

ESCAPING CUBA

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1. A NIGHT ON THE PACIFIC

In what could only be described as horrible English, the voice from the tower at Huatulco International Airport cleared us for takeoff. With the nose of the 1949 Grumman Albatross pointed toward the south end of the runway, I pushed the overhead-mounted throttles forward until the power climbed to the maximum I dared pull from these old supercharged engines. As the RPMs increased and the propeller tips accelerated past the speed of sound, the noise in my headset changed from a roar into a high-pitched buzz. I released the brakes and we started to move. Although I had put more than one hundred hours on this airplane in the past three months, this was the first time I had flown it with all six fuel tanks full. We were at her maximum takeoff weight, with 11,000 pounds of aviation gas, enough to stay airborne for over twenty-four hours. Prior to this, my longest flight was six hours.

With one third of the runway behind me, I looked down at my airspeed indicator; the needle was bouncing between zero and eighty mph. When I passed the halfway point, it was still bouncing. It was a no-brainer; a malfunctioning airspeed indicator is a no-go item. There was lots of runway left to safely abort the takeoff and return to parking for repairs. But no, not me. A little thing like a malfunctioning airspeed indicator wasn't going to stop me.

The pilot's seat on the Albatross is at least ten feet above the runway, making it difficult to judge the aircraft's speed. Guessing that we had enough airspeed, I pulled back on the control column and immediately the aircraft lifted into the air. I was ready, but with the airspeed indicator

moving rapidly all over the gauge, my heart was in my mouth. I guessed that the tube that delivers the ram air to the indicator was obstructed, probably by bugs. To build up speed, I lowered the nose then raised the landing gear. My GPS read 130 knots, about a hundred and fifty miles per hour, right where I wanted to be. I forced myself to relax, to stay focused. The journey ahead would be very long and incredibly dangerous—something my passengers didn't quite understand or they wouldn't be here.

Climbing steadily with more than adequate airspeed, I turned toward the town of Huatulco, a small tourist place in the state of Oaxaca on the west coast of southern Mexico. The view from my seat was straight out of National Geographic: blue water with immense waves rolling onto white virgin beaches. A massive cruise ship was docked beside a long pier. Almost every day, ships like this would deliver new groups of tourists, anxious to sample Huatulco's unique culture. To the north, the beach stretched as far as the eye could see. Looking below and to the south was drastically different: massive black craggy rock outcroppings jutted into the sea every hundred yards or so, with softly curved beaches between them.

After setting power to cruise-climb, I gave a thumbs up to Jorge, who sat in the copilot seat. He was an ex-Mexican Air Force mechanic who had worked on the Grumman Albatross for several years.

I first met Jorge in Mazatlan, the day I took delivery of the Albatross. He was handsome, with classic Latin looks: slender, a full head of long straight black hair, dark brown eyes and a cleanly cut, pencil-thin mustache. He worked on small airplanes, mostly Cessnas, being paid near the minimum wage. I asked him if he could look at the Albatross, especially the left engine's hydraulic pump and hoses. There was an obvious leak; a large pool of bright orange oil had formed on the pavement below it.

After giving the plane a quick look, he introduced himself. "I am Jorge, the mechanic."

"And I'm Alan Richards, the pilot."

Jorge produced a piece of paper and handed it to me. "Can you write your name for me? I have a hard time remembering gringo names. Is this your plane?"

After writing my name, I explained to him that I had never met the owners, but that I was in charge of the plane.

"I can fix the leak, Señor Richards," he said bluntly. "I work for dollars, not pesos."

“How does five hundred dollars a week sound?”

He shot back, “Señor, I’d kill for that much money.”

I laughed, but he didn’t. “Hopefully, it won’t come to that,” I said, becoming serious. “When can you start?”

“Tomorrow morning,” he answered, and he’s been with me ever since. In the hundred-plus hours we have flown together, it’s become clear that he’s not only a good mechanic, but a natural pilot as well.

Tapping the glass cover that protected the airspeed indicator, I spoke into the intercom. “It doesn’t work.”

Jorge looked at the gauge, tapped it with his knuckles and shrugged his shoulders before giving me his opinion: “No importa.”

Obviously it didn’t concern him whether it worked or not. Seeing his indifference to what normally would’ve been another no-go item, I decided not to give it another thought—at least for now. My dash-mounted GPS gave me all the information I needed to complete the flight.

When we reached 1,000 feet, I leveled the airplane, reduced power to long-range cruise and took up a heading that would take us west 1,500 miles into the Pacific Ocean—halfway to Hawaii. We were looking for what my passengers called “the floating plastic continent.”

Eight months earlier, a friend of mine at the film commission had introduced me as a pilot to Eric Ryman, a Hollywood movie producer. He’d flown his private aircraft from Los Angeles to Canada to make a movie with Jon Voight. Because Eric was unfamiliar with flying in Canada, he asked if I would fly with him from Kelowna to Vancouver. With little else on my calendar, I accepted his invitation and subsequently ended up working for him throughout the entire movie production as a stills photographer for the film. Almost every time he flew, I sat in the copilot seat, teaching him everything I knew about flying in the rugged mountains of British Columbia. By the end of the movie we were close friends. Before leaving Kelowna for Los Angeles, Eric asked if I would like to fly for Greenpeace in Mexico. Apparently, someone at Greenpeace had the bright idea of buying a 1949 Grumman Albatross. They figured the bulky, post-World War II amphibian would be perfect for filming large ships as they emptied their holding tanks at sea. The organizers planned, sea conditions permitting, for us to land behind the ship to take samples of the garbage they threw overboard.

I wasn’t what you would call the airline pilot type. I was more of an airplane enthusiast who had always wanted to fly one of these big Grumman seaplanes, and this was the largest Grumman seaplane ever made. The people who did the hiring for this mission were not airplane

people. If they were, they would have asked to see my pilot's license, medical certificate, log books and a ton of related documents for the insurance company. Most importantly, because I would be flying it as a single pilot, someone should have asked how much experience I had in this aircraft. But since they hadn't bothered to ask, I hadn't bothered to mention that, other than in pictures, I had never even seen an Albatross.

For the last three months, we had been flying out of Mazatlan. We followed freighters and cruise ships, filming them as they pumped waste overboard. If the seas were calm, we would land and the Greenpeace scientists would use large nets to pick up the big stuff and water containers to take samples of the liquid waste. Imagine the daily garbage from over 3,000 people; it was gross.

We flew with two scientists. Louis, a Frenchman, was tall and skinny, with a big nose. Otto was from Germany, a well-rounded bearded man who loved to eat. Both were very serious about their work. Each had two helpers who kept themselves busy testing the samples and filming. Altogether, we were eight on board.

Our work didn't make us very popular, especially with the Mexican authorities, who would do almost anything, except stop the dumping, to protect their tourist industry.

The Comandante at the Huatulco Airport had charged us a whopping \$20,000 on top of the normal fees to use the airport. When we argued with him, he said if we didn't pay, he would have the military impound our airplane and accuse us of being drug smugglers. If you don't pay in Mexico, you don't play. The scientists objected adamantly to this bribe, but without it there would be no trip to the plastic island. We waited in Oaxaca for a few days, and finally the Greenpeace directors approved the payment.

The sky above was overcast with black thunderclouds visible along the western horizon as far as I could see. I had checked the satellite weather earlier that morning. It showed a large low-pressure zone off the coast. I would try to stay on the northern edge of it and use its winds to my advantage.

Three hours into the flight, I needed a bathroom break. As I made my way to the toilet in the rear, Otto was as excited as a kid at Christmas, continually asking me for updates on our estimated time of arrival. I told him his plastic garbage dump should show up in another ten hours, the same thing I'd told him ten minutes ago. When I returned to the cockpit, I looked at Jorge and smiled because he was so serious about being a pilot. As a mechanic in the Mexican Air Force, he had flown many hours

in the Albatross, just not as a pilot. He didn't have any formal flight training, only the instruction I had given him in the last three months. In Mexico, a pilot is far more important than a mechanic; everywhere we went, he proudly told everybody he was my copilot. I climbed into my seat and buckled in, leaning back while I let Jorge fly the airplane. I dozed off.

Sometime later I awoke with a startle. In my dreams, I was back in New York with Jenny, the woman I planned to marry. It had been three months since I had seen her.

"How long have I been asleep?"

Jorge looked down at his watch. "Almost two hours, Alan."

"Wow," I said.

"No problem," said Jorge, proudly pointing at the GPS. "We're right on course."

I looked at my watch, then at the GPS. Jorge was right; we were on course, with only another five hours to go. The old Grumman chugged along. I sat back and enjoyed the thrill of being captain of a 1949 Grumman Albatross, headed deep into the Pacific Ocean on a dangerous mission.

We arrived at our GPS coordinates after ten hours and seven minutes of flying. There were overcast skies above and blue sea 1,000 feet below. I picked up my binoculars and began scanning. I was shocked at what I saw. The scene ahead looked like the ocean had frozen and was now covered with gray ice. I looked back into the cabin, waving my hands to draw the attention of the French scientist, Luis, because he was closest. He moved forward cautiously and climbed into one of the two jump seats above and behind us. Borrowing my binoculars, he gazed out the windows from left to right.

"Magnifique," he shouted with a look of utter amazement on his face.

I advised him it wasn't safe to land on top of the plastic but rather beside it, because of what I called the "foam effect." The floating plastic would not support our weight. I wiggled the control column slightly, making it obvious to Jorge I was now the pilot flying, and started a left descending turn. Silently, we floated down toward the ocean in awe of what was growing in front of us. At one hundred feet above the sea we could plainly see the edge where the huge mass of plastic ended. Within it were open areas of water. If we were going to land, it would have to be in one of those openings. They weren't long and straight like runways, but twisted and turned, changing direction every few hundred feet. Ahead was a break in the garbage, perhaps two hundred feet wide and

half a mile long. I ordered Luis to go aft and make sure he and his colleagues were tightly buckled in.

Using the GPS, I determined the direction of the wind. In most cases, that would be the direction in which we would prefer to land. But we had a problem; the waves were moving at right angles to the wind. Now I was confused. Did I land into the wind or into the waves?

Turning to Jorge I asked, "How big are those waves?"

"They're pretty big, Alan. More than ten feet."

This wasn't in any of the books I had read, but Jorge had more flight time in the Albatross than I did. "When you were in the Mexican Air Force, did you ever land in waves this big?"

"I think so, but from here it's hard to tell how big they actually are." He hesitated, then volunteered a little more. "But every time we landed in high seas, we landed into the waves, never between them."

This was dangerous stuff and my gut was telling me not to do it. "Jorge, when we get close to the water, if you think the waves are too high to land in, yell ABORT. Is that understood?"

Without taking his eyes off the water, he answered, "Of course."

I lined up the airplane so we would touch down directly into the waves. I pushed the fuel mixture controls to full rich, the propeller levers to fine pitch and lowered the flaps. Further pulling back the throttles, we slowed to the minimum approach speed I dared use in a crosswind. The closer we got to the water, the larger the waves appeared. The books I'd read about landing the big Grumman in rough seas suggested two options: if the swells were very large, land parallel to their direction; if the waves were smaller and closer together, landing into them was recommended. Because the waves were close together, I chose the second option.

The first wave impacted the hull of the airplane with a heavy thump. The second wave hit us much harder. We were decelerating quickly but taking an incredible beating. I pulled the power levers back to the reverse indent and immediately felt the braking effect as the huge propellers went into reverse. Two or three seconds later, the aircraft plunged nose first into a large wave. The propellers caught the water and sprayed it all around us. We could see nothing but a foamy white wall. I could feel the force of my seatbelt as it prevented me from being thrown forward. Quickly, the airplane stopped and wallowed in the rough sea.

Jorge turned to me. He didn't look happy. "That was the hardest landing I've ever seen."

I smiled back at him, trying to appear nonchalant, but inside my

stomach was churning. One look at the waves around us convinced me there was no possible way we'd be taking off, at least not anytime soon. The wave heights varied from five to ten feet, sometimes higher. The wind was gusting from fifteen to twenty-five knots. With the engines shut down, the large tail of the Albatross was soon caught by the fast moving wind, weather-cocking the machine until it pointed straight into the wind. Almost instantly, I felt the rocking sensation of the waves affecting my body. I had not been airsick for many years, but seasickness was something I was very susceptible to. I left my seat, walked into the cabin and was greeted by happy scientists and their assistants. To them this was the thrill of a lifetime.

At the rear of the cabin on the left side there was a two-piece door that opened inward. The right side was identical, except there was only the upper door, which made for a smaller opening. Working from both sides of the cabin the scientists busied themselves taking water samples and selecting pieces of plastic from the junk floating around the airplane.

The rocking sensation continued to make me feel sick. Within an hour, I was vomiting overboard. It was now abundantly clear that I should not have landed.

After two hours the scientists requested I taxi the airplane into the thicker area of the plastic. They wanted to sample the temperature of the water beneath it and measure its height. I made my way to the cockpit and started the engines, which came to life effortlessly. I noticed the right engine was running a little rough; it had probably ingested water during the hard landing.

I taxied the airplane into the plastic. After about half a mile the waste was so thick the propeller tips began digging into it as the taller waves passed us. I shut down the motors and we slid into an even thicker area of garbage. I went to the back of the cabin and saw that the rubbish was now so high it was up to the rear door.

I sat back and lazily watched the scientists and their assistants as they focused on their work, happily sampling and taking measurements, calling out readings to one another and making notes in their ledgers. I couldn't share their excitement. My nausea continued even after throwing up. After a while, I stood up and walked unsteadily to the middle of the cabin and lay down atop a pair of bright yellow lifejackets. But the nausea got worse and I had to get up again. After emptying my stomach, I plopped back onto my makeshift mattress and soon fell asleep.

Otto woke me a couple of hours later just as the sun was setting. They had the samples and data they needed. It was time to go. Our plan had

been to leave the plastic continent at dusk and arrive back at our departure airport in Oaxaca by morning. I jumped to my feet and made my way to the cockpit, seeing Jorge already buckled into the copilot seat as I climbed into mine. I looked out at the sea and was immediately disappointed. The waves were now five to twelve feet high and irregular.

I turned to Jorge. "Have you ever taken off in conditions like this?"

He shook his head. "No! Not even close to this."

His terse reply reminded me of John, my older brother, a Boeing 727 captain. When I told him I'd be flying an Albatross, he became very serious and warned me, "Don't do anything stupid! That airplane has killed a lot of people." Too late, brother.

In my career as a pilot, I had taken many shortcuts, thinking I was too smart and incapable of making mistakes. I didn't need anyone else's opinion. Now John's advice was kicking me in the ass. Three months ago when I'd taken possession of the Albatross in Mazatlan, the pilots that delivered it told me they'd never flown her on the ocean. In fact, this was only their second flight in the airplane. They handed me the keys and took the next flight back to Los Angeles. Normally someone wanting to fly this airplane would go to a school that specialized in this type, with instructors that had plenty of experience. But I was too cocky. Hell, I didn't need to go to any school. I could fly anything with wings. Now I felt like an idiot. We were floating 1,500 miles from land, being constantly battered by large waves. I had no idea when the sea would become calm enough to attempt a takeoff. Both scientists were pushing for our immediate departure. I knew this was not a good idea.

I turned to Jorge. "Check the hull. See if we've taken on any water."

The Albatross is a large amphibious flying boat. The bottom of the fuselage has a deep-V hull that supports most of the weight. Large streamlined floats at the end of each wing prevent it from tipping over. Years ago I read a story of an air force Albatross that landed in the South China Sea off Vietnam to rescue a downed pilot. Because of bad weather they were unable to take off. The airplane floated tethered to a warship for five days without a problem. As long as we weren't taking on water, we could stay afloat for days. I made a decision: if there were no leaks, there would be no takeoff—at least not for now.

It took Jorge twenty minutes to open all the inspection plates and search for leaks. I hovered anxiously above him the whole time. We were pleased to discover that the airplane was watertight. I suggested to the scientists that they pick a spot and try to get some sleep as we wouldn't attempt a takeoff until morning. Needless to say they weren't pleased,

but at least they were still alive and dry.

Jorge and I settled into our seats. He slept like a baby, but it seemed that whenever I woke up my head would soon be out the window, vomiting overboard as the waves rocked us relentlessly from side to side. At one point during the night, around 3:00 a.m., I was jolted awake by an intense bolt of lightning that was so close the thunder happened at the same time. I hustled to the cockpit.

About thirty miles in front of us was a powerful thunderstorm giving off an amazing lightning show that lit up the night, and it was headed right for us. With the tail of the airplane sticking up almost forty feet above water, we were the highest point for miles, a perfect lightning rod. As the storm neared, I could feel the hair on my arms standing out straight due to static electricity. Everything in me told me that we were done; there was no way this airplane could take multiple lightning strikes. They would fry our batteries, not to mention the damage to the electronics and wiring. When the line of lightning was about ten miles away it changed direction and rapidly moved off to our left at ninety degrees. My luck was holding.

With the storm threat gone, I moved back to the middle of the plane and tried to sleep. The constant clamor from the plastic as it bumped against the hull made sleep impossible.

When daylight finally arrived, I felt like a hostage to our situation, devoid of power and lacking will. I made my way to the back and was again sick. In an effort to calm my gut, I tried drinking bottled water, only to throw it up a few minutes later. I hung my upper body out over the right rear door and watched as small fish darted upward to eat my vomit.

During the night, the wind had pushed us out of the mass of plastic and into clear water. At about 10:00 a.m. I noticed air bubbles rising to the surface close to the airplane. I watched them intently from the back door. The bubbles became larger and more frequent over the next few minutes. They would start as small dots deep in the ocean and grow larger before they burst at the surface. My curiosity was in overdrive. At first I thought it was a submarine blowing its ballast. If there was a submarine out here, whose submarine would it be? My popularity with the U.S. government was not at an all-time high. I watched the bubbles with extreme interest until finally a large blue whale surfaced not more than fifty feet from the Albatross. More whales appeared, loudly blowing air out of their blowholes. I imagined the whales had come to see what sort of crazy people would be here in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in an airplane.

The distraction of the whales came as a relief. At least it wasn't a U.S. sub. I stayed at the back door scanning the ocean, trying to find a pattern to the waves. They were still very high, but worse, there was no apparent pattern. Sporadic large waves were surrounded by many smaller, shorter ones. Every now and then the sea would appear almost confused, as if the waves were competing for space.

Otto joined me to complain that his satellite phone didn't work out here. Feeling miserable physically, and with the tension building because of our helplessness, my usual sarcasm changed to rudeness.

"So, what do you want me to do?" I wanted to grab the phone from him and throw it in the water. "Damn it, man. We have bigger problems than your phone."

With a harsh German accent he asked, "When are we leaving?"

I snapped, "As soon as the ocean becomes calm enough that we can take off without killing ourselves. Does that answer your question?" He turned and walked away. Everyone on board seemed to be on edge except for Jorge, who was still asleep. Returning to the cockpit, I shook his shoulder to wake him and gave him a few moments to adjust and have a look at what was going on outside the window.

"Any ideas?"

He looked at me with a confident smile and said, "You're the captain, Alan. You tell me."

That was less than reassuring. Either he had confidence in my decision-making ability, or like me, he really didn't know what to do next.

The rest of the morning was wasted because of the high seas. Like the evening before, most of my time was spent lying on my stomach, trying to fight the urge to give back the apple I called breakfast.

It was two in the afternoon before the seas started to settle. I made my way to the cockpit, jumped into the pilot's seat and buckled in. I stared out at the water, trying to find some rhythm to the waves. After a few minutes it became apparent that the airplane was no longer sitting evenly on the ocean as it had after our arrival. The left wing float was piercing much deeper into the waves than the right float. The wingtip floats also served as fuel tanks, capable of carrying two hundred and ten gallons of aviation gas in each tank.

When we'd received the aircraft in Mazatlan, the left float's fuel cap was missing. In its place the mouth of the tank was covered with multiple layers of duct tape. Because we needed to carry fuel in that float for the flight out to the plastic continent, we'd improvised a fuel cap to replace the original. A large piece of hard black rubber that Jorge whittled to the

approximate dimensions of the original cap was held in place with more duct tape. We used the fuel from these tanks first because we wanted them empty so they could act as floats. I knew right away that our makeshift fuel cap had leaked during the night, allowing seawater to enter the float. It was anyone's guess as to how full the float was, but if it were to become full, that wing would sink into the water, quickly flipping us upside down, and that would be game over.

Frustrated, I looked back at a cheap three hundred dollar life raft that Phil, a friend of mine, had picked up for me in Los Angeles. It was leaking air. A proper life raft costs approximately \$5,000. This was a giant error. I had gone cheap on the life raft. We had no other option than to try to get the Albatross into the air and fly it back to Mexico. I told Jorge we were going to attempt a takeoff. He agreed it was time to go.

The engines started like they were new, but I felt a slight vibration from the right one. It was something we would have to live with. Jorge knew the procedure; he would give me a thumbs up when the needles on our engine gauges were in the green and ready to go. We taxied through the water for eight or nine minutes, waiting for the engines to come up to operating temperature. I continued to watch intently for some kind of pattern from the waves. Just as in yesterday's landing, I had to make a decision. Should I take off into the wind or into the waves?

Jorge pushed his fist in front of me, his left thumb pointing up. The engines were ready to go. I took a quick look at the controls. The propellers were set to fine pitch, the fuel mixture levers were at full rich and the flap handle was in the takeoff position. I eased the throttles forward, raising the RPMs to 1,500. This was considerably above idle. I was hoping to give us a head start on the takeoff. We taxied for five or six minutes, the sea buffeting us from side to side. Ahead I could see the larger waves had mostly subsided. Only a few medium-sized waves remained, surrounded by a vast area of smaller ones. This was my chance.

I moved the throttles to takeoff power and felt the Albatross lift itself higher in the water as we began our run. Immediately I felt her wanting to turn to the left. The heavy port float was knifing through the tops of the waves, adding drag to the left side of the airplane. I applied full right rudder and right aileron, trying to lift the port float, but it was just too heavy.

I asked Jorge to help me push down hard on the right rudder while I turned the control column fully to the right, trying to lift the float out of the water. As we accelerated, we continued to turn left. Still below takeoff speed, we had turned ninety degrees to the wind and were

heading toward a large wave. We hit it and were lifted violently into the air. I pointed the nose back down at the water for maybe a second, and then pulled it back up, making sure we would land on the belly and not on the nose. The flying gods were with me as we plopped smoothly between the first large wave and accelerated toward the next one. Again it tossed us into the air, still with insufficient flying speed. I lowered the nose to avoid a stall, a condition where the wings lose lift, making the airplane sink uncontrollably. Just before we contacted the third large wave, I pulled back hard on the control yoke. The Albatross bounced off the top of the wave and we were at last airborne.

This was not the time for celebration. We were flying, but still in a left turn. I had the control column almost all the way to the right with full right rudder, yet the airplane continued to turn left. She was flying, but barely. I lowered the nose to build up airspeed. That change gave the controls more authority. Scanning the instrument panel, I noticed the airspeed indicator was now working. The spray during landing, or the many hours of bobbing in the ocean, must have cleared whatever obstacle had plugged the pitot tube. Climbing through two hundred feet with the airspeed reading one hundred and fifty mph, I reduced the power to cruise setting and steered the airplane east toward Mexico.

The old girl still wanted to turn left because of the water in the float. To maintain our compass heading, we had to fly crabbed, a little bit sideways. I increased power slightly to the left engine. That helped to reduce our control inputs to the right. Passing through five hundred feet, now confident in my ability to control the aircraft's direction, I instructed Jorge to take over. A quick scan of the instruments sent a chill down my back. The right engine was burning fifteen gallons per hour more than normal. The vibration I'd felt earlier from the engine was a subtle indication of a looming mechanical problem.

Before takeoff when I had calculated our fuel required for this mission, I had recklessly assumed a tailwind in both directions. Checking the GPS for our actual groundspeed showed I was in error. Our headwind, plus the extra fuel the right engine was burning, scared me. I used my calculator to determine the exact amount of fuel we would need to make it to Mexico and came up fifty miles short. Somehow I had to find a way to get the airplane to go a little bit farther on the fuel we had. The good news was we were stable and airborne. We would have to reduce our cruise speed a few knots to extend our range. That problem solved, I focused on flying the airplane, avoiding any variance in heading that would further tax our fuel reserve.

After we'd been airborne for thirty minutes my nausea vanished. Despite all the problems—and all the things that could still go wrong—I loved being in the air. With Jorge flying, I went to the back cabin to put something in my empty stomach. It seemed funny to me that the only food we had on board was soda pop, loaves of bread and canned tuna. With my body returning to normal, I made a tuna sandwich and washed it down with a can of coke. Not wanting to scare our scientists any more than necessary, I told them everything was going well and we should be back in Oaxaca around sundown.

Returning to the cockpit, I again found Jorge happily enjoying his position as pilot in command. We took turns flying. My primary task now was to look for any changes in our fuel burn, my efforts limited by the machine I was flying. The hulking Grumman refused to fly straight without constant control inputs. I went to the back, opened the door and looked out at the port wing. I was startled at what I saw. I took a deep breath and stared at the aileron. When this airplane was designed, somewhere in the mid-1940s, the control surfaces were covered with doped fabric. Why, I didn't know. Maybe because the fabric was easy to repair in the field, or maybe it was lighter than the aluminum used for the rest of the airplane.

Most of the inboard half of the aileron had all but disintegrated from the twenty-two hours we had spent in the water. What was left of the fabric was streaming in the wind, slowly being torn off. Underneath the wing, the float had what seemed like a vapor trail following behind it. This was the water being forced out by the suction the wind pressure created as it moved past the mouth of the fuel tank. I stared at the tank for another few minutes. The longer we flew the more water would be pulled out of the float. That would be an improvement.

Returning to the cockpit, I advised Jorge of the situation and received his normal reply. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, Don't worry about it. I buckled myself into the captain's seat and thought of war stories I had read from World War II describing aircraft returning to their bases with parts of their wings and control surfaces shot off. There was no doubt in my mind that the Albatross would continue flying. My main concern continued to be fuel consumption.

After almost eight hours we were still two hundred miles off the coast of Mexico. My fuel calculations showed that we had only one hundred and eighty miles of fuel left. I felt reasonably good about that. If we had to land twenty miles offshore, I could radio in a Mayday. I was pretty certain someone would come and get us. That was a far better scenario

than being stuck 1,500 miles in the middle of the ocean.

Time was moving slowly. I had the airplane powered to give us the longest possible range; there was nothing else I could do. In most of the airplanes I had flown the fuel consumption always read a bit on the high side, meaning we were burning slightly less fuel than the gauges indicated. I hoped this was true with the Albatross. I used the fuel transfer pumps to move gas from the left tank to the right, providing the extra fuel the right engine needed. It would do no good to starve the right engine of fuel before we had safely landed. The Albatross, like most of the older twin-engine airplanes of its era, would not maintain altitude on one engine.

With the GPS reading twenty miles from the Mexican coast and the fuel gauges pegged on empty, we continued to fly. I told Jorge my plan. We would try to make landfall, then fly south along the coast toward the airport we had departed from yesterday. Looking back into the cabin, I motioned for Otto to come forward. I asked him to make sure everyone was buckled in as we would soon be landing. I didn't inform him where or how.

"Look," Jorge said, pointing forward. "Land."

To my delight, I could make out a long white beach. A quick check of the GPS showed us ten miles away. From our altitude of 2,000 feet I knew I could trade our height for a few extra miles if necessary. Above us the late afternoon sky was blue. Below, the sea seemed calm and inviting. According to my calculations we should be out of fuel, but the engines were still running. With Jorge at the controls, I held my breath until we were almost over the beach. With less than two miles to go to the shore we made a right turn and headed toward Huatulco International Airport.

My confidence was dashed suddenly when the right engine began sputtering. I put both hands on the control yoke, taking control, and pushed the nose down toward the ocean; the right engine was running out of fuel. I pulled the throttles back almost to idle and quickly started transferring the remaining fuel from the left tank to the right, hoping to restart the engine. The fuel transfer system on this airplane was slow and the right engine refused to come back to life. At two hundred feet above the water I lowered the flaps and slowed to landing speed. We touched down about sixty feet from the beach, parallel to the shore, smoothly settling onto the water. Because the left float still held a considerable amount of water, it was caught in the curling waves and ripped from the bottom of the wing.

The fuel transfer finally delivered enough fuel to the right engine to

RED ZONE

bring it back to life. We were in the water with both engines idling. Jorge and I were mesmerized by the float as it rocked back and forth in the surf. I lowered the landing gear and taxied onto the soft, white sandy beach in front of me. As the nose wheel touched the sand, I applied full power to lift us out of the water. As she struggled onto the beach, the soft sand grabbed our large main tires, bringing us to a stop. Relieved, I pulled the power back to idle and watched the engines as they powered down. Finally, I set the mixtures to idle cutoff. Starved of fuel the engines quickly came to a stop. For now, we were safe on a beach in Mexico.

2. BEACH PARTY

As the propellers slowed to a stop, I became acutely aware of the silence that surrounded us. Our trip to the northern Pacific was over. I undid my seatbelt, tossed the portable GPS into my overnight bag and made my way past the stunned passengers. I opened the door, attached the ladder and climbed down to the beach. The drone from an airplane above us immediately caught my attention. I looked up to see a Mexican Air Force plane slowly circling us. We had breached their airspace without a flight plan. Because we were in the southern part of Mexico, a well-known drug area, I assumed they suspected us of being smugglers.

This wasn't the first time I had been followed by a drug interdiction aircraft. Back in the 80s I had talked myself into believing that smuggling a little pot from Jamaica to Canada was no big deal. Unfortunately the DEA and the RCMP thought otherwise. I was soon convicted of smuggling an unknown amount of marijuana and sentenced to three years in prison. When I was released, things got complicated. The RCMP wanted me to testify against my friends in Canada. My only choice was to go underground and become invisible. Now was not the time and place to reappear.

I marveled at the beautiful blue water that formed perfect waves for as far as I could see. In front of me was the left float, half submerged, still bobbing in the surf. Other than that, the airplane was in pretty good shape, with all three sets of wheels stuck in the soft sand. Jorge and the scientists slowly joined me on the beach. All I could see in either direction was the sea and the pristine white sand.

Otto was the first to speak. With a heavy accent he asked, "What do we do now?"

I pointed at an opening in the jungle, almost hidden by mango trees and shrubs. "I don't know about you, but I'm going up there to try to find some shade."

Carrying my backpack, I walked through the hot soft coral sand to an opening that led into a covered area about thirty feet long and ten feet wide. I could hear the others trudging through the sand behind me. On the west side of the opening was a large swamp with huge mango roots protruding like jail bars. A cool breeze entered the shaded area, making me feel immediately more comfortable. With the Beechcraft still circling above us, we grouped in the shade and began to discuss our options.

Years ago, I had abandoned an airplane in Venezuela. I was later picked up by the military and imprisoned for sixty days, something I didn't want to repeat. Part of the problem in Venezuela was that I hadn't filed a flight plan. I informed the group that there would be military personnel and helicopters coming to their aid soon. I explained that in these situations people sometimes end up in prison before things get straightened out. Because of my colorful past, there wasn't a chance in hell that I was going to wait for the Mexican authorities.

Otto asked rudely, "Why don't we have a flight plan?"

"Don't you remember that we had to pay the Comandante at the airport \$20,000 to use his airport? If we had made it back there it wouldn't be a problem, but unfortunately we ran out of fuel and this is as far as we're going."

Almost at the same time both scientists replied, "What do we do with our equipment?"

It was obvious by the tone in their voices that they were more than a little irritated with the situation. Before they could blame me, I said firmly, "Listen to me carefully, because I don't want to have to repeat myself. What we just did was extremely dangerous. Under the circumstances I think I did a fantastic job, and right now I'm not in the mood for any criticism. If you don't want to stay with the airplane, you're welcome to come with me. But let me make this very clear; I'm leaving. I suggest you stay here and wait for help to arrive. If anyone asks where the pilot is, tell them I went looking for a phone to call for help."

My portable GPS showed the small village of Mazunte about five miles south of our position. Jorge, believing he could use his past posting with the Mexican Air Force to his advantage, stated that he would stay with the airplane to explain what happened when the military arrived. I was grateful for his help. We hugged before I left him with the scientists in the coolness of the little hideaway.

With the sun now almost on the horizon, I stepped out from under the canopy and into the jungle heat. The humidity hit me like a hammer. I walked south along the beach for half an hour, staying as close as I could to the trees for shade. I hoped this tactic would make it more difficult for the circling King Air to see me. About a mile or so in front of me I could see a large rocky outcropping that jutted into the sea. The King Air had now disappeared, probably going for fuel. Even though the airplane had left, I knew from experience that there would be more action coming this way.

With the sun below the horizon and darkness falling, I made my way

to a poorly maintained road I saw on the GPS. Ahead near the beach I could make out cabanas and hear the voices of the people within them; this place was probably used by Mexicans as a vacation spot during the warm summer and by tourists during the rest of the year. Because I didn't want to be seen by anyone, I moved slowly and carefully past them. By the time darkness fell, I was at least two miles from the airplane.

After a while I heard the sound of trucks loudly approaching and quickly hid under the thick bush that lined the road. I lay there, watching one truck after another rumble by. There was no doubt in my mind that these people were headed for the airplane. Cautiously I made my way deeper into the jungle. I carried an LED flashlight attached to a strap that was meant for my head. I put it on. No matter where you go in southern Mexico, there are crops and paths that lead from one area to another through the jungle; now I needed to find a good one. The first path I followed soon came to a dead end. Backtracking, I found another one on my right that looked better. I followed it up a small hill to a large, vertical outcropping of coral. Just as I arrived a large helicopter flew overhead, its spotlight snaking through the thick vegetation. They were close, but at the speed they were traveling there was little chance they would have recognized me even if the light had found me. I rested there for the remainder of the night, the flashlight off, swatting mosquitoes and other unidentified creatures that were trying to eat me. During the night, the dengue-infected mosquitoes would be my biggest worry.

In the jungle light seems to be turned on or off by a switch. One minute it was dark, the next minute there was light. When there was enough light for me to move safely, I used my GPS to navigate in the direction of the village, following a large coral cliff. I found a path that led to a fence, then another path that headed back up the hill. That would help—a high point from which I might be able to see my surroundings.

When I reached what appeared to be the top, I cautiously made my way to the edge of a small clearing. The first thing I saw was a well-used path running from one side of the clearing to the next. Scattered throughout the small field were corn plants, about two feet high, sown by hand. Staying in the trees for cover, I made my way along the field's edge until I came upon a manmade structure. It was approximately ten feet long by eight feet wide, with a corrugated fiberglass roof supported by four posts. There were no walls. Underneath the roof was a wood burning clay stove with two five-gallon jugs of drinking water beside it. One jug was open with a small wooden cup sitting on top of it. Smiling, I took a quick look around. I couldn't believe my luck. Not seeing anyone,

I grabbed the cup and quickly filled it, downing the water to fill my empty stomach.

Just as I finished drinking the second cup, I heard voices coming my way. I ducked out of the cabin and into an opening in the coral behind it. From my cover, I could see soldiers appearing from the north side of the field, the direction of the airplane. There were six or seven of them, walking lazily and talking like old friends. They continued through the field along the path and disappeared on the south side, headed toward the village of Mazunte. I stayed in my hiding spot for another hour, afraid to move.

When I ventured back to the small living quarters, I quickly gulped down another two cups of water as I was not sure when I would be able to drink again. There was a hammock between two of the posts that supported the roof. I was beat. I had only dozed off occasionally during the night, constantly being awakened by insects, and the night before on the Albatross had been even worse.

From my vantage point in the hammock I could see all the way up the beach to where the airplane was sitting, surrounded by military personnel, army trucks and two large helicopters. A third large helicopter took me by surprise as it flew over me, not more than three hundred feet above. It circled for a few minutes then followed the beach and landed beside the airplane. Occasionally military airplanes would appear overhead, flying in a search pattern. More helicopters arrived, most of them Russian made, to join the search. All of this activity kept me from sleeping, though it was good to rest.

I was so busy staring at the action on the beach in front of me that I almost jumped out of my skin when I heard a timid voice say, "Hola, Gringo."

I leapt out of the hammock and turned to see a short skinny man dressed in rags, holding the reins to a scrawny burro. The animal was suffering from the weight of the water it carried on its back. Immediately, I threw my hand out to the man and said, "Hola, Señor. Is this your farm?"

It took him awhile, but he gave me his hand and we shook. He said proudly, "Si, Señor, this is my property." Politely, almost timidly, he asked, "Why are you here, Señor?"

I looked down at the poor man's handmade sandals and up at his well worn white straw hat. He was obviously a peasant farmer. I hesitated for a few seconds, desperately trying to make up a believable story.

"I'm with the Red Cross. We're in the area to ask the farmers what we can do to help them improve their crops." As the words left my mouth, I

thought how cruel I was, lying to this poor man and giving him false hope. But I needed a story and that was all I could come up with.

He thought for a minute and then said, “Señor, thank you for coming here. What we need is water. If you were to put in a well down in the swamp and pump that water up to a reservoir, all the farmers here on the top of the hill could use it for their crops. That’s our biggest problem, that’s all we need.”

I admired his empathy for the other farmers nearby. We began to talk about the situation and how bleak it was. We talked for over an hour. Every now and then, I turned my head to look toward the soldiers, now crowded along the beach. There must’ve been several thousand of them, undoubtedly from a base nearby.

At some point I asked the farmer, “What’s all that commotion about on the beach?”

He looked for a while and then answered, “That’s the Mexican military; they’re practicing. They do that all the time.”

“What would they be practicing?”

“I don’t know. At the village that I just came from there are many soldiers. I’m pretty sure it’s just an exercise, nothing important.”

I was relieved; negative thinking can be very powerful. I had envisioned “wanted” posters with my face on them hanging everywhere in the nearby villages. I was overreacting and panicking. I remembered my brother’s famous words: “Panic first, get it over with, and then deal with it.” Talking to the farmer had calmed me down. Clearly, he knew nothing of what was happening around him; nor did he care. I asked him several questions about the village of Mazunte. How far down the path was it? Were there tourists there? All the time I had to remember I was hearing a description coming from a local peasant. Some of the things he was saying just wouldn’t be accurate.

We watched the soldiers on the beach beside the airplane for hours, helicopters passing by us every few minutes, their occupants looking right at us. Before I knew it, it was past five p.m., and being restless, I decided it was time to take a chance and head toward Mazunte. As a gift to the poor farmer I gave him my LED flashlight, which required specialty batteries. I was sure that as soon as the batteries wore out it would become useless to him, but for the time being he would enjoy it. In exchange he gave me his old straw hat, which I gladly accepted as it helped me look more like a tourist. After a final drink of his water, I set off toward Mazunte.

The path was wide, obviously well used, a major route into the small

village. As I walked I thought of Jorge and the scientists. I wondered how they were being treated. Because they were legal, I had to believe after a short period of time they would be released, probably after a bribe was paid.

The scenic pathway snaked around the small hill I had spent my day on. In a short while, it changed into a poorly maintained road with small huts on either side. The closer I got to the town, the more the quality of the buildings improved. A short distance later the road turned, giving way to a spectacular view to the south. Small islands dotted the rugged coast, separated by narrow strips of white sand. The haze limited my view; I could see only about ten miles.

The quality of the road continued to improve, now looking quite well maintained. I noticed some gringos off to my left, working on a brick house with a great view. One of them was using a chisel and hammer to loosen the frame around a front window. He stopped working when he saw me approaching. I said hello and asked him what they were doing. He informed me that he was part of a group of Italians that had immigrated to this part of the world to build a small community, their refuge in this beautiful hidden part of Mexico. As we talked he explained that the village below was basically for eco-tourists. No major hotels, just hostels. I asked him if he knew what all the excitement was about and he explained that the military often carried out exercises in this area and not to worry about it. In his opinion they were harmless. Easy for him to say. He hadn't abandoned an Albatross on a beach.

A few minutes later I was back on the road, headed into Mazunte. Soon the road came to a T. On my side of the intersection was a soldier, leaning back lazily against a cement wall. With my heart in my mouth I walked by him as if nothing was happening and casually said in my best Spanish, "Hola, Señor."

He nodded but didn't speak, content to ignore me. I continued past him, anxiously hoping I wouldn't hear him say, "Gringo, identification please." I walked one hundred yards before I was able to breathe normally. My confidence returned. I'd made it past a soldier, no questions asked.

I walked along the road until I reached the beach. To my right was a small hotel, or should I say, a large shack, with a few rooms on the beach. Feeling more confident by the minute, I entered and asked the clean-cut Mexican clerk at the front desk if he had any available rooms.

"Nothing, Señor," he said. "The hotel is booked solid for months ahead." That's when I remembered that before the flight we used almost

every cent we had to pay for parking the Albatross at the airport. I was left with one dollar in my pocket. Jorge had a little money, but more importantly he had my passport and immigration papers, which he had needed to file the flight plan. In my panic to leave the airplane I had forgotten to ask for them.

I walked away from the beach and found the main street which was dotted with small brown brick houses. A half block later, I came upon a modest-sized supermarket, not like what we have in the north, but this little place had a bit of everything for sale. There were stereos and TVs, bicycles, a section with fresh vegetables and freezers full of frozen food. I asked the lady behind the desk who the owner was. She quickly pointed to a tall thin man standing behind a counter. He talked slowly, bartering with one of his customers.

