.” She flicked her blonde eyebrows.

She was informative, if just a bit callous. Willie thanked her and took the gravel fork that led him to the smaller house. He parked next to the ficus hedge and walked to the door. The house was one story but had a rotting balustrade around the roof and what was either a deck or a kind of widow’s watch up top. Crimson curtains hung in the windows and were matched in color by an arbor of bougainvillea growing on the leeward side of the house.

Next to the arbor, facing the bay, stood an easel and on it a partially completed oil, a dramatic seascape made of raging waves. Flattened tubes of paint and several rags lay on a table next to it. It was a barely contained storm of a painting. Willie looked out over the bay. It wasn’t stormy at all, but if one of your family members had committed suicide out there then maybe you always saw the sea that way, in turmoil.

He used a brass knocker that was in the form of a lighthouse and discolored by verdigris. Moments later the door was opened by a small, dark young woman, obviously a cleaning lady—very likely Nicaraguan or Honduran. She wore a *Star Wars* T-shirt that depicted one of the Skywalkers wielding a laser sword. She herself held a feather duster with some of the same flourish. Willie smiled and asked the intergalactic Central American girl for the lady of the house. The girl didn’t smile back. From somewhere inside he heard a CD or tape, a piano rendition of the passionate old Cuban standard, “Siboney.”

The girl led him into the living room, where he was asked to wait. The room was painted a faded sea-blue color and crammed with tasteful old furniture, to the point where you could barely move. Crowded into that living room were a couple of couches covered in

wine-colored fabric, an antique sideboard, an old sea chest, two stuffed chairs, which were gold in color, various small tables and, near the French doors' that looked out on the bay, a baby grand piano. A very large Persian rug lay under it all, almost filling the room. It looked as if there had been a shipwreck nearby and the Espadas had been able to salvage a large amount of good stuff. But it was more likely that moving out of the big house into this smaller one they had kept as much furniture as they could.

The walls were as busy as the floor plan, with paintings and photographs everywhere, many of them of famous Cuban landmarks. The largest was a painting of Morro Castle, the colonial fortress overlooking Havana Bay. But the one that really drew Willie's attention was the original oil of the poster that Cesar had hanging in his shop. In this version, Victoria Espada's skin was even whiter, her hair blacker, the fire in her eyes more intense. Willie felt what he had experienced as a boy looking at those women pictured on the cigar boxes—that cigars were tied to all sorts of adventures and manly pleasures beyond description.

Beneath the painting, on the piano, sat family photographs. Some were in color and included graduation and birthday photos of a young man and a young woman who Willie assumed were Victoria Espada's twins, Carlos and his sister.

Other photos were in black and white and quite old. One was of a young man dressed in a dark zoot suit and a black fedora. He was handsome but pale and his smile was tentative. Willie wondered if it was the late Ernesto Espada, who had taken the long swim. Finally, there was a photo that depicted a large, rambling farmhouse, surrounded by tobacco fields, with a majestic tropical mountain rising behind it. Willie couldn't guess when it had been taken, but it was certainly Cuba and looked idyllic, something out of a dream. The room Willie stood in looked as if it might be a reproduction of a room inside that same farmhouse, a dream inside a dream, a memory inside a memory.

He was still studying the photos when two women walked into the room. For a moment Willie froze, looking from one to the other, then to the painting on the wall, and then back to them again. What he saw challenged his sense of reality.