

LINDA
BARNES



COYOTE

**Linda
Barnes
COYOTE**

A
Carlotta Carlyle
Mystery

**Delacorte
Press**

Published by
Delacorte Press
Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.
666 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10103

Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee) lyrics by Woody Guthrie, music by Martin Hoffman. TRO— © 1961 (renewed) 1963 Ludlow Music, Inc., New York, N.Y. Used by permission.

Love You Like a Man written by Chris Smither. Copyright © 1970 UNITED ARTISTS MUSIC CO. INC. Rights Assigned to EMI CATALOGUE PARTNERSHIP. All Rights Controlled and Administered by EMI U CATALOG INC. International Copyright Secured. Made in USA. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1990 by Linda Appelblatt Barnes

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law.

The trademark Delacorte Press® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Quality Printing and Binding by:
Berryville Graphics
P.O. Box 272
Berryville, VA 22611 U.S.A.

For Sam

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There comes a time in the development of a manuscript when the author needs to view it with eyes other than her own. I'd like to thank Richard Barnes, Susan Linn, James Morrow, and Karen Motylewski for providing that critical vision. I'd also like to thank Gladys Roldan for correcting my fledgling Spanish, and John Hummel for his contribution.

I am grateful to my agent, Gina Maccoby, for her unflagging support, and to my editor, Brian DeFiore, for his expert judgment.

Sometimes events in life as well as in literature warrant acknowledgment. I extend my deepest appreciation to Dr. Benjamin Sachs, Dr. Judith R. Wolfberg, Dr. Johanna Pallotta, and Alexandra Paul-Simon for helping to make the dedication of this book possible.

Woe to the sheep when the coyote is the judge.

—Folk saying

The crops are all in and the peaches are rott'ning,
The oranges piled in their creosote dumps,
You're flying 'em back to the Mexican border;
To pay all their money to wade back again.

Good-bye to my Juan, good-bye Rosalita,
Adiós, mis amigos, Jesús y María,
You won't have a name when you ride the big airplane,
All they will call you will be deportees.

—From "Deportee"
by Woody Guthrie

1

"A pickle may not remember getting pickled, but that doesn't make it a cucumber."

That's what my mom used to tell me when I was a kid. She reserved it for occasions on which I pleaded forgetfulness, for anything from "Forgot to make my bed" to "Forgot to do my homework." She'd recite it in Yiddish, and I always thought it was a direct quote from her mother, who had heard it in turn from her own mom, my great-grandmother, a formidable woman—a redhead like me—reputedly seven feet tall.

People exaggerate; she was probably no more than my own six-one.

I wanted to repeat the pickle saying to the woman in my office, the one who couldn't remember where she'd acquired my business card. But she wouldn't have understood the Yiddish. As a matter of fact, she wouldn't have understood the English either.

Her name was Manuela Estefan.

She sat in the client's chair by the side of my rolltop desk, her pinched face framed by dark hair. She wore a white blouse with a V-neck, long sleeves, and some kind of embroidery on the collar and cuffs. I'm no needlework expert, but the design didn't have the flattened look of

Linda Barnes

machine stitchery, and I got the idea it might be home-made. With the blouse she wore a dark cotton skirt and black pumps. Her hands were tightly clasped in her lap. She blinked as if she hadn't seen sunlight for days, and I wondered if I should yank the shade on the September sunset.

Her name was one of the few things we'd established. This was because she spoke little English and I spoke little Spanish.

"Car-low-ta," she said, giving the name its Spanish pronunciation, as if she thought I was Hispanic too. I didn't have the Spanish to explain that my Scots-Irish dad had named me for some movie star who made one B film in the late forties and then hit the skids. My ad in the Yellow Pages didn't even mention my first name—what with the still existing prejudice against female private investigators. And, like I said, I hadn't yet learned how Manuela had come by my card.

She'd had it clutched in her hand when she rang the doorbell. She'd shoved it quickly into a plastic handbag, but I'd seen it.

Usually my clients make appointments, but I have nothing against a little walk-in trade. If she didn't mind my shiny face, my jeans and T-shirt attire, and maybe a hint of eau de locker room, I was perfectly happy to take a crack at earning a fee.

I hoped my stomach wouldn't growl too fiercely.

If Manuela had timed her surprise visit any earlier, she'd have been out of luck. An hour ago I'd been in the gym at the Cambridge YWCA, playing possibly the best volleyball of my life. I was still awash in the afterglow, winded, sweaty, loose—and damn proud of an upset victory, another step toward the City League finals, a step nobody thought the Y-Birds could take.

COYOTE

We'd started off lackadaisical, losing two games before we found our rhythm. Fortunately, like baseball and life, volleyball has no time limit. You keep on playing the points, whacking the ball, until one side takes three out of five, and a game never ends until one team is up by two points.

At the beginning of the third game I could feel the momentum swing. The rusty gears who'd lost the first two games so awkwardly suddenly meshed as a team and won the next two.

There'd been points that left me tingling. Plays I longed to see again on some nonexistent instant replay screen. Had Kristy, our captain, really made that impossible dig? Had I managed to spike that shot? That hard?