I stood and waited for him to finish, then introduced myself as a tourist. I told him that the night before I had been drinking with some girls and lost my wallet, which had my money in it. I asked him if he would like to buy my gold-plated Casio watch, a gift that Jenny had bought me on my last birthday. I held up my wrist to him. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was eager to own this lovely timepiece. How much Jenny had paid for it I had no idea, so I took a stab in the dark and told him it cost over \$1,000. He nodded, impressed at the price, and asked how much I wanted for it. We bartered, eventually settling on a price of 3,000 pesos, or approximately \$300. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills and quickly counted out the money and handed it to me. Leaving the store I was elated, and so was the guy with my watch. I had 3,000 pesos, wasn't under arrest and there were no soldiers in sight. I was too happy to focus for very long on what Jenny would say when she learned I'd sold her gift.

Every small town in Mexico has a phone company office where you go in, pay and use the phone until the money runs out. Mazunte was no exception. After paying the lady one hundred pesos, I phoned Eric Ryman and told him of the situation. To say he wasn't impressed would be an understatement, especially when I told him I had abandoned the scientists. After a short conversation, he suggested I wait a couple of days for the smoke to settle, then get back to him. He assured me that with his contacts, he would find the scientists and take care of them.

Next I dialed Jenny's number in New York. I was surprised when the operator informed me that the number had been disconnected. I was certain I'd given the operator the correct number and asked her to dial one more time, only to receive the same message. My curiosity was

peaking. What could possibly have happened to Jenny's phone? Until a couple of days ago, I had spoken with her at least once a week. She had given me no indication that there were any problems. I called Virginia, a good friend of Jenny's whose number I happened to know by heart, because the last four digits were the same as mine and Jenny's, except in reverse order. Virginia told me she hadn't seen or heard from her in days. I decided I would try again tomorrow. Right now I had more immediate considerations to worry about.

This wasn't my first time in a foreign country with the military looking for me. The last time I had made the mistake of moving too quickly. I wasn't about to do that again. The beach was only a block away. After the phone calls I headed there. I looked in all directions. At the end of the beach to the north was the small mountain I had walked in from. In front of me was a tiny island with swimmers perched on its jagged edges. To the south was another rock outcropping that contained this short beach. It was maybe three hundred yards long and filled with tourists. I walked south, smiling at the white-skinned people sitting in their lawn chairs, some of them applying aloe vera onto the red sunburnt shoulders of their loved ones. Each section of the beach contained a restaurant and bar, tucked behind the many chairs and sun umbrellas that protected clients from the intense sun during the day. The sun was lower in the sky now, but it was still very hot. Removing my shirt to fit in better with the crowd, I approached a young couple. They were drinking beer while hiding under an umbrella.

I said in English, "Hi, how're you two doing?"

The man looked up and in perfect English said, "We're good. How are you?"

"I'm great. Where are you from?" I asked, trying to sound like a tourist making conversation.

"We're from Los Angeles."

I had to be careful what I said, just in case he knew the place. I was going to lie to him about. "I'm from Spokane, Washington. How long have you guys been down here?"

"About a week."

I could tell by his answers that he was uninterested in talking to me. He wanted to return to the conversation with his girlfriend and I couldn't blame him. She was stunning, with large blue eyes, shiny long blond hair and a body to die for. They had given me the information I was looking for. There were Americans here; I'd fit in just fine.

The roar from the surf curling onto the beach filled my ears as I walked

along the hardened sand where the waves had just retreated. At the south end of the beach was a small bar with a roof. There were six or seven stools in front of the makeshift bar. I dragged myself onto one of the stools and sat down in the shade. It was evening, but it was still too early for whatever activities took place here at night. After a short time a thin man—about thirty-five years old, dressed in a light cotton shirt, tan shorts and sandals—approached me carrying a case of beer. I had been too busy looking at the tourists and the waves to notice that he had pulled up in an old pickup truck from which he was unloading the beer. I jumped from my seat and in my best Spanish asked him, “Can I help you with that?”

He turned and looked me up and down before speaking. “I’ll give you a free beer if you help me unload these cases off the truck and into the cooler.”

I smiled broadly, truly happy. “You’ve got a deal.”

He put the case down on the bar and pushed his hand out toward me. “My name is Pablo.”

We shook hands, and without lying for the first time that day, I said, “My name is Alan. Pleased to meet you, Pablo.”

For the next few minutes we unloaded cases and stacked them beside the cooler. Then, one bottle at a time, we carefully placed the beer into the cooler. When we were finished, Pablo opened the coldest beer he could find and handed it to me.

“Enjoy,” he said as he opened one for himself. I sat on an empty carton drinking the beer slowly, enjoying the view and my freedom.

“Where are you from, Alan?” Pablo asked, making small talk.

“I’m from Canada, just down here checking things out. What’s this place all about?” I asked, trying to sound like a tourist.

Pablo informed me that Mazunte was famous for its turtles. At different times during the year they crawled up on the beaches and laid their eggs.

“Tourists will come from all over the world to watch.” He was quite sarcastic in adding, “Very exciting.”

I laughed at the way he told the story. When he finished, I asked him, “How did you get here?”

He was happy to tell me.

“I lived in Mexico City for most of my life, working as a video photographer,” he began. “I came down here one weekend about a year and a half ago and I’ve been here ever since. I run this bar and rent hammocks to the tourists.” He pointed at a hill where I could make out

at least ten thin yellow and red hammocks attached to posts and covered by a large asbestos-tiled roof. "It's very peaceful here; lots of tourist girls."

I nodded in agreement, dragged out some pesos and told Pablo, "My turn to buy."

He pulled out two more beers but refused to take my money. "How long are you planning to be here, Alan?"

"I don't really know. This place looks kind of nice. Maybe I'll stay a couple weeks. How much do you charge per night for a hammock?"

"I get thirty pesos a night. Do you want one?"

I grinned. Thirty pesos was equivalent to three dollars. This definitely wasn't the Ritz, but it was affordable. "How many girls do you have staying here at night?"

Pablo laughed at my question. "It depends. Sometimes none, sometimes quite a few."

"Do you want me to pay you in advance?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Actually, if you want, you can work off your rent by helping me around here."

I jumped at the opportunity. Not only would I be able to keep busy, but I would also fit in instead of wandering around the town looking lost. "It's a deal." We shook hands.

Pablo led me up a short set of stairs that were carved into the coral to a row of hammocks on the right of the landing. The view of the waves, combined with their music as they rolled onto the beach, was hypnotic.

"I sleep in that hammock." He pointed to the nearest. "If we're sold out, I sleep on the beach with a blanket. Keep your stuff wrapped inside your hammock. That way no one else will use it."

With only a small backpack containing a spare pair of underwear, shorts, another T-shirt and my GPS, I probably didn't look like a normal tourist, but if Pablo noticed he didn't say anything.

My first job was to fix two broken toilets on the far side of the sleeping area; water was continuously running through them. Pablo had bought two toilet repair kits on his last trip to the city. In no time I had both functioning properly. It was almost dark by the time I finished.

Walking back to the bar I noticed that the small rock island about one hundred feet offshore still had five or six men on it. I could see that they were fishermen, diving among the rocks to find shellfish. With darkness approaching, they soon swam toward the shore, pulling large mesh bags filled with their day's bounty.

I asked Pablo, "Are there any sharks in the water?"

He laughed. "Do you know how many times I've been asked that question?"

"Well?" I was laughing now too, still waiting for his answer.

"I won't lie to you, Alan. There probably are sharks out there from time to time, but I've been here for almost two years and I've never heard of anyone being bitten."

"Good enough for me." I threw my shirt on one of the stools, kicked my sandals off and ran into the surf.

The waves were at least six feet high. It took quite a bit of effort to swim out past them. I enjoyed the exercise and the refreshing feeling of being in the water. The ride back to the shore was exciting to say the least. I had to use all my strength to stay on top of the large waves as they broke on the beach. After rinsing off the salt water in the open air showers, I put on my dry clothes and returned to the bar.

Soon the place was very busy. I stayed behind the bar, serving beer to the tourists for thirty pesos apiece. Most of the people were couples from America, some were French. Only a few spoke Spanish. Pablo mixed fruity drinks and changed CDs, keeping the bar hopping until about three a.m. I felt as if I'd worked a full shift by the time the music ended. I said goodnight to Pablo and made my way to my hammock. It was swaying in the slight breeze. The evening's work and entertainment could not block my mind from the reality of my situation. There was no doubt that the Mexicans would think mine had been a smuggling mission and inform the DEA. Fingerprint evidence would soon tell them that I was the pilot, and because of the lack of help from Eric Ryman, I could safely assume that my employment would be terminated. Like a bad movie, the sequence of events played over and over in my head until I finally fell asleep.

The problem with sleeping in the open is that when the sun comes up, it's no longer comfortable. I awoke at about 7:30 in the morning to a very quiet beach. It was far too early for the tourists. At a nearby roadside restaurant I enjoyed a breakfast of fried eggs and fresh bread, plus a platter of mangoes, papaya and pineapple. After that I headed back to the ocean to play.

The waves were as magnificent as they had been the evening before. I swam out to the rocks where the fisherman had been working since daylight. I was surprised to find they would dive without masks down as far as thirty feet for their prizes. I stayed on the rock island until early afternoon and then swam back to shore. While taking a shower I realized that I had taken a little more sun than I really wanted; my body was glowing red like a lobster. Pablo gave me a container of aloe vera, which

I applied in a thick layer over my puffy, aching skin. For the rest of the day, I hid from the sun. That night was my second night working as a bartender. Pablo was pleased to have me and I was happy to be there.

The next day I went back to town, phoned Eric and asked him what the situation was. He was still pissed off. He informed me that, "When the Mexican military discovered the people I had abandoned with the plane were scientists and photographers, dedicated to gathering evidence to show how polluted the Mexican waters were, they treated them worse than if they had been smugglers. I had to pay \$30,000 to get them out of custody and more yet to get their equipment released."

Then he dropped the bomb, telling me, "The Mexican military is still looking for the pilot. The scientists ratted you out. They told the military everything they knew about you, including showing them pictures taken of the plastic world from the cockpit. Guess who was in one of the pictures?"

I remembered. When we were taxiing the Albatross into the plastic, Otto came forward taking pictures out every window. That must have been when he got me.

"So, let me get this straight, Eric. The military has my name and picture?"

"That's right. You're a commodity to them. Abandoning the plane made you look guilty. They'll extort you for money or put you in jail, maybe both. I suggest you get out of the country any way you can without showing your identification."

The line went dead. I stood there for a minute, letting his words sink in. Then I tried phoning Jenny, only to receive the same recording; her phone number had been disconnected. I was starting to feel abandoned. There were still options. I could call my brother John. I knew he would help me, but I wasn't quite ready for the verbal beating I would have to suffer first. Phoning him would be my worst case scenario.

I made my way back to the bar to my friend Pablo, who was sitting with two gorgeous French girls. Like many Canadians, I can speak a little French, and he couldn't. I translated for him; they were tourists and would be with us for four days.

During the next four days, I became the unofficial tour guide for Mazunte. Pablo and I took the girls to the turtle museum. Though it was quite small, it was interesting. It was there that I came to believe that turtles are very smart, sensitive animals that shouldn't be killed. They were the only natural defense against a catastrophic jellyfish explosion.

Our mornings and evenings were filled with swimming or walking

along the lengthy beaches exploring the area. The girls were intrigued by my alertness to our surroundings. I convinced them that we had to avoid contact with the police or the military in this remote part of Mexico. I told them a story that Pablo had told me about two tourists who were shot and robbed by someone in uniform. The woman lived to tell about it; her boyfriend didn't. Soon I had the girls acting like combat marines checking out a beachhead. They were fun.

Too soon they were headed back to France. We parted as friends, not lovers.

Early in the morning on my tenth day, Pablo woke me in my hammock, yelling for me to come down to the bar. His tone conveyed an urgency to the situation. I smoothly descended the uneven stairs to the bar below. Laid out in front of me was my picture on the front page of a local newspaper. It was grainy and could easily have been someone else. Pablo looked at me and laughed.

"You didn't tell me you're a pilot, Mr. Richards." He laughed some more. Not only did the newspaper have my picture and my full name, but they had printed some not very flattering episodes from my past. The two-page story started out by describing how I had come from a good Canadian family and had fallen into smuggling. It went on to say that I had been arrested in southern Florida and convicted of smuggling pot, and that there was an arrest warrant for me in the U.S. for a probation violation. As if this wasn't bad enough, it went on to say that I was wanted in Canada for outstanding warrants. My past was catching up with me.

The picture showed me with aviator sunglasses in front of overly white skin. The image wasn't the same as I looked today. During the time I had been with Pablo, I had spent many hours in the sun. My face was now quite dark and I had a scraggly beard. After seeing my picture, I had no intention of shaving.

"Is someone coming to get you? What's your plan?" Pablo asked as he unconsciously rubbed his hand over his chin.

My plan? My only plan for now was not to get caught. The last time I abandoned an airplane on a beach was in Venezuela a few years back. My copilot and I walked all night to a small town, hopped on a bus and rode to an immigration checkpoint where the military was waiting for us. After two months in prison, and with the help of Pablo Escobar, we escaped, only to be taken to Colombia and forced to fly missions for the cartel. Moving fast had gotten me caught last time, so now, I was moving slowly.

My situation was complicated and impossible to explain, so I lied. "I'm

still working on my plan. For now, I figure I'll stay here with you." For some reason that I'll never understand, I thought my words were funny and started laughing.

Pablo came over to me and put his arm around my shoulder. "Amigo, you can stay as long as you like."

I looked Pablo in the eye and said as sincerely as I could, "Thank you, my friend."

3. RESCUED

After failing to reach Jenny, I finally called her father, Victor. He informed me that she was out of town, something about a job interview with an orchestra. He said he didn't know what was wrong with the phone but that I shouldn't worry. I phoned her brother Paul, and he gave me much the same story. I was worried, but there wasn't anything I could do.

It was now two full weeks since I'd abandoned the Albatross. During that time I had become a familiar face in Mazunte. As the days went by my time became more and more routine. In the morning I would have a brisk swim, then a good breakfast at the same small roadside café.

During the day, I dared not travel too far for fear of running into a military roadblock or being recognized by the secret police presumably looking for me. My new friend Pablo kept me informed of what was being said about me in the newspapers. The military was making a really big deal about the plane, implying that it was carrying a large amount of cocaine, declaring that finding the pilot and the drugs was only a matter of time.

Eventually the news about the airplane, as well as the local gossip, began to die down. During the first few days the Mexican Air Force helicopters had been everywhere, flying along the beach, sometimes directly overhead, but that too had diminished. For the last two or three days, we saw the helicopters only once during the early morning and again in late afternoon. They were giving up the search.

The girls at the restaurant now knew me so well they would bring me fresh-squeezed orange juice on their first pass by my table without my asking. I sat at the same small table in the outdoor dining area, always ordering coffee, scrambled eggs, ham and toast, and a platter of fresh fruit. I was so preoccupied one morning with trying to figure my way out of Mexico that I almost failed to notice how pretty the young waitress looked. She wore a new floral dress that perfectly accented the curves of her breasts and hips.

As I was sipping the sweet juice she had brought me, I saw two men walk together into the dining area. They separated, one moving to my left and the other right. I put my glass down slowly. These guys didn't look like locals. Mazunte is a tourist town where people wear shorts or cut-offs. These men were muscular and wore cheap-looking medium blue

suits, clothing completely unsuitable for the high temperatures and humidity of southern coastal Mexico. A few anxious seconds passed, then a third man entered. He was older than me, tall and well built, dressed in expensive pants and a well-pressed light blue shirt. He looked like a union leader about to give a speech. To my surprise, he walked directly to my table and pulled out the chair across from me and sat down like an old friend joining me for breakfast.

“Good morning, Alan,” he said nonchalantly.

My heart, which was racing, warned me that this conversation would be anything but good. I’ve had a lot of experiences confronting strangers in my life, and more than a few have gone very bad. After a few such situations you develop an intuition, a sixth sense, especially when a stranger calls you by name. The clean-cut man in front of me was a cop of some sort. Worse yet, I could tell by his accent that he was an American cop, one that couldn’t be bribed. For him to be in Mexico with two other men meant he had to be some kind of special cop, here just for me. The good news was that no one was pointing any guns or telling me I was under arrest.

Deciding there was no sense in denying my identity, I smiled as pleasantly and calmly as I could. “Good morning,” I said, trying to act unconcerned. “I seem to be at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

The man smiled and nodded slowly. “You can call me Fred. I’ve always liked that name.” The game was on. This guy was a real player.

“Okay, Fred,” I answered, still smiling on the outside. My next question was a scary one, but it had to be asked. “Am I under arrest?”

“Not just yet,” was Fred’s icy response.

Not just yet. I repeated those words in my head trying to guess what this was all about. After a flurry of confused thoughts, I decided this man wanted me to squirm before he let me hear the truth.

The pretty waitress reappeared and placed my breakfast in front of me, the hot black coffee steaming. “Can I get you anything else, sir?” she asked politely.

“No, thank you. This is fine,” I said. We exchanged smiles. Her innocent face showed that nothing seemed out of the ordinary to her. She turned toward Fred, but he quickly lifted his hand as if to say there was nothing he wanted.

“Go ahead and have your breakfast. We’re in no hurry,” Fred said after she walked away.

I looked at the food and then pushed the plate aside. “I’ve lost my

appetite.”

Fred leaned forward. A sly grin came over his face as he folded his hands on the table. “Well then, Alan, let me get to the point. We’ve been watching you for quite some time, and I for one am very impressed with your flying.” He paused for effect.

“So I guess you’re here about the Albatross. I can explain that.”

Fred raised his hand as he had to the waitress, motioning me to stop. “I’m not concerned about the Albatross. Since 9/11, we’ve been keeping track of all large airplanes bought in the U.S. We had a GPS tracking device in the plane long before you got it. Originally, we thought the plane was for smuggling drugs. That’s why we were watching you by satellite. But that has nothing to do with why I’m here now. But I must say your flying was impressive, landing and taking off in those big waves. Yeah, that was good flying.”

I wanted to thank him for the compliment but didn’t. The anticipation was killing me. If he wasn’t here about the Albatross, then why was he here? And how did he know about my takeoffs and landings?

“To be quite honest with you, I was far more impressed with what you did a couple of years ago when you flew into Cuba and picked up... How many people was it? And then you brought them back to the U.S.? I’m guessing you knew that was illegal.” Fred was still smiling with his eyebrows raised. The way he spoke almost sounded as if he were a fan of mine.

I had almost forgotten the flight he referred to. It was one of those bad memories I had buried, hoping it would disappear. I had flown from Homestead Airport on a sightseeing flight plan into the Bahamas. I took a detour into Cuba and landed on a small dirt road between sugarcane fields where I picked up family members for a Cuban friend of mine, Javier, and flew them back to the States. Because the flight plan did not include any stops in the Bahamas, we re-entered the States without clearing Customs. The reunion at the airport made it seem all worthwhile. The dumb part was that I did it all for free. I even paid for the fuel. In my mind it was a humanitarian act. Javier had missed his family dearly and wanted to bring them to America to improve their lives.

I thought I’d gotten away with it clean, but obviously I was wrong. Whoever this guy was, he knew far too much about me. One of my brother’s favorite expressions rang in my ears: No good deed goes unpunished. The question was: What would the repercussions be? And how would Jenny handle it if I were to be thrown in jail again?

If we had been playing chess, Fred would have just put my king into

checkmate. He looked that cool and confident. I looked left and right, eyeing his two buddies. I knew they'd close in on me fast if I tried to make a run for it, not that I had anywhere to run to. As far as I could tell, he had me. I was dead meat.

"You look surprised," Fred said. "Wait, it gets even better. By the way, are you sure you don't want those eggs?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not hungry anymore."

As if he had been hoping for them all along, he reached across the table, snatched my plate and slid it over to his side.

"No sense letting this go to waste," he said as he began to eat my breakfast. I dragged my coffee mug close before he decided to commandeer that too. I took a sip and watched in silence as he ate. He was definitely enjoying himself.

Several times, he looked over his right shoulder at the restaurant's entrance as if he were expecting someone to appear.

"Seeing as how we have a few minutes," he said casually, a piece of my ham skewered on his fork, "why don't you go ahead and tell me about some of the adventures you and Mario had. That was some pretty exciting stuff when you were in Venezuela and Colombia, si?"

I could feel my gut tightening even more. "You must be mistaking me for someone else," I replied coolly.

"Not likely. There's only one of you. Believe me, there's only one." Fred laughed as he wiped his mouth on a napkin. He glanced at one of the men who had come in before him and the man nodded without expression. Then Fred turned back to me. "I have another surprise for you," he continued and stood up. "Now that we've had a good breakfast, why don't we take a little walk?"

"You had a good breakfast," I shot back sarcastically. Now he had me looking at the door every few seconds.

I wasn't sure I could handle another surprise. As I rose from my chair, I saw both suits in my peripheral vision. They were coming closer. I dug fifty pesos out of my pocket, set it down on the table and followed Fred out of the restaurant with the two men close behind. The part of me that remains objective during times like this was kicking myself. Why was I buying breakfast for a cop who was undoubtedly here to arrest me?

Fred and I walked together down the short paved road that led to Pablo's bar, his men close behind us. I wondered from which suit jacket the handcuffs would appear, and who would say the magic words: You're under arrest. I was close enough to the suits to hear one of them say to Fred, "He's waiting for us at the bar." Who were they talking about?

Pablo? I silently hoped my problems had not spread to him.

As we approached the bar, I saw a light-skinned Latino man sitting on one of the stools, talking casually to Pablo. My first thought was that this guy, wearing expensive clothes that made him look like a pimp, looked a lot like Mario Rodriguez.

Mario had been my copilot and interpreter a few years back on a flight that was supposed to be from Miami to Colombia. It should have taken only a couple of days. Instead, the flight went from Miami to Venezuela and it took almost eight months. We should have delivered an airplane to its new owner, collected our fee and headed back in an airliner. Instead we made a fiery off-airport emergency landing, and within the first few hours of our arrival, we were picked up by Venezuelan authorities and accused of being drug runners. Later—much later—we escaped from a Venezuelan prison where we endured constant threats, poor living conditions and torture at the hands of some very nasty people.

But escaping Venezuela turned out to be only the beginning of our misadventure. Afterward, we had to escape from the Colombians who had arranged for our prison escape and who thought they owned us as a result. Pilots are a highly valued commodity in Colombia. Mario and I didn't even like each other much when we first left Miami. But after spending over seven months together, in prisons and then in a camp in the northeastern part of Colombia, the Guajira, also known as the Red Zone, things changed. We shared a history by then, and even though it wasn't a pretty one, it had brought us close.

I had put together a plan for us to escape and get back to the States, but he had fallen in with some people who had promised to help him escape in another way. At the time he thought their plan sounded better than mine. I begged him to come with me. Their plan sounded like a death sentence to me. But he wouldn't come and I couldn't stay, so I left him in Barranquilla. Once I got home I tried to find out what had happened to him. I tried for months and months. After more than a year of looking, I ran out of leads, and that's when I stopped looking for him.

As the distance between us shortened, I had this thought: Shit, it is Mario! How could this be? When I was only a few feet away, he jumped from his stool and rushed me. We shook hands and hugged. Then, in typical Latin style, we shook hands again. I was so astonished to see him I forgot for a moment that there were three men surrounding us, looking on stoically at our happy reunion.

"What's going on, Mario? Who are these guys? Where the hell have you been all this time? Why didn't you contact me to let me know you

were alive?”

“Relax, Alan, it’s not what you think,” he said. “I’ll explain everything. Let’s go for a walk.” He pulled me by my arm and we walked toward the beach, leaving Fred and his men to keep Pablo company. When we reached the water’s edge where the waves had receded, leaving the sand hard enough for us to walk on comfortably, Mario began to speak.

“Alan, what I’m about to tell you is top secret. You and I have been through a lot together and I think of you as my brother. I need you to agree that you will never repeat anything I say to anyone outside our group.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Are you feeling important these days, Mario? Top secret.”

“Just promise me.”

“If it makes you happy, I promise I won’t tell anybody anything you say. Do you want to swap spit?”

We both laughed at my question. It definitely eased a tense moment.

Then he grew serious. “I work for the CIA as an independent contractor. When we first flew together, I was hoping you would be my ticket into the cartel, and you were. I was going to tell you when we were still in Colombia. We were going to try to recruit you, but you wouldn’t stop nagging me about leaving. Besides, you were like a one-man wrecking crew. You did more damage to the cartel’s operation than any agent. You got me inside their operation. Once there, I couldn’t take a chance and tell you. It was just too damn dangerous. I worked for years in Colombia with the contacts I made through you. Over a hundred arrests and tons of coke seized, all thanks to you.”

I began to laugh very hard, from the gut, because I thought this was a joke. Mario was a pretty boy, much more interested in attracting beautiful women than in anything close to spy work, or so I thought. But he was not laughing with me. His face was still set with a grave expression. I looked back toward the bar at the three men watching us, who seemed to share the same grave expressions.

I was confused. Everything that had happened since breakfast, or lack thereof, was confusing.

“You know what, I don’t really care who you work for. I thought of you as a brother. You could have had the decency to let me know you were alive. All this time I was carrying around a ton of guilt, thinking you were dead and believing it was my fault.” Still racing from my adrenaline rush, I was almost yelling. “And what about your mother? Has she been in on this too? Calling me, telling me stories, making the guilt even worse?”

Thanks, buddy.”

“I never knew you cared so much,” Mario said, trying to lighten the moment.

I stared at him, hoping my face portrayed the anger I was feeling.

“Alan, please. Just listen to what I’ve got to say. You’re going to like this.”

At that moment I didn’t think I would, but I was silent. At the very least, I owed him an opportunity to speak. I nodded at my former colleague, my former friend.

“I’m listening.”

“It was necessary, and for your sake, safer that you didn’t know I worked for the government. If you were pushed into a corner and forced to talk, it was better that you knew nothing. In fact, I’m sure you remember that at one point you were pushed into a corner and you had nothing to say because you knew nothing. You were believable; you even passed a lie detector test. Makes sense? That’s why I didn’t tell you I worked for the government. It was safer for you.”

He was referring to a few days of torture I underwent in Venezuela after I was mistaken for someone else. I didn’t like to be reminded of that event.

“Get to the point, Mario. You’re losing me.” I had a sharp memory of how much I had disliked many things about him, back when we had worked together. I’d forgotten how manipulative he could be. Now I understood why. He was a pro at flattering people, right before he asked them to do something for him. He was crafty like a fox.

“The woman you talked to on the phone who said she was my mother, she’s also an agent for the Company. Listen, I’m sorry about the deception, but it was necessary. Now that you know the truth, can we move on?”

I had to agree with him there. “Okay, enough about the past. Why are you here?”

He laughed and put his arm around my shoulder. “I’ve come to rescue you.”

I looked at his smiling face and we both broke out into laughter. “Good timing.” We laughed some more.

“Seriously, we’ve got a mission and you’re the best person for it,” he stated bluntly. I opened my mouth, but he flashed his hand in front of my face and went on. “Just let me finish before you interrupt me. Fidel Castro has a baseball program in Cuba that is probably the best in the world. It’s like a religion over there. We want you to fly into Cuba, land on a road

just like you did before, and pick up two of the country's best baseball players."

"Mario—" I tried to interrupt.

"Wait, it gets better. They're going to pay you \$250,000 for each player. Cash, tax free."

"Yeah, right. Whatever you're on buddy, I want some. You work for the CIA, you're here to rescue me, and all I have to do is fly into Cuba and pick up two people and I get half a million?" I continued slowly and as sarcastically as possible. "Why am I blessed with this amazing opportunity?"

"Your flying ability, for one. Trust me what I'm saying is true."

I shook my head at him. "When it sounds too good to be true..." I muttered. Yet, I had to admit, he had my attention. The only goal I had at the moment was getting out of Mexico and back to Jenny. With that kind of money she would easily forgive me for selling the watch, and a few other misdeeds I'd committed along the way. During our last few phone conversations she'd mentioned some of them, and I'd promised to turn over a new leaf. I told her when I got back I'd either get a full-time job or start up some kind of small business. I was pretty sure there wasn't much I could start with the money I had in my pocket. If what Mario was saying was true, I'd be set. We could easily buy a house and a business. It was the American dream. Jenny would love it.

"Tell me more about why I'm the best person for this job," I demanded.

"You're a Canadian, Alan. If something goes wrong in Cuba, the United States Government can disavow any knowledge of your action. That saves them a lot of problems. And with your shady background, no one's going to believe anything you say about working for the CIA." He laughed. "See, you're perfect."

I didn't know whether to take that last remark as a compliment or an insult. It sounded rehearsed. For one thing, "disavow" was not a word Mario would have come up with on his own. At least not the Mario I had known in Miami and South America. Or maybe acting like a bad boy out for a good time was just his MO back then.

"Great," I said. "They want me because I'm disposable and unbelievable."

"Don't worry. You won't be going alone. I'll be going with you." He grinned and I saw something of the old Mario glittering in his eye.

"Oh, that's even better," I said mockingly. "Look what happened the last time we flew together." But I was grinning too.

I wondered how far the CIA would go to make such a mission a success. I thought about the conversation Fred and I had while he was eating my breakfast. My less than honorable background had put me in a position to be blackmailed. Since it seemed I didn't have much choice in the matter, I thought I might as well make the best of it.

"How much upfront money are they willing to pay? And who pays for the airplane and the expenses?"

"The Company will pay for everything, and I'm sure there'll be upfront money." Mario smiled his big smile and went on. "It's not like you have a lot of other opportunities at this moment." He was right about that. "Just think about it for a few minutes, please. What are your other options?"

"What happens if I say no?"

"We leave and you stay here. There are other people who want to do this mission. There's no gun to your head."

He was playing with me; first giving me this opportunity, then taking it away.

"I don't think staying here is in my best interest."

With that said, we both laughed, then turned and walked back to the bar where Fred and his men were waiting. When we arrived, I walked up to Fred and asked, "Are you the boss?"

Fred nodded in the affirmative.

"I have a couple of small requests, other than the money. Since I'll be risking my freedom and my life, I'd like American citizenship when this is over. I want papers so I can live like a normal person."

"We can do that," Fred said without blinking an eye. "No problem."

"Will you put that in writing?" I asked.

"Come on, Alan. You know we can't do that. You have to trust us," Mario piped in.

I ignored him and kept my eyes on Fred. "There's one other little thing. I have this small misunderstanding with the Justice Department in the States..."

Fred spoke almost before I finished. "Small misunderstanding would be putting it mildly. There's a prosecutor and a cop that want you dead or alive. Seems you made some promises you didn't plan on keeping."

"I can explain that," I said quickly.

"I'm all ears."

"The cop and the prosecutor were blackmailing me into falsely testifying against my friends. I told those idiots the damndest lies and they believed me. When it came time to go to court, I disappeared and they were pissed. The charges against my friends were dropped. Now,

because I didn't take part in their lies, they want to put me in jail."

Fred waved his hand to interrupt me. "I had a feeling you would want this job, so I took care of it before we left. It wasn't easy. I had to have the prosecutor promoted to a judge to shut him up. The cop wasn't a problem; we had lots on him. Alan, I guarantee you there are no warrants for you in the United States or Canada."

Wow, that was a big one. I was starting to like this guy. "How quickly do you want me to do this?"

"As soon as you're ready," he answered. His somber expression had changed. Now he was smiling like he'd just won the lottery.

"Oh, one other little thing," I said. He turned with his palms up as if to say, What else? "I'm sure you know I'm kind of popular with the Mexican army right now. By any chance have you given any thought to getting me out of the country?"

He waved off my question. Without answering he nodded toward one of the men in the cheap suits. He lifted his right sleeve to his mouth and spoke into what I assumed was a hidden microphone. Compared to how I felt thirty minutes ago, convinced I was going to prison for a very long time, I had to admit I felt relieved. This wasn't quite the same as being forced by kill-happy Colombian thugs with guns to fly drug missions, flights one step removed from suicide. And I might come out of this with a lot of money in my pocket. Jenny wouldn't like the mission, though. I'd have to play it down when I told her, make it sound less dangerous, focus on the money part.

A pair of black Chevrolet Suburbans with Mexican license plates pulled up and parked beside Pablo's little bar. Seeing the SUVs arrive, Mario turned to me. "Alan, we're ready to go. Get your things."

I hustled to my hammock and quickly grabbed the small cotton bag that contained my GPS, a pair of shorts, toiletries and a couple of new T-shirts that I had bought from the beach vendors. I returned to the bar, shook hands with Pablo and gave him my remaining pesos. One way or another, I wouldn't need them. I thanked him for everything he had done for me. As we walked to the black SUVs, he shouted, "Alan, don't forget your friend in Mazunte. You're welcome here anytime."

With a big smile and a wave, I said goodbye to Pablo.

Fred got into the front seat of one of the Suburbans, while Mario and I jumped in the back. The two men in suits sat in the other Suburban. Fred turned and looked back at the small bag that held my belongings. "You like to travel light, don't you?"

I didn't answer.

The paved road from Mazunte to the Huatulco Airport followed the beach almost all the way. We sat quietly, enjoying the magnificent scenery. It was constantly changing from deep green jungle to ocean vistas that were nothing less than spectacular. This would be where I would take Jenny for our honeymoon.

There were three military roadblocks between us and the airport. We breezed through each one effortlessly after Fred flashed his identification to the soldiers, without a word spoken. When we arrived at the airport it was pretty much the same treatment. Because Fred and his crew had established themselves earlier that morning, gates were opened without any checks for identification. With my grubby clothes and unshaven face, I looked out of place beside him and his men. I was quite impressed that no one questioned us. Fred was for real. Two hours after meeting him, I was sitting in the plush tan leather seat of a Gulfstream IV, taxiing for takeoff.

Once we were airborne, I asked Mario, "Where are we going?" I was so desperate to leave Mexico that I hadn't bothered to ask about our destination.

Reading my mind, he grinned. "Opa-Locka Airport in Miami. We should be there in about four and a half hours."

"Does this jet have any food on board? I'm starving. Fred ate my breakfast."

Mario laughed and pointed to the back of the airplane. "There's a full galley back there. Help yourself."

This was the first time I had ever flown in a Gulfstream. The interior was opulent; all the comforts a fast-paced chief executive would demand. Unlike the smaller business jets I had flown, this aerial palace had a stand-up cabin—high enough for people taller than six feet to move around effortlessly without bending down.

In the back of the airplane was the large galley Mario had mentioned. I found a hot coffee urn on a counter next to a small fridge. In the fridge were fruits, vegetables, soft drinks and fresh cold cuts. A nearby basket held fresh buns and a loaf of multi-grain bread. The bar had at least thirty types of whiskey, brandies and liqueurs. It had been quite some time since I had enjoyed American food. I made a thick beef, onion and lettuce sandwich, opened a Coke and returned to my seat to slowly savor my feast.

Mario eyed my sandwich, then he quickly made his way to the galley and returned with one thicker than mine. I had seldom known him to miss a meal. As we ate, he and I discussed the upcoming mission.

RED ZONE

“We’re going to need an airplane,” I offered, “and that could take some time.”

“No problem,” he replied. “The Drug Enforcement Agency has a hangar full of confiscated airplanes at Opa-Locka. We can get you whichever one you want.”

We talked for hours, catching up on each other’s lives over the last few years. The time passed quickly, and soon we were landing in Miami.

4. BACK IN THE USA

The Gulfstream touched down smoothly on the longest of the east-west runways at the Opa-Locka Airport. We taxied to a huge hangar, its large doors partially open and with Air Force markings clearly visible on them. Walking down the Gulfstream's stairs to the tarmac, I peered into the hangar and saw a shiny recently-painted Grumman Albatross. It was a more modern model than the one I had left on the beach. After a long admiring look I was certain that this must be one of the best examples still flying. Two Jet Skis were attached to the lower surfaces of the wings where the long-range fuel tanks normally hung. She was beautiful, fully customized, no comparison to the one I'd abandoned.

As we got closer to it, I asked Mario, "Where'd you get this beauty from?"

"Marijuana smugglers. They landed her in the water off the coast of Jamaica, went ashore with the Jet Skis and towed back inflatable boats filled with large bales of pot. Pretty ingenious...until the DEA caught them in the act."

"How'd they catch them?"

Mario laughed. "Bad timing. A DEA plane was flying a training flight over Jamaica that morning. It was pure dumb-ass luck, spotting the smugglers as they loaded their last boatload of weed into the plane. This plane is so big and colorful a blind man couldn't miss it."

I would love to fly this airplane, but it wouldn't work for this mission—it was much too big and far too slow. I forced myself to look beyond the Albatross. There were several Cessna 206s and 210s, and at least half a dozen Piper Navajos—once the preferred airplane of anyone in the smuggling business. There were two twin-engine Aero Commanders, one piston-powered and the other with turbine engines, and a gorgeous Piper Cheyenne 400LS.

"Does this one run?" I asked, already moving toward it. The attraction was instant.

"Every airplane you see here is in running condition. Do you like it?"

I felt like a kid in a toy store, one who had just been told he'd been a good boy and could have any toy he wanted. My frame of mind at that moment was precisely the part of me that Jenny liked least.

"Oh yeah, this is a magnificent airplane," I said to him. "Two counter-rotating Garrett turbine engines, 1,000 shaft horsepower each on a tiny

airframe, with aftermarket five-blade propellers.” Chuck Yeager, the famous U.S. Air Force officer who first broke the sound barrier back in 1947 in the Bell X-1 rocket plane, had recently set a bunch of new performance records in this very type of airplane. “It climbs to 40,000 feet faster than a Boeing, yet it can land on very short unimproved runways. Someone spent a ton of money on this baby.”

In front of each engine the five-bladed propellers looked huge. I knew only a few had this modification. There were two benefits to this type of propeller. Because they were shorter blades than the original, there was more propeller clearance above the ground. This is especially important when operating from dirt strips; the five-blade props also shortened the takeoff run and improved what was already a magnificent climb rate.

I turned to Mario. “This airplane is perfect for what we want to do. With this bird, we can get in and out really fast.”

“Can you fly her?” he asked.

“You bet, although I’ve never flown this exact model. I have flown a Cheyenne III; it’s the same airplane, only with Pratt & Whitney engines. I also have a type certificate for the Swearingen 3B, which has similar Garrett engines. It won’t be a problem. I’ll just need a little practice to get to know her.” Then it hit me, a thought I’d suppressed while examining the DEA’s stable of airplanes.

I turned to him. “Why don’t I take her to New York for a practice flight? That way I can explain to Jenny what’s going on in person. I can show her the airplane; maybe take her for a little ride. I can get to know the plane while flying up there and back and kill two birds with one stone. She’ll love it.” Or at least I hoped she would.

Fred, who was listening intently to our conversation, stepped a foot closer to us. “No problem, as long as Mario goes with you.”

Believing I had just scored a major victory, I climbed up the Piper’s rear stair door and walked up the long aisle to the cockpit. There were eight passenger seats, covered in off-white leather that looked as soft as baby’s skin. I touched them to be sure. In the cockpit were the latest avionics and electronics, everything gleaming and new. I sat in the pilot’s seat. This was the biggest and fastest plane Piper ever made. It would be a privilege to fly this hotrod.

The Pilot’s Operating Handbook was in a stretchy mesh pocket on the cabin wall to the left of my seat. I pulled it out and glanced through the pages. On the front page in big letters it said, “1991 Piper Cheyenne 400LS.” An evening with this book and I would be good to go.

Fred came in behind me.

“Can you have your mechanic go through this baby one more time and make sure it’s perfect?” I asked him. “Then, if it’s okay, tomorrow Mario and I will fly up to New York and surprise my girlfriend.” In my mind’s eye I could picture our reunion: Mario and I walking to the front door—already mesmerized by the sweet, sad sounds of Jenny’s violin coming from a front window—inserting the key and opening the door. There I stand, looking directly at her, her perfect chin positioned on the violin’s chin rest; the bow coming slowly to a stop as she wonders if she can believe her eyes, her lips parting to allow a smile. This was going to be good.

“We can do that. It’ll be ready for tomorrow morning,” Fred said seriously. His actions made it obvious that they wanted this project to move forward as fast as possible. “I’ll have five thousand in cash for you tomorrow morning. That should cover your expenses for a few days.” He lowered his head like a man in deep thought. Then he lifted it again. “One other thing, Alan. After you pick up the ballplayers, you can’t bring them back to the States. That would cause a few too many problems. Do you know where Moores Island is?”

“Of course. It’s northeast of Nassau. A little island with a short coral runway.”

“Can you land there with this airplane?”

“No problem.”

“Good. That’s where I want you to take the ballplayers.”

“Anything else I need to know?” I opened a storage compartment and saw that it contained several maps of the U.S., Caribbean and South America. “Man, the previous owners were ready to fly just about anywhere,” I mumbled to myself.

Fred thought before he spoke again. “I hope you’re not offended, but I’ll only give you the information you need to know.”

“Hell no. I understand you guys are spies. Everything’s on a need-to-know basis. Don’t worry about it, Fred. I watch TV.”

When he finished laughing, he asked, “Is there anything else?”

I was embarrassed, but I had to ask. “I need a few personal things, like a new watch. Could you advance me, say, two hundred dollars?”

Fred laughed, then he took out his wallet and counted out \$200 and gave it to me. “Looks like we arrived just in time.”

“Yeah, I have to admit, your timing was good.”

He and I climbed out of the Cheyenne. I had taken the aircraft manual from the cockpit and showed it to Fred. He nodded his okay. Then he left Mario and me to do whatever CIA agents do.

“Alan, you can sleep here in the hangar if you want, but I have an apartment with an extra bedroom you can use,” Mario said.

“Sounds good. First I need to stop at a Wal-Mart and pick up a few things.”

He nodded and we climbed into the back of the black Crown Victoria that was waiting for us, one of Fred’s men in the driver’s seat. We stopped at Wal-Mart where I picked up some toiletries and a new Timex watch. After we cruised through the Miami streets for perhaps ten minutes, we pulled into the driveway of what looked like a pricey apartment building. The driver stopped in front and popped open the trunk.

