

The discovery of the body: This excerpt begins on page 42 of the book. We are in the mind of Detective Roberto Leary of the Buenos Aires Police, who is arriving at the scene of a stabbing on the most elegant shopping street in the city

Cast iron street lamps spilled pools of light at intervals along the empty walkway in front of shuttered shop windows. The rain had left puddles that glistened in his headlights. The patrol car he was looking for was stopped on the narrow sidewalk halfway between Corrientes and Sarmiento. Its high beams shone into the doorway of a dress shop. Leary scrunched his whitewall tires against the curb as he pulled up behind the other car.

As soon as he got out, he saw the victim. Oh, shit. The body lying in the entryway was a girl's, small and slender. Very young. Bad enough to be on permanent nightshift when it meant investigating carved-up *compadritos* killed in their petty gangster knife fights. But a dead teenage girl? Younger than his youngest sister? Shit. Shit.

"*Hola, muchachos,*" he called without enthusiasm to the uniformed guys standing over the body. They parted, revealing the girl's head. Disbelief stopped him in his tracks. It could not be. The dead person was the actress Evita Duarte? The mistress of Juan Perón, the just deposed Vice President of Argentina? And the Captain had sent him to investigate? Velasco did not come himself? A murder like this should bring out the Minister of Justice, if there was one after the government housecleaning of the past twenty-four hours. Maybe Velasco himself had already been thrown out—creature of Perón that he was.

"I don't think it's her," Ireneo Estrada said. He was a short, muscular guy, who never kept his shirt color buttoned once he left the station. Of all the nephews of minor-league politicians on the force, he at least had a brain in his head.

Leary pushed back his fedora and leaned over the body. "She could have fooled me." On closer inspection, the nose, the mouth did not look exactly like the face on the covers of his mother's soap opera fan magazines, but everything else--- "Was she on her back like this when you found her?"

"No. I turned her over to make sure she was dead." This was from Estrada's chubby partner—Rodolfo Franco, whose mother's second husband had the contract to pick up garbage in the Palermo district. The well-to-do refuse collector had dumped this particular piece of low-wattage trash on the Buenos Aires Municipal Police Force. Anyone with two centavos worth of brain cells to rub together would have concluded from the size of the pool of blood surrounding the body that there was not enough left in the poor girl to keep a mosquito alive.

Her dress, where it was not soaked with blood, was pale green and looked expensive. A small cheap purse on a metal chain handle hung from her forearm. The real Evita Duarte, he was sure, would not have been caught dead in these tacky stiletto-heeled patent leather shoes, one of which was half-off the dead girl's foot. But this waif was caught dead in them. Where did a girl who could not afford decent shoes get this dress?

He reached up and closed her eyes, then opened her purse. It seemed almost as much of an invasion as the knife had made. He took out a small glassine envelope with her identity card and held it up to the beam of the patrol car's headlights. "Luz Garmendia. It says she lives on Colombes. She was sixteen." His voice choked on the last word.

There was one peso, 69 centavos in the purse, and a handkerchief edged with the kind of lace working-class girls made with fine cotton. Then, he noticed a glint of metal at the margin of the pool of blood, near the girl's right hand. "A key." This was odd. Poor girls did not live in

houses that were ever locked. "The dress is too expensive for the shoes and purse." He was thinking out loud.

Franco guffawed. His soft belly wobbled when he laughed. "Big expert in girl's dresses, are you, Robo?"

Leary would gladly have strangled the knucklehead. "I have three sisters," he said instead of a curse. He had been warned too often that his arrogance toward the politically well connected was not a proper path to promotion on the force. "I don't imagine you know anything at all about women."

An ambulance siren approached from the north. Leary got to his feet and on a whim tried the key in the lock of the shop door. It opened. He looked up at the sign across the top of the entrance. "*Chez Claudia*," it said in large gold letters and under it in elegant script, "Style Pour les Femmes."

"Reno, find out where the owner of this shop lives and get me a phone number for him." The ambulance pulled up. The spinning red light reflected off the girl's blood.

The driver approached with a stretcher. One glance and he looked stunned. "Holy God!"

"It's not her," Leary said. But a suspicion was beginning to form in his mind that whoever stabbed this poor girl had made the same mistake.