The final game was like floating, like slow-motion choreography, like shared silent prayer. I knew what every other player would do before she did it. Winning that last point didn't mean any more to me than breathing.

I must have talked a mile a minute taking Paolina home. Sometimes a good game affects me like that. Paolina, my little sister—not my real little sister but my Big Sisters little sister—had been curiously silent, moody. I wondered if she resented the Y-Birds, disliked sharing me with the team. I'd have to spend more one-on-one days with my little sister.

I'd made it back to the house in good time, driving like the part-time cabbie I am but managing to avoid a traffic ticket. I'd slipped my key in the lock, patted T. C., my cat, and raced to the kitchen to pour a tall glass of orange juice in preparation for a pig-out dinner.

I was surveying the dismal contents of the fridge when the doorbell rang.

My stomach was getting impatient, not having

counted on playing several rounds of twenty questions in Spanglish.

Manuela's eyes flickered and she stood abruptly. I thought she was going to storm out and return with an interpreter. But she only marched as far as my late Aunt Bea's rocking chair and the *Globe* I'd abandoned on its cushion.

I'm better at guessing weight than age, but I figured her for anywhere from seventeen to thirty. Her hair was long enough to brush her shoulders, fine and straight, giving her a dark Alice-in-Wonderland look.

I hadn't read the paper yet. It was still rolled and bound with a rubber band. Some days I read it devotedly; some days it goes to the bottom of the parakeet's cage right after I read the comics.

Manuela grabbed it triumphantly, opened to the Metro section, and spread it on my desk, stabbing one of her bony fingers at an article below the fold. Her nails were short and unpolished, her hands chapped and lined. They made her nearer thirty than seventeen.

I grimaced because the first thing that caught my eye was the front-page picture of a wounded child, shot along with twenty-one others in a California schoolyard. The caption said the gunman had used an AK-47 assault rifle. Just walk into your local gun shop and tell the owner you want to shoot up a playground full of kids. Okay, mister, will that be Visa or MasterCard?

I shifted my gaze to Manuela's pointing finger. It tapped a small item, maybe three inches of print. "Body identified," it said.

I pressed my lips together while I read the brief report. I learned that a female corpse, found some three weeks ago in the Fens, had been tentatively identified by a certain document discovered on the body.

COYOTE

The Fens is a meandering Back Bay park surrounding a straggly excuse for a river—sometimes called the Fenway, sometimes the Muddy River. It's an urban oasis, replete with the usual muggings, but dead bodies don't turn up there every day. I was surprised this corpse had gotten so little play in the press.

I read on. The name of the victim was Manuela Estefan.

I stared at the woman in my office.

I reread the last sentence, the last paragraph.

I glanced up. My Manuela Estefan had returned to the chair next to the desk, and was nervously twisting a ring on one finger. It was a filigree silver band, maybe a wedding ring. I noticed that her fingernails were not just short, they were bitten, worried away to tiny half-moons with pads of bulging skin beneath.

"*¿Usted es parienta de ella?*" I asked, hoping I'd come close to saying "Are you related to this woman?"

"*No es su nombre.* No her name," Manuela said, shaking her head vigorously. "We—I think—"

"Did someone else—?"

"No. I think— *Mi tarjeta.* She is—no—she *has* my card. You get my card back for me."

"What card?" I asked. "An identification card? Was yours stolen? *¿Por un ladrón?*" The only reason I remembered the word for "thief" was that Paolina had just come back from Bogotá, where she'd lost her camera to a horde of gamins, abandoned children who'd become experienced *ladrones*. It was a cheap camera. I couldn't remember the word for "stolen." I wished I'd paid more attention to Paolina's attempts to improve my Spanish.

Manuela didn't answer, but I'm pretty sure she understood the question. Undaunted, I tried another one.

"Who is she?" I asked, pointing at the article but get-

ting no response. I tried in Spanish. "*¿Cómo se llama, la mujer?*"

"*No sé,*" Manuela mumbled. I don't know.

While she answered, she twisted her silver ring some more. She wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Manuela, we need to go to the police," I said slowly in careful, if possibly incorrect, Spanish. "I'll go with you and nothing bad will—"

"No," she said immediately. "Police" she understood.

"I'll go with you. I know who to see."

"No," she repeated firmly. "*Usted. Sola.*"

"Why? *¿Por qué?*"

"Tell them," she said slowly, feeling for the foreign words. "Tell *policía* she is no Manuela. My card, get it back for me."

"They'll ask me how I know she's not Manuela. *¿Comprende? ¿Cómo yo sé?*"

Manuela bit her lower lip and worried at her ring. "Tell them you know," she insisted.

"You must tell them."

"*No es posible.*"

"You told me."

"*La Migra,*" she whispered, glancing quickly around my combination living room and office, as if agents from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service were ready to spring from behind the worn velvet sofa.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath. "You're illegal."

"I no go back."