“This is where I live,” Mario said as I got out and thanked the driver. “I’ve got a nice place with a view of the ocean. You’re going to like it.”

How many times today had he said, You’re going to like it? So far, on this day at least, he had been right. This morning I had been a scared sought-after fugitive in a foreign country. Now, I was entering a nice apartment building in the United States of America a free man. I was feeling pretty good. Flying into Cuba in the Cheyenne was an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up, especially with the huge financial payoff.

Mario’s apartment was nice, very nice, just like he said. After a quick tour he showed me my bedroom. It was painted sky blue and had its own fully equipped bathroom. I borrowed some clothes from him, then took a quick shower and shaved. I was beginning to feel human again, back in the game. I lay down on the bed and turned on the lamp to begin reading through the aircraft manual. I had numerous questions for Mario, but since we’d be spending a lot of time together, they could wait. For now I planned on memorizing the emergency procedures, plus a few critical airspeeds and power settings.

In less than an hour I had finished my first pass through the book. Taking a break, I looked for Mario. He was nowhere to be found. Looking out over the balcony, I saw him below, floating in a small kidney-shaped swimming pool in the middle of the courtyard. There were approximately twenty people in the water, most of them young women. If I knew Mario, he was probably lying through his teeth to them, his *modus operandi* when he was around women. I could only imagine his cover story for living in this apartment.

Later, while we were having a quick dinner of leftover Chinese food, he told me that one of the girls from the pool had said she might be in love with him. As usual his mind was running on one track; his ego was as big as ever. He went on bragging about the intimate conversation he’d

had with this girl Ramona, but I was only half listening. I was thinking about how cool it would be to see Jenny tomorrow. I had convinced myself that she would be happy for me. Now I had a job working for the U.S. Government, the CIA no less. An easy job; all I was doing was fly to Cuba to liberate a couple of jocks. If I explained it right she'd be relieved, not angry. Best of all, I'd be making money, a lot of it. It was a no-brainer. Jenny would see that.

Tomorrow I would be home and surprise her. I returned to my room and spent the rest of the night studying the manual while Mario continued to chase the latest love of his life.

The next morning I awoke around six, made myself a cup of coffee and sat on the veranda overlooking the ocean. I brought the operating manual, proof positive that the dreams I'd been having all night about flying the Cheyenne weren't imagined. This would be a big day and I was anxious to get started. After one more look at the manual I took a quick shower and on the way out of the bathroom, I yelled to Mario, "Hey, let's get going, amigo."

I dressed, turned on the television and found the Weather Channel. I have always believed it is the best source for learning almost everything I need to know about the weather I'll be flying through. The attractive blonde in the too-bright orange blazer talked about a few scattered clouds, warm temperatures with light winds over the eastern seaboard of America. The flight to New York would be easy.

The apartment building was forty-two stories high. On the top floor was a very private restaurant with a spectacular view. We went there for breakfast. I couldn't help but notice how friendly the pretty young waitress was with us, or, should I say, with Mario. It was the same girl from the day before at the pool. When I asked Mario if this was the Ramona he had been telling me about, he just smiled that stupid grin of his. This was so familiar to me I had to laugh. We were both in a very good mood.

Fred picked us up at exactly eight o'clock as promised. The pilot in me was impressed with his punctuality. On the way to the airport, we discussed the mission. He told me I would be responsible for planning the flight; how I wanted to do it was up to me. I told him I would need maps of the Bahamas, plus satellite shots of the area where we'd be landing in Cuba. It seemed sensible to fly this mission the same way I had the last one into Cuba.

We would leave Miami on a flight plan to Abaco Island in the Bahamas. When I got close to the island, I would cancel my flight plan. To anyone

looking or listening, we would appear to be normal daytime traffic. After passing Abaco, we would descend to about fifty feet to keep us invisible to Cuban radar. From there we would fly the exact route as the airlines do when they cross through Cuban airspace. With luck, if someone were to report a low flying airplane, the Cuban military air controllers would be confused long enough for us to quickly get in and out. I wanted to land like I did the last time, on a dirt road surrounded by sugarcane fields. The most difficult part would be coordinating our pickup spot with the baseball players. Once we had the satellite pictures, we could agree on a time and landing site.

Fred liked what he heard and assured me he would have all the pictures and maps ready by the time Mario and I returned from New York. With the plan finalized, he and I spent the rest of the ride to the airport bugging Mario about his love life. He cracked us up with the details.

We arrived at the airplane, which had been moved to a position outside the hanger, just as the fuel truck was leaving. The Piper was ready to go. I climbed into the Cheyenne and picked out the maps I would need for today's flight. The maps for the U.S. were a little out of date, but not much had changed. There would be no problem using them. I'd flown many times with less—far less.

I had memorized the walk-around inspection the night before and started giving the airplane a good going over. Everything seemed in excellent shape. With that done, I went into the hanger to the pilots' lounge where I filed a flight plan from Miami direct to Middletown, New York. The trip would take approximately three hours and twenty minutes. Mario and I said goodbye to Fred, entered the airplane and settled into our seats. As I started the engines it occurred to me that the more expensive an airplane is, the easier it is to operate. Starting the engines was little more than flipping a few switches and watching the dials come to life. It had been a long time since I had flown anything with Garrett engines; the familiar scream from the propellers was a welcome sound.

Once both engines were running, I signaled the ground crew to disconnect the auxiliary power unit which supplied electricity during engine start to prevent drawing down the batteries. When we were disconnected; the ground crew signaled that I was clear to taxi. I pulled the throttles back into reverse indent, allowing the propellers to free themselves from the pins that prevented them from moving. When I shifted the throttles forward, I felt her surge ahead. This baby wanted to go almost as badly as I did.

I turned on the communication and navigation radios, first calling for clearance delivery, they replied with, "Cleared as filed." Next I radioed ground control for my taxi clearance, which came after just a second or two. After a three-minute taxi, we arrived at the holding area next to the active runway. I completed my pre-takeoff checklist. With that finished, I informed the tower controller that I was ready for takeoff.

In a brisk professional manner, he replied, "November six five Alpha Charlie, Miami tower, cleared for takeoff. Contact departure, frequency 128.6 passing the freeway."

I acknowledged the clearance and glanced at Mario to see if he was ready. He beamed, nodding in the affirmative. I pushed the two throttles forward to one hundred percent power.

"Wow" is the only word I can use to describe the feeling of 2,000 horsepower pulling us quickly down the runway. We were accelerating quickly, like nothing I had ever experienced before. We had traveled less than 2,000 feet when I gave the control column a small backward tug, and immediately the Cheyenne leaped into the air.

Things were happening fast. I raised the landing gear, switched the com radio to departure control and informed them we were passing over the freeway.

"Six five Alpha Charlie, cleared to flight level two nine zero, turn right to a heading of zero one zero for now."

Once I'd acknowledged departure I engaged the autopilot. We were climbing at almost 4,000 feet per minute. The flight attitude was at such an angle that I could only see blue sky out the front window. It felt as if we were going vertical. The sky was that kind of crisp blue you always hope for when you're in the air. No wonder Yeager had used this airplane to set so many records. Within eight minutes we were leveling at flight level 280; that's 28,000 feet. I promised myself that when I had time I would have to look in the Guinness Book of World Records to see what Yeager's records actually were. I was convinced we wouldn't be very far off his climb record.

For the next couple of hours Mario spoke in more detail about what he'd been doing as a CIA contractor. It was hard to believe that some of the bad people he hung out with during my last days in Barranquilla were spies just like him. I guess if you can bring the CIA information, they don't care much what kind of a person you are.

I was taken aback when he said his love affair with Maria, the wife of a well-connected cartel member, was an affair of convenience for both of them. He used her to get information, and he was her ticket out of the

country before her husband, Jota, could find her...and kill her, which he undoubtedly would have done.

I had witnessed Jota kill a man, back in a camp in the Guajira. He had done it as easily as another man might turn out a light or open a door—which is to say, he didn't give it a single thought. Mario said he had been very successful working with the U.S. Government against the Colombian drug cartels. So successful that if he was to show his face in Colombia, he would be killed in a heartbeat. He was responsible for disrupting the cartel's organization and putting many of its members behind bars or into the ground. He was number one on their hit list.

As I listened to him reminisce about various missions he had directed, I began to wonder again if he was telling me the truth. The Mario I remembered made a much better storyteller than an unflinching heroic type. But here he was, hanging out with CIA agents who treated him as one of their own. And here I was, testing out a plane so that I could do a mission for them myself. It was going to take awhile for me to get it through my head that all this was for real.

After three hours and ten minutes we were flying the approach to the Middletown Airport. I used the com radio to cancel my IFR flight plan, flew a standard traffic pattern and brought the Piper in to land. For the first landing, I would use the airspeed numbers that the manual recommended, even though I was sure they were too high for what I wanted.

The airplane floated about three feet above the runway for perhaps four seconds before it settled down, the main wheels squeaking as they touched the pavement. It was the sort of landing that passengers love—no bumps, no swerving and almost no noise. But it wasn't the landing technique best suited for a short narrow dirt road. In Cuba, I'd want a firm thump on my arrival.

I would practice this type of landing later. For now I was in a hurry to park the plane and finally see Jenny. I pulled the power levers back into the beta indent. The braking effect of the five-bladed propeller blades flattening out was amazing. The Cheyenne decelerated so quickly that I could feel my shoulder straps holding me in the seat. In Cuba I wouldn't want to use reverse thrust. Because we would be landing on a dirt road, putting the propellers in reverse would blow forward any loose gravel or other debris and possibly ingest it into the engines. That kind of debris could ruin a turbine engine. This airplane's strong brakes and large propellers would make it easy to stop without using reverse thrust.

Ground steering is provided by two systems: an interconnect between

the nose wheel and the rudder generating directional control during takeoff and landing, and pressing one's feet on the tops of the rudder pedals to activate each main wheel's disk brake independently. I would use this for tight turns and of course for stopping the airplane. A firm landing would guarantee immediate positive steering response, crucial on a narrow dirt road.

I taxied the airplane to the parking area near a small building with an illuminated payphone beside it. It was 3:30 p.m.; Jenny would be at work. Most of her violin students were kids, and naturally, her busiest time was right after school. She used to have her students come to our home, but over the last year she had started going to their houses. That's where she had to be. I picked up the phone to call for a taxi. While on hold, I turned to Mario.

"If we can get there soon enough, we can surprise her when she comes home from work," I said. He smiled. I knew he wasn't as excited over the prospect of surprising Jenny as I was, but he wasn't about to let me out of his sight either. He was in a sense babysitting me, making sure I didn't change my mind—or that Jenny didn't change it for me—and back out on Fred.

The taxi seemed to take forever to get to the older duplex where Jenny and I lived. I'd been away a little over three months. It felt really good to be home again, especially having Mario with me. Jenny had never met him, but she had heard so many stories about him that she'd often said she felt as if she knew him. She was a great comfort to me when I first came back from Barranquilla without him, when I was thinking he surely had been killed. She seemed to understand exactly what I was feeling—a combination of grief and guilt. I knew Mario would help me convince her about the mission to Cuba. Just one more job and then I could settle down and be the kind of partner she had always wanted me to be. She'd put up with me all this time because she loved me madly, but enough was enough, and I didn't want to risk losing her love. Just one more job...

My old pickup truck was right where I'd left it and I had to smile as I looked it over. I elbowed Mario and jutted my chin in its direction. He nodded to humor me and paid the cabbie. But as I got out and looked at our side of the duplex, I knew immediately that something was wrong. There were no blinds on the windows.

Maybe Jenny had taken them down to have them cleaned. I ran to the front door with my key in hand and opened the lock. I gasped as the door swung open. Other than a few boxes, the place was empty. My heart

sunk. I didn't have to look in the boxes to know that they held the few things I had to represent my life.

My stomach was in a knot. I felt abandoned and a raw physical pain coursed through me. I could hardly breathe. I must have looked as bad as I felt because I could hear Mario behind me saying, "Take a deep breath, Alan. You're turning purple." I did as he said. After a minute of deep breathing the pain started to subside.

"She's gone, Mario. She's gone." They were the only words I could find.

I didn't know what to do next. I felt I was falling into a black hole where time stood still. Mario wandered into one of the other rooms. I could hear him saying something but I couldn't make out his words. Then I heard another sound. I realized it was someone knocking on the door. I came back to reality and turned to the open door. There stood Paul, Jenny's brother. He lived on the other side of the duplex. As he approached me, I saw an envelope in his outstretched hand, not a good sign.

"She left you a letter," he said. "I know you must be choked up and angry right now, but this is all for the best. You and her were like oil and water. It was never meant to be." He was trying to be kind, but he was achieving the opposite effect.

"Choked up and angry? That would be an understatement," I managed. "I come home to find my house empty? Where the hell is she?"

"She moved to Las Vegas, Alan, and landed a permanent position with an orchestra—"

"How can that be? I've only been gone for three months! I talked to her last about three weeks ago. She said everything was fine."

"You know that was her dream, the orchestra, and as long as she was with you it was never going to happen."

"But why wouldn't she tell me? I'd have moved to Las Vegas in a flash for her."

"She tried to tell you so many times, but you never listened. All you ever did was talk about what you wanted, and what you did. Just read the letter."

One of the boxes was marked "books." I sat on it, tore open the envelope and removed the letter. I stared at Paul until he turned and left. Then I began to read.

Dear Alan,

I know you must be very upset right now, but please try to think this out rationally. Our relationship was not meant to be. You are an action-

adventure guy who at any moment could be off doing something that could endanger your life and quite possibly mine as well. I can no longer live like this. I've tried talking to you about it so many times, and every time you make promises that you'll change, but it's not going to happen. It's in your blood.

I'm sorry, but I have not been faithful to you when you were gone. I became friends with Mark Edwards, our accountant. For a long time he was just a friend, someone to talk to about the great loneliness I was feeling. Then something changed. I didn't intend it to happen, or ask for it, and neither did he. It just happened. Now I am living with Mark in Las Vegas as a couple. Please don't try to find us. It will only cause you more pain. Because Mark is afraid of you, he will call the police. I know you don't want that—and I don't either. I know that right now we cannot be friends, but I hope that in the future we can sit down and talk about it. But for now, I'm asking you as nicely as I can to stay away.

Alan, I want a stable relationship with a man who is home every night. Now be honest, that's not you.

I hope you can forgive me for the manner I have chosen to end our relationship, but I know if I told you in person, you'd try to talk me out of it. You're a great talker, that's for sure, and I feel as though you've talked me into every decision I've made the whole time we were together.

I pray you don't do anything stupid. I know you must be very upset. You loved me as much as you are capable of loving anyone. I'm sorry, Alan, but I no longer feel the way I used to.

Keep chasing those dreams. Some day you might catch them.

Take care.

Jenny.

"Oh shit."

Mario was standing behind me, reading over my shoulder. I started to fold the letter but he put up a finger, indicating he still had more to read. I waited until he was done. I felt like a kid sitting there on a box in an empty room looking up at him with eyes filled with tears.

"What do I do now?" I asked. I was genuinely expecting him to have an answer.

"Easy. You go to work, you make money and you have fun. Life goes on. It's like she said in the letter. It was never meant to be. This is all for the best," he said in a serious tone.

One thing about Mario, he wasn't big on sugarcoating things. Still, his honesty wasn't very comforting. It wasn't meant to be. This is all for the

best. It was already a broken record, playing over and over again in my mind. I wondered how long it would go on like that.

“Think of it this way, Alan. When you dump a girl, you feel good, but when you get dumped, you feel bad. By your actions, you were the guy who dumped the girl. She just made it final.”

“Mario, you’re unbelievable!” No matter how he put it, one thing was certain. My relationship with Jenny was over.

5. HARD BARGAIN

We loaded my belongings—everything I owned in the world—into the back of my pickup truck. I used my key to lock up the duplex and then threw it into the flowerbed of the rented house. Mario and I drove to a nearby gas station where I knew there was a payphone and I called my friend Bruno. After I told him the quick version of what happened, he confirmed that it would be just fine for me to store my stuff at his house.

He lived on a large property in lower New York State along the New Jersey border, about a twenty-minute drive from my place—or should I say, from where I used to live. He and his wife Diane had built a big white two-story house on land that at one time had been lived on by indigenous people. Some say it used to be a graveyard. Bruno and Diane believed the house was haunted. The property featured a sizeable pond at the front with a creek running through it filled with trout. Behind the house was Bruno's private airport. Diane taught riding inside a modern indoor riding ring. She kept her horses, and horses that belonged to her clients, in an old barn across from the riding ring. They were living the American dream.

I had known them for almost ten years now. We met at the Sussex Airport at Bruno's shop where he bought, sold, rebuilt and painted airplanes with his wife and three young boys—all of whom were now grown. When we got talking, I told him I noticed he was a little short on staff and for the right amount I was available. Without knowing much about me, he offered me a job. He was rebuilding a Stearman biplane, a World War II trainer. Because I was between jobs, I accepted his offer under one condition: that I could leave at any time without giving notice. Bruno was a cool character and I worked there on and off for years.

When we finally arrived, it was about six in the evening, and Bruno and Diane were just about to sit down to eat. They insisted we stay and have dinner with them. During dinner, I assumed they wanted to console me, so I plunged right into my story of how Jenny had deserted me. After fifteen minutes or so, in which I listed every detail of every sacrifice I had ever made for her, and every promise she had ever made to me, Bruno raised his hand like he was a traffic cop and cried, "No more! If I have to listen to another minute of this shit, I'm going to kill myself! Please, Alan, no more! Nobody wants to hear this story. It's too depressing."

I took a fork full of chicken casserole, stuck it in my mouth and chewed

while I considered his response. I found it an effort to eat. I could see Mario, his head bent with a slight smile at play on his face as if Bruno's outburst was somehow funny. Diane was staring at her husband, her features scrunched together in disbelief. Right there I made a decision: I would never, ever, say another word about Jenny leaving me again. No one wanted to hear it. I swallowed the food and resigned myself to silence.

Mario broke the silence after a few minutes. "Alan had quite an adventure with an Albatross down in Mexico."

"What's happened?" Bruno asked, his expression confirming this was something he did want to hear.

Before I had a chance to open my mouth, Mario dove into the story as if he were there. He liked to be the center of attention. Back in the old days I would have called him on it, but I was too ensconced in my self-pity to care. He ended the story by telling Bruno how he had to go down to Mexico and rescue me. I knew Mario would find a way to make himself look good.

Bruno turned to me and asked, "Is that right, Alan?"

My mood had lightened somewhat after listening to Mario's version of events, but I still wasn't overly enthusiastic about entering into this conversation. I replied simply, "He tells a good story." I turned to Mario. "How do you know so many details about what happened?"

"Easy. I talked to Jorge, your copilot. He told me everything. I forgot to tell you, he says you owe him a week's pay."

Changing the subject, I said to Bruno, "Talking about Albatrosses, I saw one in Miami that looked better than new. Someone mounted a Jet Ski under each wing where the long-range fuel tanks used to be. The Jet Skis could be lowered or raised back into their aerodynamic cradles by cables controlled from the cockpit. Very nice toy." Looking at Mario, I added, "Bruno restored an Albatross a few years back."

"Sure did. It took us two years, but when we were finished it was outstanding. I think I know every nut and bolt on that airplane by name."

"Are you a pilot?" Mario asked.

"Damn right."

Now it was Bruno's turn to tell stories, and I must admit they were a lot more entertaining than listening to me whine about losing Jenny.

After dinner we unloaded my stuff into an empty corner of Bruno's basement garage and covered everything with plastic. When that was done we sat down for a beer. Bruno and Diane made me promise that I would stay in touch, keeping them better informed of my flying

adventures. It was obvious they were worried about me. After a couple of beers we said goodbye and Mario and I drove into town listening to Latin music on the radio. We took a room in the Middletown Inn—nothing much to speak of; just a couple of beds, a TV and a bathroom, but it was clean. I dropped my bag on the bed nearest the door and went immediately down to the bar, which was almost empty. Hours later, I stumbled back to my room and plopped onto the bed. My last thought before giving myself over to sleep was that I had survived day one. Tomorrow would be better.

Mario's loud snoring woke me earlier than I would have liked. After a quick shower I shook him awake and went down to the restaurant, picking up a newspaper from the front desk along the way. I was halfway through the paper and my second cup of coffee when Mario showed up, hungry and surprisingly happy. After breakfast we packed our gear and checked out. We drove the old pickup to the airport and pulled up to the truck that contained jet fuel. We put in our order and watched as the driver filled the Piper's tanks. I found the old man who managed the airport and asked him if there was a place I could park the truck for a few weeks. Initially he refused, but he changed his mind when I gave him a hundred dollar tip from the expense money Fred had given me. We parked my truck and walked to the plane.

I scrutinized the airplane carefully before I entered it, walking all around it, looking for anything that might render it short of airworthy. Mario knew from experience that this was not the best time to talk to me. He sat silently in the cockpit and waited. After I was sure that everything looked normal, I entered the cockpit and began the preflight checklist. Once the engines were started, I explained to him that this airport was uncontrolled—which meant it didn't have a control tower. Unlike large busy airports, there was no one to ask for takeoff and landing clearance. The proper procedure was to transmit my intentions on a frequency assigned to the airport and hope everyone in the vicinity would be listening and following the same protocols. The main advantage of uncontrolled airports is that I could do whatever I wanted with no witnesses.

We taxied to the runway and I performed the remaining preflight checks. With the tanks full and two people on board, the aircraft was very close to its gross weight. We would take off into a light headwind, less than five knots. I wanted to try a maximum performance takeoff to see how quickly we'd be airborne—but more importantly, how straight the airplane would track down the centerline of the runway. I stepped hard

on the toe brakes, then pushed the two black throttles forward. The airplane started complaining, telling me it wanted to go long before the engines reached full power. I released the brakes and again felt the tremendous acceleration this little airplane possessed. I tried to keep it on the centerline using the nose wheel steering and brakes, but with 2,000 horsepower pulling us, it was difficult. I strayed off centerline almost three feet. I was not impressed, since three feet off center on a narrow road in Cuba could kill us. I needed more practice.

Once the landing gear and flaps were up, I reduced power and started a left turn. I would bring the Piper around in a tight circle. That way I could get a lot of landings and takeoffs in in a short period of time. This time on final approach to the runway, I slowed the airplane to ten knots below the recommended approach speed. It still felt solid. When I believed the tires were about one foot over the runway, I eased the power off. Because we were almost at max weight, the aircraft settled firmly. I used the propeller beta system and the toe brakes to slow down. This time I had no problem keeping it on the centerline. The kind of landing I wanted wouldn't be difficult now that I knew how to do it. I brought the airplane to a full stop and looked at Mario, who I had almost forgotten about.

"Nice landing," he said smiling.

"It's not the landings I'm worried about, it's the takeoffs," I responded. "Did you see how much we wandered past the centerline on that takeoff? There won't be any room for that in Cuba. Let's try again."

Once again I applied full power, only this time I managed to keep the nose within inches of the centerline. The more experience I gained in the Cheyenne, the better I felt about the mission.

We flew ten more takeoffs and landings until Mario finally said, "Enough. If you're going to do any more touch and goes, please let me out. Your takeoffs and landings are perfect. You'll never get any better than you are now. Enough already."

He was right. I was getting very good with this airplane. I responded by applying full power, and in under ten seconds I lifted the airplane into the air, raised the flaps and landing gear and headed for the blue sky that awaited us above a low cloud layer. Once through 2,000 feet I contacted New York departure control and filed an IFR flight plan back to Opa-Locka Airport. By the time I finished with the flight plan, we were at the base of the clouds. I engaged the autopilot, sat back and relaxed, watching the gauges—happy to see the airplane was performing flawlessly. We shot out of the cloud base at a forty-five degree angle, very impressive. The cooler northern air increased the already spectacular climb rate.

Because the Cheyenne was performing so well in the cool air, I asked New York center if I could get a clearance to climb to 41,000 feet, the service ceiling for the Cheyenne. I knew this would put us in conflict with high-altitude jet traffic that traveled at a much greater speed than us. To my surprise the controller came back telling us, "Six five Alpha Charlie, you're cleared to flight level four one zero." As we passed through 30,000 feet, I donned the pressure oxygen mask and started breathing pure oxygen. I did this hoping the oxygen would help my hangover. In thirteen minutes, we were level at 41,000 feet, the highest I had ever flown in any airplane I piloted.

The view of the world was different from this altitude. The arc of the earth was plainly visible. It felt like we were in outer space. Although this little high-powered turboprop was capable of reaching this altitude, it didn't perform well up here. I turned to Mario, catching him fumbling with his oxygen mask in a futile effort to put it on, and explained, "We're too high. We'll get a lot more speed at a lower altitude. I'll tell Houston that we're ready for reentry. Get set to fire the retro-rockets."

Mario nodded, then asked, "Where's the switch for the retro-rockets?"

He must have been affected by a lack of oxygen. "Don't worry about it, Mario. The button is on my side. I'll handle it." When I finally stopped laughing, I informed traffic control of my desire to descend. They instantly gave us a clearance to descend to 34,000 feet, an altitude where the Cheyenne would perform much better. A few minutes later we arrived at flight level 340. Mario used the aircraft phone to call Fred to tell him our approximate time of arrival. When he finished the call, he confirmed that everything was ready for our mission.

"How soon do you guys really want to go?" I asked him.

"Fred said unless something goes wrong, he wants us to try for tomorrow."

"Damn, Mario, you guys work quick! How'd you pull that off?"

"We've been working on this project for a while now. We already tried once, but it didn't work out."

He had my attention now. "What do you mean, it didn't work out?"

"Three weeks ago an American flying a Cessna 210 tried to do what we're going to do. The road he landed on was elevated above the level of the surrounding sugarcane fields. Because it just rained the night before, there were some large ruts in the road. As soon as his wheels touched down he hit the ruts and one side of the landing gear collapsed. Lucky for him he spun backward into the sugarcane."

Mario went silent and stared out the window, like he had just finished telling a story from beginning to end. "Are you going to tell me the rest of it?" I asked impolitely.

He shrugged. "Well, this is the bad part. The pilot got pinned in the airplane and before he could get out there was a Cuban Defense Force helicopter landing on the road beside him. Lucky for us, he had landed early and the baseball players hadn't arrived yet, so they didn't get arrested with the pilot."

"Yeah, that sounds really lucky to me. What happened to the pilot?"

He shrugged again. "Our people in Cuba said he died of a heart attack just as they started torturing him. The Cubans are very good at torture. Bad for him, but lucky for us and the baseball players that he didn't live long enough to talk."

"Wow, that sucks." Up until now all I thought about was the money I was going to make. But, like any other warrior, I didn't believe this would happen to me. And I wouldn't have to feel guilty about ruining Jenny's life if something did go wrong. I was trying hard to stay positive.

"Hey, there's a reason you're getting paid half a million for doing this. You've already done the same thing for free, so what's the big deal?" Mario was testy now. I was betting that he knew the pilot, that maybe they had been friends.

Dwelling on what happened to someone else would only be detrimental to our mission. That pilot had bad luck. I have good luck—though maybe not with women. After hearing Mario's story, my priorities changed. The first thing I planned on doing once I had the satellite shots was check the condition of the road. I was glad we were going tomorrow. The sooner the better.

At least Mario didn't stay on the morbid subject of the dead pilot for very long. He segued directly into a discussion about Ramona, the pretty Latin girl he met while swimming in the pool at his apartment. He was sure she would be waiting for him. I felt a little jealous. No one was waiting anywhere for me anymore. For the rest of the flight, I thought of the many things that could go wrong with this trip to Cuba. As each one occurred to me, I quickly dismissed it. Nothing was going to happen to me. After all, I was lucky.

Air traffic control cleared us to start our descent as we passed Cape Kennedy. They had vectored us approximately two miles off the coast to avoid conflicting traffic. As we descended, I enjoyed the spectacular view all the way from West Palm Beach to Miami. And the closer we got to Miami, the lower we got and the better the view became. The turquoise

blue water turned dark as the shallow water slid into the deep abyss. White sandy beaches went on forever. What a beautiful place. I calculated my landing weight and decided that because we were light now, I would land with the lowest airspeed yet.

The airplane was handling perfectly. When I was approximately two feet off the runway, I pulled the power back and the aircraft dropped with a thud. Braking was instant, just the way I wanted it. We taxied to the hangar and exited the airplane. Unlike when I went to New York with a small overnight bag, I now carried a suitcase filled with clothes that I had picked up at the duplex. Fred and a couple of his no-name friends were waiting for us. The tall skinny one took our luggage, placing it in the trunk of the Crown Victoria.

“How do you like the airplane?” Fred asked, a big smile on his face.

“It’s good, real good,” I said. Remembering the story about the pilot who died because of ruts in the road, my first question was, “Did you get those satellite shots we talked about?”

“Follow me. We’ve got everything you asked for.”

Fred turned and led us into a briefing room inside the hangar. It consisted of several large tables, all of which were covered with maps.

After one look at the pictures—which offered amazing detail—I knew I was looking at something few civilians got to see. Fred pointed out an area in central Cuba that his intelligence people thought would work perfectly.

“These roads are smooth as a baby’s bum,” he said. “They were graded less than a week ago and it hasn’t rained since. We think they’re perfect. No power lines or cables to hit.”

Clearly, these guys were being a lot more selective about what kind of road they picked because of what had happened to the last pilot. I still hadn’t let on that I knew about him. As bad as I felt for the dead pilot, I would benefit from his death. I studied the pictures for a long time. What caught my attention was the shadow I saw beside the road.

“How high is this road above the cane fields?”

“We estimate it’s about three feet,” Fred said. “Why do you ask?”

“Once I land, I don’t want to have to shut the motors off. It would be best if the ballplayers are already at the bottom of this shallow ditch so I can taxi past them. Mario can open the door, help them get in, and we’re off again.” I looked at Fred and Mario. “With luck, we should be able to do this in less than one minute ground time. As soon as my enunciator panel door warning light tells me the door is securely shut, we’re gone. Are you able to contact the baseball players and let them know this is

what we want?”

“We can relay that message to them tonight. As long as we can get through to them, they’ll be waiting tomorrow exactly where you want them.” His expression was utterly serious. I’m sure mine was too.

“What does your intelligence tell us about aerial surveillance in this area?” I asked Fred.

“It’s sporadic. They have fuel shortages and their maintenance isn’t great. They’re running out of spare parts for their equipment. Some days the best they can do is get a couple of MiGs up. As for helicopters, they only come out after an incident, or if they’ve been tipped off. When you’re flying in you can circle the area first and have a look.”

One MiG would be more than enough to ruin my day. “There’s no use circling the area, Fred. That would just give us away to anyone on the ground and take up time. Besides, we wouldn’t be able to see much out the window in a tight turn. I think it’s best if we just go straight in, and unless we see something bad, we’ll land. Mario can look out the window.” I turned to him. “As long you don’t say anything, I’ll assume there’s nothing to worry about. If you see something bad, the only thing I want to hear is GO GO GO! Is that understood?”

“Totally,” Mario said. “Down and up in under a minute.”

I looked around the room. Fred, Mario and the others were all staring at me solemnly. It was as if they were all picturing the same thing I was, all the things that could go wrong, all the things that might make Mario shout GO! I returned my attention to the maps, making a mental note of some of the landmarks near our landing area. The maps made me feel secure again. I measured the distance from the shore. Our destination was only sixteen miles inland. I estimated our ground speed should be close to 360 miles an hour. That works out to six miles in one minute. International water around Cuba starts twelve miles offshore, which meant that we would be in danger for less than fifteen minutes in and out, including the pickup—assuming nothing went wrong. I chuckled. It didn’t seem nearly enough time for Fidel and his brother to catch us. I was feeling good again.

“You’re sure the road is smooth?” I asked Fred bluntly.

“Absolutely, we won’t make that mistake a—” He caught himself before finishing. Then he quickly launched into the part of the plan that dealt with where we would be taking the ballplayers and where we would be flying after we dropped them off on Moores Island. “Are you happy with the plan?” Fred asked when he was done.

“I am. I’ll refine it a little more over dinner this evening. When will you

know what time the baseball players will at the landing zone?”

“We won’t know until later tonight. We’re all staying in the same hotel, so the minute I find out, I’ll be knocking on your door.”

“We’re staying in a hotel tonight?”

Fred gave me a curious look. “Yes, it’s for security. Mario knows the drill. He’ll explain it to you.”

“Okay by me. I love American hotels.” Getting back to business, I informed him, “As soon as you tell me what time the ballplayers will be there, I’ll plan for us to land ten minutes later. I think it’s better if they’re not hanging around too long. Does that work for you?”

“Sounds good,” he answered. He looked at his cronies, then back at me. “One other thing, Alan. If they’re not there when you arrive, don’t hang around and wait. Come back empty. If they don’t show up, there’ll be a good reason why.”

“You got it. If they’re not there, I’m gone.”

“Are we done here?” Mario asked. “Can we go to the hotel now and get something to eat? I’m starving.”

Mario’s constant focus on food had been the bane of my existence back when we had worked together. At this moment, however, I welcomed it. It was time to leave.

On the way to the hotel, Fred told me that his people had secured the premises, but it was best that any conversation we had about the mission was conducted in our rooms. We all readily agreed.

Eight of us sat down to dinner a short while later. Except for Mario, everyone was silent. For the first time, I appreciated his ability to talk about women at length. He made us all laugh as he went on and on about his romantic conquests. When he paused, I managed to slip in that I had been to his former stomping grounds, the Nikki Beach Club, about a year ago, trying to find someone who might know whether he was dead or alive. No one knew anything, but everyone I talked to commented about him being what is known in polite circles as a “ladies’ man.” My remark was like turning a TV from one show to another.

Instead of bragging about his romantic conquests in general, Mario began telling us about all the beautiful women that he had known at this club. Several times this talk about women began to pull me into a dark place where I didn’t want to go. But his stories were so outrageous, so exaggerated, that I couldn’t help but be pulled back in the other direction just as quickly. Teetering, I guess I was, between oblivion and hell.

After dinner I returned to my room. I was going over the flight plan in my head for a second time when I heard a knock on the door. Fred

entered and closed the door behind him. "They'll be at the landing zone at 1050 hours," he said, whispering.

I chuckled at his attempt to be clandestine. I guess it was better to be safe than sorry. But it seemed to me that the possibility that someone might be interested in this particular mission was slim to nonexistent. After all, these guys were trained government agents. They were the ones who did the spying. Who in Miami would bother to spy on them? Maybe I was just naïve.

I did some math in my head. "That means wheels up at 0940," I said. "I would like to leave here at 0700. Okay with you, Fred?"

"I agree. Are you sure you're ready?"

I was not as concerned as he seemed to be. It's always easier for the guy doing the mission than the people who have to stay and watch the minutes tick by. We would not have communication for almost the entire flight. The look on his face told me a lot about him; he cared about us.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Now get out of here and let me get some sleep. And can you make sure everyone's awake for a six o'clock breakfast?"

"Alan, believe me, they'll be ready." He made an effort at smiling. "Get some sleep. See you in the morning." He opened the door and looked left and right before stepping into the hallway. I laughed as I shut the door. Talk about overkill.

The alarm woke Mario and me at 5:30 a.m. I told him to shower first. I felt I needed another five minutes of sleep. But as soon as I put my head back on the pillow, I was wide awake. In a short time, we were both ready to go: clean, shaved and packed. When we arrived in the dining room the others were already seated. It was still a few minutes before six. We ate hastily and left on schedule for the airport.

The night before when I should have been sleeping, I was calculating the amount of fuel that we would have to add to the fuel already in the tanks to give us enough to get from Miami to Cuba, Cuba to Moores Island, then to Nassau with a decent reserve. If we were lucky enough to make it to the island, the baseball players would be transferred to a waiting luxury yacht. Mario and I would be flying empty to Nassau, where we would wait to be paid in one of the many Canadian banks that operate there.

Our car arrived at the airport at the same time the fuel truck arrived. I made sure the operator filled the tanks with the exact amount I wanted. I went inside the airplane and checked the fuel quantity gauges to confirm I had the correct amount. Once the refueling was done to my

satisfaction, I began my preflight inspection, looking for anything amiss. This airplane had been purchased by the previous owners for exactly this type of mission, but with a different payload in mind. It was ready to go; all we had to do now was wait. There was still an hour to kill before engine start. I walked around the airplane again, this time looking for Mario, but he was nowhere to be found. I went inside the hangar to the briefing room and asked Fred if he knew where he was.

“He went to the corner store to pick up a few snacks for the trip,” Fred informed me.

“I wonder if he’ll remember to get me something,” I said to no one.

There were three VFR (visual flight rules) maps needed to cover the flight. Even though I would be using the GPS as my primary source for navigation, I wanted paper maps for backup. I taped them together, cut out the piece that I needed and discarded the rest. Next I programmed the GPS with the latitudes and longitudes of the dirt road where I would pick up the baseball players. I had just finished when Mario showed up with a large bag. I could only make out what was on top—potato chips and tortillas—but I was sure the rest of the bag contained pop and other goodies that he liked so much. I put my suitcase, along with his, in the very back of the plane. That small amount of weight wouldn’t make a huge difference, but I wanted to get as much weight back there as possible. We were definitely nose heavy.

Fred joined us on the tarmac to give us the latest intel. “I just received a message from Cuba confirming they will be on time,” he said and looked into my eyes. “Alan, please bring back my plane in one piece.”

We were ready and it was time to go. We spent another minute or so talking, then said our goodbyes and jumped into the airplane. Mario closed and locked the back door before joining me at the front. Engine start was uneventful. After receiving our clearance, we taxied to the active runway and informed the tower that we were ready for takeoff.

“Six five Alpha Charlie, cleared for takeoff. Contact departure 118.9 crossing the freeway. Have a nice flight.”

I taxied onto the runway and replied, “Six five Alpha Charlie cleared for takeoff departure 118.9 crossing the freeway. Good day, sir.” I smoothly pushed the power levers to one hundred percent. Because we had a lighter fuel load than on our previous takeoff, the airplane accelerated even faster. I was fascinated by the power this little Piper could produce. Once airborne, I retracted the flaps and landing gear and contacted departure control.

“Departure, six five Alpha Charlie with you crossing the freeway.”

Departure Control responded with, “Six five Alpha Charlie, this is Miami departure; you are cleared en route; remain on this frequency; no other transmissions required.”

No other transmissions required? That was different. I laughed. The guys in the tower obviously knew something was going on and were getting a little carried away with that last transmission. It was kind of cool working for the government. It was also nice to be part of a team, a very well organized team with a lot of players.

I climbed the airplane to 1,000 feet, leveled off and reduced power. The airspeed indicator read 265 knots, almost three hundred mph, and our fuel burn was right where I had planned. We were heading toward Billy Island, a tiny dot of land off Andros Island in the Bahamas. It was one hundred and forty miles away. At this speed—taking into account a slight headwind—I estimated we would reach it in about twenty-eight minutes.

In no time we had crossed the coast and were flying over Biscayne Bay. It was filled with boats of all types. The view was fantastic. The crystal clear water allowed us to see the bottom of the bay, almost inside the coral reefs. The colors were gorgeous. I was relaxed and comfortable now that we were underway. Jenny liked to say that no matter how much grief I caused her, she always had her violin to lose herself in. I pretended not to know what she meant, because I was jealous of her holding that little wooden instrument so intimately. Truth is, I knew exactly what she meant. This Cheyenne made me feel the same way.

We reached Billy Island as scheduled. I turned the airplane so that from here on, we would be going in a straight line to “the ball park” where we would pick up our passengers. One hundred and fifty-nine miles to go—or thirty-five minutes to touchdown. I lowered the nose of the airplane, forcing it to descend until we were level ten to fifteen feet above the water. I planned to stay at this altitude until we crossed the shoreline; this would make it hard for Cuban radar to see us coming.

“Mario, I need you to be looking out the window right now. Let me know if you see anything, anything at all.” Traveling at over three hundred miles per hour ten feet above the water is a rush like no other—but it takes total concentration. The normally chatty Mario simply replied, “Okay.”

I kept one eye on the GPS, watching the distance between us and our destination shrink. With only thirty miles to go, it wouldn't be long until we flew over the outer islands of Cuba. Within seconds the islands appeared. I pulled the nose up; it was time to get a couple hundred feet of altitude. Rectangular plots came into view with their different colors,

depending on what was growing there. When the GPS showed two minutes to destination, I eased the power all the way back and again felt the braking effect of the five-bladed propellers. With one mile to go, I lowered the flaps and landing gear, checking for three green lights that confirmed the landing gear was in the down and locked position.

Mario kept busy scanning the horizon for unwelcome friends. At half a mile, I was lined up for the small farm road that looked tiny from this height. It grew a little bigger as we got closer. Using power, I held the agile Piper off the ground until the GPS told me I was at the exact touchdown spot. That's when I reduced power, putting the wheels firmly on the ground. I set the propellers back to beta, and with my feet on the rudder pedals, I gently applied pressure to the brakes. We were decelerating at an acceptable rate. Looking ahead, I saw what appeared to be a large group of people scrambling out from the ditch beside the road, blocking it, right about where the two Cuban baseball players were supposed to be.

"Do you see what I see, Mario?" My heart was pounding so loud I wasn't sure I'd hear him answer.

He looked forward. "Go back up, Alan," he yelled to make sure I heard him above the noise of the propellers.

"I can't. There isn't enough room."

As I continued slowing the aircraft, I could see that some of the people had suitcases and handbags; they appeared to be families. Husbands and wives huddled together with children ranging in age from toddler to teen. At least it wasn't the Cuban military.

I looked at Mario. "Plan B," I said. "Looks like our passengers are bringing some friends along."

He nodded and seemed nervous. I brought the airplane to a stop a few feet from the small crowd.

"Listen, Mario, there must be least thirty-five people out there. We can't take them all. You decide who we take."

He undid his seatbelt and was about to jump out of his seat when I grabbed him by the arm. "I'm going to shut down the left engine so these people can pass. You have to get all of them behind the airplane. Fill the cabin until it's full. Don't worry about the weight. Be quick."

He was out of the seat, down the aisle and outside the airplane just as the left propeller came to a halt. I could see him talking to what looked like the two main figures—both tall, strong-looking young men. He immediately started funneling people under the wing.

A tall man jumped into the copilot seat and said casually in perfect

English, “My name is Alejandro. My friends call me Al. Thank you very much for coming to get us.” He sounded like someone who had just flagged down a cab.

“Okay,” I replied. “Who are these people?”

“They’re my family. I can’t leave without them. They would be punished for my escape. Your friend said it was not a problem.”

“That Mario, he’s quite a guy,” I said, shaking my head at the absurdity of the situation.

I turned and saw an old man and woman—undoubtedly one of the ballplayers’ parents—coming up the aisle with a boy and a young girl. Behind them was another couple with at least three kids. I didn’t know who was behind them because my view of the back of the plane was blocked by the first wave of passengers. Out my side window, I could see that about half of the original group had climbed down the ditch into the field. They were headed toward a pickup truck that was parked close by on another narrow road that cut across our makeshift runway. When I was sure there was no one in front of the propeller, I started the left engine. Just as it was revving up to full power, I saw the enunciator light go off, indicating the rear door was closed. In almost the same instant another white light came on, confirming the door was closed and locked. I didn’t have any idea how many people were inside, but with the door securely shut we were ready to go. I took a quick look around me. That’s when I saw Mario standing by the wingtip waving his hand, signaling me to go. I raised my hands in a questioning manner, yelling, “What are you doing?” Although he couldn’t hear me he understood.

He continued waving me off, mouthing, “The plane is full. Go!”

I pointed to the back of the plane and mouthed, “Get in.”

His hands flew back and forth across his chest. “No more room. Go! GO! GO!”

I turned and looked toward the back of the cabin. It was definitely full, and judging from the nose high attitude, we were heavy, but this plane had 2,000 horsepower; we could take one more. I put the parking brake on and got out of my seat and wove between the passengers, pushing people out of my way until I reached the door and opened it. I screamed to Mario, who was standing in front of me outside the plane.

“Not a chance in hell I’m leaving you behind again. Get in,” I ordered loudly.

“What about the weight?” Mario yelled back.

I yelled at the top of my voice, making sure he heard me above the propeller noise. “I can handle it. Get in.”

With a little more pushing, I created a large enough space for him to squeeze in. When he saw this space—or maybe he saw the resolution on my face—he climbed up the stairs and shimmied in. I stayed long enough to watch him shut and lock the door.

“Follow me to the front of the plane,” I demanded. “I need your weight as far forward as possible.” Displacing people as we went, we pushed our way to the cockpit. I dropped into the pilot seat. Mario hunched between the two front seats. I fastened my seatbelt, released the parking brake and pushed the two throttles to one hundred percent. We were moving forward, but it felt as if the parking brake was still on. I had experienced this sensation in the Canadian north many years ago when I was working as a bush pilot, often flying overweight airplanes. The lack of acceleration was due to the overloaded tires sinking into the soft dirt. With speed we would be able to overcome this effect. To get that speed before we ran out of road I pushed the throttles forward to approximately 120 percent power, causing the internal engine temperature gauges to move well out of the green arc. The difference in acceleration was noticeable, but still not great.

Seeing what I was doing, Mario asked. “How much will the engines take?”

“I don’t know.” These engines were de-rated, meaning they could produce much more than their 1,000 horsepower rating. If there was a weak point, it was the transmissions between the engines and the propellers. We’d know soon enough. It would be like an overloaded bus going up a steep hill at full power. If there was a weak point, that’s when we’d find out.

The Cheyenne was not exactly rocketing down the tiny dirt road, but it was moving quickly. Because of our heavy weight, I decided to try and hold it on the ground until I had at least one hundred and thirty knots airspeed. I was guessing that would be enough. The excessive weight in the rear of the plane gave us a nose high attitude. As the airspeed indicator passed one hundred knots, the Cheyenne lifted a foot, maybe two, only to settle back onto the small road a second later. The road was getting shorter quickly. She wasn’t ready to fly yet.

With my peripheral vision, I could see Mario shaking his head. “I told you. It’s too heavy.”

I pushed forward on the control column, keeping us on the ground until we had more speed. It took all my flying skills to keep us in the middle of the narrow road. If the airplane were to drift only a few feet left or right at this speed, it would be all over. I didn’t dare take my eyes

of the road.

I yelled to Mario, "Read out the airspeed."

He didn't have to be told twice. "One hundred twenty...125...130."

A light tug on the controls and we were airborne. There was a big difference in the way the plane felt this time. I kept the Cheyenne level, building up speed, and once I saw the airspeed passing one fifty, I raised the landing gear. When we passed through one sixty, I raised the nose a little to gain some altitude. Gently, I set power back to one hundred percent and raised the flaps. I had to apply extra forward pressure on the control column until I could trim the nose down. We were heavy, but worse, we were way out of balance. I laughed; the folks who built this airplane would never believe it could fly with this many people. Considering how far out of the weight and balance envelope we were, the Cheyenne was flying just fine. What an amazing airplane.

I started my turn east toward the ocean. When we had climbed to one hundred and fifty feet, I leveled off and watched her to race past three hundred knots indicated airspeed. I pulled the power back to approximately eighty percent to keep her from accelerating any farther. The reduction in power also dramatically slowed the fuel consumption. Ahead, I could see the shoreline approaching. No one said a single word, not even Mario. I engaged the autopilot and turned to him.

"What the hell were you thinking? I'm the captain. I make the decision about weight, not you, or was there some other reason you wanted to stay behind?"

Mario went silent. His mouth seemed to move from one side of his face to the other. He hated it when I gave him shit.

The baseball player in the seat beside me asked, "How much longer?"

We'd only been in the air a few minutes and he wanted to know how much longer? I explained as calmly as I could.

"In about five minutes we'll be out of Cuban airspace. Unless a MiG catches us before then, we'll arrive at Moores Island in about an hour."

Alejandro smiled confidently and slowly nodded. I guess he thought that the chances of something going wrong now were pretty slim. I was thinking just the opposite. The next few minutes would tell if my decision to insist that Mario board the plane was the correct one. Why couldn't he have left just one more person behind and got in the plane right away? Was he trying to be a hero by staying? If only he'd gotten in the plane as planned, I wouldn't have taken the extra time, which now could cost us our lives.

As we passed over the last of the small outer islands off the Cuban

coast, heading into what looked like an endless sea, my passengers broke into applause. They congratulated Mario and me for picking them up. I didn't have the heart to tell them that we were far from out of danger. If the Cuban Air Force had been alerted to our flight, a fighter plane would be intercepting us any time now. Our white airplane would stick out big time with the blue ocean below us. I remained silent, watching the clock, listening to my jubilant passengers, holding my breath as the seconds ticked by.

Seven minutes out of Cuba, I saw a cruise ship appear in front of us, confirming we were now in international waters. As I flew over the ship, I started to relax. I turned to Mario and said, "We just earned our money."

Mario gave me one of his patented grins. "We only earned half of our money, Alan."

"What are you talking about? We picked up the baseball players, so we get the money. The deal didn't include taking every single member of their family. Damn, Mario, we should get a bonus."

"Well, actually, we only picked up one baseball player, Alejandro. The rest of our passengers are his family."

"You've got to be kidding me. All these people are his family?"

"The other ballplayer and his family stayed behind. Neither of them would leave without their family, and the plane isn't big enough for both families. You said it was my decision."

I looked at him. Then I looked at Alejandro. He was busy staring out the window, smiling at the sea beneath us. He must have felt like he'd just hit a home run.

6. THE ISLAND

I flew the airplane as close to the water as I dared until we could see the first of the Abaco Islands. Then I started climbing. I turned the transponder on to a prearranged code and watched its light flash. The controller in Nassau would be able to identify us by the code our transponder was transmitting to him. They would know our course altitude and airspeed. I was sure Fred had at least one friend watching the radar scope, along with the technician.

The airplane was heavy. Just how many people were onboard, I still didn't know. She was flying fine, considering. I leveled off at 9,500 feet and eased the power back, slowing both the airplane and fuel consumption.

The ringing of the cockpit telephone startled me. I wasn't expecting a phone call, but maybe Mario was, because he quickly reached back, grabbed it and answered. I could hear him telling someone, presumably Fred, what had happened. Their conversation was very short.

As he hung up, he said, "Fred's happy to hear we made it. Our crew has secured the island. We're cleared to land."

I started the descent onto Moores Island approximately twenty miles ahead. It was still little more than a green dot surrounded by white on a blue background, but it was growing bigger every second. I had to laugh at Mario's "Our crew has secured the island." He made it sound as if the marines had landed and would be waiting for us. The island grew bigger. It was as beautiful as any I had seen, but I was in no mood to appreciate its beauty. Thinking about landing with an aft heavy airplane on a short runway had my full attention.

As we got closer I could see the northeast part of the island; it resembled a horseshoe. The water was lighter blue within the bay, indicating that it was shallow. There were about a dozen small boats that looked to be anchored there, and one very large yacht. Undoubtedly the large boat was waiting to pick up our valuable cargo. The airport was located just west of the horseshoe part of the island. Leading away from it was a paved road about a mile long. The road passed through an area of small modern houses and ended in a tiny seaside village.

Because our center of gravity was way out of the plane's design envelope, I didn't want to slow us under one hundred and forty knots on approach; we had to touch down much faster than normal. I aligned the

airplane with the center of the small 2,500-foot coral landing strip and touched down within the first hundred feet, right where I wanted to be. I jumped on the brakes—and for the first time, I used reverse thrust. The breaking effect was good, too good in fact. The passengers, who were in a tight but unsecured bundle, came flying forward all at once. If not for Mario’s quick instincts and his upper body strength, it would have been a disaster.

When the plane had slowed enough, I pushed the propeller levers out of reverse and felt the mass of people pressing against us shift back. The landing was a comedy of errors, but we made it. As we approached the end of the runway, I could see a small cinderblock building with a twin-engine turbo prop Aero Commander parked in front. Fred and two of his men stood watching us from the shade provided by the tail of the airplane. A tall overweight black policeman stood with them. I stopped the airplane and looked at Mario.

“Are these the guys that secured the island?” Laughing, I proceeded with the shutdown checklist. Already the enunciator panel indicated that the back door was open. From the rocking motion of the plane, I was pretty sure my passengers were departing as quickly as possible. Without a doubt, this was the first time many of these people had ever ridden in an airplane, and it had been a pretty exciting ride.

I finished the shutdown and took a look at the short shrubbery that surrounded the runway. All of it leaned in one direction, pushed down by the prevailing winds. At its highest point, this little island was perhaps thirty feet above sea level. I guessed the total population was no more than a hundred. Surely everyone made their living fishing. It was obvious why Fred had picked this place. Moores Island was literally the middle of nowhere.

Alejandro exited the cockpit first and I followed him, the last to leave the plane. As my feet touched the coral, mixed feelings coursed through my body. I was happy that we had succeeded at getting in and out of Cuba without getting killed or caught, but I was still a little pissed off that we had brought back only one baseball player.

The passengers were standing in a group waiting for us. Alejandro, Mario and I joined them as Fred approached without his usual friendly face. “What happened?”

I wanted to say, “Surprise, surprise,” because that’s how I felt when we arrived in Cuba. On second thought, he had enough on his plate without my sarcasm. “Well,” I began, scratching my head before speaking, “when we arrived, we found at least thirty-five people waiting.

They must've thought we were coming with a Boeing. I left it up to Mario to decide who got on the airplane, and that's what happened." I thrust my hand in the direction of the passengers who stood in almost as tight a group as they had been in the airplane. I glanced at Mario and saw him looking peevish, not happy to get hit with the blame. To shift the focus of the conversation, I turned to Alejandro and asked, "Why don't you introduce your family?"

Alejandro smiled and introduced his wife Sofia and young son Arturo, then his mother Corina and father Alfonso, then his wife's mother Beatriz and father Carlo, and then, of course, his brother Cristian and his brother's wife Adriana and their two little babies. One couldn't have been more than two years old, and the other a toddler. The clothes the little ones wore looked like they had been washed so many times they were now colorless. That made it impossible to tell whether they were boys or girls.

Alejandro swept his arm from one side of the group to the other and proudly introduced his sister Alexandra and her husband David, and their three children—a boy about twelve, a pretty little girl, maybe eight, who was hanging on tightly to her father's leg, and another boy, who I judged to be around six years old. He seemed more interested in the airplane than the introductions going on around him. Finally, Alejandro introduced his two cousins, both boys about sixteen. I missed some of the names because I had been too busy counting; eighteen people, with four or five small suitcases between them. They had packed light, probably carrying only their most precious possessions. Mario was right. There wouldn't have been room for even one more. I shook my head, amazed that the Cheyenne was capable of carrying so many people.

With the introductions behind him, Alejandro turned his big smile in Fred's direction. "I told the man in Havana, the one I made the deal with, I could not leave my family behind. If I left them in Cuba, they would be taken from their homes and put to work like slaves on a tobacco plantation. I couldn't leave without them. Thank you for liberating us."

Fred nodded, but the look on his face showed his thoughts were elsewhere. As Alejandro turned his attention to something his wife was saying, Fred pulled Mario and me away from the crowd.

"This is going to screw things up royally," he said. "I'll take care of these people, but if we're going to get the other ballplayer out, we're going to need to act fast before the whole world finds out about this."

I could feel the hair on the back of my neck raising up in resistance. "Wait a minute, Fred. You're not thinking about us going back to Cuba,

are you? We need things to cool off there. A lot of people saw or heard the airplane coming and going. We were supposed to be on the ground for mere seconds. Instead, we were there for a good five minutes. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that somebody's going to talk."

Fred's expression changed. Suddenly, he looked a little like a basset hound. I think "sincere" might have been what he was going for.

"Look, too many people know about this operation already. There are other government agencies that would have a fit if they knew what we're doing. We've crossed a lot of lines here. We can pull this off only if we act quickly before anyone can react. The Castro brothers will think it was a one-time thing. They'll never suspect that we would try two in a row. Not a chance. The other player and his family are waiting in a safe house. They can't stay there long." Fred looked me right in the eye. "Don't forget the money. That's \$250,000 in your pocket and another \$250,000 when you bring back the other ballplayer."

"It's not the money, Fred. It's my life." I looked to Mario for help. He hadn't said a single word, but he was smiling. By the look on his face, you would have thought the conversation was about whether to have fish or meat for lunch. I could tell he was eager, ready to go—risk or no risk. I wondered why he hadn't said anything about his part of the payment. Since I knew he was as greedy with money as he was with food, I had to wonder if he had some other deal going on with these people. I turned my back to Fred. There was a lot of noise going through my head and I didn't want to give him an answer I would immediately regret. When I looked at him again, I asked. "Can you give me a minute to think about it?"

As I was thinking things over, two older, thoroughly rusted Chevrolet pickup trucks rumbled toward us, stopping just short of our small crowd. Their purpose was likely to transport Alejandro and his family to the waiting yacht I had seen anchored in the bay. Both trucks stank to high heaven of fish, the usual load for these rust buckets. Fred's men came forth, all but holding their noses against the pungent odor, and helped the happy Cubans up onto the trucks. I envied them; their lives were irreversibly transformed. Then it hit me. My own life had totally transformed too. These weren't some sleazy criminals I was working for. This was the CIA. If I wanted to continue working for them, I needed to accept the risks that came with the job.

I turned back to Fred. "Okay, I'll make another trip as soon as I get paid for this one. All you need to do is deposit \$250,000 into my Royal Bank of Canada account in Nassau. After that's done, I'm ready to go."

He nodded. "That's fair enough. Give me your account information and consider it done."

Smiling, I whipped out my wallet and pulled out a used deposit slip with all my bank information on it and handed it to him. He turned toward the pickup trucks. Everyone had climbed in and the drivers were waiting, apparently, for a signal from him. He waved them off and turned back to us.

"Alan, you and Mario need to stay here on the island until we get the next trip organized. Two days max."

My experience in the Bahamas had taught me about islands this small. "Are you kidding me, Fred? Two white guys will stick out like a sore thumb, especially after what we just did at the airport. The whole island knows something is happening. This is not a good place for us to stay. Why don't we just fly to Nassau like tourists and stay in a nice hotel until we get organized? I'll pay."

Fred stepped close to me and spoke almost without moving his lips. "This operation is clandestine, remember? I can't have you associated with this airplane. The DEA has people all over the Nassau airport taking pictures of anyone who arrives in a private plane. It won't take them long to find out who you are, and that's something I don't want. I'll have one of our pilots fly the airplane to Nassau, refuel it, and bring it back when it's time for the next mission. We have to do this in the next two days. After that the NSA will have analyzed the satellite photos of Cuba and there'll be questions. You'll be safe here. Go fishing, relax."

"Safe, here? Don't you mean more like trapped here? Where'll we stay?"

"There's only one cop on this island, Alvin, and he works with us. You can stay at his house. He'll take care of you."

Upon hearing his name, Alvin took a step in our direction.

"So this is plan B?" I said. "Well, plan B sucks." I turned to the cop. "Are you okay with us staying at your place?"

Alvin put his hands on his hips and tilted his chin up. He had a huge scar running from the right side of his neck to behind his right ear. That had to be an interesting story, but it wasn't the time or place to ask about it. When he spoke, he looked at Fred.

"I'm okay with it," he said. "But it's going to cost you another \$10,000 to use the island again. As for taking care of these white boys, I'll do that for free as long as they stay indoors."

No shit, Dick Tracy. It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut. I had no more desire to be seen than the cop had for his neighbors to see me.

As a pilot, I like to plan everything in advance, not make things up as I go along. Mario still wasn't saying anything, which was in some way more troubling than if he had been jabbering. A couple of days on a Caribbean island indoors? I didn't like it, but I'd been in worse spots.

We were still talking when the pickup trucks returned empty and one of Fred's men proudly announced that the Cubans were safely on the yacht. He went on to say that he was concerned because some of the people in the nearby boats had followed them out to sea.

Fred chuckled. "Is Mario's team on the yacht?"

"Yes sir. Sixteen men, all fully armed."

"That yacht cruises at over forty-five knots. They'll never catch her."

I turned to Mario. I was starting to get why he had said, "Our crew has secured the island."

"It's time to go," Fred said, seemingly unconcerned by what he had heard. The man who had spoken to him turned at once and headed toward the Aero Commander. Before boarding the plane, Fred retrieved a business card from his pocket and handed it to me. It contained only a phone number scrawled in blue ink.

"Call me on this number only in an emergency," he said. "Otherwise, no contact."

I laughed. "You give me a phone number then tell me not to call it. How am I going to know what's going on?"

"Look, you're staying with Alvin in his house. I'll be in contact with him and he'll keep you informed. Don't worry. This is all going to happen fast." He shook my hand, then Mario's. "Goodbye."

I called to him as he walked away. "If for some reason you call off the second trip, don't forget us here. If you're not back in three days, I'm leaving, even if I have to swim out of here." Fred shook his head. When he entered the Aero Commander, I could see that he was smiling. Apparently, he thought I was kidding. He shut the door. Meanwhile, another of his men, the shorter guy, was climbing into the Cheyenne. Funny that all of Fred's men were pilots, or copilots, like Mario. I wondered how they had been recruited.

Someone threw my bag out the Cheyenne, followed by Mario's, and I muttered something unkind.

Alvin, Mario and I walked to his pickup. Behind me I could hear both planes starting their engines. It was too painful to look back and see the Cheyenne, which I'd already come to think of as mine, moving down the runway.

We hopped into Alvin's truck and minutes later arrived at his house,

about a quarter a mile away. The Cheyenne was already in the air by then and the Commander was just taking off. I felt abandoned. As for Mario, apparently he felt hungry, because when Alvin got ahead of us to open the door, he whispered, "I hope they have something to eat here."

Alvin and his wife lived in a white one-story cinderblock house with a flat roof. Avalon was tall and skinny, with curly black hair. Whatever she was cooking sure smelled good. She looked up from the stove as we entered and smiled. She seemed happy to see us, probably because we meant money. After introducing us to her, Alvin showed us to a room where we would be sleeping: dull white walls, two single beds with a lone sheet thrown over each mattress up against opposite walls. There was no other furniture in the room. I dropped my small bag on the bed to my right. Mario threw his bag on the other bed.

"Do you have any money?" Alvin asked.

I had a little over \$2,000 on me, most of it in hundred dollar bills stuffed into my socks so many hours ago that I had all but forgotten them. I pulled out my wallet, which had no more than a few hundred dollars in twenties. "What do we need money for?" I asked.

Alvin laughed. "Beer," he said. "We're going to need beer and you're going to pay for it."

I laughed too. "Yah, man. We need beer. How much?" I was relieved when he held up four fingers followed by a zero sign. I gave him forty bucks, then returned my thin wallet to my right front pocket.

We followed Alvin back to the kitchen and watched as he went out the door and got in his truck. Avalon was still working at the stove. Avalon seemed a strange name, but then again, this was a strange place, and these were strange people. After a while she put down the wooden spoon she'd been using to stir the contents in her black kettle and told us to follow her. Even though we had already seen most of the house en route to our sleeping quarters, she took us through all the rooms again. It was a small house, just two bedrooms and a bathroom, and the living room and kitchen. Yet you could see she was very proud of her home. It was brand new, she said, so new that the water had not yet been connected. She took us out the back door and showed us where they got their water. It came from a simple cast iron pipe with a valve on one end that protruded out of the ground about three feet. The pipe was surrounded by five empty buckets. She said the water was drinkable; it came up from deep underground wells drilled by the government two years earlier.

Back in the kitchen, Mario quickly went for the seat in front of the fan. I sat at the table beside him. Avalon returned to her work at the stove.

After a few minutes the silence became awkward. I asked Avalon if the television in the other room worked. She explained that it did, but since there was no reception on the island, they only used it to watch videos. She turned her back to us and went on cooking. When it became clear that she was not going to feed us anytime soon, Mario and I moved into the small living room and spoke in low voices for a while about everything that had happened in the last several hours.

A short while later Alvin returned with a box containing twenty-four cold Heinekens. We drank a few before dinner and then sat down to Avalon's fish stew and drank some more. I appreciated the hospitality but was mostly bored. No television, no radio, not even a book to read. At least we had the company of Avalon and Alvin, I thought—until Alvin announced that he and Avalon were going out for the evening to meet with some friends and confirm that everything was cool among the locals. I nodded as if I approved, but I was pretty sure his real intention was to boast to his close friends about the important mission he was working on. Mario and I didn't wait up for them.

We woke early the next morning to the unmistakable sound of a large helicopter flying overhead very low. We both scrambled to put on pants, shirts and shoes, then rushed out into the living room. Out the large front window I could see a Black Hawk landing on the road not forty feet away. Alvin, who was still in his underwear, yelled, "It's the Bahamas Defense Force. Go out the back door and stay in the bushes until I come and get you."

I wasn't about to argue. Without delay I led Mario out the back and into the bushes while the Black Hawk settled to the ground. As we cleared the back door, the enormous noise from a second helicopter approaching the rear of the house filled my ears. I looked for a place to hide. At first I couldn't see anything that would withstand the downdraft from the approaching helicopter. A short palm tree with its large leaves and thick trunk was the only possible cover. I pulled Mario by his shirt, pointing in the direction of the palm, which was maybe ten feet away. Just as we reached it, the powerful downwash from the rotating blades of the second Black Hawk pushed the large palm leaves down, so that for the moment we were well hidden, totally enveloped by the leaves. I chuckled as the second helicopter flew right over us, landing beside the first in front of Alvin's house. I poked Mario and motioned for him to follow me. Crawling on my hands and knees, I led us away from the palm tree into scrubby brush that was thick and too entangled for us to walk through standing up.

I had heard that there were many dogs that ran wild on Moores Island. Now I could see that they had created distinct tunnels running under the canopy formed by the brush. The thick green intertwined vegetation would make it impossible for us to be seen from above. I headed through the largest tunnel with Mario close behind, sharp thorn bushes cutting into me as I went. I tried to move in a straight line, to put as much distance as possible between us and the helicopters. I stopped only when the tunnel ended at a rugged coral ledge that created a jagged shoreline. I backed away from it and flattened myself beneath the largest low-slung bush I could find. A moment later, Mario was lying beside me. We stayed still, trying to catch our breath. In a moment we were breathing normally, listening intently for any sound that would tell us that someone was moving in our direction. We were alert and ready to move in an instant. But there was nothing except the sound of the waves calmly flowing over the rugged coral.

Aside from agreeing that our hideout was about the best we were going to find, Mario and I stayed silent. We lay on our stomachs the entire day under the thick brush, which turned out to be home for a variety of colorful spiders and other ground-roaming critters. In the early evening the helicopters finally left. We lay silently until they were gone.

Quietly, Mario said, "Man, I'm starving. Do you think it's safe to go back to the house?"

I was hungry too, and also thirsty. It had been almost twenty-four hours since we last consumed anything and I could feel it. "We don't have any choice. Let's move slowly and quietly," I whispered.

Cautiously we turned and began to crawl back through the heavy brush. It seemed we were going the way we came, but when we emerged into a clearing, we were not behind Alvin's house but behind the house next door. This house was still under construction. No one lived there. I hadn't paid much attention to it before.

I was cramping badly from lack of water. It wouldn't be wise, or possible, to make any quick moves. When I told Mario to be still for a few minutes, he didn't argue with me. We stayed ten more minutes on the ground, not moving, but listening carefully for any sign of people. Finally, I made my way between the two houses to the front of Alvin's house where the military helicopters had landed. Alvin's truck was gone. While Mario waited at the side of the house, I peeked into the living room window. There were no lights on.

In fact, the entire island seemed to be eerily quiet. The only sound was the wind moving through the brush and the sea grass. We made our way

to the outdoor tap, turned it on and took turns drinking. I was so preoccupied with the sensation of finally filling my parched gut with water that I almost jumped out of my skin when Avalon cried in a loud voice, "Welcome back!" She scared the hell out of both of us. She was walking toward us carrying two glasses. She handed them to us. "This'll make drinking a little easier." Over the next several minutes, with Avalon telling us what had happened during the day, I drank nine glasses of water. Mario had more.

Turns out her husband was right. There was someone on the island who was jealous of Alvin, thinking he and his white friends had been working drugs—and hoping there might be a reward involved. This so-called friend had called the Bahamas DEA.

After all the hours lying on my stomach, it felt incredibly good to sit in a chair. Avalon served us large bowls of fish stew and steaming thick slices of freshly baked bread. I ate slowly, not wanting to shock my stomach. Mario ate like he always did. He was on his second bowl before I was halfway through my first. Nothing affected his stomach. Alvin arrived just as we were finishing.

"Glad you came back," he said. "I didn't want to have to go looking for you in that thick brush."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well, let's just say it's a good thing the defense force didn't find you. That would have complicated things. As it is, Fred had to make a few phone calls to get them to back off. He says to tell you you're going tomorrow morning. They'll be here at nine."

"Is that all he told you? Any other details?" I asked.

"He said they would go over the plan with you in the morning, but other than a few changes, this mission would be the same as the last one." Alvin went to the fridge, pulled out three beers and handed each of us one. "Have you had enough excitement for today?"

I nodded and drank my beer, and when he offered it, I had another.

Later I went out back and filled two of the five-gallon water buckets so I could take a shower, one cupful at a time. When I finished, Mario did the same. With fresh clothes on and more cold beer, I felt like a quarter million dollars. Thankfully, the rest of the evening was uneventful. When the beer ran out, I went to bed.

I awoke suddenly, thinking there had been a noise in the house or a noise in my dream. I looked at my watch. It was 6:30 a.m. Mario was still snoring, dead to the world.

"Time to get going," I said softly, shaking him. When he opened his

eyes, I put my finger to my lips. He rose quietly. We both dressed as quickly as possible and then warily approached the living room. I took a peek and saw Alvin talking with the two truck drivers who had transported our passengers to the boat. Seeing me, he waved us into the room and explained that they were making plans for our departure.

"It's simple," he said. "I'll stay back and block the road to the airport. When the airplanes land, one of these guys will drive you to the strip."

He had one request. On our return, he wanted us to arrive as late in the evening as possible. I told him this could be a problem. The time we landed depended on when we picked up our passengers in Cuba, and that depended on the arrangements Fred had already made.

"You've got to discuss this with Fred," I said. "I'm just the pilot."

At ten minutes before nine, one of the truck drivers went out to the airport. The other sat at the table with us and finished the delicious breakfast that Avalon had prepared: scrambled eggs with leftover fish hidden under melted cheese, my favorite. No sooner had we finished eating than we got a call from the driver at the airport saying Fred and his crew had just arrived in two planes—as always, right on time. Mario and I thanked Avalon. While Alvin went out to block the road, we hopped into the pickup and drove in silence to the airport. When we arrived, Fred and his pilots were outside the Aero Commander waiting for us.

"Got a little exciting around here yesterday," Fred said, smiling sarcastically. "This should make things a little more tolerable," he added as he handed me an envelope with a folded Royal Bank of Canada deposit slip. I opened it and smiled broadly as I read the part that said \$244,800 U.S. had been deposited in my account. "I don't get it, Fred. Why \$244,800?"

"Remember? I gave you \$200 the day you arrived and \$5,000 the next day."

"Yes, I remember." Although I thought that money was for expenses, I wasn't about to argue the point. This was more than I'd ever had in my life. I couldn't help but reflect on how sad it was that Jenny would be missing this opportunity to share it with me. But I didn't dwell on that for very long. Over the past few days I had moved from despair over Jenny's abandonment to anger. Really, she had a lot of nerve to take off without a word to me. The anger felt better. It was easier for me to deal with.

"Alan, are you ready to go now?" Fred asked chuckling, pulling me out of my reverie.

"I am now." I shook his hand. Then I had another thought. "What about Mario's money?"

“Don’t worry about that. Our arrangement with him is different from the one we have with you.”

I turned to look at Mario. He shrugged. Something wasn’t adding up here. The Mario I had spent the last several days with was different than the Mario I’d spent months with in South America. This Mario was a lot quieter, nowhere near as sarcastic and much less forthcoming. But before I had a chance to give it more thought, Fred started talking again.

“We’re going to do this mission almost the same way we did the last one. The only difference is the new location. Shortly after you left with the first ballplayer, there were helicopters all over the area. We’re lucky no one on the ground was spotted. Our pilots think this road is perfect. We reviewed it on the satellite pictures. High-tension power lines at the end of the road are your only obstacle, but that shouldn’t be a problem. You have over three miles of smooth road to work with before you get to the wires. The pictures are laid out inside the airplane.”

I hopped into the Cheyenne and found that it appeared much bigger inside than before. Talk about room! In the short time that we had been separated, someone had removed the seats and the custom toilet. It looked like a cargo plane on the inside. Satellite pictures of the road we planned to land on were spread out on the floor. The pilot who had flown her to our island handed me the same handheld GPS that I had used on my first trip. He had already programmed in the coordinates for our new landing spot. I checked the figures against the map and, of course, they were right on. I was pretty sure these pilots working for Fred were highly qualified, briefed and ready in case I wouldn’t go. Using a piece of paper, I calculated for a twenty-knot crosswind and planned for fifty-eight minutes from Moores Island to the pickup point in Cuba. The shorter pilot, who was watching my every move, smiled when he saw my calculations. Even though it was still early morning, it felt like a sauna inside the airplane. I exited in time to hear Mario listing all the details about yesterday’s island adventure for Fred.

I interrupted him. “What time do they want us there?”

Fred stopped listening to Mario. “One hour and ten minutes from now. They’ll be there when you arrive. You won’t be able to miss them. They’re going to be right in the middle of the dirt road. There’s a turnoff for farm equipment to enter the field exactly halfway down the road where they’ll be able to get out of your way. You’ll be able to taxi right by them. That way you can stop, open the door, load, and leave without shutting down a motor. There’ll be no confusion this time. You should be in and out in minutes.”

My confidence was growing. This landing spot was much better than the first one. “Well done, Fred,” I said. “Pretty impressive for only one day’s work. How many are we picking up?”

“One less than last time. I hope.”

Wishing he hadn’t said that, I entered the Cheyenne and turned the master switch on. The fuel gauges indicated the tanks were almost half full. Perfect. I wanted just enough fuel to get there and back, nothing extra. Fuel is weight. Now that Fred had made the deposit to my account, I was a wealthy man. When I got back with this second baseball player and his family, I would be a rich man, or at least by my own standards. I was ready to go.

7. AGAIN

Mario and I said goodbye to Fred and his pilots before we entered the airplane. He locked the door while I settled into the pilot seat. I felt like a pro with this airplane now and was able to go through the checklist quickly and confidently. In a few minutes both engines were running and we were off for the next—and final—leg of our mission.

We taxied to the runway, and without stopping I slowly increased power. I wanted to gain some speed before applying full throttle. The runway was made out of coral and a lot of it was loose. If I powered up too quickly, there was a chance the propellers would pick up some of the loose coral, which, if ingested into the motors, could easily cause major

damage.

We traveled almost 1,000 feet down the runway before I set the throttles to one hundred percent. I had to smile. Never in my life had I experienced the kind performance this baby was providing. It felt like I was driving a dragster down the quarter-mile strip. I lifted the nose as the airspeed passed one hundred knots and we vaulted into the air. I raised the flaps and landing gear, lowered the nose and watched the airspeed indicator race past two hundred knots. I was tempted to pull the nose up and do a 360 degree gentle roll. I was sure I could roll this thing so smoothly that if you were drinking a soda in the back of the plane, you wouldn't spill a drop. Common sense took hold, however, and a little voice that sounded like a cross between my older brother and my first flight instructor whispered, "Don't do that, Alan."

Hearing it made me think back to when I was a young pilot building experience in airplanes. I would often take my friends for rides, but instead of a casual sightseeing flight, I would treat them to loops, rolls and even spins. Normally this resulted in at least a few of my passengers becoming ill—and I mean violently ill. After a while it became impossible to find anyone who would fly with me. That's when it dawned on me that despite what they might say when they first got in a plane, most people just wanted a nice ride where they could enjoy the scenery. They really didn't want to be hanging on for dear life. I guess that wasn't a treat after all. This revelation resulted in a lot of self-examination. Why did I enjoy hanging on for dear life? And was it acceptable to feel like that? In the end I concluded that it didn't matter, because right or wrong, that was who I was.

We climbed to 8,500 feet, just above the cloud tops. It was a beautiful Caribbean day. From this height, visibility was at least a hundred miles. So far, things had worked out in our favor; even though the first trip did not go as planned, it did go well. And I had a bankbook with almost \$250,000 to prove it. Today's flight would double my wealth. I would be free to decide my future. That's assuming I would be paid right away. Sometimes that was a problem in this kind of work. But then again, I was dealing with the government, the good guys.

Minutes later I was lowering the nose of the plane to begin descent toward Abaco Island. We sped across the island at about one hundred feet. There wasn't much to look at; the highest point was about ten feet above sea level, a windblown desert island with hardly any vegetation. In no time, Abaco Island was behind us and we were skimming along at a mere twenty feet above the water, making our run toward Cuba. I told

Mario I thought it was more important to keep an eye out the window than to focus on the gauges. If anything went wrong mechanically, the enunciator panel would light up and buzzers would sound. The first trip had been a cakewalk, but this one was a whole different ballgame. As much as I tried to deny it, I was convinced that Cuban security would be greatly increased.

It takes a great deal of concentration to fly fifteen to twenty feet above the water at three hundred mph. Things were happening quickly. Soon the outer islands of Cuba were visible. I raised the nose and almost instantly we were two hundred feet above the water. Mario suddenly shouted, "Shit!" I looked in the same direction that he was looking and saw a Cuban gunboat 3,000 feet away at the most. There was no doubt he saw us. I had flown right in front of him.

Now we were in a race. Timing was everything. I had to get to the road, land, pick up the ballplayer and his family and leave as quickly as possible. I hoped my passengers would be ready. I pushed the power levers forward to full and watched the airspeed needle go past three hundred knots, the last number on the indicator, telling myself one more time how indestructible this little plane was. I was confident it could take anything I might have to give it. I really didn't have a clue how strong the wings were, but I knew there was a safety margin built into them and the air was calm.

Five miles from the touchdown spot, I began to slow down. One mile out, I lowered the landing gear and flaps. Quickly, we slowed to the approach speed I wanted. With only a half mile to go, I looked at the road I was about to land on and was surprised to see nothing. There were no people visible on the road or beside it. There were no trucks anywhere in sight. The road was empty. I could see a large ditch alongside the road, and the turnoff that the farm equipment used to enter the cane fields. This had to be the right place.

"Do you see anybody, Mario?" I yelled. He turned his head to the right and looked out the side window as if he expected the people to be hiding in the cane field beside us. Man, we really weren't on the same page. "I'm talking about the road in front of us! There's nobody on it. Shouldn't there be a small crowd about halfway down this road?" I was losing patience. I needed input and I needed it fast.

Still he said nothing. He just continued to look out the window, his neck extended, like he expected to see people jump out of thin air at any time. I shook my head. This was his mission too, yet it felt like all the pressure was on me.

The wheels touched down exactly where I had planned and the airplane began slowing. I was using only the wheel brakes, and lightly, wanting to keep my speed. Something wasn't right.

"Do you see anyone?" I all but screamed.

I could see for myself that there was no sign of humans anywhere. I released the brakes, letting the airplane roll along the road, concentrating on keeping it straight as we taxied past the pickup point.

"Damn, where are they?" I was talking to myself at this point. "Something has gone very wrong."

I smoothly applied power and lifted the airplane just slightly into the air. I didn't climb very high, maybe twenty feet, before I retracted the landing gear and flaps, letting the airspeed build. I started a left-hand turn to fly over the field one more time, just in case somehow I had missed them. It dawned on me that there could have been a communication failure, that the ballplayer and his family were waiting somewhere nearby on another road. Had I been concentrating so hard on the designated pickup point—not to mention flying the plane—that I hadn't looked around enough?

I was halfway through the turn, leaning, like Mario, as close to the window as possible, when I realized why there was no one waiting for us. A helicopter about a mile away was heading in our direction. Without a doubt, this mission had been compromised. If the helicopter was carrying missiles, we were definitely within range. For a brief second I wondered what it would be like to be hit by a missile in such a small plane. I could only imagine the impact.

Mario saw the helicopter too. He yelled, "We've got to get out of here!"

With the engines set to full power, we had plenty of airspeed. I rolled the airplane hard onto its port side, pulling a 3-G turn away from the helicopter. I leveled the wings and lowered the nose of the plane until we were only feet above the cane fields. Although I had no fighter experience or military training, I was confident it was very difficult to hit a plane this low to the ground with a missile. We headed for the coast, hoping our speed would soon take us out of range from whatever might be coming our way.

The night before Mario and I left Miami on the first mission, we'd talked about painting the top of the aircraft with camouflage paint. The following morning we laughed and concluded we were just being paranoid. Now I regretted that decision. I was certain the helicopter was still in pursuit. We were now fully involved in a deadly game of cat and

mouse, and we were definitely the mouse. With every second, we gained distance from the helicopter, but what worried me was the possibility that fighter planes would be called in to finish the job. If they knew we were coming—and why wouldn't they?—it was only a matter of time before we would be scrapping with a fighter.

I could feel Mario looking at me. I dared to take my eyes away from the window for a second to glance at him. His expression looked as sincere as a child's. "We're in big trouble, aren't we, Alan?" he said.

"Yeah, that about sums it up," I responded. "Tighten your seatbelt and shoulder strap. The best is yet to come."

The words were barely out of my mouth when a Russian MiG 21 fighter blasted past us, missing us by only a few feet. Its speed made me feel like we were standing still. We ran right smack into the jet wash from his engine, which was running with its afterburner on. The afterburner is a set of nozzles that are placed at the rear of a military fighter's engine to inject fuel into the hot exhaust gases, which are then ignited, giving the fighter as much as a hundred percent more power. It's like moving into warp speed, except for real. More important than the speed, to me at least, is that the temperature of the gases coming out the back of the engine increases tremendously with the afterburner on. At night, it looks like a thirty-foot pulsating flame behind the jet engine. If the hot exhaust under extreme pressure were to hit our windshield, it would burn through into the cabin and incinerate us. Lucky for us, it hit the right wing, forcing us upside down, causing me to bang my head on the left side window. If not for my seatbelt and shoulder strap, I would have been thrown from my seat. I rolled the airplane back level almost as quickly as we had gone upside down. We were very low, missing the ground by mere inches!

I could see the MiG out the side window. The pilot had pulled the jet into an incredibly tight right turn. After about twenty seconds, he pulled up alongside us, matching my speed. Since there was no longer any reason to fly low—in fact it was now detrimental—I gently climbed to approximately five hundred feet. With the left wing of the MiG overlapping my right wing, he followed my lead. Lifting his shaded visor, the pilot showed us his face. It was not a pretty sight. He looked like we had personally insulted him. He raised his hand, pointing forward, signaling that we should follow him. At almost the same time, his landing gear quickly slammed down and snapped into the locked position. It was the international signal to follow. Here it meant "follow me or else."

"He wants us to follow him," Mario cried.

I snapped at him, “Yeah, right. He wants us to follow him to a military base where we’ll be arrested. If we’re lucky, we’ll be imprisoned for years. That’s not my idea of a Caribbean all-inclusive. I think I prefer to die in the airplane trying to make a run for it.”