I knew too many immigrants, legal and illegal, to disagree with her. Instead I reread the brief news article and ran my tongue over dry lips. "It was brave—*valiente*—for you to come to me," I said very slowly. "Tell me about this other Manuela, the woman they think is you. Tell me her name. *Dígame su nombre.*"

COYOTE

I'm not sure if she understood what I said, but suddenly she started to cry, her breath coming in short, jerky sobs. She grabbed at her chest, and her skin got pale and blotchy. She made a motion in the air, like she was clutching a glass, drinking, and she said, "*Por favor, señorita.*"

I figured she needed a glass of water, if not something a hell of a lot stronger, so I sped out to the kitchen.

It must have taken me all of thirty seconds, finding a relatively clean glass, running the tap water till it was as clear as Cambridge water gets. I didn't even take time to see if Roz had stocked up on Scotch.

When I got back, she was gone.

I ran out the open front door in time to see a car careen around the corner, a beige clunker with a dented fender and a plate I couldn't make out.

I cursed, went back inside, and drank the stupid glass of water. I'd abandoned it on Aunt Bea's best mahogany end table, and the wet circle it left behind seemed like a reproach. I gave it a swipe with the edge of my shirt, went back into the kitchen, found a raggy old dish towel, and polished the offending mark out of existence.

Then I plunked down in my desk chair and reread the article in the *Globe*.

Massachusetts private detectives are forbidden from meddling in murder cases, unless the case is already sub judice and the PI is working for a lawyer, gathering evidence. But the article didn't mention cause of death. It could, I supposed, have been natural causes, exposure, a lightning bolt for all I knew.

I lifted the *Globe* off the desk and an envelope fell to the floor. Just a white envelope with five hundred-dollar bills inside.

The bills were crisp, folded once in the middle. I smoothed them and counted them again. Manuela hadn't

Linda Barnes

said anything about murder. All she wanted was to get her card, her *tarjeta*, back.

I considered her plastic handbag, her cheap shoes. I wondered what she'd done to earn those brand-new bills. I sat at my desk a long time, fiddling with the cash, watching the sun sink in a flash of crimson, followed by violet and a deepening blue. Then, prompted by my stomach, I went to the refrigerator and whipped together a couple of huge BLTs on toast. I washed them down with enough Pepsi to keep my kidneys afloat.

Also enough to keep me awake for the night.

I tried everything. A long hot soak in the tub, even a meaningless Red Sox game on my flickering black-and-white TV. Finally I hauled my guitar out from under the bed and set about practicing some tricky riffs, hoping some of the magic feeling of the volleyball game would return and inspire my fingers. But the picture of that silver ring on Manuela's work-roughened hands kept edging between me and the blues.

2

"You're absolutely right," Mooney said the next morning at nine through a mouthful of doughnut.

He wasn't talking to me. Lieutenant Joseph Mooney of the Boston Police Department rarely says things like "absolutely right" when he's talking to me. He was addressing the phone, and from the look on his face he'd been murmuring polite little nothings for some time, doing a lot more listening than talking, and not particularly liking what he heard.

He yawned, carefully turning away and covering the receiver with one hand so the listener on the other end couldn't catch the noise. He had a dab of powdered sugar on his chin.

As soon as I'd entered his cubbyhole at Southie's old D Street station, he'd nodded me into a chair and winked. Not really winked. He has this trick where he lowers the eyelid of his left eye. No squint. No wrinkles. It looks like half his face has fallen asleep.

I tapped my chin on the spot corresponding to his powdered sugar. He picked up on it immediately, rubbing his jaw. Mooney and I communicate well, part gesture, part mind reading. It helped a lot when I worked for him.

Mooney's got a good face, sleepy or not. Maybe a little too round, on the big-nosed side, definitely Irish. He used

to be my boss when I was a cop. He's still my friend, although it's a complicated relationship. I'm getting so I hate the word *relationship*. There are romantic overtones and undertones, mostly coming from his side. On my side there's a lot of warmth. Not heat. Warmth.

Mooney says I don't know how to love a guy who attracts me as a friend. You know, a guy I enjoy, a guy I like to talk to. And considering my history with men, he may have a workable theory. Who knows? A relationship with Mooney might be okay, in a warm kind of way. But the wild and crazy chemistry's not there. Mooney, who's eight years older than me, nudging forty, says someday I'll grow out of the wild-and-crazy-chemistry stage.

I say, who wants to?

Amid the jumble of printed forms, plastic coffee cups, crumpled papers, pens, and pencils on Mooney's desk sat a newspaper. The *Herald*. I picked it up, although it's not my paper of choice, wondering how they'd handled the Manuela Estefan story.

I found it on page seventeen, well after the important stuff like Norma Nathan's gossip column.

While the *Herald* didn't have anything the *Globe* hadn't run, the tone of the piece was of the breathless, breaking-news variety. There were hints at "sexual mutilation" and a coy reference to a key discovery. The name Manuela Estefan was there.

Sexual mutilation would make it murder.

I wondered if Manuela Estefan was a common name, like Jane Smith.

Mooney grunted at the phone, sandwiching it between chin and shoulder while his hands frisked the desk and finally came up with a full cup of coffee. He must have been hiding it in a drawer. He raised his eyebrows at me, and I helped him wrestle the plastic cover off the cup.