“I don’t know, Alan. If we run, they’ll shoot us down for sure. We might be better off—”

“Are you serious?” I yelled. “What do you really think, Mario? With all your knowledge and spy experience, if we follow him and land at their base, they’re going to torture us until they have the information they want, and then imprison us for life, or maybe just kill us. Yes or no? The last time we worked together, I made the tough decisions and you never stopped blaming me. Not this time. I need your answer now!” It surprised me to see how much pent-up anger I was displaying.

“Yes, yes!” He was screaming now. We were paralleling the MiG, trying not to arouse the pilot’s suspicions. But the moment we broke away, he would know our intentions and act accordingly. “There’s no doubt about it,” he continued. “Once they finish torturing us, they’ll put us in front of a firing squad and shoot us. If anyone asks, they’ll deny any knowledge of us ever being in their country. We’ll just disappear and be dead. No one will be able to do anything about it.”

My heart was thumping and my teeth were so tightly clenched that my jaw hurt. I was a dead man either way. “Landing at their base is not an option,” I said. “We’re going to follow him for now until I think of something.”

“Think fast,” Mario cried.

“Yeah, well, if you have any suggestions, now’s a good time...”

“I don’t have—” he began, but just then a second MiG pulled up on our left side, cutting Mario off in mid-sentence. I wasn’t surprised; fighter jets almost always travel in pairs. One part of me was noticing in an objective pilot-like way how big those MiG 21s were, much longer than I’d realized. That’s when I heard a voice in my mind reminding me that as long as I was still breathing, I still had a chance. We needed a plan.

We were heading northeast. I could see that the beach was only three or four miles away from our position. Ahead and to our right was a long peninsula named Varadero. With its endless white sandy beaches and crystal clear waters, this was considered one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. As we got closer, I could make out a resort, the first of many that I knew lined the long beach. The resorts at Varadero were owned in partnership between Europeans and the Castro brothers. Many of my Canadian friends had visited there. These resorts were well

marketed in Canada. The only complaint I ever heard about them was the food.

“The food is just terrible.” I don’t know how many times I’d heard someone say that. It amazed me that this was what I was thinking about. My mind was doing whatever it could to escape the reality of our situation. I had to force it to concentrate. What were my options?

The fighter at my left moved ahead and started a slow left turn. As I began to follow him, I could see a long runway about three or four miles ahead. It was a safe bet that this was the runway they wanted us to land on.

“I’ve got an idea, Mario,” I announced.

He gulped. He was staring straight ahead and had been since the second MiG had joined us. “Tell me,” he said softly, as if he thought we might be overheard.

“You see that runway up ahead? I’m sure that’s where they want us to land. There’s no way in the world that these jets can fly as slow as we can. I don’t know if they plan on landing at the same time as us, but it doesn’t matter. On final approach, I’m going to slow our airplane to a speed lower than the MiGs can fly. Once they’re ahead of us, I’m going to make a hard right turn and fly down that long white beach. The light colored sand should make this little airplane hard to see since it’s also white. It’ll take the MiGs a few seconds to realize that we’re not complying with them. That’ll give us a head start. It’s our only chance.”

Mario was silent for a moment. Then he nodded decisively. “Let’s do it.”

As we lined up for the runway, the MiG on my right moved farther away. Knowing that he would still be watching us closely, I lowered my landing gear. With approximately one mile left to go, I pulled the power back to idle and lowered the flaps and raised the nose. The breaking effect was incredible. I was right, the jets couldn’t fly this slow. Both were now in front of us. With only five hundred feet below me, I knew this next maneuver would be dangerous. I raised the nose a little more and watched the airspeed fall well below the minimum amount needed to maintain flight. We were stalling the wings; they were no longer creating lift. The annunciator panel lights were flashing and a buzzer rang in my ear, telling me my airspeed was too slow. The control column was shaking noisily. This was brought on by our low airspeed; it automatically activated the stick shaker, informing the pilot that the airspeed was dangerously slow. I ignored it.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the landing gear lever into the up

position, then raised the flaps. I lowered the nose and kicked the right rudder. The airplane fell forward and started a slow right turn. I pushed the throttles to where I thought full power should be. Leaving the nose down and leveling the wings, I lined us up with the beach.

The airplane was falling like a rock. At the very last moment, with the airspeed now in the green, I raised the nose and flew over the red tile rooftops of the nearby buildings only a few feet beneath me. Then I turned the airplane slightly to the left and flew down to the beach. At about ten feet above the sand, I leveled off. We were traveling at well over three hundred knots, but I wanted even more speed. The jets that were chasing us were capable of nearly 1,500 miles an hour. We were no match for them where speed was concerned. I pushed the throttles past one hundred percent, squeezing out every bit of speed she had. As I looked down, I could see tourists looking up, watching us whip by. I wondered what they were thinking.

“Mario, keep your eyes open for the MiGs. Let me know the second you see them.”

“Bad news, my friend,” Mario said. “I can see them now, flying in formation about a mile off our right wing. They’re moving fast. There are too many people to land on the beach. We’ll have to go into the water. It’s our only chance.”

I paused before answering. I was thinking the exact same thing. Usually when Mario and I agreed on something, things went bad. But this time he was right; it was our only option.

This was one decision I wouldn’t have time to weigh. “That sounds good, but we have a problem,” I said. “They might not see us right now because we are a white plane flying over a white beach, but as soon as we’re over the blue water, they won’t have any trouble finding us, and this time they won’t be asking us to follow them either. Still, we can’t use the beach.”

I was no longer concerned about hurting the engines with rapid power changes; in a few minutes it wouldn’t matter. I pulled the power levers back quickly. As we slowed, I could see ahead that there were tourists swimming and playing in the shallow water. I pointed the plane farther from the beach and pushed the emergency stop and feather buttons for both engines. These switches are normally only used for engine fires or other emergencies. This was the first time in my aviation career I had ever used them.

There was an immediate change in sound as all engine gauges dropped toward zero. I was surprised at how quickly the propellers came

to a stop. How strange to be flying an airplane ten feet above the water with both engines shut down. The MiGs, flying at very high speed, had flown right past us in the opposite direction. It would take at least thirty seconds before they could turn and come back. Meanwhile, the people on the beach were getting quite a show. Some were actually waving while others were taking pictures. I guess they thought we were stunt pilots, paid by the owners of their fancy resorts to entertain them. Although I was concerned only about living through the next few minutes, I had to laugh.

We were a high speed glider now, still moving very quickly. Because we were light, we continued gliding above the water for what seemed like a long time. At about a hundred knots our little plane started descending by itself. I left the flaps in the up position; they would only induce a nose down attitude. In Canada, I had flown floatplanes for years and had become very good at water landings. The difference here was there would be no taking off once we landed. I continued to gently raise the nose in an effort to hold her two to three feet above the water. When I felt certain that she no longer wanted to fly, I pushed the nose forward a tiny bit and gently placed her down.

The silence within the cabin was replaced with a thumping sound. We skimmed along the water for at least a hundred yards like a speedboat bouncing on the tips of the waves. I used the rudder to keep us straight. As we started to settle, the left wingtip grabbed a small wave and immediately turned us sideways, then backward. The back of our wings dug into the water. From our viewpoint we could see the flaps and ailerons tumbling through the air. They had been torn off by the tremendous impact as we hit the water backward. Because we were turned around, the force of the rapid deceleration pushed us hard against our seats. We rocked back and forth, left and right, finally settling into the water with a nose down attitude. The sound of water entering the airplane told me it was time to get out. I glanced at Mario. He looked as amazed as I was that we had survived the ditching without injury. We actually smiled at each other; we had been here before.

Knowing I wouldn't have to give him any instructions, I undid my seatbelt and climbed toward the back door. The nose was sinking quickly, leaving the tail high in the air. The empty cabin made it look as if the door was a long way away up a very steep incline. Scrambling on all fours like a cat, I made for the door, unlocked it and pushed it open. Because of the steep angle, the shock damper system on the door that prevented it from flying open was now working against me; it seemed to take forever to get

it fully open. I turned to Mario, who was hanging onto the doorjamb waiting his turn to exit.

“Here’s the plan,” I said as I took off my T-shirt and tucked it into my pants. “When we leave the plane, we’ll dive down about five feet heading toward the shore. Stay under water as long as you possibly can. When you need air, surface on your back and take a couple of deep breaths, then go back under. Keep doing this until we’re close to the shore. Then we’ll try to mingle with the tourists.”

Mario pulled his shirt over his head and tucked it into his pants like I had. “Okay,” he said. “Go!”

Because the plane had spun around before sinking, I found myself facing the beach. In the split second before I hit the water, I looked up and saw that our plane had the undivided attention of just about everyone. I focused on making sure my entry into the water was perfect. I wanted to gain as much distance from the plane as possible with my first breath. Years of scuba diving and competition swimming had taught me that my first breath would give me the most distance. After that, I would need to surface more often. I swam down maybe five feet under the surface and headed toward shore. All the time I swam, the rational part of me lectured: Don’t panic; don’t go too fast; don’t go too slow; do this right and maybe things will work out.

I could hear a splashing noise behind me as Mario dove from the plane. From our long time together, I knew he was a strong swimmer. Since he was younger and in better physical shape, I was sure he’d be able to keep up. I started counting the seconds. I would force myself to stay under water for at least a hundred of them, something I had done many times before. I knew I was getting close to shore because the water was becoming shallow. I could even see the distant movement of people who had come off the beach and into the water to get a closer look at the sinking airplane. I thought at first they were rushing toward me. Then I realized they were actually rushing past me.

When I got to ninety-five seconds, I rolled over on my back, allowing only my face to break the surface, and took a series of deep breaths. I didn’t want to draw attention. Suddenly, I felt someone grab my arm. I turned to see Mario’s face pop up beside me. He had stayed with me the entire distance and was now filling his lungs as quickly as possible, unconcerned about who might be looking. Luckily, the tourists who had run into the water seemed so focused on the sinking airplane that they didn’t pay any attention to us. Most of them had already waded past the place where we had surfaced. The pace at which they were racing toward

the airplane confirmed that some of them were do-gooders determined to rescue any survivors. Others were probably hoping to get a better look at the action. I tugged on Mario's arm, bringing him to a stop.

With my feet touching the sandy bottom, I said, "Move backward toward the beach and try and get out of the water without being noticed."

"That might be a little hard, considering I have pants and shoes on."

"As we move backward, take your shoes and socks off and wrap them in your shirt. Then roll your pants up as far as they'll go. No one is looking at us right now. Everyone's looking at the plane. Keep the bottom part of your body under water for as long as you can. Don't move too quickly. Look at the plane like everyone else."

He seemed dubious. "It's not like we have a lot of options," I said. I glanced at the plane. Only the tail was still visible. The rest had already sunk into the clear Caribbean sea.

The MiGs had made another turn and were approaching from the west in tight formation. They were much lower than before and the crowd in the water stopped moving toward the plane long enough to look up at them. I was amazed that no one seemed to pay any attention to us. But then again, we were just two more heads in the water. I was just about to conclude that luck was on our side when I heard what sounded like bricks being dropped into the water in rapid succession from high up. This was followed by a lot of screaming. Amazingly, the MiGs were firing their cannons at the sinking airplane. I kept moving backward at the same pace. The impact from the bullets created a white wall of water about thirty feet high, leading directly to the airplane. People were making U-turns and heading back to the beach as fast as they could. Between the waves and the splashing, there was too much going on for anyone to notice us climbing out of the sea.

"Let's get the hell out of the water now," I commanded.

We made our way out and moved quickly toward a part of the beach that was littered with palm cabanas that would offer us some cover. Except for a few kids playing in the sand, they were deserted. The former occupants were now gathered in the surf, probably discussing the startling experience they had just shared. Beneath one of the cabanas was a pile of towels. I yelled out to Mario, who was closer, to grab some. He took four or five and threw one my way.

We weren't running, but we were moving fast. Behind the cabanas was a scattering of small palm trees. As we made our way beneath them, I wrapped my towel around my waist. Luckily it was big enough to cover

my rolled-up pants.

“Toss me another,” I yelled. I wrapped my wet shoes, socks and shirt in it.

“Now what?” Mario asked.

I stared at him. Except for the anxiety on his face, he looked like a tourist to me.

“Now what, Alan?” he asked again.

There was no obvious answer. I needed to think.

Glancing behind me I saw the MiGs had turned again and were headed back for a second pass. The seriousness of their attempts to kill us brought the reality of our situation to a new and ugly level. I looked at the water and saw the tail of the Cheyenne still sticking up in the air defiantly.

As I was turning away, I saw two guys wearing Tommy Bahamas and carrying exotic drinks approaching us. They were smiling.

I quickly forced a smile onto my face, ready to do some good-natured fellow tourist bantering with them if necessary. But I was hoping we could get past them with nothing more than smiles and nods. The bigger one, in fact, looked like he would do just that. But then the slightly shorter, thinner one stepped right in front of me and said, “You two are from the plane. We saw you dive into the water.”

8. NICE HOTEL

“We watched your landing from our balcony. Wow, that was spectacular,” said the bigger man with the hairy belly. They extended their hands toward us at the same time. “My name is Barry,” said the big guy. He jerked his head toward his slimmer friend. “And this is my friend, Dennis.”

Both men were in their forties, over six feet tall, well groomed and in top physical condition. Barry had jet-black hair and wore a bright gold watch on a leather wristband. He looked at us through blue designer sunglasses. His colorful Tommy Bahamas outfit suited him perfectly.

Dennis looked like a surfer. He was handsome and well tanned from

head to toe. His perfect white teeth looked like those of a movie star. Straight blond hair and blue eyes made him seem almost too good-looking.

We shook hands all around. "I'm Alan and this is Mario. As you can probably tell, we have a slight problem."

"A slight problem!" Barry laughed, his green eyes twinkling with delight. "It looks more like a catastrophe from where I'm standing."

"Mechanical problems," I said, stumbling for an answer. "Looks like we picked up some bad fuel in the Cayman Islands."

"Looked to me like you shut down the engines intentionally," Dennis interjected in a low voice. I turned to him. "I know about planes," he went on. "I've got a pilot's license. It looked like the engines were running fine right up until you shut them off. Nice landing though, very nice."

Mario piped up. "Are you guys Canadian?"

"How did you know that?" Barry asked.

Mario started laughing. "Your English. This is the first time I've ever met anyone who speaks exactly the same way as Alan."

This really wasn't the time for small talk. "I'm from British Columbia," I said in an effort to get to the point. "Where are you guys from?"

"Small world," replied Barry. After announcing he was a pilot, Dennis had taken a step back and Barry was controlling the conversation again. "Dennis and I are from Vancouver. We're attorneys. We specialize in real estate law, pretty exciting stuff." They both chuckled. "What part of British Columbia are you from, Alan?"

I glanced at the sky and then at the sea. I didn't see any MiGs at the moment, but the tail of the plane was still saluting us from the ocean. There were still plenty of people standing around in the water and on the beach, making friends and speculating on what had happened.

"I was born in a small town called Rossland. It's in the interior, about two miles north of the U.S. border."

Out of nowhere came the deafening roar of jet engines. I looked up to see one of the MiGs flying approximately a hundred feet over our heads. They were keeping an eye on the Cheyenne from their high speed platforms.

"We need help," I said bluntly.

Dennis and Barry looked at each other, then back at us. The moment of silence that followed seemed to last forever. Finally Barry let out a bark of laughter that caused his hairy belly to shudder.

"No kidding," he said, and we all laughed as if that was the funniest thing in the world. And maybe it was to Barry and Dennis, but Mario and

I were laughing out of sheer anxiety.

Suddenly Dennis stopped laughing and turned serious. "Let's go to our room and get you some clothes that are a little more appropriate."

His blond brows came together above his eyes. I could see that despite hanging back at first, he was a take-charge type of guy. I was glad, because I was pretty much out of ideas.

"Alan, you come with me," Dennis said as he turned on one heel. "Mario, you and Barry hang behind us just a little. Keep your clothes wrapped in the towel with your hands covered in case the hotel security people are checking for wristbands. Let's move. With all eyes looking at your handywork, we'll be practically invisible."

Without another word, Dennis and I began walking along the path toward the hotel lobby, with Mario and Barry close behind. As we walked, Dennis rambled on about the magnificent tropical gardens which seemed to escort us on either side of our trail. Obviously, he was hoping to throw off any tourists who may have been listening. As we neared the lobby, a wall of hotel staff, wearing their sharp-pressed floral outfits, appeared to be waiting for our arrival. In reality, they were looking past us, trying to get a glimpse of the action we had left behind. They moved aside to let us pass, acknowledging our presence without really seeing us. Once we had cleared the crowd, Dennis turned to Mario and Barry.

Lowering his voice to a whisper, he said, "The stairs are quicker. Follow me." Walking in a line, we moved smoothly up the open-air stairway.

The second floor landing was filled with tourists, all glued to the railing and the sight of the airplane and the people still in the water trying to get a bead on the action. The third and fourth landings were the same. No one paid any attention to us. I heard a helicopter but kept my eyes straight ahead. When we reached the fourth floor landing, Dennis turned to the right and walked several yards down the catwalk with us close behind. He inserted his electronic key into the door lock and we quickly entered room 403. The sound of the helicopter grew closer. Once we'd shut the door behind us, we hurried to the balcony to watch the growing crowd around the Cheyenne.

"Do you guys feel important?" Barry asked.

I thought I detected sarcasm in his remark, but I couldn't be sure.

He continued, "You should. This is all about you."

Barry was looking out over the balcony, smiling, seemingly very content. Less than a hundred feet away was a Russian helicopter, beginning its approach to the beach. Most of the tourists were scrambling in every direction to get out of its way. Remarkably, a few seemed frozen,

unwilling or unable to accept the reality that a military helicopter was about to land where they were standing. Finally, with the huge machine only a few feet above their heads and sand spraying everywhere, striking out like millions of tiny bullets, the last of the tourists ran to safety.

As the helicopter hovered over the sand, red-bereted Special Forces troops began jumping out of it, some of them carrying bundles of red poles and other apparatus. I counted twelve soldiers. Bending low, they dispersed quickly while the helicopter roared upward. The soldiers gathered together and immediately went to work, hammering the bright red poles into the sand and connecting them with white tape. From where we were I couldn't read the writing on the tape, but it looked very similar to the tape used by police to block off crime scenes.

Some of the soldiers went to the water's edge and pointed their automatic weapons at the tourists between them and the plane. The horrified people began panicking, desperately trying to get out of the water. It looked like a scene from the movie *Jaws*.

I felt sorry for the vacationers, many of them middle-aged, who had come here to relax. I heard the rumble of a second helicopter and looked away from the beach scene to see the chopper appear over the roof of the hotel. They passed right over our heads, stopping above the sunken plane. When it was low enough, four military divers in dark scuba gear emerged at the door, dropped into the water and disappeared. The helicopter then crept slowly over the water and landed on the beach in the area secured by the soldiers. While the rotor blades slowed to a stop, a different class of military personnel could be seen exiting the helicopter. These elite troops wore dark green camouflage fatigues with blue berets and sidearms. They were clearly the officers who would now direct the operation.

"I'm not sure we want to know you guys," Dennis whispered, his narrow eyes sweeping away from the scene on the beach. "This is getting very serious." He gave me a look that reminded me of how my father's face looked when he was giving me my last chance to come clean before he took me over his knee. "If we're going to help you, we need to know what's really going on, and we need to know now."

I turned to Mario, hoping he would be the one to put forth a story, but he seemed to be puzzled. I'm usually pretty fast in the story department myself, but with soldiers armed with machine guns combing the beach for us, and divers in the water, I was having a hard time concentrating.

Dennis laughed. "We're attorneys," he declared. "I understand why you don't want to tell us the truth." His smile seemed to cover his entire

face. He had us. There was nowhere to turn from this phony smile. "Obviously, trusting two strangers is hard for you," he went on. "I understand, but we need the truth if we're going to help you."

"So you're not going to believe the story about getting rainwater in our fuel tanks and losing engine power?" I asked, knowing he was right, that the truth was our only real option.

Barry blurted out, "We don't have time for bullshit. Just tell us the truth and we'll go from there."

I looked at Mario again. "Why don't you tell them? You're the spy. I'm only the pilot." In my peripheral vision I saw Dennis and Barry exchange a quick glance as I spoke the word "spy."

Mario backed away from the balcony and sat down on the edge of a wicker chair. He nodded and licked his lips for a few moments as if uncertain where to start. Then he began to speak slowly, detailing the events that had led up to us hiding in a hotel room with two Canadian tourists on a beautiful beach in Cuba. When he was finished, our newest best friends looked at each other and at almost the same time said, "Damn."

"What's your plan now?" Dennis asked. His insincere grin had been replaced by a look of genuine concern.

I turned to Mario. "What is the plan?"

He stood and looked out over the balcony where the Cuban officers were now standing in a line, facing the sea. Beyond them the scuba divers were walking awkwardly out of the water, shaking their heads in the negative to indicate that things had not gone well with their dive. Some new people had joined the crowd, men dressed in dark blue suits and Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses. They looked young, in their twenties and early thirties. They carried small notepads as they went among the tourists, interrogating those who seemed eager to relate their version of events.

"I don't have a plan," Mario said sadly.

Suddenly I was very angry. He was the man in charge here. He should have a plan. "Well, you'd better get one pretty damn quick," I said loudly.

Barry glanced at Dennis before turning to Mario and me. "Both of you are insane. You came to Cuba to smuggle out a baseball player and his family without a backup plan?"

I replied at once, emphatically, "It's not like I volunteered for this mission. I didn't have a lot of—"

Mario cut me off. "You could have said no. You didn't have a gun to your head."

“Didn’t I? Do you mean to say Fred and his pals weren’t carrying guns?”

“Bickering isn’t going to help,” Dennis said quickly, shouldering in between us. “We need to be working on a solution. Let’s look at the options.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right.” I forced myself to smile. “We just needed to panic a little. Now that that’s over, let’s get on with it.” I looked around, unable to think of a solution. “Who wants to go first?”

Everyone laughed, and the laughter continued longer than it should have. It was a rare, insane moment. Dennis was the first to get serious.

“While we’re all so diligently thinking of a possible resolution, let’s get you dressed like tourists.” He walked to the large closet and opened the accordion doors on either side, displaying an array of colorful designer summer wear. On the bed he laid out two outfits of matching shirts and shorts, directing Mario to one and me to the other. “These should fit you. Try them on.”

I immediately shed my wet towel, pants and underwear. “Sorry, we don’t have any underwear,” Barry explained. “It’s too hot.”

“No problem,” I said, slipping on the light blue shorts. They fit nearly perfectly. As I buttoned up the shirt, I turned to the mirror and found Mario’s image already in it. “Wow, do we look like tourists?” I asked him. The transformation the clothes made was incredible. I pulled my wet socks out of my running shoes and retrieved \$1,000 from each sock, all in hundred dollar bills. I laid the bills out on the bed to dry. “How much do we owe you for the clothes?” I asked.

“Don’t even think about it,” Dennis said sincerely. “We’re happy to help. Besides, you guys look great in those outfits.” He picked up a Nikon from the top of the dresser. “I have to have a picture of you two. No one at home will believe this story without one.”

I didn’t like the idea of letting this guy take my picture, but as he and Barry were our only hope at the moment, I didn’t see how I could protest. Mario must have been thinking the same thing because his first reaction was to turn his head aside, like a girl too shy to smile for the camera. Under normal conditions, he loved cameras. In any photos I have of him from the old days, he is the one out in front of the others guys, the one with the big smile. I gave him a little nod, which was meant to say: these guys are taking a great risk to help us, the least we can do is let them have a few pictures to authenticate their stories for their colleagues back at the office. Theirs was not going to be your average Cuban vacation story after all. Mario got the gist of my meaning and nodded back.

“Snap on,” I said. Dennis took one picture of the two of us, and then another with Barry. Next, Barry took the camera and shot us with Dennis, and finally Dennis set the automatic timer on the camera and then placed it on the dresser to capture all four of us together.

When the picture taking was over, Dennis looked at the money on the bed. “Let me buy as much of that as I can from you. There’s a ten percent surcharge on U.S. money, and most of the tourists here are from Europe or Canada and don’t carry U.S. bills. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb if you carry that around.” He turned to Barry. “How much Canadian cash do you have?” Barry emptied his wallet, and then went through a small leather carry-on bag that he pulled from the closet. All told, he produced a little over \$1,100 Canadian. Dennis’s cash came to about \$1,400 Canadian. “How much U.S. money do you have?” Barry asked Mario. Mario retrieved his wallet from his pants and took out sixty-eight dollars.

I was stunned and also embarrassed. “You go on a mission to Cuba with sixty-eight bucks in your wallet? What the hell were you thinking?”

Mario shrugged. “I’m on an expense account,” he declared in his typical arrogant style.

I laughed bitterly. “An expense account? How does that work here in Cuba?” Our new friends laughed nervously, perhaps hoping to avoid another altercation between Mario and me. I turned to them. “Between us, it looks like we have \$2,068 U.S.”

Dennis said, “Barry and I have a little over \$2,500 Canadian. We’ll trade you straight across. You won’t have any trouble converting your Canadian money to Cuban pesos. They take Canadian at the banks and money exchanges in all the tourist hotels. Do either of you know the difference between the convertible Cuban peso and the regular Cuban peso?”

“No problem,” Mario said confidently enough for me to believe him.

“We shouldn’t have any trouble looking like dumb Canadian tourists exchanging dollars. Thanks for the help,” I added.

“Don’t thank us yet. This isn’t over by a long shot.”

I gave Mario approximately \$800 Canadian and kept the rest. I figured that was more than fair, considering that over \$2,000 U.S. was mine in the first place. I divided the money into two small piles, putting half in the left pocket of my new shorts and the other half in my right pocket. Mario did the same. Looking like Canadian tourists with ready-to-spend money bulging out of our pockets, it was now time to go. But the question was, where?

“You must have a contingency plan of some sort,” I said to Mario.

“What was the plan if we crashed while landing on that lousy road between the cane fields?”

Mario came to life. “Yeah, I forgot, we do have a plan for that. If we crashed while landing or taking off, we were to go with the baseball players back to Havana and then go to my aunt’s house. I have the address right here.” He opened his wallet and pulled out a wet business card from a Miami nightclub with an address written on the back of it.

Dennis grabbed it from him. “You can’t travel with this card,” he said. From the desk, he picked up a pen and notebook with the hotel logo on them and copied down the address from the business card. “This looks better than a wet business card with a Miami address.” He looked at his watch. The guy was all business. I was betting he was a great lawyer. “Listen, a small van leaves the hotel every hour for Havana. It takes tourists in both directions. You’ll have to move fast. You’ve got seven minutes until the next van leaves. It’s your only option.”

I replied, “Damn, Dennis, the last time we moved this quickly, we ended up in a Venezuelan prison for two months.” He looked at me quizzically. “But that’s another story,” I said.

“Listen to me carefully, Alan. If you don’t get out of this hotel, they will catch you. That’s a fact.” He opened his wallet and pulled out his credit-card-sized Canadian birth certificate. “Take this and my Cuban travel visa. It’s what you’ll need to get on the bus.” He turned to Barry. “Give Mario yours.” He turned back to me again. “We only use our passports when we travel on the airlines. Inside Cuba, we use our birth certificates for identification along with the visa. Don’t worry, they won’t look at you twice. The assistant to the bus driver will ask you for your room number. Remember, it’s 403. They’ll check the names against the hotel registry. I ask only one thing. If you get caught with our identification before we leave in two days, you tell them that you broke into our room and stole it. Do we have a deal?”

“For sure,” I said, glancing at Mario. He was grinning as if he thought all our problems had just been solved. “How much trouble is it going to be for you guys to get another visa?”

“Hopefully we won’t draw too much attention to ourselves when we apply for new visas. Be very careful using those visas, just in case some smart Cuban figures it out. Down here they don’t have computers, just radios for communicating amongst themselves. What I’m trying to say is, they’re not that good at sharing information.”

I turned to Mario. “Are we going to do this? Or do you have a better idea?”

“I agree with these guys. The sooner we get out of here the better.”

“Put your wet stuff in my day bag,” Barry said. He opened a colorful canvas handbag and Mario and I stuffed our wet clothes and shoes inside it. “Be careful with this bag,” he went on. “Normal tourists wouldn’t be carrying wet clothes around with them.” Barry suddenly realized what he had just said. “Actually, I think it’s a better idea that we just throw these clothes away. If you end up in a roadblock, this would be a dead giveaway.”

Dead was the key word in that sentence. Mario and I both nodded in agreement. Throw the clothes away. We were on our way to Havana like tourists, empty-handed, carrying only money to buy what the Cubans had to offer. Both of these men were smart, probably a lot smarter than either of us. They also had the advantage of thinking without the pressure that we were under.

I was just about to mention the fact that Mario and I were barefoot when Barry dropped two pairs of fine, handmade leather sandals in front of us on the tile floor. “Wear these. We just bought them yesterday in Havana. I want them returned when you get back to Canada. You have our names on the birth certificates. We’re in the Vancouver phone book.” He looked at his watch. “You have less than five minutes now. The bus is usually on time. Let’s go.”

With Dennis leading the way, we left the security of the hotel room and walked down the stairs the same way we had come up. People were still gathered on all the landings, looking out at the beach. We entered the lobby walking at a painfully slow pace to avoid calling attention to ourselves. We moved to the driveway in front of the hotel. The Mitsubishi minibus was waiting with its engine idling. Two Cuban agents wearing cheap blue suits and sunglasses came down the stairs from the lobby on both sides of us. They stopped and took a good look, which sent a chill down my spine. A moment later they continued past us as if we weren’t even there. I took a deep breath, and out of relief, I chuckled. When we reached the bus, Dennis and Barry stopped and turned. Both men took turns hugging both of us.

“It’s time for us to part company. We wish you the best of luck,” Dennis said.

Barry whispered, “Remember to act like tourists. You won’t have any problems.”

As the two lawyers walked away talking to each other, I was overcome with a feeling of loss—of both friendship and security. Who would have thought it? Two guys from Vancouver that we had known for not much

more than an hour had helped us out of a huge jam that by all rights we should not have survived. I would never forget them. But for now, it was Mario and me again, on our own, an all too familiar scenario dating back to our past escapades.

We stepped off the curb in front of the minibus and handed the birth certificates and visas to the pretty young woman who stood in front of the bus door. “We’re from room 403,” I said, trying to sound as boring as possible. She looked through two pages of names and room numbers and found the correct names. She checked them off with her red pen and handed us back the documents, gesturing for us to enter the minibus.

The bus had seats for about twenty-four people and was a little more than half full. Besides Mario, me, and two elderly women, all the other occupants were middle-aged couples. This concerned me; the Ray-Ban guys that we’d seen on the beach were surely looking for two men. We took seats at the very back of the bus and sort of slouched down into them. We must have looked like two little kids trying to hide from their parents.

“How much longer until we leave?” Mario asked impatiently.

I looked at my watch; we were one minute past the hour. “If this thing really goes on time, we’ll be leaving any second,” I whispered. “Remember, no Spanish under any circumstances. Canadians don’t speak Spanish, or if they do, they speak it the way I do. Let me do the talking no matter how ridiculous I sound. If you need me to know something, tell me in English.” Mario had criticized my Spanish on many occasions, but right now, my brand of Spanish would be perfect. I sounded like a Canadian tourist.

We sat together without saying a word, scared with nowhere to run. I started to breathe again when the young woman who had checked our IDs shut the door and sat in the front of the bus near the driver. The driver slipped the transmission into drive and it engaged with a thump. We moved slowly along the hotel road to a stop sign, and then turned right onto the main road. In a minute, we had accelerated to approximately forty miles an hour. I looked ahead of us. There were no roadblocks in sight. In fact, there were no other cars in site. That bothered me. I glanced at Mario. He looked petulant, like a kid who had been forced to leave his favorite toy behind.

“What’s the matter now?”

“I need to get to a phone,” he said. “I have a date tonight. I’ve got to call and tell her I can’t make it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I shook my head in disbelief. He had

this incredible talent for being able to slip in and out of the moment. “We should be discussing what we’ll do if we get stopped at a roadblock, not thinking about women.”

Of course, just saying those words caused me to see Jenny in my mind’s eye. And thinking of her now caused me to realize how long it had been since I’d spoken to her. To my surprise, the anger that I’d felt the day before on Moores Island had moved on and I was on to another emotion. That was the only good thing about the trouble we were in. It softened the blow of getting dumped. Not that she wasn’t right to dump me. The fact that I was sitting in the back of a bus with Mario, trying to make it to Havana, of all places, praying not to come upon any roadblocks, was a perfect example of why she was right to move on. I lowered my head. At least if I got caught and tortured to death, I wouldn’t be leaving behind a grieving lover.

When my moment of self-pity had passed, I pulled Dennis’s birth certificate out of my pocket and read his full name. Dennis Alan Bryant. I nudged Mario. “How cool is that?” I asked him. “His middle name is Alan, spelled like mine too.”

Mario produced his certificate. “Barry Thomas Bryant. I guess they’re brothers.” He scrunched his nose in puzzlement. “Why do you think they had just one bed? They’re lawyers. They should be able to afford a suite.”

I laughed. We were speeding down the highway, getting farther and farther away from the crime scene, and Mario wanted to know why there was only one bed. “Maybe they take turns sleeping in the hammock on the balcony. Maybe they’re gay. Who cares?” I looked over his shoulder. “What’s Barry’s birth date?”

Mario studied the document.

“We’d better memorize their statistics in case someone asks.” I lifted Dennis’s birth certificate closer to my face and started reading it very carefully. Mario was doing the same with Barry’s. We should have thought to commit all the information to memory before we got on the bus, but there just wasn’t time. Now I started to second-guess our actions. Would it really have been such a big deal if we had waited an hour for the next bus?

The man in front of us turned suddenly and asked if we knew what the action on the beach was all about. He was bald, a bit haggard looking, probably in his mid sixties. His wife glanced our way, smiled thinly, then turned back again. Her jerky gesture made it clear that it hurt her neck to turn her head more than she had to.

“I heard a shark swam close to shore and some of the swimmers saw

it and panicked,” I lied.

The man leaned toward his wife. “See, I told you there were sharks in these waters.” Then he turned back and said in a voice loud enough for the entire minibus to hear, “I was snorkeling yesterday and I saw a really big shark about fifty feet offshore. Nobody believed me, not even the people at the hotel.”

“I believe you,” I said, smiling, happy to have a conversation about sharks like any normal tourist.

Another man, who was seated in front of the bald guy, threw his arm over the back of his seat and twisted himself so he could jump into the conversation. “These waters are full of sharks. Many tourists are bitten each year and some die. They don’t tell you this when you book your vacation. It’s a well kept secret.”

One of the two elderly women traveling together turned from her seat across the aisle with her hand on her heart. “They come right up into the surf, you know. You don’t have to be deep in the water to get bit.” Her companion glared at her as if to say, “That’s enough now.” Suddenly the entire bus was alive with conversation. I was happy to think that I had been the one to generate it—until Mario nudged me and whispered, “Why is there no other traffic?”

I shrugged. “Just be cool. Who cares about the traffic, we’re tourists.”

I was having fun now. I thought we were too far away from the hotel to find a roadblock. But only seconds later, I saw the flashing lights of police cars and military transport trucks coming into sight from a ramp entering the highway. Up ahead, it looked like an anthill until we got closer. I counted a dozen cops backed up by dozens of soldiers still in their trucks. As we slowed down, I was amazed that the cops all looked identical. Same size, height and posture. They were standing in a strange type of formation, with large semiautomatic handguns protruding from their exposed holsters. They looked like they were ready to stop an invasion. Serious overkill, considering they were looking for only two people.

The van came to a full stop in front of the barricade. As soon as the door opened, four cops climbed into the van with an obvious attitude. The soldiers climbed out of their vehicle and surrounded the bus. They were carrying AK-47s and had them pointed toward the bus. Mario leaned toward me and whispered, “Your friends from Vancouver ratted us out.”

“Bullshit,” I said quickly. “Don’t blow this. Just be cool. You’re a tourist.”

The cops got in the faces of all of the tourists, even the two elderly women. “Documents,” they shouted in Spanish. The passengers, none of whom seemed to understand Spanish, went into a panic. Then the wife of the man who had seen the shark passed out. She fell to the floor with a thud that was barely audible over the shouting and general hysteria. The closest policeman looked at her in surprise but didn’t bother to help her. Her husband, meanwhile, was sitting with his hands up in surrender, a look of horror on his face.

I whispered to Mario, “Don’t do anything heroic. When they get in your face, act scared. But don’t give them your ID right away. Remember, you don’t understand what they’re saying.”

“Acting scared won’t be a problem,” he whispered back.

No sooner had the words left his lips than one of the cops appeared in our faces, demanding our papers. I threw my hands into the air and replied in panicked English, “What are you people doing?”

The angry cop replied in broken English, “Documents, now.”

I slowly lowered my hand into my pocket. I produced Dennis’s birth certificate and visa and held them out to him. Then I pointed to the woman lying unconscious on the floor. “I’m a doctor,” I said. “Let me help her.”

The cop understood. She was almost between his feet. He had to step over her to get to us. He moved his hand in her direction. I took his gesture to mean that he was allowing me to help her. I climbed over Mario and the cop took a step back so I could get near the woman. I reached for her hand and felt for a pulse. Thankfully, she was still alive, but her heart was racing. Using her handbag as a pillow for her head, I positioned her flat on the floor, trying to make her as comfortable as possible. Her breathing was deep and not overly fast.

The girl who had boarded us had found her way to the back of the bus by now. She had her clipboard in her hand. I snatched it from her, removed all the papers and handed them back to her. Then I bent over the woman on the floor and used the clipboard to fan her.

I pointed at Mario and said loudly, “Barry, please. I want you to fan her while I check her pulse.” The cop allowed Mario to pass. I handed him the clipboard and instructed him to fan her as quickly as he could.

Once the police had gathered everyone’s identification and visas, they stepped outside the van. The young woman from the hotel joined them, and together they began to compare the names on the documents with her paperwork. I continued to pretend to treat the woman on the floor while Mario fanned her. When I glanced at him, he imitated me,

whispering in a sarcastic voice and with a comical look on his face, “Don’t do anything heroic.” From the window I saw another tourist van pull in behind ours, and although it was likely from a different hotel, it was greeted in the same fashion ours had been. The cop who held our documents passed them to the woman from the hotel and quickly ran off to scare the new busload of passengers. Meanwhile, the pulse of the woman on the floor slowly returned to what seemed like a normal rate.

Her eyes opened and she groggily asked, “What happened to me? Why am I on the floor?” Her husband, who was much calmer now that the cops had left, told her briefly what had happened. She tried to get up, but I asked her to wait a few more minutes. I instructed the young lady who was busy returning documents to shut the door so we could utilize the air-conditioning that the bus was producing.

With the door closed, the minibus quickly became comfortable once more. The woman who had passed out asked me to help her stand, and I did. As she settled into her seat, her husband, who had tears in his eyes, thanked me. To my surprise, he began to clap. Then one of the two elderly woman started clapping. In a moment, everyone on the bus, even the woman from the hotel, was clapping. The only ones not clapping were the driver and Mario. All the others were clapping for me, the phony doctor. I bowed humbly and sat down. Mario plopped down beside me and gave me a dirty look. The bus began to move and the soldiers in front of it parted like the Red Sea, allowing us to pass by.

“That was close,” Mario whispered.

9. LA HABANA

The Mitsubishi minibus pulled away from the roadblock as if nothing had happened. Hopefully, we were on our way to Havana. Now that the fun was over, the bus occupants became very quiet. No one said a word. I looked at Mario, who was still sulking.

"I told you there wouldn't be any problems," I said. "We have visas and IDs. We'll be okay."

"There's at least one more roadblock to come," he said squeamishly.

I stared at him for a full minute. "I'm surprised, Mario. All this time I've known you, you never mentioned that you were psychic."

He shrugged. "I can't help knowing what I know."

"I don't believe you just said that." This had to be the stupidest thing he ever said to me. Instead of insulting him, I pressed for more information. "But how do you know?"

He shrugged again. "I can feel it."

"Where? In your bones?" I laughed. The only thing I'd ever known Mario to be able to feel was his stomach. In fact, I was surprised that he hadn't already brought up the subject of food. As I looked out the window and pondered his words, I began to wonder if he knew more about this place than he let on. And if he did, why was he trying to keep it a secret? What was the big deal?

Crossing a fairly large elevated bridge provided a good view of the surrounding flatlands that we had flown over not very long before. The roadblock we left behind was positioned at the beginning of the bridge,

a natural chokepoint. These Cubans weren't stupid.

I sat back in my seat looking from one window to another as we came to the far end of the bridge. To my right was a large body of water. Beyond it was a long line of private beach houses. To my left was the airport we had been lined up to land at before we made our decision and cut free from our escorting MiGs. Cruising parallel to the runway, I could see two MiG fighter jets parked on the tarmac.

I jabbed Mario in the ribs and whispered, "How much do you want to bet those are the two that were chasing us?"

Mario took a good hard look. The jets were being refueled on the tarmac beside the runway less than two hundred yards away.

"That's them," he said finally. "Man, if the Castro brothers knew we were driving by the airport they wanted us to land on, they'd flip." He smiled arrogantly. In spite of his sulkiness, he was feeling some pride at having evaded a formidable enemy—at least for now.

A marina came into view on the right of the bus. There were slips for at least forty boats. I counted six boats moored there. I pointed at the almost empty dock.

"Looks to me like they're having a hard time getting yacht owners to come to Cuba. The American embargo is working just great, isn't it?"

"Don't blame me. At least I'm trying to change things. What are you doing to make things better?"

"Hey dude, my country is doing just fine."

"Your country doesn't have Fidel Castro to deal with."

A couple of minutes later we were beside the ocean. The view was spectacular, with tall waves rolling up on what looked to be an uninhabited, virgin white beach.

The traffic began to pick up now that we were over the bridge. Surprisingly, I saw Toyotas, Mercedes, BMWs and Peugeots, though by far the most prevalent car on the road was the Russian-made Lada. I got my first view of the vintage American cars that I had heard were driven regularly in Cuba. They seemed to be everywhere. We passed slow-moving Chevrolets, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles and Fords, most of them billowing dark smoke out of their tailpipes from the four-cylinder Russian diesels that had replaced their original engines long ago. I didn't know their exact years. I guessed most of them to be from the late 1940s through the mid-50s.

There were also what I assumed to be Russian military trucks, going in both directions on the bumpy four-lane highway. A motorcycle cop cruised by, and to my amazement I saw he was riding a Moto-Guzzi, an

Italian motorcycle. Hitchhikers and people riding bicycles dotted the narrow shoulders of the highway. I was actually beginning to relax and enjoy myself when Mario suddenly jabbed his sharp elbow into my side.

“Police checkpoint up ahead,” he said. “What’d I tell you?”

I straightened in my seat and leaned forward to see out the front window. In the distance, I could just make out a building that had been built across all four lanes of the highway. As the bus got closer, I could see Mario was right; there were police in light blue uniforms everywhere.

As we slowed down, two cops standing in our lane showed our driver exactly where to park. As soon as the driver opened the door, warm ocean air rushed in to displace our cool air-conditioned environment. It was followed by two policemen wearing new-looking well-pressed uniforms. I could tell that these guys had much better manners than the Ray-Ban cops who had been our last visitors. I watched as they spoke with our tour director. I could even hear a bit of the conversation. They were asking if everyone on board was a registered hotel guest.

“Si, Señor.” I heard her go on in Spanish. “I personally checked everyone’s visas and identification against the hotel guest list before we left. They were checked again by ministry personnel at a checkpoint before the Varadero Bridge. My passengers are all tourists, sir.”

The young cop and his accompanying constable cast a long cold stare down the length of the minibus. I don’t know what Mario was thinking, but I was certain they were looking directly at us.

The warm humid air that had swarmed in suddenly seemed to turn ice cold. They were still looking in our direction and time was standing perfectly still. But then they turned, and after thanking the young woman and the driver, exited the bus. Once again we were on our way. I took a deep breath, a very deep breath.

“How many more roadblocks are there between here and Havana?”

“At least one more, after the Varadero airport,” Mario said.

I nodded slowly. Yes, indeed. He knew a lot more than he was letting on. I resumed my position by the window and tried to enjoy the beautiful view of the beach. I told myself that we had passed two tests now. This was reason enough to be confident that we would make it to Havana without incident. What I couldn’t guess was what would happen when we got there.

About five miles farther down the road we came to the town of Varadero. We crossed a rather impressive cement bridge that gave us a great view of the ocean and the river that flowed beneath the bridge. To call Varadero a city would just be wrong. It was more like a small village.

As quickly as we entered it we were leaving again; it was one city block at the most. We cruised down the long stretch of highway beside the ocean. The sheer beauty of this island nation bemused me. I must have seemed like an owl in the back of the bus with my head turning from side to side. In spite of the jam we were in, I didn't want to miss anything.

After a short time we turned inland and I was able to read a sign that said Aeropuerto, Juan Gualberto Gomez, Varadero. So this was where almost all of the Canadian tourists arrived when they visited Cuba. We cruised over another bridge, Puente Guiteras. Its height afforded us yet another spectacular view. On the other side of the bridge, we entered the city of Matanzas, which is also the name of the province we were traveling through. To the right were more beautiful beaches. On our left were small houses that appeared to be well kept. The paint was peeling on some of them, undoubtedly from the relentless exposure to humid salt-filled air.

In total, we passed over four bridges before leaving Matanzas, all of them offering incredible views of the city and the turquoise Caribbean. The ride through the small coastal city took almost twenty minutes. I wished I had a camera to take some pictures; it was that beautiful.

The road turned inland, bringing us alongside a long row of small hills on our left and farm fields on our right. After another twenty minutes we crossed the largest and tallest bridge yet, Puente de Bacunayagua, then turned down an access road that led to a tourist spot just below the bridge. The bus stopped and our attractive young tour guide announced that we would be here for thirty minutes and suggested we enjoy ourselves. For the first time since we had left the first checkpoint, conversations started among the passengers. They were finally beginning to relax. As we exited the bus, several of them pulled cameras from their pockets and purses and began taking pictures of the bridge and the surrounding valley. I motioned with a pull of my head for Mario to follow me away from the crowd.

"Do you know where this bus stops in Havana?"

"Yeah, the first stop is the Hotel National. We can exchange money there and use the hotel phones to call Fred and Linda."

"You crack me up Mario, no lie. You're actually going to phone this girl Linda in Miami and tell her you can't go out with her tonight?" It dawned on me that the name of the waitress he'd been in love with before we'd left Miami was Ramona. Somehow between then and now he'd managed to meet yet another woman. Not possible.

"Yeah, damn right I am. If you saw this girl, you'd call her too," he said.

My curiosity was killing me. “When did you meet her?”

“I met her at the convenience store the morning of our first flight. Love at first sight. We both felt it. You can smirk all you want, because that only tells me that it never happened to you. If it had, you’d know what I’m talking about.”

When I saw his defiant expression, I decided it was probably best not to provoke him over this girl. Let him call her if it made him happy.

“Okay, make your phone call. Then what?” I asked, trying to get us back on track.

“Then we take a taxi to my aunt’s house. You’re going to be surprised when you see her house. It’s first class.”

“When are you going to tell me how you know this place so well, Mario?”

Without thinking, he said, “I was born here, remember?”

“Yeah, right. I also know that was a very long time ago. Either you have an amazing memory or you’ve been here since then. Enough of your spy bullshit and your need-to-know rules. I’m in this with you and I’d feel a lot more comfortable if I knew that you actually know your way around this place and really have some connections here.”

“Okay, to tell you the truth, yes, I’ve been here before and not just once. You’re going to think this is funny. Do you know how I’ve gotten in and out of Cuba so many times?” he asked smugly.

“I haven’t got a clue. Maybe you have a secret little submarine that you keep harbored in a shallow bay just off the coast that we can snorkel out to, hop in and leave. That would impress me. Am I close?”

“You watch too many movies. You need to get out more. Go to clubs, dance a little, loosen up. Whenever I travel to Cuba, it’s from your country, Toronto to be exact. How do you like that? We use Canadian IDs provided to us by your government. Now are you impressed?”

“I’m speechless.” I started to laugh. “I like the mini submarine story a lot better.”

“Don’t worry. Fred will send us new IDs and we’ll be out of here within a few days.”

“One thing for sure. We’ll find out how important we are to Fred real quick.”

“This isn’t like Venezuela, Alan. We’ll be out of here in no time, you’ll see.” He hesitated a moment. “Hey, do you want anything to eat? I’m going to grab a sandwich and a Coke before the bus leaves.”

I shook my head. “How can you eat at a time like this?”

“I’m hungry. I don’t understand why you don’t eat now. If something

goes wrong it might be your last chance for a while.”

I sipped a bottle of water while Mario ate. After he finished his two ham sandwiches, we headed back to a spot near the bus where our fellow tourists had gathered. They were still taking pictures of the bridge, talking about what a marvelous structure it was. Everyone seemed to have forgotten our earlier ordeal. Even the woman who had fainted was prancing about, showing the two elderly ladies some postcards she’d bought in one of the shops.

Our tour guide appeared and announced that it was time to board the bus and continue on to Havana. I felt better knowing that Mario had been in Cuba recently. I hoped that at least some of what he said about our next stop would be true.

The road grew bumpy as we traveled beside small hills and farmland. Santa Cruz del Norte, a very small coastal village, appeared then disappeared just as quickly. We were traveling along the beautiful coast again. Its appearance was constantly changing as the miles passed by.

Once we left the coast, we entered what was clearly an industrial area. “Havana?” I asked Mario when he looked my way. He didn’t answer, but I noticed that his face had darkened again. I asked, “What’s the matter now?”

“One more roadblock before we enter the city. This one is serious. I’ve had problems there before.”

“Why do they have these roadblocks? Other than us, who are they trying to stop?”

“They check for people coming from the country bringing back food to sell on the black market.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of food?”

“Malangas, and other vegetables they grow without the government’s knowledge. Beef, lobster and fish they buy from the local people. Just poor people hustling, trying to make enough money to get by.”

“People smuggle food into the city? They don’t have food for sale in Havana?”

“Very little meat, if any, is available. Only the tourists can legally have it. The same goes for lobster, fish and many vegetables. Even beans are sometimes hard to come by. If some poor farmer gets caught smuggling food into the city, he could end up in jail for as much as five years, maybe more.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. These roadblocks are here to take the food away from the farmers who attempt to make a living selling their product?”

“You’re not listening to me, Alan. There are people serving more time for slaughtering, butchering and selling beef than for murder. In this country the state owns everything. When a farmer sells chickens or beef, that’s theft, and, worse yet, it’s capitalism. If they get caught, Fidel always makes an example of them. The Castro brothers hate their own people. They treat them like prisoners. It’s no exaggeration when people in Miami refer to Cuba as the world’s largest prison. Some say it’s the world’s largest slave camp. Not much difference really. Look, we’re coming up to the last checkpoint before the tunnel into Havana.”

I looked out of the front window and could see up ahead at least nine pillars with a roof over the top of them. Red and green lights at front indicated which booths were open. On the roof a Cuban flag flew in front of large red numbers reading 26-7.

“What is the significance of these numbers?”

“It represents the first day of Fidel’s revolution, July 26, 1953. On that day approximately a hundred farm workers who had fallen under his control attacked the military garrison at Moncada. With Fidel and his brother Raul guarding the rear, the farmers at the front attacked with squirrel guns. Many were shot dead as they attacked the fort. A little over one third of the rebels were captured, tortured. For every soldier killed in the attack, Batista ordered two rebels killed. His secret police were brutal. Before they died the peasants gave up the Castro brothers as the leaders of the failed assault. At his trial, that arrogant piece of shit Fidel told the world that history would absolve him.” He hesitated for a moment and then sighed. “The story gets better. Fidel and Raul served only two years of a fifteen-year sentence before Batista pardoned them. Big mistake.”

While Mario was talking, the driver steered the bus to the booth farthest to our right. Like all the others, it was manned by a single cop. When the bus came to a stop and the door opened, the officer entered, asking the exact same questions the tour guide had been asked twice before. The cop accepted her story, and before leaving the bus, he wished her a good day. This roadblock was a breeze. So much for Mario’s intel.

We drove into a four-lane tunnel that went under the channel leading to the Port of Havana. The tunnel had dull lights on one side and was lined with light blue and white tiles. Without fans to move the air, it was filled with exhaust fumes from the constant traffic. We emerged on the other side like astronauts arriving on a new planet. Everything was different from what I had seen so far on this trip. This was old Havana. On our left was an elevated pedestal with a horse and a military guy poised in the

saddle. At its base were statues of soldiers and peasants, something to do with the revolution. The road circled to the left and joined the Malecón, a wide highway that followed the shoreline from one side of Havana to the other. Neo-classical columns, ocean-sprayed colonnades and aging facades rolled by the left side of the bus. I felt like I was in a Turner Classic black-and-white movie.

“This is like going into a time machine,” I mumbled.

Mario laughed. “Different from what you were expecting?”

“I wasn’t expecting anything. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t expecting to visit Havana this afternoon, remember?”

“You can relax now, Alan. As Canadian tourists, no one in this city will bother us. The city cops are very careful not to harass the tourists because they bring in hard currency. Enjoy the view. In a few minutes we’ll be at the Hotel National.”

Cruising down the Malecón produced almost too much spectacle for my eyes to take in: dilapidated buildings on the left, the ocean on the right, beating against the coral where fishermen with long poles were trying their luck. An old black Cadillac caught my eye as it passed. It looked good for something from the early 50s—very rare. The sun was on its way down. The buildings were casting large shadows across the road. The tremendous vista made everything about this day seem even more surreal than it already was.

Our minibus pulled into a large loading area for buses and taxis in front of Hotel National. The top of the hotel looked like a church, with two large towers where you would expect to see crucifixes. It was impressive enough on the outside, though its design gave away its age. The grounds were well manicured, with tall royal palm trees noisily swaying in the wind.

We exited the bus with the other tourists. Our young tour guide informed us we would be here for one hour.

Mario walked up to her and said in English, “We won’t be returning with you to Varadero. We’re going to be staying here with friends for the next two days.” He pointed in my direction so she would know who he meant by “we.” She nodded before turning to answer a question from another passenger.

Mario led the way into the lobby like he owned the place. The entrance to the grand old hotel was breathtaking: terracotta plant pots and large Spanish tiles everywhere, giant columns supporting the huge mahogany beams that formed the ceiling. A large and glamorous art deco chandelier proudly dated the hotel to the 1930s.

I caught up with him and elbowed him to get his attention. “Why did you tell the girl we were going to be here for two days? Don’t you think she might have noticed we don’t have any luggage? You could have told her we were going to catch a later bus back to our hotel and not cause any suspicion.”

“She doesn’t care,” he said, looking straight ahead. “You’re so smart, next time you do the talking. Right now I just want to make a couple of phone calls and get something to eat. The sandwiches back by the bridge did nothing for me. I’m starving.” He pointed to the patio restaurant. “Order me the lunch special. This will only take a few minutes.”

He was gone before I could tell him what I was thinking. I stood there a moment, lost in the day’s events. Regaining my composure, I walked through the restaurant entrance. I was quickly greeted by a well-dressed young woman who asked me if I would like a table. After seating me, she asked if I would like something to drink before my meal. I was tempted to ask for a Cuba Libre, which meant “free Cuba,” but not knowing if that term was politically correct, I asked her politely for a large rum and Coke.

Smiling, she said, “One Cuba Libre coming up.” Next time, I’d know. She handed me a menu, written both in Spanish and English, then went to the bar. I was looking intently at the magnificent colonnade that separated the dining area from the grounds when the lovely young hostess returned with my drink.

“What would you like to have for lunch today, Señor?”

“My friend will be joining me soon. Could we have two orders of the lunch special, please?”

“Si, Señor, I will bring that for you right away.”

The hostess reminded me a bit of Jenny. They didn’t look alike, but both seemed to genuinely enjoy pleasing others. One of the things I loved best about Jenny was that she never said anything bad about anyone—unless you count me.

Mario came to the table with a handful of Cuban pesos. He handed me a small wad of bills and said it was about the equivalent of two hundred dollars.

“Don’t worry,” he added. “Where we’re going, somebody else will take care of the money.”

“What did Fred have to say?” I asked anxiously.

“Yeah, well, remember that part about the Americans wanting to be able to disavow any knowledge or involvement with our activities?”

“What are you trying to tell me? Please say you’re not telling me there are no IDs on their way down to us, no tickets home, worse yet, no mini-

sub." I started to laugh, though nothing was really funny. "How did I know it would be like this?"

"I'm not worried even a little bit," Mario said defiantly. "With a guy as smart as you on my team, we'll be out of here in no time. Maybe you can build us a submarine."

"You picked a real good time to be sarcastic. The truth is, we're on our own. No help from your spy buddies, just like in Venezuela and Colombia."

"Think what you want, Alan, but it's not like that. We have options."

I waited with my arms crossed for him to tell me the options. His silence spoke volumes.

Our lunch arrived: baked chicken with black beans, rice and a small tomato, cucumber and lettuce salad. Seeing and smelling the food made me realize that I was really hungry myself. We ordered more drinks and silently ate our lunch, both of us thinking about the reality of the predicament we were in. It scared the hell out of me to think that my life was now totally in Mario's hands.

After eating we paid the bill and left the courtyard. As we walked to the front of the hotel, Mario explained to me the Cuban exchange rate, which was posted on a large sign in front of a cashier. It was a no-brainer: eight pesos to one Canadian dollar.

To my surprise, a waiting late model four-door Mercedes taxi looked like it could be our transportation to Mario's aunt's house. We entered the taxi and Mario gave the address to the driver in Spanish. The taxi driver immediately asked him, "Are you from Miami? Your Spanish is the same as my son's. He's lived in Miami since he was a little boy."

"I was raised in Miami from the time I was four," Mario answered. "I live in Canada now and work with Canadian companies that do business down here."

"Smart," the taxi driver said. "You're a lucky man. You get to earn the income from the north and yet you're able to enjoy your homeland. Do you know how hard it is for people down here?"

"I know how lucky I am," Mario replied. "I try to help as many people down here as I can. I know it's tough here, but trust me, I'm doing everything I can to change things. I'm sure you know how hard it is to make changes."

Mario's expression of compassion surprised me. In all the time I had known him, compassion was not a word I had ever associated with him. Also surprising was his knowledge of daily life in Cuba. I was seeing a side of him that I never knew existed.

The taxi drove east along the Malecón, taking us under another river through a much shorter exhaust-filled tunnel. Unlike the traffic in Miami at four in the afternoon, the roads in Havana weren't very congested. We were only ten minutes out of the tunnel when Mario told the driver, "We would like to get out here."

The taxi pulled over to the side of the road in front of a large white mansion surrounded by a very high expanded steel fence holding back royal palm trees and tropical gardens. Mario handed the driver twenty pesos and wished him and his family well.

"The future will be better. Keep the faith, my friend," he added as he slid out of his seat. I smiled. The arrogant pretty boy I had known for years had a softer side to him.

We watched the taxi drive away. Then I turned to Mario. "Do you think it was a good idea to have the taxi driver drop us off right in front of your aunt's house?"

"This isn't my aunt's house. Follow me. It's about a block from here."

I didn't want to compliment him, but I was impressed with the decision he just made. They must have taught him that one in spy school. We walked about half a block before arriving at a narrow cement-tiled alley that led between the houses.

"Before the revolution," Mario began, "this area was the Beverly Hills of Havana. Rich industrialists, politicians, doctors and lawyers lived in these mansions. After the revolution, Fidel gave most of these homes to his generals or friends that had supported him. The change took place almost overnight. One day families lived happily, secure in their future; the next, they were on an airplane to Miami with whatever their suitcases could hold."

After exiting the alley he pointed to a large off-white brick-faced house ahead on the right. "Pretty nice, don't you think?"

"Not bad. How many people live there?"

"My aunt and my cousin. Not very many people for such a large house."

One thing for sure, it was big. It looked as though there was a constant battle going on between the house and the surrounding vegetation, and the vegetation was winning. Somewhere near the property line, Mario stopped. He was looking intently into the overgrown bushes when I heard him say "follow me" just before he disappeared into the thick flora. I hustled to the spot where he had been a moment ago, and to my surprise I saw him cautiously move down a small path through the lush surroundings. I followed him down.

He called back to me, "Watch out for snakes in the trees. Some are a little aggressive, especially if they have babies. But don't worry. They're boas and not venomous."

I hate snakes and Mario knew it. For a second I wondered if he was trying to scare me, but after a quick look around I determined there could be more than just snakes living here.

"Why are we taking this secret path through the jungle instead of using the front door?" I asked as I lifted each foot high in the air to clear anything that might be slithering below me unseen.

"So the neighbors won't see us entering the house. This is serious. The story about the plane will be all over the press by tomorrow. Every do-gooder in Cuba will be calling in reporting anybody that looks even close like us. There'll be a big reward for our heads."

I followed him down the path in silence. He was right. We were still in big trouble with no solution in sight. The path ended beside the house under a large overhanging roof that covered the tile walkway. We turned the corner of the mansion and stopped in front of a large hardwood door.

Mario opened it without knocking and in we went.

10. NICE HIDEOUT

We descended a steep flight of wooden stairs. A few long beams of light shone through small windows on the far wall, but they didn't quite reach us. I had to hold onto the wooden railing to keep from tumbling. We seemed to be kicking up dust with every step. Wherever there was any light, dust twisters became visible, generated by the air turbulence we created as we walked. At the landing the air became cool and very humid. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I realized that we were inside a large wine cellar. It would have been as quiet as a crypt if not for the sudden, too familiar sound of a helicopter.

"Do you hear that?" I asked Mario. We both froze for a moment to listen. "Any chance that's about us?" I snapped.

"I doubt it," he said, but his face—what I could see of it—looked full of concern. He shrugged. "The houses in this area are for VIPs or the heads of companies from other countries. Or, like this house, for important Cubans. The CDR and police keep a sharp eye on this area. They wouldn't expect us to hide in a neighborhood like this."

"What the hell is the CDR?" I asked.

"They're a bunch of morons dedicated to the defense of the revolution. They're like a neighborhood watch, only well trained and well armed."

The noise from the helicopter came alarmingly closer. We rushed to the far wall and climbed onto wooden crates so we could look out through one of the small windows. Amazingly, the helicopter was making a landing in a clearing behind the house. "They're here for us!" I said. My heart was pounding.

"How could they possibly know we were coming here?" Mario asked.

Like a light being turned on, it came to me in that second; the business card that Mario had left in Varadero—a Miami night club name and address on one side and a scribbled address for this house on the other. I remembered how quickly Dennis had grabbed it out of Mario's hand and thrown it in with our wet cloths. Without destroying the card, he'd rushed us to the minibus that was bound for Havana.

"That damned business card!" I said. "We left it behind with our wet clothes in their hotel room."

Mario and I exchanged a look of panic. At the same time, we both

turned back to the window to watch the olive-green helicopter settle to the ground.

“Follow me,” he said. “This house has hidden passageways and secret rooms. Since we haven’t announced our arrival to my aunt or anyone else in the house, their surprise when these guys come banging on the door will be genuine. We’re going to be okay.”

Mario hustled over to a wall covered with racks for wine bottles, most of which were empty. He reached his right hand over the top of one rack and felt for something. I heard a click. In the dim light, I saw him pull down on a small lever. He leaned on the right side of the wall—which was apparently a very well-disguised door—and it began to open. He stepped forward, reached up and twisted a light bulb, bringing the room to life. There were few furnishings, just a massive mahogany bench and a few wooden crates like the ones we’d stood on in the larger room. I quickly entered behind him. He closed the secret door and bolted it shut with three oversized rusty latches that looked like they could hold back an armored assault.

“They’ll never find us here,” he said. “Castro used to visit this house on a regular basis. Each time his thugs swept the place before his arrival to make sure it was safe for him. Not once did they find any of the secret passageways.”

I glanced up at the dim light bulb. “Don’t you think we should turn off the light?”

“Good idea.” He reached up to twist the bulb and we were in complete darkness.

We stood like that for several moments. Then came the noise of pounding on a distant door followed by movement on the floor above us. Moments later we could hear the door to the wine cellar as it was flung open. While Mario and I held our breath, at least two people—maybe more—charged down the stairs. We could hear them clearly; they were just a few feet away from us on the other side of the wall.

“There’s nothing but dust and spiders down here,” one said. “We need to talk to the Señora about keeping this door locked,” said another. There were sounds of movement and kicking of crates, then the sounds of men climbing back up the stairs. The door slammed. We heard a woman’s voice, loud and authoritative, coming from the above.

“What are you doing in my house? Don’t you know who I am?”

A male voice replied, “Si, Señora, we know who you are. We believe there may be an attack on your house. Possibly your life is in danger.”

“What are you talking about? Who would want to hurt an old woman

like me or anyone else in this house? Don't you know that I'm a good friend of the President?"

"Si, Señora, we do know that you are a special friend of the President. But today an American spy group illegally entered Cuban airspace and landed an airplane in the water off the beach at Varadero. We have captured two of the accomplices. In their possession was a card with this house address on it. We have orders from the President's office to protect you."

I turned to Mario and whispered, "Shit."

"Barry and Dennis will give up everything they know about us," he whispered back.

"I would too. I don't imagine they're being treated all that well right now. How long do you think these cops are going to stay in this house protecting your aunt?"

"It depends whether they think she's involved somehow. One thing is for sure, they won't be leaving anytime soon."

Somewhat frustrated, I asked. "Can you give me a general idea? A few days, weeks, a month, what?"

"Why don't you be quiet so I can hear what's being said. Maybe then I can answer your stupid questions."

I had to agree that being quiet was a pretty good idea, but I was irritated to say the least and needed to let off some steam. I could barely hear the voices anyway. My thoughts turned to our lawyer friends. They were in a much worse situation than we were, at least for now.

Mario twisted the light back to life. "I need to sit down," he whispered. He moved to the large wooden bench against the damp wall and began to wipe the dust from its surface with a rag that had been sitting on top of one of the nearby crates. "Watch out for scorpions," he advised, glancing over his shoulder at me. "They love this kind of environment. I've seen them down here before." Once the bench was clean, he gestured for me to take a seat. I walked across the room, checking for scorpions. I saw none but identified plenty of places where one might hide. I sat down on the bench. Mario walked back to the light bulb and twisted it one more time, returning us to complete darkness. He slowly felt his way to my side.

We sat quietly, listening to the near-continuous conversation above us. There were several different voices, at least two of which were women's. Trying to discern exactly what was being said was too difficult. It wasn't long before I gave up. For now, I was more concerned with staying alert to the possibility of scorpions. I imagined them crawling out

of the corners and crates that were all around us. Mario must have been preoccupied by them as well, because after only a couple of minutes, his voice came out of the darkness, startling me.

“Do you think you can hear scorpions when they move?” he asked.

“Yeah, Mario,” I said sarcastically. “I’m sure scorpions make a lot of noise when they move. I think they sound a lot like a spider when it moves. Why? Do you think you just heard one?” I asked, shaking my head at the ignorance of his question.

He was quiet for a long while. Then he said, “You know, I once saw a scorpion with two tails.”

I could picture that.

“Most of them have a pair of eyes like us, but some can have as many as five pairs of eyes and—”

“Enough! I don’t need a science lesson on every possible scorpion mutation, at least not while we’re sitting here, probably surrounded by them.”

“Thanks. Thanks for saying that. I needed you to creep me out even more.”

“You’re welcome. Now shut the hell up.”

I tried not to look at my watch because I was afraid of finding out that while it seemed like we’d been sitting on this hard bench for hours, picturing scorpions taking their positions in a semicircle around us, it was possible that only an hour had passed, or maybe less. Eventually the desire to know overtook me and I looked at the glowing numbers on my Timex; it was 9:00 p.m. About three hours had passed. My ass was sore. I was tired. It had been a very long day in a string of long days. What I wanted was a good night’s sleep in an above-ground room with bright walls where I could easily see if something was planning to attack me.

A half hour later the conversation above us came to an end and we heard footsteps, followed by the slamming of a door. To our delight the house became dead quiet. The only sound now was the wind pushing around the dense vegetation just outside our hiding place. For what seemed like a long time we sat in silence.

Finally I spoke. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Mario answered, and I heard him stand up. A few seconds later, the light came on again. We took a quick survey of our surroundings. No scorpions. “They’re gone,” he said. For a moment I didn’t know if he was talking about the scorpions or the police. “Hey, Alan, we even have a bathroom down here,” he said, suddenly more cheerful than the occasion called for.

He led me to the far corner of the room. There was a narrow entrance there I hadn't noticed before into yet another dark room. Mario had to turn sideways to shimmy in. He screwed in the overhead light bulb and returned to the first room to unscrew that light. This second room featured three colorful nylon hammocks hanging from massive unfinished beams that ran parallel across the ceiling. In one corner of the concrete floor was a hole—the toilet. As I stared at it, a small fast-moving black spider climbed out over the edge and set off for a dark corner. Against one wall was a handmade wooden ladder that disappeared into the darkness above. I was about to make a testy comment about the fact that we'd spent three hours sitting on a hard bench when we could have been reclining in the hammocks when Mario opened a cabinet that was fastened to the near wall. He removed two dusty bottles of water and handed one to me.

"Thanks," I said, a little embarrassed by what I was thinking.

He climbed into the hammock farthest from the open toilet. I took the other one. We drank our water slowly, lost in our thoughts. After a while he got up, turned out the light and climbed back into his hammock. Once again we were in total darkness. But at least now we were suspended from the ceiling by long thin cords. I didn't imagine that even a two-tailed scorpion would bother us here.

After a time I asked, "What does your aunt do that entitles her to this mansion?"

Mario sighed. "Her husband, along with my father and his brother, fought with Fidel and Raul from the very beginning. My aunt Maria, her sister Lia, and my mother, used to wash their uniforms and cook for them when they lived in shacks and caves hiding in the mountains fighting for democracy. They were patriots who believed Fidel's every word. They thought the revolution would eliminate Batista's ruling elite who had taken over the country. My father used to quote Fidel's favorite speech. 'Above all else, we fight for democracy for the Cuban people.' That's what got him and many others killed."

"Did I miss something? Last I heard, Fidel was a communist."

"He wasn't a communist when he started the revolution. At that time the communists were backing Batista. Fidel and the others—including my family—were freedom fighters, battling to liberate the poor people that were being abused by the Batista government. Before leaving the country like thieves in the night, the bastards sucked every dollar out of everyone they possibly could. The revolution was all about helping the people get a decent break.

“Fidel had everybody convinced they were fighting for democracy. Maybe he believed it himself in the beginning. Who knows? But once the revolution succeeded, there emerged many leaders from the guerrilla forces that had been promoting democracy and were more popular than the Castro brothers. Fidel realized rather quickly that democracy meant competition, and he would have none of that. Communism provided the solution to keeping power. But many of Fidel’s friends didn’t see it that way. So the Castros got busy having people killed, or doing the killing themselves. Camilo Cienfuegos was one of them. Cienfuego believed he was one of Castro’s closest friends and allies, but he protested a little too loudly when Fidel moved from democracy to communism. He was shot down in his private airplane as he flew over Cuba. Castro had everyone convinced it was an accident. My uncle and my father were also murdered for the same reason by that rotten Machiavellian piece of shit.” He took a deep breath. I could hear the shudder in it. “The jails were filled with Batista’s secret police. Most disappeared over time.”

“Damn, I didn’t know that. You never talked about this before. I’m sorry, buddy. In my country all we ever get are snapshots about Cuba, or the odd documentary, but that’s about it. In Canada, we’re bombarded with beautiful pictures of happy communists and vacation package deals. We aren’t taught about the history of your country, only about beachfront hotels. The average Canadian’s interest level in Castro just isn’t that high.”

“What I’ve told you is nothing, just the tip of the iceberg. It’s hard to believe how many really good people have died.”

My question had opened a wound in him; I could feel it. This was the first time he had ever told me anything about his family history. I continued delicately with my questions.

“How did you and your mother get to the States?”

“My mother was a very smart woman. She knew that Fidel killed my father and wasn’t going to pretend otherwise. She tried to organize the remaining freedom fighters against Castro. They were soon betrayed. In 1961 my mother, my younger brother and I left Cuba on a fishing boat for Miami, leaving my older brother Roberto behind.”

“You never told me you had an older brother.”

“So?”

“Why did you leave him behind?”

“Roberto was eight when we left. At that time he thought Fidel was a god. One of the first things Castro did when he gained power was to organize the youth that had supported the revolution. The bastard was

well studied. He adored Bismarck, Mussolini, Stalin, but his favorite of them all was Adolf Hitler. Whatever worked for these fascist dictators, Fidel imposed on the Cuban people. Because of this brainwashing, many people are still loyal to him. My brother was hypnotized just like so many others, and when my mother told him we were leaving, he was so loyal to the revolution that he refused to leave. He started to make a scene at the wharf when my mother tried to force him to come with us. It broke her heart to leave him behind.”

The emotion in Mario’s voice was scary. I was reluctant to ask more, but I had to know. “Is your mother still alive?”

“When we arrived in Miami, we moved in with my uncle and aunt who had left Cuba in 1959. My mother worked cleaning toilets and mopping floors in public schools to support my brother and me until one day she died.”

We remained silent in the hammocks for a long time before he spoke again.

“I was only ten when she died, but I remember it well. When they put her body into the ground, I asked my uncle what she died from. He told me she died from a broken heart.”

I could hear him shift in his hammock, and even though it was too dark to see him, I suspected he was wiping tears from his eyes. When we were in prison together in Venezuela, he had talked about his mother, not as someone who had died when he was ten, but as someone who would be worrying about him if he didn’t get out of Venezuela and get back to her. I remembered the conversation very well. It had been emotional too. Either he was lying then or lying now.

In an effort to change the subject, I asked, “How did you end up working for the CIA?”

With renewed energy, he answered, “I was seventeen and always in trouble with the law. I was so stupid and rebellious that I robbed a liquor store with a toy gun. I didn’t know that one of the ladies that worked at the store was my neighbor. The police were waiting for me when I came home that night. I spent two weeks in a Miami jail before going to court where I pleaded no contest. My uncle spoke to the judge on my behalf at the hearing. After listening to the evidence, the judge gave me two choices: go to jail for one year or join the military. The two weeks I spent in jail convinced me that the military was my best option. I signed a four-year contract with the Navy to avoid going to prison.

“I had no ambition to become a sailor. My plan was to travel around the world and enjoy myself. Fortunately, it didn’t work out that way. The

competition the Navy provided brought something out of me that I didn't know existed. At the end of basic training, I was at the head of my class. Because I was Cuban and fluent in Spanish, I qualified for a special group within the Navy SEALs. We were trained with only one thought in mind, the invasion of Cuba. Other than the Bay of Pigs disaster, an outright invasion has never happened. Before leaving the Navy, I was recruited by the CIA and have been working with them ever since."

"So, when we were in Venezuela and you talked on the phone to a woman that said she was your mother, who were you talking to?"

"Her name is Maria. She works for the CIA in Fred's office." He laughed. "Had you fooled, didn't I?"

"Yeah, Mario, not just me, but everybody else. Honestly, you deserve a damn Oscar for that performance. But why did the CIA want to be involved with drugs? Isn't that the DEA's job?"

"Because the Colombian cartel was flying drugs to Havana. The Cuban Navy would then take the drugs offshore where they met Cuban Americans in high speed boats that were more than willing to import and sell the drugs for them in United States."

"Were you able to do anything about it?"

"We shut down one group, but we believe there are others still working directly with the Castro brothers to this day. They use the drug money to keep their military strong. Now do you understand why we want to stop them?"

"Why would Castro work directly with the smugglers? Why not have a subordinate handle it?"

"Remember, these two brothers turned against every trusted friend and ally they ever had, killing them, or worse yet, putting them in their disgusting prisons until they rotted to death. They only trust each other. Does that answer your question?"

It took a few minutes for me to digest what he had just told me. "That's quite a story." Bringing us back to our present situation I said, "You still haven't said how your aunt remained in Castro's favor after he killed her husband."

He took a few minutes to think before he responded. "The bastard always made it look like they were killed by enemies of the revolution, or by accident, making himself look like the good guy. But many soon knew the truth and tried to assassinate Castro before he could kill them. Because of this, Fidel seldom slept in the same place two nights in a row. He just had too many enemies who wanted him dead. There were almost a hundred attempts on his life in his first year in power. But he knew that

if he acted like a friend and put the widows of the murdered freedom fighters in some of the beautiful homes that once belonged to the wealthy business people during the Batista era, they would be grateful and he would always have a place to stay overnight.”

He stopped again and took a few deep breaths, trying to relax. Talking about his family history was bringing out emotions he probably preferred to keep hidden. It was quite awhile before he spoke again.

“At one time, this house was a place Fidel visited often. He always brought food and gifts, like the expensive jewelry he pillaged from safety deposit boxes that belonged to a Jewish criminal who plagued this island. My aunt had small children to feed. She had no choice but to pretend she was okay with the arrangement, pretend she didn’t know who killed her husband. Many people thought he was being kind to her and other widows whose husbands had once been his trusted friends. In reality, my aunt and the other women lived in fear. They were his slaves, forced to obey. If any of the women protested, Fidel immediately made an example of them. Army trucks would pull up in front of that woman’s house and soldiers would load everything the woman owned into the trucks, along with her children, and out to the farm they went. Some families even disappeared. The Castro brothers definitely aren’t very friendly dictators.”

“These brothers are bad.” I smiled. “You must admit they’re very good at being bad. Why didn’t the people organize against them?”

“Many have tried, but the Castros have a solution for everyone who gets in the way. People who were a big problem just disappeared. Tens of thousands died in front of firing squads. Even more died in prisons. No one knows for sure how many drowned at sea trying to get away from this insanity called Fidelism.”

“How many years has this idiot been dictating this disaster?”

“Fifty years. He took over in January, 1959. After that, tens of thousands were murdered.”

“How did Batista become president?”

“Fulgencio Batista first took power on September 4, 1933 in a coup called the Revolt of the Sergeants. Batista, who was a sergeant at the time, promoted himself to chief of the armed forces.”

The effects of the day were winning out over me. With my eyes closed, I dozed off listening to Mario telling me the violent history of Cuba.

The next thing I knew there was a loud banging noise cutting into my dreams. I jumped out of the hammock and landed on my feet, but I wasn’t sure where I was. The total darkness was so disorienting that I

immediately fell hard to the concrete floor. A few seconds later the light came on. Mario had screwed the bulb in. A quick look at my Timex told me it was 7:30 a.m. We had slept for a long time. As I pulled myself to my feet using the hammock as a rope, another light coming from above drew my attention. There, looking down on us from an opening between two rafters at the top of the ladder, was the sincere face of a gray-haired woman. At first I thought I must still be dreaming. Looking directly at Mario, she spoke softly in Spanish.

“Mario, come up here right now. We need to talk.”

Without a word to me, Mario scrambled up the ladder and through the opening in the ceiling. Not wanting to be left behind, I hurried and climbed up behind him. At the top of the ladder, I had to squeeze through a narrow opening. It was almost too tight. A moment later, I found myself standing alone in a small closet containing an old broom, dustpan, mops and several colorful aprons hanging from a row of hooks. I cautiously moved in the direction of the light, which led into a large, well-lit kitchen. Mario stopped talking to his aunt and pointed a finger at me.

“Tia Maria, this is the pilot,” he said. “His name is Alan.”

Recalling my manners, I smiled widely. “Good morning, Señora. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

I extended my hand, shaking hers ever so lightly. She laughed and shook her head.

“Only the Canadians are this polite,” she marveled. “I’ve been reading about you in the newspapers. Come and have a look.”

Mario and I followed her to a nearby kitchen table with a newspaper spread out on it. The name Granma in large red letters was at the top of the front page. Below it was the picture of Dennis, Barry, Mario and me, the one that had been taken in room 403. I cursed myself silently for being foolish enough to allow us to be photographed. I had gone along with it out of courtesy, out of a sense of obligation to the two men who were taking such a big risk to help us. I had always thought having good manners was one of my better characteristics, but here in Cuba, I’d have been better served without them.

“What does the story say?” I asked.

Mario started reading silently. After a couple minutes he was able to give me the short version of what was a lengthy article.

“It’s not good.” He paused. “They’re accusing us of espionage. They claim we work for the CIA.”

“I guess that wasn’t hard to figure out. So much for being clandestine.” He ignored my sarcasm and continued reading.

“They say Dennis and Barry are our accomplices.” He ran his finger down the column, translating as he went. “They were discovered after DSE agents reviewed the hotel’s security tapes. It showed them in conversation with the two occupants of the American airplane. From the video it was obvious the two Canadian attorneys had helped with our escape. Both were arrested by State Security and are charged under Article 91, for acting against the independence and territorial integrity of the state. The attorneys claim they are not involved. Only under the threat of death did they agree to participate. Pictures taken at the hotel by the criminals with their own camera tell a different story. The director of the DSE has placed the country on high alert until the depths of this conspiracy are known. They believe the two agents still at large are connected with an underground movement here in Havana that is trying to destabilize Cuba.”

He shook his head solemnly and went on. “Because we’re being charged under Article 91, the order is for the military to shoot on sight. If someone other than the military turns us in, we’ll ultimately go before a firing squad as spies.” He looked at me and at Maria, smiling ironically. “Good news, there is nothing about the baseball players. It looks like Roberto is okay.”

“Let’s hope so,” exclaimed Maria. “State Security and the DSE are making this into a big deal. They can’t tell the truth about anything. They’ll lie like sidewalks to impress el Comandante. Last night we spent four hours trying to determine how the address to our house was found in that hotel room. Right away I knew it was you, Mario.”

I wanted to say something. It wasn’t totally Mario’s fault that the address was left behind. Mario’s aunt didn’t seem overly distressed. It was as if she was acknowledging the situation, not criticizing our actions. I said nothing.

“I need a place to hide him,” Mario said matter-of-factly, looking at me.

Maria pulled out a thin wallet from the right pocket of her flowery dress. “This is your cousin Hector’s ID. Give me yours, Mario. I’ll hide it until you’re ready to leave.”

He pulled his wallet from his pants, removed the money and exchanged wallets.

“I know you want to see Roberto. With your cousin’s ID, you won’t have any problems. He looks almost exactly like you. But your friend here, he’s another story.” She turned to me. “This gringo can’t be moving around. For now, you have no choice but to stay here.” Her face became

stern. “For your safety and for my family’s, you must agree to do everything we tell you. Is that understood, young man?”

“Si, Señora,” I said, puzzled as to why these people would put themselves in such grave danger to help someone they had never met before. I knew I was no longer in control. The situation was enveloping me, but I was willing to do anything this wonderful woman said. With a smile, she continued to study me a moment longer before she turned to Mario.

“I have convinced State Security that I know nothing about what is happening. For now, the police will stay outside the house. Go upstairs with Alan and change into some of your cousin’s clothes. They have pictures of you in that flowery outfit you’re wearing. Once you’ve changed, bring down these clothes so I can dispose of them. And stay away from the windows! Just in case.”

She had barely finished speaking when Mario dashed out of the kitchen. I turned and hurried after him. We ran up a flight of stairs to the second floor landing. He opened the door to a bedroom, then walked directly to the closet and started throwing clothes onto the bed. These were not designer jeans and shirts, just simple cottons in bland colors. They reminded me of what my mother used to buy for us as kids. While I watched him, I allowed myself to drift for a few seconds.

“Hurry up and get dressed!” Mario ordered, jolting me back to the present.

I tried on a pair of pants. They were a little on the tight side. One thing was certain about Cubans; obesity was not a problem.

“Something a little bigger, please.”

He tossed me a plain pair of off-white cotton pants with a tan leather belt to hold them up. I put them on, along with a faded gray cotton T-shirt. Both the pants and the shirt were quite comfortable. I looked at myself in the mirror and thought I looked like somebody’s gardener. All I needed was a straw hat and a hoe. Mario was trying on one thing after another. His problem wasn’t weight, but muscle. From what I knew about him—which, I was discovering, was not nearly as much as I thought I knew after all these years—when he wasn’t in clubs picking up women, he was in the gym working out. That, I believed about him.

I was still looking at my new image in the large mirror when in the reflection I saw the door open behind us and a young woman enter the room. I thought I was dreaming. I immediately spun around to have a better look. When Mario saw her, he held out his arms. She ran toward him and they hugged.

“Mario, my dear cousin, you’ve been very bad!” she said with a smile that lit up the room.

“Did you miss me, Andrea?”

She let go of him but held onto his hands. “Of course I did! You are one of my favorite people. You know that! We knew it was you when State Security showed us a Miami business card with our address on it. They told us that a plane had landed off the beach in Varadero. Only you could pull off something like that and not get caught.” She kissed his cheek. “One thing about you, Mario, you’re not boring,” she exclaimed in perfect English.

“What am I seeing in front of me?” I said louder than I meant to. Actually, I didn’t mean to say it at all.

When she turned to look at me, I straightened. Until that moment I don’t think she realized there was someone else in the room. I was awestruck looking at her, unable to think of a single thing to say.

She had to be the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life. She was dressed in an oversized T-shirt. I guess that was what she slept in. Her long, muscular, perfectly shaped legs were completely exposed. Though the curtains were drawn, there was enough light coming through the window for me to see she wore nothing beneath the faded green shirt. I tried to look away from her but found the task impossible. She was a goddess, perfect in every way, full lips and eyes sparkling like diamonds. Her high cheekbones, straight nose and perfect white teeth made her seem surreal. When she turned back to Mario, her long thick black hair swung out behind her like a veil. I marveled at her slim neck and beautiful figure, her sharp nipples announcing her gorgeous breasts. I was completely overwhelmed.

Andrea and Mario were once more engaged in conversation, neither paying the least bit of attention to me. Finally, Mario turned and pointed at me with his thumb.

“This is Alan, the pilot I was with in Venezuela. He’s the man who landed the airplane in the water off the beach. He’s good at wrecking airplanes.”

Andrea aimed her perfect smile in my direction for the first time. She extended her hand, which I took eagerly. “Nice to meet you,” she said. Unable to think of a single response to her greeting, I merely smiled back at her and nodded.

She gave Mario a puzzled look. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Time had stopped for me. I thought I must have known her in another world, another lifetime. She picked up my hand, held it between her own and

felt for my pulse.

She questioned me. "Are you okay, Alan? Your heart is racing. You'd better sit down." She led me by my hand to the bed and motioned for me to sit. She sat beside me, still holding my hand. "Breathe, Alan. Take a deep breath."

I took a few deep breaths and began to feel the blood returning to my brain. I like beautiful, kind women as much as anyone, but I swear nothing like this had ever happened to me before. Maybe it was the excitement of the last twenty-four hours. I imagined she was an angel sent to earth to save me from the misery of my life, if only for a moment. I sat there like a dummy, silent, unable to take my eyes off her. She smiled at me gently for much longer than I deserved.

Mario appeared before us, forcing her attention away from me. "Alan, enough goofing around. We don't have a lot of time."

"His pulse is racing. There's something wrong with him," Andrea exclaimed.

"You're right about that, but believe me, physically, he's fine. He passed his stress test yesterday ditching the plane. If what we did after that didn't give him a heart attack, nothing will. Andrea, I know you're a doctor, but this is not a physical problem. I know him. This is a mental problem. You can't fix it." He hesitated and then went on bluntly. "Besides, I don't have a lot of time. I want to talk to you. What's going on in your life? How's what's-his-name, Mr. Wonderful?"

Andrea dropped my hand and rose from the bed. "Oscar? I haven't seen him for over a year. You've been away too long, cousin. He's old news. Besides, now that I'm a surgeon, I don't have any time for men. All I do is work at the hospital and help mom around the house. My life is pretty boring, cousin. Not like yours."

They went on for a while, talking about other members of their family. While they chatted, Mario pulled one shirt after another out of the closet. He finally found one big enough to conceal his muscular upper body, a faded green cotton pullover. Now he looked more Cuban than ever.

"It's time for me to leave," he said eventually. "I'll need you to create a diversion on the far side of the house where you do the laundry. While you distract the police, I'll slip out of the wine cellar and into the bushes. I'm leaving Alan here. Your mother said she would take care of him."

In a split second, Andrea's expression changed from cheerfulness to grave concern. "When do you want to go?"

Mario looked at his watch. "It's twenty minutes to eight. The buses will still be full of people going to work. Now is a good time."

“I’ll meet you downstairs as soon as I put some clothes on. Two minutes at the most.” She turned and left without as much as a looking in my direction.

They were right; the moment was deadly serious. I silently followed Mario downstairs to the kitchen. I tried to memorize as much of the floor plan as I could—information I might need later—but I continued to be distracted by the effect Andrea’s beauty was having on me. Mario approached his aunt.

“Andrea is going to create a diversion outside where you do the laundry. When the police go there to find out what the commotion is about, I’ll slip out the cellar and into the trees.”

I had to hand it to him. The way he was handling the situation was impressive and very brave. In Venezuela, it seemed that most of the ideas had to come from me. It occurred to me that maybe he had learned from my example. Andrea came bouncing into the kitchen, now with her hair tied back and wearing a white doctor’s uniform. I felt intimidated and amazed by this woman.

“Are you ready?” Mario asked her.

“Give me one minute, we should both be in position by then. After one minute, I’m going to scream as loud as I can. About ten seconds after, I’ll start a second scream. Within thirty seconds, all of them will be standing beside me. I’ll tell them I saw a rat. Thirty seconds after you hear my first scream, you should be out the door and into the trees running. How does that sound, cousin?”

“You’re the best, Andrea.” Mario turned to his aunt. “If the gringo gives you any trouble, shoot him.” Amused with his sarcasm, he flashed me a big grin.

“Sixty seconds from now until my first scream. Get ready.” Andrea blew him a kiss, turned and walked toward the far side of the house, disappearing from sight.

“Let’s go,” Mario said calmly, directing me to follow him.

But his aunt stopped him in his tracks and handed him a small brown bag. “Here’s your breakfast,” she said. “When will you be coming back?”

“Two days, if it’s possible. I’ll come by in the evening at seven. Alan, make sure the wine cellar door is unlocked.” Not waiting for my answer, he walked to the hidden passageway that led to the basement and disappeared.

I turned to his aunt before following him down. “Do you want me to come back up to the kitchen once he’s gone?”

Maria thought for a second. “Wait below until I tell you it’s safe.”

“Si, Señora.”

I squeezed into the closet, hurried down the ladder and dropped to the basement floor just as Mario was unlatching the large bolts that kept the secret wine cellar door locked. “Make sure this door is properly locked before you go back upstairs,” he said. We shook hands. “Good luck.”

“Damn, Mario, same to you.” I began to feel like I had when we’d parted in Venezuela. Then I remembered that all the time I had spent worrying about him, he was actually doing better than I was. He never bothered to get in touch with me to let me know he was okay. But even that wasn’t enough to diminish the emotion I felt. The next few days would be very dangerous for him, and for me as well. Anything could go wrong. It hurt to think that after all we’d been through together, we might never see each other again.

He entered the wine cellar, climbed the stairs and waited. A moment later we heard the first scream from the other side of the house. I counted ten seconds. Her second scream was right on time. Thirty seconds later, Mario turned and said. “Don’t worry. You’re now in my country; we’ll be fine.” Again, he flashed his smile. Then, like some sort of Cuban superhero, he dashed out the door and disappeared.

Shutting the door behind him, I pushed the large bolts back into place. I stood perfectly still, holding my breath and counted thirty seconds. I exhaled as quietly as possible and looked down at my new Timex; it glowed 8:15. Moving like a cat, I descended the stairs and entered the hidden room, closing and bolting the heavy door behind me. I waited with my ear pressed against the wood.

Suddenly, I heard gunshots. Bang, bang, bang, two seconds passed. Then bang, bang.

11. VERY DANGEROUS

In my mind a horrible image formed: my friend Mario, lying motionless on the ground full of holes, his blood pooling around him like a grotesque red cloak. I tried to shake it but could not. I began to feel nauseous. I wanted to puke, but there was nothing in my gut to bring up.

In the dark I moved to the bench on the opposite wall and sank down.

“Damn it, Mario.”

My whole life had turned to a bucket of shit in a matter of seconds. Mario was dead, and surely Andrea and her mother would now be arrested for aiding him.

Yet here I was, in the secret hiding place, safe for the time being. I stood in silence feeling sorry for myself, and guilty for all the havoc I had caused the people who helped me along the way. My mind moved from thoughts of Andrea and her mother to Barry and Dennis, even to Jenny. I wondered how my brothers, sisters and parents would grieve if they heard I’d been captured or even killed in Cuba. I saw all their faces, heard their words of warning: “Be careful.” “Don’t try that.” “Why risk it?” “What makes you so eager to take those kinds of chances?” “What’s wrong with you?” Was this, I wondered, what is meant to have one’s life pass before one’s eyes?

I nearly jumped out of my skin when suddenly the hatch on the ceiling above me opened, and in its place appeared the face of an angel. “You can come up now,” Andrea said matter-of-factly.

I sat for a moment, stunned. When I finally composed myself, I quickly hurried up the ladder, squeezed through the narrow entrance into the kitchen closet and stepped into the room. Andrea and her mother were sitting at the table eating breakfast as if nothing had happened.

“Sit down, Alan. Have something to eat,” Andrea said, pointing at a chair beside her. Moving my gaze from her perfect face, I saw a plate that had been set out for me. It held a large piece of white bread and a small piece of ham covered with scrambled eggs. Behind it was a small glass of orange juice.

“I heard shots. What happened?” I asked, trying to act as calm as possible.

Andrea studied me, her expression shifting from curiosity to concern. “You thought they shot Mario, didn’t you?” she said at last. “Oh, it was nothing like that. Mario didn’t have any problem leaving. After hearing me scream, the police ran over, and all of a sudden a live rat appeared as if on cue! Can you imagine it? One of the stupid policemen shot at it and kept shooting five or six times until he finally killed it. I told him he was an idiot.” Proud of herself, she laughed.

Her laughter and reassuring words instantly calmed me—and with my dark thoughts out of the way, I realized I was really hungry. It must have shown, because as I started to eat, Maria stood up and brought to the table a platter filled with farm fresh cheese, slices of pineapple and thick

pieces of French bread. The meal seemed to contradict everything that Mario had told me about Cuban life.

"Thank you so much for the food and for letting me stay here," I managed between mouthfuls of ham and egg. "Without you, I don't know what I'd do."

Andrea smiled. "No kidding," she said. "At this moment, you and Mario are the most infamous people in Cuba. In this house you'll be safe, just stay away from the windows." She glanced at the kitchen window where the curtains were drawn. "The police believe there are only two women living here, and I have asked them to respect our privacy." She laughed. "I told them to stay away from the windows too. The captain likes me and the other cops know it. They wouldn't dare enter without knocking first. Another important thing: Keep your voice low and address me as your cousin and my mother as Tia Maria, in Spanish, just in case."

"No problema, Prima y Tia Maria," I said in my best Spanish. My smile had to be larger than the occasion called for. I couldn't help myself; I felt intimidated in her presence. Timidly, I asked, "If I'm your cousin, may I call you Andrea?"

She tilted her head slightly to one side contemplating my question. We sat less than two feet apart. Her beauty continued to overwhelm me.

"Of course you can call me Andrea. Just mix it up with Prima. These walls are very thick; sound doesn't travel through them. We'll be okay. I'll be home from the hospital about eight this evening. After dinner, I'll show you more of the hidden passageways in the house."

We were interrupted by a loud knock at the front door that caused me to jump in my seat. Andrea quickly covered my mouth lightly with her right hand.

"Don't worry, Alan, it's just my ride. I go to work at this time every day." She rose from the table and reached for her handbag. "I'm leaving now. For safety's sake, stand behind the closet door and don't come out until you hear the front door shut. I'll see you tonight."

It took an effort to leave the room while she still remained in it. My hand rose of its own accord and I waved to her as I moved off into the closet. I heard the front door open, followed by the calm greeting of another woman, then the door shut loudly. I waited about thirty seconds before entering the kitchen, then sat at the table and finished my breakfast as if nothing unnerving was happening. I smiled as I helped myself to more of the goodies on the platter. Here I was in a house surrounded by police who wanted nothing more than to put me in front of a firing squad, yet all I could think of was Andrea. I should have been

scared to death, or at least preoccupied planning my escape. But all I could think was that Andrea would be back tonight.

I asked Tia Maria, "While I'm here, how can I help?"

"You can help by not getting caught," she quickly responded. "We'll take care of everything. For now, you're our guest."

"Si, Señora." I thought about this for a moment and decided I should be happy to pretend I was no more than a guest. In an effort at casual conversation, I asked her. "So, how many children do you have, Tia Maria?"

She answered quickly and bluntly. "Andrea is my only living child. I had two sons. Both of them disappeared at sea trying to get to Miami on an inner tube raft. Andrea's father and uncle were killed fighting for democracy. She's all I have left. Please stay away from these subjects with Andrea; they only depress her. It does her no good to be reminded about what has happened in the past."

In Canada, asking about someone's family is considered part of normal conversation. Here, I was beginning to realize, it could produce a flood of unhappy memories. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know," I mumbled.

"Life in Cuba is much different from anywhere else," she continued, speaking with authority. "If you want to know anything about this country or what has happened to Andrea and our family, please ask me."

I shrugged. "I'm at a bit of a disadvantage. You've read about me in the newspapers, and Mario has told you how and why I'm here. But for me, this is all unplanned and unresearched. Please excuse me if my questions offend you. That's the last thing I want to do."

She smiled. "Don't worry about offending me. I can see you are a sincere man."

"Thank you." I reached for another slice of pineapple. "Mario said there's a shortage of food and basic supplies here in Havana. I know he's fighting a new revolution for his country and you and your daughter are involved with him, yet you live in a mansion and seem to have lots of good food."

"That's true. We have more than most. A great deal of the food in this house is given to Andrea at the hospital by the families of her patients. We eat much of the food ourselves and trade the rest for repair work around the house, or exchange it for other necessities. Even the lady who washes our clothes is paid with food. We don't have hard currency, so we use food as money. This mansion was paid for with the lives of my husband Manuel and his brother Santos."

It was clear that she was saddened deeply by the loss of her two men.

I could see the look of helplessness in her dark brown eyes whenever she mentioned them. She was like someone experiencing but trying to hide a sudden blast of physical pain. Why couldn't I just stop talking? I felt like a reporter who had been charged with the task of getting the whole story.

"I'm very sorry. I won't ask any more personal questions."

She sighed. "It's okay. How could you know?" She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms under her breasts. "It's very important for you to know what kind of people you're going up against."

"The people you are going up against" rang in my ears. Had I in some way been recruited into their revolution?

"Mario told me about some of this. I'm not sure there's much I can do to help the Cuban people."

She smiled sadly. "There's a lot you can do. When you get back to your country, tell everyone you meet that the Cuban people need help. Our only hope is to educate the people of the world to what's really going on here, so that other nations can put pressure on the government to change." She shook her head and smiled more brightly. "But for now, we need to keep you hidden."

"I feel so helpless, almost like a child. All I've done so far is create problems for you."

She quickly replied, "Not true. You can be sure your lawyer friends who helped you escape from the hotel in Varadero have made the worldwide press by now. The whole world is looking at Cuba. For us, this is good. I feel badly for your friends. I'm sure they're not being treated well. They have become unwilling participants caught up in our revolution. Hopefully, they will soon be returned to Canada."

I bowed momentarily, thinking of Dennis and Barry. "What do you think will happen to them?"

"Yesterday they would have faced the worst of it. They were vacationing with a group of Canadians from Vancouver who are now talking to the international press, proclaiming their innocence. From what I've seen on television, there's a huge uproar in Canada. We will need to wait and see what happens in the next few days, but the worst is over for them now."

"I still don't know why they helped us out, taking the chance they did," I said, feeling full of guilt.

"They helped you because it was the right thing to do."

I rubbed my chin, hoping Maria was right in thinking that media attention would be enough to ensure that Dennis and Barry would get out of Cuba alive.

“On the other hand, only a few Canadian tourists stay long enough to really see what’s going on here. Often they make promises that when they get back to their country, they’ll write letters and make speeches to gather support for the Cuban people. Some say they will raise money for our cause. I’m sure their intentions are good, but most of them forget about us and go on with their lives. After all the promises the reality is they have their families and jobs to worry about. I’m hoping you will be different, Alan.”

I didn’t come to Cuba as a do-gooder trying to help the Cuban people. I came as a mercenary, expecting to receive the second installment on a very large amount of money for taking two athletes out of their country. Maria, Andrea, and even Mario were working for a noble cause, knowing that if they were caught the consequences would be deadly. I pushed the platter away, my appetite gone.

Maria watched me closely as she spoke, suddenly stiffening in her chair. “The water we use in the house is heated on the roof by the sun. So you’ll want to take a shower in the evening, not the morning. In the kitchen, the right faucet is the only one that works. Would you mind passing the dishes? Many things remain broken even in the best houses in Miramar, but the worst problem is with plumbing. No parts are available.”

After placing the dishes neatly in the sink, I volunteered to do the washing, but Maria would have no part of it. Instead, I returned to my chair and sipped on the double espresso she had brewed for me earlier. As she worked, she told me stories about some of the insane ideas Fidel had implemented over the years.

The funniest of these was a story I labeled The Pigeon Express. “After losing the support of the Russians in the early 1990s,” she said, “Fidel was so paranoid about running out of fuel that he created a network of passenger pigeons as an alternative to domestic airmail. Pigeon mail stations—wooden poles with large boxes that had holes in them—were erected throughout Havana, each able to support up to a hundred birds. The obvious problem was training the pigeons to fly where they wanted the mail delivered. Of course, there was nothing but confusion. In the end the only beneficiaries were the pigeons themselves, who were well fed. The point of this story is that no one had the courage to stand up to Castro and tell him how stupid his idea was.” The story reminded me of the fairytale *The Emperor’s New Clothes*.

Once the kitchen was clean, she led me upstairs to the second floor. This trip was less hurried than the first one I’d made previously with

Mario. As we ascended the staircase, I was able to take in what a magnificent building it was. All of the floors were marble as were the stairs, even the handrail. The landing was almost as large as the kitchen. There were four doors, one on each side of the landing. We walked into what was previously her son's bedroom, the room where I had shed my old clothes and had first seen Andrea's beautiful face.

Tia Maria explained, "You can stay here during the day and at night." She pointed to the deadbolts on the inside of the door. "When you're here, lock the door. If anyone raids the house, you'll have enough time to enter the passageway and hide."

I looked around the room slowly, failing to see anything that had the potential to be an escape route. When I looked back at Maria, her eyes were twinkling with mischief, excited by my curiosity. She walked to the closet and pushed some clothes aside, revealing a suite of built-in drawers against one wall. She opened one of the drawers and reached inside and, glancing over her shoulder to make sure I was watching, pushed aside several pairs of boxer shorts and nudged a small lever at the back corner of the drawer. The lever looked like a nail that hadn't been hammered in all the way; a simple case of poor craftsmanship. But as it moved, I could hear the sound of multiple latches releasing. The wall at the opposite end of the closet, which appeared only seconds earlier to be seamless, began to reveal an opening about two feet high.

"Damn," I heard myself mutter.

"Only this bedroom and Andrea's bedroom have access to this passageway," she said. "If you believe that someone other than one of us comes into the house, go through the duct down to the hidden room and stay there until one of us comes for you."

She showed me how to close the passageway by pressing a switch just inside the entrance. Then she had me repeat the process. We agreed the entrance was best left partially open, so I could scurry into the walls like a rodent if necessary.

She then led me into the other bedrooms. They were much the same. Each had marble floors and whitewashed plaster walls, with lighting and fixtures that dated the house to sixty years earlier. Each had its own bathroom.

When we completed the tour, she said, "I would love to stay with you all day and talk about my country, but that would not be my normal routine. I'll be leaving in a few minutes and you will be alone in the house. Stay in my son's bedroom with the door locked. Make the bed and leave the room as you found it, unoccupied. Remember, if you hear anyone

else in the house, get into the hiding spot as fast as you can. You won't have any problems."

"I'll be okay," I said, giving her my most confident smile as I stepped back into her son's bedroom. The bookshelves on either side of the bed caught my attention. "There's lots of reading material here."

"There's plenty of food in the kitchen if you get hungry, but bring it up here to eat. Wait here until you hear my voice or Andrea's." She smiled and left the room, gently shutting the door behind her.

As requested, I bolted the door immediately and randomly pulled a paperback from one of the shelves. There were cobwebs in almost every corner of the room. The double bed was soft, with clean white sheets covering it. In spots the paint on the wall bubbled out from the eroding cement behind it.

It would be difficult to concentrate on reading with everything else going on in my mind, but I was determined to make the effort. But like a lovesick schoolboy, as soon as I opened to the first page, my thoughts turned to Andrea. I lay on the bed and drifted off to sleep thinking of her, hoping the time would pass quickly until she got home.

I was so tired from the events of the previous days that I slept like a dead man right through the day. When I woke, there was almost no light left in the room. A glance at my Timex confirmed that it was already well after eight. I sat up, and for a moment I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten there. I heard a gentle knocking on the door and a soft female voice whispered, "Alan it's me, Andrea. Please open the door."

I jumped to my feet, quickly walked to the door and fumbled as I unlocked each of the deadbolts. There she stood as she had in my dreams, a goddess, only a few feet away from me.

"Did you miss me, sleepyhead?" she asked, smiling beautifully.

For a second I thought she was flirting with me, but I dismissed the thought at once. Why would such a goddess want to flirt with me? But then she stepped across the threshold and gave me a hug. Maybe in Cuba this is a common greeting amongst friends. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close, in a friendly way I hoped. Before I released her, I dared to lower my head to her neck, to breathe in the scent of her body. We stepped back from each other, and when I looked at her, her eyes sparkled like diamonds. Cautiously I stepped closer again, our lips now only inches apart. For a second I lingered there, waiting for her to respond. She didn't flinch but her expression, which was bemused, was not encouraging either. Sensing her reluctance, I pulled away. But the only thing I could think about was that I wanted her to touch me again.

"I brought you a toothbrush and a razor so you can shave that scrubby face of yours," she said. To my delight, she reached out and rubbed the stubble just under my chin with her finger. She made a face. "Too rough," she whispered. "I like my man to be smooth shaven."

Again I wondered if she was coming on to me. "Give me that razor. I'll be right back," I said.

She laughed. "You are so funny, Alan. My mother has dinner almost ready for us. You might want to have a quick shower before you come down."

She handed me the razor and toothbrush, turned on her heel and deftly descended the stairs. I watched as she reached the floor below and disappeared out of sight. Then I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. There were dark bags under my eyes, my hair was standing up crazily on the side I had slept on and my cheek was marked with red ridges from the corduroy cover on the bed. She had been playing with me all along.

I showered, enjoying the cooling effect of the water. I dressed quickly and hustled downstairs. Andrea and her mother were at the table, watching the 13-inch Sony color television they'd placed at the far end of it. The Cuban newsman on the screen was speaking about Mario and me, our image just to his right. The women had been talking, but they stopped and looked at me as I entered the kitchen.

"Buenos noches, Tia Maria," I said in my best Spanish. "Any good news from the outside world?" I sat in the chair opposite Andrea.

Maria pointed at the flickering screen. "Your two attorney friends have been on TV all day. If you believe what the media is saying, you might think there was an invasion underway. That's how much this government has blown the situation out of proportion. It's a never-ending charade to keep the people afraid of an invasion by the United States." She stopped for a second to compose herself and then continued. "I talked to Mario earlier today. He says to tell you not to worry." Glancing at the TV she cried, "Look!"

I immediately looked at the screen and saw the picture taken in room 403. A sense of dread shot through my body. But when I glanced at Andrea, she was smiling, amused by my reaction at the sight of myself on the screen. I chuckled. The woman across the table didn't have a worry in the world just now, so why should I?

Dinner was roast chicken with rice and beans, plus a salad of tomato, cucumber and lettuce, with an oil and vinegar dressing. I didn't speak during the meal, content to listen to Andrea and her mother as they

discussed the events of the day.

“Would you like an espresso with your pie, Alan?” Andrea asked at the end of the meal.

Our knuckles touched when she handed the cup to me. I was giddy with the possibility that she wanted to touch me as much as I wanted to touch her. A few minutes later, she extended her leg and her foot hit mine. It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time for her to move it away. Or was it my foot that moved away? Before I could decide, I felt her foot again, this time skimming along my shin. Apparently she had crossed her legs. It felt as if her foot was shoeless. I had to know, so I reached down as if to scratch my thigh, and sure enough, I brushed her bare toe just as it was pulling away from me. I laughed. Maria, who had stood up to put the leftover chicken on the counter, turned and looked at me curiously.

We played like this throughout dessert, touching in ways that might appear accidental. I knew that if there was more touching, playful or not, I would be unable to resist her advances. To distract myself, I insisted on doing the dishes.

After rinsing and drying the cutlery, I turned to Andrea, who was standing beside me, a dishtowel in hand.

Maria was leaving the room, carrying some of the serving bowls into the pantry.

“Let me tell you something,” I whispered, putting my hand to my mouth as if I had a great secret to reveal.

She leaned toward me.

As softly as I could, I said, “I have only known you for just over thirteen hours, but I’m starting to...”

She backed away, but I saw that she was smiling. Then she began to laugh.

I laughed with her.

Tia Maria returned from the pantry.

Andrea put aside the dishtowel and said, “I’m going to take Alan upstairs and show him how the passageway between the bedrooms works, okay, Mama?”

I held my breath, certain that Maria would ruin everything by revealing that she had introduced me to the passageway earlier that day. But she said nothing. I knew it would show poor manners to oppose Andrea’s kind invitation. I had no choice but to follow her up the stairs. Any well-mannered houseguest would have done the same.

12. YOU'RE GOING TO LIKE THIS

We entered her room and she switched on the light. "I'm going to take a quick shower and put on more appropriate clothes for our tour," she said. "I have some magazines in English that you can read while I'm getting ready." She pointed to a neat stack of publications on the night table beside her bed. Entering her closet, she pulled some clothes from hangers and disappeared into a large bathroom.

I sat on her bed leafing through one of the magazines. It was in English, but like all the others, it was a medical publication. I tried to read an

article about sutures and some fascinating new equipment that was available to medical practitioners with money, but my mind was focused on Andrea. She was singing a Cuban love song in the shower. I couldn't help but note that her voice was as lovely as the rest of her. I lay my head on her pillow and smiled at the ceiling, conspiring. It occurred to me that maybe I was still lying in one of the hammocks in the damp, scorpion-filled basement. Had I been given a drug that would make me think that a beautiful woman, a doctor no less, was about to seduce me? I had to laugh at myself. I was in a surreal state and I didn't want it to end.

The door to the bathroom opened, pulling me out of one dream and into another. I sat up right away. The sight before me blew me away. Andrea was dressed in white, baggy hospital scrubs. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, exposing her perfect china doll face. She wore a blue T-shirt that clung to her pert breasts. She was the most perfect, most alluring woman I had ever seen. To my delight, she sat beside me on the bed and bent over to put on a worn pair of tennis shoes, exposing a bit of her lower back. It was too much for me. When she sat up and saw my face, she put her hand on my forehead and said, "Are you okay, Alan?" She giggled like a child, but she was a woman and had to know what was causing me to look like a man on the verge of a heart attack.

"I'm just fine," I lied. "Sometimes I forget to breathe, that's all."

She laughed. "Don't do that too often. It can be bad for your health." And with those words she put her smooth hands around my neck and pulled me toward her. For an instant I thought she was going to kiss me. Instead, she turned her head and put her mouth to my ear. "Let's go check out the passageway," she said. "Come on. I have a surprise for you!" She was playing with me again, teasing me piteously, having fun at my expense. I guess you could say I was a deliriously willing participant.

She jumped up, walked to the closet and opened the secret passageway door. As in the other bedroom, a release lever was hidden in one of the drawers inside the closet. As she bent to enter, she called over her shoulder, "It's only big enough for one at a time. Be careful, it's very dark. Let your eyes adjust to the lack of light before you try to move around. My cousin's room is at the other side of this wall. I'll go across first. You follow me." And she was gone.

I followed her through the narrow passage that led to the next bedroom. The doorway was still open, just as I had left it in accordance with Tia Maria's instructions earlier in the day. Andrea walked past the opening, turned, crouched and opened a hatchway in the floor. She secured the hook on the hatch to the eye on the wall behind it. She was

right about the visibility; there was virtually no light. I could see, though barely, that on either side of her were evenly spaced wooden rungs leading down into total darkness.

“We’re going to leave these doors open this time,” she said, referring to the passageways leading to the two bedrooms. “That will give you a little bit of light. But you must learn to find your way inside the walls without any light at all. We do this in case there are any holes on the outside walls where light could escape and be noticed by someone in the house. My advantage is that I’ve been playing in these passageways since I was a little girl. I’ll go first, and when I get to the wine cellar, I will turn on the small light so you won’t bump your head. Take your time and don’t fall,” she added sternly.

To my amazement she leaned over like someone about to dive into a pool of water. Using her hands and feet on the ladder rungs to control her descent, she lowered herself head first and quickly disappeared. I leaned over the hole that had swallowed her and thought, No way. I turned around and entered feet first, descending in a more conventional manner. At about twelve feet down into the hot wet musky air, I could make out the familiar door that led to the kitchen. I continued down through the darkness another ten feet or so until I was in the concealed room of the wine cellar where Mario and I had spent the night. Standing in the dim light was Andrea, smiling proudly. I was impressed with the quick and practiced way she traveled through the tight passageway.

“That was pretty cool,” I said and was immediately rewarded for my words by an even wider glowing smile.

“If you think that’s cool, watch this.”

She walked to what looked like a solid wall at the far end of the room. She pushed with the side of her foot on a small section at the base, causing a loud clunking sound. She leaned her weight against the wall and it began to move, rotating on a single large vertical post that was attached at its center. It was almost impossible to tear my eyes away from her, especially when her body was at work like this.

I allowed myself to be impressed with the very fine carpentry that had gone into this and other passageways and secret doors. The handmade mahogany door before me had to weigh at least a ton and was probably bulletproof against anything smaller than a medium-sized cannon. I could scarcely believe what I was seeing. It was a work of art, especially with Andrea leaning against it. It swung open at least three feet before smoothly and silently coming to a stop, revealing a passageway six feet high and four feet wide leading away from the house.

"You're going to need to duck as we go down this one," she said, her eyes shining in the dim light. "Give me your hand and don't let go. It's really dark inside this tunnel." Without hesitation, my hand went out to her. As I began to follow her I found myself wondering what I was getting myself into. As if she could read my thoughts, she stopped moving and turned to me. Our faces were only maybe four inches apart. She was still holding my hand.

"You're not afraid, are you?" she asked. This girl knew how to push my buttons.

"No way. Who do you think you're talking to?" was my dishonest, but gallant answer. "You lead and I'll follow, at least for now."

Until that moment, I hadn't been honest with myself about Andrea. Now I reminded myself that this was the type of girl your mother tells you to stay the hell away from. She was a revolutionary, fighting in a real revolution. She was a beautiful patriot ready to die for her cause. She had become accustomed to dangerous situations that normal people couldn't comprehend.

Crouching even lower as the tunnel narrowed, we moved into total darkness. I ran my free hand against the wall for balance as Andrea pulled me along. Surely there were snakes, rats and scorpions living in this place. I was concerned, but there wasn't a chance in hell I would tell Andrea that. After what seemed like a long way, she stopped without warning. With no light to alert me, I slammed right into her, lost my footing and fell. To keep from hurting her, I rolled to my right and crashed into a large invisible steel surface, a door I guessed. The impact sent vibrations through me and through the door.

"Damn it, that hurts," I said. I wanted to say something about the virtues of artificial light but decided instead to enjoy the fact that she had tumbled on top of me, her back to my chest. My arms instinctively wrapped around her.

"Don't move," she said.

That was fine by me, but she quickly moved away. The next thing I heard was a loud screeching noise, the sound of a steel hatch opening. As the light from the other side reached my eyes and I was able to focus, I saw her crouch down and exit the tunnel through a hatch that looked like it belonged on a submarine. I got to my feet, hunched to keep from hitting my head, and followed closely behind.

A quick look around the narrow room told me that at one time this had been a workshop. Two large rusting iron vices were fastened to a wooden workbench and looked like they had been sleeping for years. This

room reminded me of my father's garage. How many times had my brothers and I used his vices to work on our snow skis or other sporting equipment? The dusty wooden shelves on the far wall had probably at one time held spare parts for the equipment that once ran in this mansion.

I could hear the sound of moving water. It got louder as Andrea guided me into an adjoining room. A large opening in the roof of the tunnel allowed just enough moonlight for me to see a narrow channel of water, no more than two feet wide, flowing through a cement duct that looked to be about two feet deep along the wall on my right. The water flowed through the room, disappearing into the wall on my left.

"This aqueduct starts about a hundred meters upriver and meets it again another hundred meters downstream. That's why the water is constantly flowing." She pointed to old iron pipes that protruded from the concrete below the flowing water and into ancient leaking rusted pumps. "It was made to supply the house, the swimming pool and the grounds. Nothing has ever worked down here in my lifetime though. We get our house water from the city waterworks. The people who owned this house before the revolution put the best of everything into it. They must have been very rich and extremely secretive." She turned to smile at me. "What a terrible thing to lose so much. Can you swim?"

Where did that question come from? "Yes, I can swim. Why?"

"When I was a young girl, my cousins, my brothers and I would lie flat in the trough, and the flowing water would carry us down the aqueduct and spit us out into the river. Once I almost drowned. My brother Julio had to pull me to shore by my hair. He and my other brother, Hector, thought it was very funny. I was so mad at them." Her voice had grown distant as she finished the sentence.

This place brought back memories of her brothers and some of the good times they had during their innocent youth. It must have also reminded her that she would never see them again. Her body seemed to sag as if she were losing her strength and might fall. I stepped close and wrapped my arms around her. She melted into me, her face buried in my neck. She was trembling and I could hear her softly crying. Her mother's words came back to me. It does Andrea no good to discuss the past. It took everything I had not to cry along with her. I held her for a long time and would have gone on holding her for the rest of the night had she wanted me to.

She regained her composure and began to apologize. "I am sorry for acting like this. Sometimes I get so sad." She straightened and looked into

my eyes. I leaned forward and kissed her softly on her perfect lips. It was a short kiss, but a powerful one. With her arms still wrapped firmly around me, she whispered, "Alan, please, would you be my friend?"

Her question took me by surprise. In my country, when the woman you care for says she wants to be your friend, we call it the kiss of death, signaling she lacks feelings for you. It usually means, Will you be available when I need you, for anything but a relationship? But we weren't in my country and my emotions were working overtime. Still, I couldn't help but hide my lack of enthusiasm.

"Yeah, okay," I said.

Andrea stepped back suddenly. "Have I offended you?"

I laughed nervously. "No, you've terrorized and thrilled me. You've made me feel vulnerable and unsure what to do or say next, but you have never offended me, and to answer your first question, I would love to be your friend—and a whole lot more."

She leaned forward and gave me a long kiss, hugging me tight, assuring me that my answer this time was more in keeping with the moment. When the kiss ended, she took my head in her hands, looking as if she was about to lecture me. "Good," she said smiling. "Let's get out of here."

She led the way back to where we started. The small iron door was disguised from the outside with a veneer of bricks that blended seamlessly into the surrounding wall. We went through the door and into the tunnel.

"You go first," she commanded. "I'll lock the door behind us and meet you at the end of the tunnel."

I didn't exactly like the idea of being first, but since nothing had attacked us on the way down the dark tunnel, I assumed we could make it to the other end without being eaten alive. Ducking low and using my hands on both walls for balance, I moved forward. The iron door made a horrid screeching sound as Andrea closed and locked it behind me. I moved cautiously through the passageway, finally breaking into the light of the secret room with her following close behind. She went to the far side of the pivoting wall and returned it to its original position. It came to a stop with a loud clink. She looked me in the eye.

"If the house gets raided by the police or military, you will be able to use this escape route. Remember to stay very flat and straight when you float down the trough. There's only about four or five inches clearance between the water and the cement cap above it. You'll like the ride, it's lots of fun." She flashed me a smile, jutting her chin toward the ladder.

“You go up first. I’ll stay behind and unscrew the light bulb.”

Using the ladder rungs on both sides, I climbed up through the small hole. When I made it to the top I found I was forced to make a decision. To the left was the entrance to Andrea’s cousin’s bedroom, and to the right was Andrea’s room. Without giving it too much thought, I entered her cousin’s bedroom, turned around and waited for her to appear. With the suddenness of a cat, she was there, gesturing for me to move out of her way so that she could enter through the small passageway. I helped her to her feet, only to find myself without a clue as to what I should do next. I felt a closeness I didn’t understand—maybe because she had shown me her vulnerable side, that secret place that most people prefer to keep to themselves. She looked as lost as I felt. Finally she spoke.

“Would you like to sit down on the bed, Alan?” She laughed. “Are you always this awkward around women, or is it just me?”

“It’s you,” I said, hoping she understood my nervousness, my fear of her rejecting me. “You’re very different from any woman I’ve ever met. It’s just going to take time for me to get used to you. I’ll probably be okay by tomorrow.”

She must have thought my response was funny, because she laughed again. “Yes,” she said, smiling brilliantly. “You’ll probably be okay by tomorrow.”

We moved to the bed and sat side by side, looking at each other, searching each other’s eyes for the answers to our questions, I guess.

“What?” we said at the same time. That caused us to launch forward with laughter, like a couple of kids sharing a prank. Then she straightened and tried to put on a serious face.

“Tell me about Alan, the man who lands airplanes on the water. The DSE confiscated a videotape from a tourist who filmed your landing. I caught the Alan and Mario Show a few times on the screens in the rooms of some of the patients today. I recognized you diving off the airplane and into the water wearing only your pants.” She began to laugh again.

“You think that was funny? That wasn’t funny.”

We laughed for a bit more before becoming serious again. “Why did you land your airplane on the beach?”

“You mean to tell me you don’t know what Mario and I are doing?”

“I know Mario and other members of our family are obsessed with eliminating the Castros. They’re unable to ignore what these horrible people did to us and are still doing to the people of our country. It scares me to think of what Mario is capable of. He is so dedicated to this country and its people. And you are his right-hand man. I’m so proud of you.”

I turned my head aside so that I could think without the distraction of her smile. The last thing I wanted to do was to disappoint her. But I had experience with departures from the truth in the past and I didn't want to repeat the same old mistakes.

"Don't be," I whispered, looking back at her. "I'm not the man you think I am. I'm not even close. I accompanied Mario for two reasons. One, I thought I could get away with it. And two, money. A very large amount of money."

Andrea's expression changed as she heard my words. She regarded me questioningly. I was embarrassed and looked away again. I had only told her a small part of the truth about me, and even that was too much. I could feel her disappointment.

I found myself thinking about how nicely Jenny had worded her goodbye note, when what she really meant to say was that I was a loser who couldn't be responsible to anyone or anything except adventure. And she had been right. I was definitely the wrong person for this idealistic, courageous goddess sitting beside me. Andrea had asked me earlier if we could be friends, and now I wondered if I was capable of even that.

"My middle name is Trouble," I stated bluntly. "You don't want me for your friend. The best thing that you can do is ask me to leave the premises before I bring trouble to you and your mother. But as you know, I have nowhere to go."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she asked sarcastically, "Are you feeling sorry for yourself? We've known about you for a long time, Alan. Mario sent us letters, telling of this brave pilot who saved his life on more than one occasion when he was working in South America. Was it some other pilot, or was it you? Or are you trying to tell me something else? Are you married? Is that why you are telling me these crazy things?"

"I'm telling you this so that you'll know that I have nothing to offer you. I'm no good for you. What part of that don't you understand? And no, I'm not married."

"You said you would be my friend. That's all I want."

"Andrea, I'm not sure I know what it means to be someone's friend."

"Mario told me that you're the best friend he's ever had, maybe his only friend. He said you looked after him like he was your little brother." She suddenly seemed very sad. "I would love to have a friend who takes care of me like a little sister. Is that too much to ask?" We sat quietly for a few minutes, thinking our own thoughts. Then all at once she smiled and wrapped her arms around me, and her forward motion pushed me

flat on the bed with her on top of me. I reached around and pulled her as tightly to me as I dared.

I whispered in her ear, "I'll try to be your best friend. You just need to know I have shortcomings, no matter how hard I might try."

We lay there together, not speaking. I untied the knot that held her hair and let her beautiful black mane cascade down around us, hiding us from the world. I caressed her back and shoulders lightly until she fell asleep in my arms. I was more confused than ever about my feelings for her, and more importantly, hers for me.

I was jarred awake to the sound of someone knocking on the bedroom door. "Breakfast is ready, young man," Tia Maria said. Sitting up in the bed, I looked around quickly to see if Andrea might still be in the room. She wasn't, but I was pleasantly surprised when I realized I was under the covers and no longer wearing my shirt or socks. I cursed myself for falling asleep.

I replied to Maria, saying softly through the locked door that I would be down in a minute. I rushed into the bathroom and brushed my teeth, combed my hair and quickly shaved the stubble from my face. Shaving with lukewarm water and hand soap hurt a little, but I didn't care. Andrea liked a clean face. The shirt I wore the day before was neatly folded on the foot of the bed. I quickly put it on and headed downstairs.

"Good morning," I said to both of them and sat down. I noted that Maria was better dressed than yesterday and was made up with rouge and blue eye shadow. She looked quite lovely. In any other country, she might be going over to her friend's house to play bridge, but not here.

The small TV on the table was on. Both women were so riveted to it that neither even thought to ask me how I'd slept. The reception on the screen was bad, but through the flicker I recognized the Canadian Minister of Transport. He was doing an interview with a CNN reporter. I listened proudly as he spoke earnestly to the camera as if he were speaking directly to Fidel Castro.

"If these two innocent Canadian tourists who have been illegally detained by the government of Cuba are not returned to Canada by tomorrow midnight eastern time, we will suspend landing and refueling privileges for all Cuban Airline flights coming to or leaving Canada. This is not negotiable."

When a commercial came on, Andrea and Tia Maria turned to me. "Good morning, Alan," they said, almost simultaneously. Maria placed the newspaper *Granma* in front of me. "Raul Castro has determined that the two Canadian tourists are not involved with you, Mario, or the

airplane in the water off of Varadero,” she said. “Because they are innocent, he is allowing them to return to Canada this afternoon. They must have some very powerful friends in Canada.”

“I think you’re right, Tia Maria. I wish I had the same friends.” The picture on the front page of the newspaper was the same one of Barry, Dennis, Mario and me, the same picture I had seen on TV the day before. Looking at it brought back to me the seriousness of the situation, which I had managed to forget the previous evening. “In my country,” I said, “almost all the judges and politicians were lawyers at one time. As you can see, they have a very strong fraternity. Good for them.” With that said, I turned my attention to Andrea. “I think I must’ve been in a coma last night,” I said.

“You sleep like the dead,” she replied. “I tried to make you a little more comfortable before I left you alone. Did you sleep well?” We both smiled widely and I managed to nod in response. “And how are you feeling today? Is that breathing problem you were having yesterday gone?”

Maria stood up and walked to the pantry. I heard the refrigerator door open. She returned a moment later with pineapple slices and cheese. She sliced some fresh bread at the counter and added it to the platter. The espresso was already brewing. While she worked, she kept one eye on the TV screen where the host was now interviewing the survivor of a bus crash in the Philippines.

I dared to whisper to Andrea, “Actually, I think it’s worse today than ever. I’m going to need a really good doctor.” I reached across the table and placed my hand on hers. “Do you know any doctors that make house calls?”

She squeezed my hand and smiled.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” I asked, trying to sound hurt.

“Are you saying that you weren’t awake? You don’t remember what happened?” she teased.

I studied her face. I couldn’t determine whether she was having fun with me or being serious.

Tia Maria placed the platter on the table and sat down, still giving all her attention to the TV. I ignored Andrea long enough to devour a few of the pineapple slices and some of the cheese. When I finally looked at her, I saw she was still grinning from ear to ear, waiting to see if I had fallen for her story. I smiled back, closed-lipped because my mouth was full of food.

“Next time, I’ll make sure you’re awake,” she said softly. At that

moment I felt quite sure that she had been playing with me all along. "Sorry, no eggs today," she went on in a louder voice. "Just fruit, cheese and bread. Very healthy."

Guilt suddenly overtook me. I was sitting at their table eating their precious food with over six-hundred Canadian dollars in each pocket. I wanted to give all my money to them, but I knew they would be too proud to accept it. As I ate more cheese, I devised a plan. I pulled out the money and handed it to Maria.

"Mario asked me to give this to you before he left," I lied. "Sorry, I forgot all about it yesterday." When she saw how much money there was, she said, "Alan, are you sure this comes from Mario? What is all this money for?"

"Yes, Tia, the money comes from Mario, sort of. He said it was to buy food for me while I'm staying with you, but I think you should use it for whatever is needed." I smiled.

"This is a very large amount of money. How long are you planning on staying?" Maria smiled back at me.

I glanced across the table at Andrea. She seemed to be on the edge of her seat waiting for my answer. "Forever," I mouthed before I turned from her. "I don't know. I hope to be able to stay here until it's safe to go," I said to Tia Maria.

Andrea reached across the table and took my hand and squeezed it tighter than she had before. "You'll have to excuse me," she said. "I have to get ready for work. My ride will be here in five minutes." She got up from the table and disappeared up the stairs, leaving me alone with Maria.

"Thank you for the money," she said. "We will put it to good use." Then she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Alan, I may be an old woman, but I'm not blind or dumb. Andrea is my daughter and I love her more than you can imagine. I'm telling you this because I want you to remember that one day soon, you will be going home. That means you'll be leaving her behind."

I kept smiling, but I felt like I'd just been hit in the head with a hockey stick.

"Her happiness comes from being a doctor," Maria continued, "and her sadness comes from being a Cuban. She has seen and experienced hardships that she should never have had to endure. Her inability to solve everyone's problems sometimes makes her dissatisfied with herself. She needs to love herself before she can love anyone else." Maria got up and poured me a second espresso and sat down again, looking directly into

my eyes. It was the most sincere look I'd ever seen in my life. "Andrea has a very complicated background. It's obvious that she likes you. With that said, I'm going to ask you as nicely as I can: Please don't hurt her."

I was still smiling stupidly. I felt like a teenager who'd just been read the riot act in the principal's office. The message was loud and clear. Tia Maria did not want me to be in a romantic relationship with her daughter.

"Mario is planning to be here sometime this evening," she continued. "Hopefully we'll find out what the plans are for the both of you to escape Cuba. In a very short time, you will be gone from our lives forever."

I remained speechless.

Maria stared at me a moment longer, then got up to start the clean up. I started to rise too, but she said, "Sit. Sit and finish your coffee."

Even as one part of me was resisting her lecture, another part knew she was right. After all, I had only known this beautiful, radiant woman for two days, so how could I possibly be in love with her?

Over her shoulder, Maria continued to speak. "I will be having some people visiting today that I will leave with, not returning until much later. This is the day that Andrea works late at the hospital. You'll be alone, probably until Mario arrives. Keep your ears open. Feel free to come down and eat, but don't stay long. I didn't sleep well last night. I had dreams." She turned and gave me a strange look as if she wanted to tell me more but couldn't.

Andrea appeared in the kitchen dressed in blue hospital scrubs ready for work. "My ride will be here any second," she said. She sounded almost apologetic and she wasn't smiling anymore. I wondered if she had heard some part of Maria's reprimand—or maybe she had reached the same conclusion on her own. "Alan, do you mind hiding just in case the police lieutenant decides to come into the house and has a look around again? It will only be for a few minutes. Once I'm gone, you can come back out."

I stood up and started walking glumly toward the closet, but she intercepted me, giving me a warm hug. As she pulled away, she looked back at her mother, who was preoccupied—or at least pretending to be—with the dishes. Impulsively, she stepped forward again and gave me a quick but energetic kiss. "I can't wait to get back from work tonight," she said.

I looked over her shoulder at Maria. To my dismay, I found her staring back at me, obviously unhappy. "I hope to see you, too," I said loud enough for Maria to hear, "but your cousin will be here tonight, possibly to collect me. If I leave before you get back, Andrea, I want you to know I think you are a very special woman. I'll never forget you."

I was wondering if Mario knew of another place where I could hide out until we were ready to make our escape. That would put an end to the pain I was causing, and the deep sense of loss I felt already. The thought of never seeing Andrea again brought sudden tears to my eyes. She saw them and hugged me again, this time much tighter.

She whispered into my ear, “Don’t go. I love you.”

Before I could react to her words, before I could even be sure I’d heard them correctly, there was a loud knock on the front door. Immediately, Tia Maria had a hold of my arm, pulling me toward the safety of the closet. “You need to get into the hiding space now,” she whispered sternly. I hurried into the small entranceway, shut the door behind me and climbed down the ladder into the hidden chamber inside the wine cellar. I climbed into one of the hammocks and wiped the tears from my face.

I love you too, I said to myself, and I knew at that moment that I would do or say anything to prove it.

13. IN THE DARK

After a minute of self-pity, I was able to remember to slide open the deadbolts to the door that separated the inner secret room from the rest of the wine cellar. I had to make sure the outside door was locked. I hopped out of the hammock and made my way in the dark. Above me I could hear Andrea and her mother engaged in a loud acrimonious discussion—speaking that rapid-fire Spanish I never quite mastered. In spite of my efforts, I was unable to decipher a single word. Their discussion lasted only a moment, then silence. The next thing I heard was the sound of the front door being slammed shut.

I leaned against the wall and put my head back hard, hoping to knock some sense into it. I had told Andrea I was trouble, but she hadn’t listened. Jenny hadn’t either in the beginning. She had to find out the hard way. This family had enough agony and grief without my

contribution.

I returned to the inner room and fell back into my hammock, as well as into my cocoon of self-pity. Andrea was gone. The thought of never seeing her again caused a deep physical and emotional pain in my heart. I reminded myself that I had only known her for two days, so how could my feelings be so strong? But logic did nothing to stave off my pain.

After a few minutes of reflection it occurred to me that I was often attracted to the wrong kind of women, the kind that would be impossible to marry and live happily ever after with. Jenny and I were like oil and water; we just didn't mix. A violinist with a part-time pilot and full-time thrill seeker? It was laughable. Now I was falling fast and hard for a Cuban doctor. What future could we possibly have together? I saw the irony in the situation and shook my head. Here I was trying to conjure up a possible future with Andrea when the truth was, as long as I remained a fugitive in Cuba, there was no guarantee I had a future.

I rose from the hammock and began to pace from one side of the small room to the other, my hands behind my back. I have always believed there are multiple personalities in my brain that take turns running this person I call me. The faster I paced the more I became aware of what I liked to think of as my voice of reason beginning to rear its grim-faced head. The voice of reason was calling for what it always called for, self-preservation. It was saying, Time to sit down and take a break, think things out. When I didn't respond, it jumped forward and yelled in my ear: WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU THINKING? Andrea is just a wish! You don't even know her. It's going to be hard enough to get your own ass out of this place. The voice of reason was right. I needed to be putting all my efforts into an escape plan, not the seduction of a most beguiling woman. I returned to the hammock unconvinced.

Once I was comfortable, swaying back and forth in the dark, I went over my situation again. Number one: my picture had been broadcast throughout the country in newspapers and on TV. It appeared our landing and subsequent escape was the biggest domestic news story in quite some time. Number two: I didn't have any identification that I could use in this country. Number three: I was stuck on a heavily policed communist island ninety miles from the Florida Keys.

You could say that the first two problems were overwhelming, but the third problem was actually solvable. Florida was only ninety miles away. I wondered how many Cubans had repeated that to themselves so often it became their mantra? The United States is only ninety miles away. Of course, that stretch of water between Cuba and America cost many

Cubans their lives.

A catamaran would work just fine. I saw quite a few cats when I was flying low along Varadero Beach just before we ditched. Back when I lived in southern Florida, I spent many days practicing sailing a cat. I became addicted to high winds, which meant high speeds and high waves. Once when I was far off the coast, my catamaran was flattened by a huge wave. I spent all night lying on top of its remains, drifting. The following morning, I found the waves had deposited me on a small but very nice private beach on one of the upper Keys. A catamaran, yes; very doable, with only a couple of minor obstacles to overcome.

I settled deeply into the hammock and drifted away to its rocking motion while my inner voice went on with its work, conjuring up solutions for each obstacle that lay ahead. There was no shortage of them. In the back of my mind, I hoped when I saw Mario he would say he had a much better plan—a solid plan.

Without warning I was pulled from a dream in which Andrea and I were riding in high seas in a small yellow catamaran. Right above me was the sound of doors and cupboards being closed violently. I sat up quickly to listen. I could hear multiple male voices speaking in a loud, authoritative manner. I leapt from the hammock and ran to the inner door, feeling a little bit stupid when I realized that while I had checked the bolts on the door to the outside, I had left the inner door ajar. I quickly closed it and secured the large deadbolts. Unquestionably, something bad was happening. Tia Maria was alone in the house and these men had entered without her permission. I sat on the wooden bench analyzing every sound I could from above. I decided that at least eight, maybe ten people had entered the house. A low clear voice was giving orders in a practiced military style. It sounded as though he was addressing as many as three or four different commanders by name. In a short time, I could hear the commanders in turn addressing cops or soldiers, telling them the same thing they had just been told. I was pretty sure they were barking orders concerning the most expedient way to thoroughly search the place.

The first question that entered my mind was: are they looking for me because someone told them I'm here? And if so, would they know about the secret rooms and passages?

I moved quickly to the pivoting door that led to the only escape route. I pushed firmly on the wall right where Andrea showed me, but nothing happened. I started searching frantically for the lever. It seemed like a long time before I hit a soft spot and was rewarded with a loud click. The

heavy handmade mahogany door began to rotate open.

I squeezed through the opening the instant I was able, closing the large door behind me. Only after I was in the passageway did I realize I had no idea where the lever was to open the door from this side. My heart began to pound in my chest. Either Andrea hadn't shown me, or if she had, I had been too distracted by her presence to pay attention. I felt around the doorframe for a moment or two until the thought of scorpions brought my effort to an abrupt end.

For what seemed like hours, I stood helpless in the narrow passage, using my hands to steady myself against the walls to keep my balance in the darkness. I heard nothing except the distant occasional shuffling of feet, probably on the second floor. The silence was broken by someone pounding on the outside door that led into the wine cellar. I could hear a male voice demanding the door be opened, followed by a much louder response from inside the cellar. Someone was telling the person outside to relax. The creaking sound the deadbolt made as it was opened preceded a flurry of people hurrying down the stairway and into the cellar. They were only yards away from me now, separated by the thin wall. An authoritative voice was reprimanding someone.

"Next time, I want this area searched before El Comandante arrives. It does no good to search this place now that he's left. Is that understood?" A different voice replied, "Si, Señor. The next time, I will make sure myself, sir."

"Lock the door behind me." Again, I could hear the sound of the door shutting. It was followed by the screech of the deadbolt sliding into place, then rapid footsteps before complete silence. I listened in the darkness and asked myself if I had heard these people correctly. Does El Comandante mean Fidel Castro? Had El Maximo himself just visited Tia Maria? Wow, what were the odds?

I stood in the darkness listening, but the house was silent. Using the light from my Timex, I found the release lever that opened the door from my side. I passed in front of the mahogany door and felt my way back to the bench, sighing with relief as I sat on it. This was the first time in hours that my legs had been allowed to rest. Funny how I was no longer concerned with scorpions; their potential for aggression seemed minor compared to the armed soldiers who had just left.

I sat for a long time, once again focusing my mind on how I might get off this island. Years ago I had read about cigarette boats which picked people up from the northern coast of Cuba and delivered them to the Keys. Unfortunately, the story was in the Miami Herald. The people

involved were arrested and charged with human smuggling. I could see where it might be a problem finding a brave boater to come and pick me up. Of the many ideas that had come to me as I sat there, the one I liked most was definitely “Escape by Catamaran.”

I decided to stay in the security of the hidden room and wait for Mario. I returned to the hammock and tried to rest, but I was too nervous. After a time, I stood and felt my way to the cabinet on the south wall looking for a bottle of water. Keeping my fingers away from the corners where scorpions were most likely to be lying in wait, I felt each shelf. I was rewarded with a dusty bottle and a tin containing stale crackers. I had my lunch sitting in the hammock.

Again I tried to sleep, and again I was unable. Another bottle of water, plus the crumbs at the bottom of the tin were my dinner. It was all I wanted. I continued to ponder the possible reasons why Fidel would personally visit Tia Maria. Was he here because he knew something? If that was the case, Maria and Andrea were in big trouble.

It seemed to take forever for my trusty Timex to glow 6:45 p.m. Quietly, I slid open the deadbolts to the hidden room and entered the wine cellar, crept up the stairs to the door that led outside and unlocked it in anticipation of Mario’s 7:00 p.m. arrival. With that done, I retraced my steps back to the security of the hidden room. I closed the door and latched it. Sitting silently, I watched the seconds pass on my glowing watch. At four minutes past seven, I heard the sound of a door opening. Someone was entering the wine cellar. I was sure it was Mario, but I was not about to announce myself until I had proof. Within seconds, the outside door release lever was pulled with a loud click. That would have opened the door but for the fact that I had locked it with the deadbolts on the inside. Mario’s voice came like music to my ears. “Aw shit!”

That was all I needed to hear. Immediately I slid the two deadbolts back and opened the door to find Mario standing in the dim light. “Man, am I glad to see you,” I whispered.

He pushed me inside the room as he entered, quickly bolting the door behind us. With a throw of his arm, he motioned for me to follow him toward the secret room.

“The house is surrounded by dozens of Special Troops. I think they saw me enter.” The loud banging on the outside door confirmed his words. We rushed into the secret room, passing through the mahogany door and closing it. He pressed a switch two inches from the right corner, locking it from the inside. It was not the time to ask him to show me how he’d done it.

“Follow me,” he commanded as he turned and started down the tunnel. I tried to keep up with him, with one hand on the brick wall to steady myself and the other in front to keep from crashing into the iron door as I had the last time. In no time we were together at the iron door, both of us pressing against it. It surprised me that it took a great deal of force to open. I entered the dimly lit room with him right behind me. Once inside, he shut the door.

“Too bad for us, but this door can only be locked from the inside. Special Troops are the best trained, most loyal military troops in Cuba. Not only that, they have a K-9 unit with them,” Mario said as we hurried toward the next room with the aqueduct flowing through it. “They’ll find the hidden passageways. We need to tell Andrea and Tia Maria as soon as possible. If they go back to the house after the police find the hidden corridors, they’ll be arrested and put in prison. That I guarantee.”

Everything was happening too fast. It didn’t make any sense. But there was no time to ask questions. Mario went right to the aqueduct and lay on his side facing me on the edge of the concrete slab that formed the trough the water flowed through. “This is the only way out. Hold your sandals in your hands and keep your legs straight. Don’t bend your knees or lift your head whatever you do. Move quickly, we’ve got very little time.” He removed his sandals and rolled onto his back in the water, instantly disappearing into the aqueduct. His last word was, “Hurry!”

I sat on the cement slab, took my sandals in my hands and rolled as Mario had onto my back, splashing into the warm water. I too was immediately pulled into the wet darkness of the aqueduct. I was surprised at how fast I was moving. If not for the fact that armed forces and snarling dogs were searching for us, I might have enjoyed the sensation of hurling through the concrete chute like an athlete on a luge track. A few times the backs of my sandals, which I was holding over my chest, scraped the cap of the aqueduct, making me anxious about my various body parts.

In about twenty seconds, I exited the aqueduct by dropping more than six feet vertically into a shallow pond. I checked myself, and as soon as I knew that nothing was broken, I climbed out and set off into a tangle of Banyan trees, twisting and turning to get through the widest openings. I could hear Mario running through the brush in front of me. I deduced two things: he knew his way, and he was very scared. I emerged from the Banyans and followed him down a narrow path toward a dirt road, my fear and a surge of adrenaline making it possible to keep up with him. After about thirty yards, he pushed his hand out behind him and came to

a dead stop.

“Don’t get ahead of me,” he whispered. I barely managed to keep from slamming into him. I was about to ask him why the hell we were stopping when out of nowhere a Russian-made Lada screeched to a halt right in front of him. He waved for me to follow as he opened the back door and jumped in. I didn’t need to be told twice. I entered so close behind him we might have seemed connected and shut the door. We bounced around on the dirt road for a few seconds and spun out onto the main road.

Mario leaned forward in his seat and said to the driver, “The house is totally compromised. We can’t let Andrea go back there or she’ll be arrested. Can you get your people to pick her up and take her to the beach house?” The driver, whose mouth and nose were all I could see in the rearview mirror, nodded and picked up a portable radio.

“Jorge,” he snapped. “Go to Havana General and get my cousin. Take her to the Casa Azul. What’s your ETA?”

“I’m about five minutes away,” replied a man’s voice. The driver dropped the radio onto the seat beside him and produced another, apparently from his belt. He spoke into it. “Carlos, have you picked up my aunt yet?” The voice on the second radio replied, “Si, she is in the car with me. I am driving her back to her house.”

“Cancel that,” he said calmly. “Take her to the Casa Azul immediately. Watch your six.”

Only one word came back over the radio. “Roger.”

Once the driver had put aside the second phone, Mario turned to me and said, “Alan, meet my brother, Roberto. Roberto, Alan.”

Roberto nodded. This time his eyes appeared briefly in the rearview mirror. They were Mario’s eyes, green, long-lashed and surprisingly untroubled, considering our situation. If I had seen them earlier, I would have known he was Mario’s brother. They looked almost identical.

“Hello, Roberto,” I said. He nodded again, and we sped through the mostly empty streets in silence.

After a while Mario said, “Roberto is a captain in the DSE.”

I nodded. Even though I had a million questions for Roberto, I decided it would be better to let them wait until we arrived at the Casa Azul, whatever that was. We carved our way through the streets for another five minutes and then abruptly turned right into a gated driveway manned by a single security guard. Upon seeing us approach, he hurriedly opened the large metal gate. We drove in and parked the Lada out of sight at the rear of the house.

What struck me immediately as we got out was the view from the backyard. There was nothing between us and the Florida Keys except the majestic blue of the Florida Strait. Breaking waves rolled into a large protected area that looked as if it had been cut into the coral by a colossal router. The entrance that originated at the far right side of the property was at least twenty feet wide and cut into the coral for almost thirty-five feet. The cut made a ninety-degree left turn and paralleled the beach for another fifty to sixty feet, leaving a long high mound of coral to protect the twenty-foot-wide manmade harbor from the waves.

I imagined this must have been someone's private slip before the revolution. Glancing away from the sea, I took in the house itself. Some of its shutters were missing and others were hanging lopsidedly. The faded blue paint was peeling, showing years of neglect. The house was surrounded by weeds, some of them quite high. To the left was an empty star-shaped swimming pool with a shallow layer of dirty, insect-laden water. The moon provided enough light for me to see that the surrounding concrete was badly cracked and weed-ridden.

We walked into a sprawling outdoor courtyard that was covered with palm leaves. Mario immediately disappeared into a nearby room and returned a moment later with a pair of boxer shorts.

"Put these on," he said. He pointed to another door adjacent to the one that he had gone through. I slipped in and found myself in a large marble-floored bathroom. As I changed out of my wet clothes, I could hear the buzz of one of Roberto's radios. He spoke into it, then Mario and Roberto spoke together heatedly, as if there were some sudden tension between them. When I went back outside, Mario was hanging his wet clothing on a piece of rope that had been strung between two posts in the courtyard. I followed suit, wringing my clothes out as best I could in case I had to put them on again.

When I turned from the clothesline, I saw Mario moving toward a small refrigerator. He opened the door, pulled out three beers, came back and gave me one. He handed one to his brother. Mario sat down hard in a wicker chair, pulled back the tab and took a long swallow. Roberto sat in the chair beside him. I was still standing, looking around uncertainly, wondering how safe we were and what the brothers had been talking about.

"The soldiers that surrounded Tia Maria's house are assigned only to Fidel and his brother," Mario declared. "We were extremely lucky to get you out of there alive. That son of a bitch Fidel is very clever."

I knew that already. Roberto took over from there. "I heard from one

of my contacts while you were changing,” he began in an assertive tone. “Your two lawyer friends from Varadero are on a plane back to Canada. That’s the good news. The bad news is that Castro is convinced Tia Maria and Andrea are somehow involved in all of this. It’s a miracle that his men didn’t pick up Maria earlier in the day while El Jefe was questioning her at the house. I guess they were waiting to see if my cousin or aunt would slip up somehow and lead them to you. Anyway, we managed to get them both before the Special Troops did, and now we need to get them out of the country as soon as possible. You guys really screwed up by leaving that business card behind with Tia’s address. What really set things off was when the captain of Fidel’s personal security team found three sets of dishes in the dish drain. He might not be the smartest man on earth, but it took him less than two seconds to figure out that three people had breakfast this morning.”

We stared at each other for a moment. I walked to one of the wicker chairs, collapsed on it and hung my head. I had to agree. We had made too many mistakes. Because of our errors, two brave patriotic women would be forced to leave their home and country to avoid prison. I was sure Andrea would hate me for that. I was not looking forward to seeing her reaction, or Maria’s. I turned my anger on Mario.

“How the hell are we going to get off this damned rock?” I asked him bluntly. “You must have a plan, right? Are we getting any help at all from Fred and his crew?”

“Alan, I’ll tell you everything,” Mario began. “Fred is chief of the CIA’s Caribbean Desk. We work with a group that is planning for a future when the Castro brothers are gone. The man we are throwing our support behind is Carlos Lage Dávila, the Vice President. He and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, who is in line to become Cuba’s next president, work clandestinely with six others. Their objective is to make sure that once the Castros are gone, their kind and their system stay gone. His group was responsible for organizing the baseball players we hoped to deliver. The reason no one was waiting for us on the second flight was because Roberto discovered, by coincidence, barely an hour before we arrived, that the defense forces had been informed of our pending arrival by an unknown source within the Ministry of Interior. Somebody talked. Unfortunately for us, we were already committed. The good news is they don’t appear to know we were here for the baseball player. The one we didn’t pick up doesn’t have any problems and still wants to leave.”

I don’t know why, but I felt better knowing this information.

“How good are you with boats?” Mario demanded.

I put my beer can down on the wicker table. "Why don't we borrow a catamaran from one of these beach hotels and sail it to the Keys? It's only ninety miles. If we leave at night, we could be in the Keys by morning."

Roberto joined in, his tone less hostile than before. "A catamaran is too slow. These waters are patrolled by gunboats at any given time. They have a top speed of almost twenty-five knots. To avoid them, you need to be riding on something much faster than a catamaran." He hesitated, took a sip of his beer and sat back in his seat. "We've been using Sea-Doos successfully between here and Key West for quite some time now. It will take me a day or two, but I can get two good ones delivered here. After we paint them black, you can both go back to the States. Does that work for you, Alan?"

"Yes," I answered immediately. "They definitely beat a catamaran. All we'll need is a compass and a full tank of fuel." I couldn't help but smile imagining how cool it would be to ride a Sea-Doo away from this place. I looked over my shoulder at the sea. I suspected they had used this house before to smuggle people in and out of the country. The one problem with a Sea-Doo was that it could only hold three people.

"How are we going to get Tia Maria, Andrea, the ballplayer and his family off the island?"

Roberto leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. "The ocean is calm this time of year. Almost nightly, it seems, there are high speed twin-engine cigarette boats from the U.S. picking people up off the north coast. The authorities know about these boats and patrol the area intensely, but the cigarette boats are too fast to catch. That's why we use this house. Very few Coast Guard boats patrol this area. Once you reach the States, you'll need to buy a fast boat with a capacity for at least fifteen people. Then return here and pick everybody up. Other people do it all the time. How hard can it be?"

How many times had I heard that line, especially from Latinos who seemed to live in a different world than mine? Rather than becoming argumentative, which would have been my first choice, I let diplomacy rule the moment.

"The problem with your plan is that nobody makes a high speed boat that carries fifteen people or more." Just as the words were leaving my mouth, in my mind's eye I saw the Grumman Albatross that was parked at Opa-Locka airport. Quickly I added, "I do know of a large flying boat that could easily carry fifteen people. It's three or four times faster than the fastest speedboat." I turned to Mario. "Remember the Albatross at the Opa-Locka airport?"

"Yes, I remember. There were two Jet Skis hanging from its wings. You said you wanted to play with her."

"Exactly, the Jet Skis. Do you think your buddy Fred would let us use it?"

Mario laughed. "After what you did with his last airplane? I don't know."

Our conversation was interrupted by an excited voice coming from one of Roberto's radios. "We've got company, a black Mercedes 280 with tinted windows. Ministry of Interior, for sure."

"Where are you?"

"We're on 23rd Street, passing the Habana Libre. Do you want me to lose him?"

"Negative. If it's a Mercedes 280, you won't be able to outrun them in your Lada."

"I know this car. It's definitely a Mercedes 280."

"Stay on 23rd Street. We'll intercept them when you turn off 23rd onto 49C."

"That's only three blocks from the house. Don't you think that's cutting it a little close?"

Roberto thought for a second and then spoke clearly into the radio. "Twenty-third is the route Andrea normally takes home. If you turn off before 49C, they'll know something's up for sure. They'll stop you and grab her. I can't let that happen."

"Si, Señor."

Roberto stood up. "Alan, Mario, put your clothes on. I'm going to need you both."

We put our damp clothes on as Roberto disappeared into another room adjoining the courtyard. I could hear him on the radio again, barking instructions to his comrades. When he appeared a few moments later, he was carrying three short-barreled AK-47s with folding stocks. He handed them to Mario. Then he walked back into the same room and returned with a heavy box filled with at least fifteen loaded magazines.

"Get in the car," he commanded, handing the box to me.

We rushed to the car with the AK-47s and the ammo. Mario put two of the machine guns on the back seat floor as he climbed into the front seat beside his brother. I slid the box of ammunition along the seat, jumped in beside it, and shut the door. While Roberto was turning out of the driveway and maneuvering past the security guard at the gate, Mario turned in his seat. Knowing what he wanted, I pulled one of the magazines out of the box and handed it to him. In less than a second, he

had inserted it and pulled the slide back, filling the breech with a round. I loaded magazines into the other two guns. We were on the main road now. If Roberto drove fast after he picked up Mario and me, now he was driving like a madman, screeching around corners and cutting off any cars in his path.

Roberto announced to no one in particular, “Not Andrea. Over my dead body.” He was so wound up that he was shaking. I could see his jaw trembling in the rearview mirror. I never doubted his words for a second. “Alan, do you know how to use an AK-47?” he snapped.

A feeling of pride swept through me. The voice of reason that had come to me hours earlier in my dark hiding space was long gone by now. Many times at Bruno’s house in upstate New York I had the privilege of firing his AK-47. This was a gun I knew well. I sat forward in my seat.

“Roberto, I know how to use it.”

With Mario watching, I pulled the stock from its folded position and locked it into place. I then pushed the selection lever down into the firing position and chambered a round. I did the same to the other AK-47. They were both loaded and ready to go.

Mario looked at his brother, who was busy driving around a corner on two wheels. As soon as the screeching noise ended, he said, “Don’t worry about Alan, he knows guns. They’re loaded and ready, safeties off.”

Roberto was on the radio again, asking Jorge what his ETA was.

“Six, maybe seven minutes, over.”

“That’ll work,” he responded. “We’re less than two minutes away. Call me when you have the bridge in sight. When you turn off 23rd onto 49C, accelerate as much as you can to put some distance between you and them. You will see me stopped on the first street to your right. Turn there and drive past me back onto the main road. Don’t look back. Get Andrea to the Casa Azul as fast as you can. Do you understand?”

“Affirmative, sir.”

Realizing we would arrive in plenty of time, Roberto slowed the car to an almost normal pace. Both he and Mario had stern, determined expressions etched onto their faces. Roberto turned the rattling Lada onto a small paved side street, then made a quick left turn down the alley where Mario and I had walked when we first arrived at Andrea’s house.

Roberto stopped the Russian sedan on the right-hand side with the nose blocking half of 49C Street. He put it in park, but kept it running and turned to me.

“You take the right side of the road, about there.” He pointed to a small opening in the thick vegetation and then turned to his brother. “I

want you on the left under those bushes. Both of you should be on your stomachs so if you do have to shoot, you'll be shooting up. That way you won't hit each other."

Roberto was showing good leadership skills, considering the wildcards. With two dozen heavily armed Special Troops camped at Maria's house less than two blocks away, I felt we had virtually no chance of succeeding.

"Just the three of us?" I asked.

"There is no time for reinforcements. One way or another, this will be over in less than a minute. Don't fire unless they fire first. Are you going to be able to go through with this?"

"Don't worry about me, Roberto. Worry about yourself. If they start shooting, the first person they're going to shoot is you."

His radio interrupted our tough guy discussion. "Coming up on the bridge now, over."

Roberto responded, "We are in position, proceed as planned."

With no further instruction, I pulled two more magazines from the box on the seat and handed one to Mario. "Just in case," I said. Lifting my weapon, I exited the car and ran to the spot Roberto had indicated. Mario did the same, flanking me on the other side of the road.

I lay on my stomach in the thick underbrush with the AK-47 firmly against my right shoulder ready to fire. With Mario almost directly across from me, we were in a perfect position to ambush anyone who stopped or slowed in front of us. I watched Roberto grab his machine gun from the back seat. He folded the collapsible stock into the closed position, shortening the gun, making it easier to handle with one hand. We were ready to kill.

The driver of Andrea's Lada must have been pretty revved up on adrenaline. The little Russian clunker almost rolled over as it rounded the corner onto 49C Street, well ahead of the unsuspecting ministry personnel in the black Mercedes.

As soon as the white Lada passed us, Roberto pulled his car into the middle of the street, turning it sideways and blocking the oncoming Mercedes, forcing them to come to a screeching halt. He quickly exited the Lada, his AK-47 aimed at the occupants. Standing in front of the black Mercedes like a bull ready to charge, he screamed, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The tinted driver's window of the black Mercedes disappeared into the door. In its place appeared the large ugly clean-shaven head of a dark-skinned man with a very puzzled expression. He stretched his neck,

angled his head out the window and yelled, "Chasing criminals! Are you going to shoot me for that, Roberto?"

14. NOBODY NEEDS TO DIE

With his AK-47 unlocked in the ready position and his finger on the trigger, Roberto walked up to the Mercedes and rested the muzzle of the gun on the sill of the driver's window. "We had an agreement, my friend. None of our family gets arrested or jailed. Remember the deal? Or are you trying to start a civil war?"

The driver lifted his palms from the steering wheel and drew his head back in a turtle-like fashion, revealing several layers of skin around his neck.

"Roberto, I'm not your enemy. Our kids play together, for Christ's sake. We were told there is a credible threat against El Jefe. We have an agreement: nobody hits Fidel. Who are the people from the plane? Why are they here and where are they now?"

Roberto lifted his left hand off the barrel and pointed at the base of the Banyan tree where I was lying in the ready position, my AK-47 aimed squarely at the driver's head. The driver looked right down my barrel. "Juan, that's the pilot. The copilot is on the other side of the road in the same position. Both were in the house today when Comandante visited. If they wanted to kill him, he would be dead. Stop listening to the same old paranoid bullshit. These two guys are smugglers. They make money for us, for me and for you. This operation is under my control. I'm in

charge.” Roberto said the last bit with absolute authority.

Juan was still nodding, chewing it over. Then he shrugged. “We’re out of here, Roberto. Just tell me what you want me to report.”

Roberto smiled and slapped him on the side of his shiny bald head. “You’re a smart guy, you’ll think of something.”

“When the old man hears about this, he’ll probably have another heart attack!”

“Go back onto 23rd Street, Juan. The same direction you came from.”

Juan put the black Benz into reverse and swung it hard to the left, brushing against the thick vegetation beside the road. He pulled onto the road and took a right onto 23rd exactly as Roberto had ordered. When the car was out of sight, Mario and I emerged from our attack positions. Silently, the three of us moved swiftly toward the Lada. As soon as the doors were closed, we sped off in the opposite direction, the iconic car creaking and complaining all the while.

“So what happens now?” I asked. I was still pumped up by the effects of the adrenaline racing through my veins.

Roberto hesitated a second before answering. “Juan will report to his boss, Captain Lopez. Then the captain will call me. We will arrange to meet. Privately, he will tell me how much he wants. We’ll argue for a few minutes and then settle on a number. Since 1990, it’s all about the dinero.” He lifted his right hand from the steering wheel and rubbed his thumb and middle finger together, the universal sign for money—or maybe for greed. “People need to eat. In your country, you don’t see people who are hungry. Here in Cuba, normal working people cannot earn enough to eat properly. Many of them are starving. It is the most striking difference between our two worlds. All other differences pale in comparison.”

I leaned forward in my seat. “Let me see if I have this straight. The top people in the DSE and Interior Ministry are working around the Castros?”

“Yes, but remember, we’re a very small group. The majority of the people in the DSE and the military are loyal party members. Now that we have Vice President Carlos Lage as our leader, everything is organized. The man’s a genius. He was trained as a pediatrician, a true academic who is very well read in international affairs. Lage is the only man with enough integrity and pragmatism to lead us out of this mess.”

His green eyes flashed in the rearview mirror. “Our goal is to mandate a system involving democracy. It will have to be phased in. If we went democratic overnight, tomorrow we would have total chaos on our hands. Every Cuban-American would return here, claiming ownership of

property that belonged to his family before the revolution. Some of this real estate has become hotels and resorts. Think about it. There would be an endless number of lawsuits involving astronomical amounts of money. Corruption would soar and we would soon be back to where we were before this Castro brothers' train wreck. We'll need to keep socialism in place while we dissolve communism. Think of it as a ladder. You know what happens if you try to skip a rung or two and rush your way down. We have this group of well-educated influential administrators to ensure the stability of the country once the Castros are gone. We don't want a system like the United States. Don't get me wrong; we want the U.S. as a trading ally, but we don't want Uncle Sam meddling in our affairs."

"Wasn't that what Castro told the people at the beginning of his revolution?" I asked as we drove past the security gate and pulled into the driveway alongside Casa Azul. I didn't want to sound like a smartass. I just wanted to know what I was getting myself involved in.

Mario and Roberto laughed at my question. Like their appearance, their laughter was similar.

"Actually," Roberto answered, "in the beginning, Castro claimed he was, above all else, fighting for democracy for the Cuban people. Fidel changed his mind when he saw the competition that democracy brought with it. My friend, the most effective form of government is a benevolent dictator with a smart, dedicated group of people to work with him or her. So, for now we need Carlos Lage and Felipe Perez, and the many others who are part of the movement, to make sure they don't change their minds the way Fidel changed his."

I couldn't resist. "Name one benevolent dictator?"

Ignoring me, Roberto turned off the ignition and the three of us bailed out of the car at the same time, machine guns in hand. As we entered the courtyard, I could hear Tia Maria and Andrea within the house. Mario knocked lightly on what appeared to be the main door off the courtyard. Not waiting for a response, the two brothers entered. I stayed in the courtyard with my gun at my side, staring at the ocean. I wondered if this reunion was something I really wanted to participate in.

Eventually I placed the AK-47 on the wicker table and returned to the car for the box of magazines. There was a bench along the wall in the courtyard. I placed the box there, and not knowing what else to do, sat down beside it.

I tried not to listen, but it was impossible. The women were sobbing. Mario was trying to explain, apologizing for his part at how things were

going. I hung my head. What had I been thinking? I had unrealistically hoped the women would be happy to see us, their rescuers. What a sad moment it had to be for them. They had invested so much energy and effort to bring change to their country. Now, with Cuba's transformation perhaps just around the corner, they would be exiled.

Guilt, heavy as lead, overcame me. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined being involved in something this awful. Cause and effect. Mario and I were the cause. What was happening to these brave people was the effect. The crying—mingled now with cursing—continued for another ten minutes. Then there was silence. Andrea emerged and approached me directly. My breath quickened. I imagined ever so briefly that I would have yet another chance to hold her in my arms, to console her. She was like a magnet and I was irresistibly drawn to her. But I saw the flame in her eyes and her hand was drawn back like a pitcher's. She slapped me hard across the cheek.

I covered my cheek, which was stinging and hot, with my left hand. Wow, that hurt. I looked into her eyes, hoping to communicate my regret visually. I wanted to add a verbal apology, but I couldn't find the words to express the magnitude of the disaster I had brought to her and Tia Maria.

Finally I said, "Please listen to me, Andrea. I know it can't mean anything to you now, but I am so very sorry this is happening to you and your mother."

In a split second, I saw her expression change. She threw herself at me like a child, hungry for a parent's love, crying, "Oh, God. I'm sorry I slapped you. I think I'm losing my mind. Hold me, Alan. Hold me. I feel so lost."

To say she was a little upset would be an understatement. I pulled her close to me and wrapped my arms around her tightly, whispering my apologies over and over. She was trembling, taking short, sobbing breaths. After a while, with dusk settling around us, she began to relax. When she looked at me, I gently kissed her. She pulled away, her eyes suddenly pleading.

"Alan, take us away from this evil place."

I placed both of my hands on the sides of her beautiful face. "I will." I kissed her again, knowing that I had spoken the truth. I was fully committed to her and my heart was no longer under my control.

I had momentarily forgotten all about the others. When Mario's voice suddenly came from the darkness, he startled me so much that I nearly jumped off the bench.

“No, no, no!” He gestured at Andrea. “What do you think you’re doing? Don’t you think we have enough trouble?”

Andrea lunged at him with the same fire in her eyes as when she’d slapped me. “Don’t even think of trying to tell me what to do, cousin! It’s your fault we’re here in the first place. You brought him here, remember? Because of you, my mother and I are homeless, with only the clothes on our backs, wanted by a goon squad of idiots. You’ve got a lot to fix, cousin.”

“Fidel is the one who made these problems, not me,” Mario countered gently. He gave me an admonishing look and then mumbled, “There’s food in the kitchen. You must be hungry; I know I am.” He turned away, now focused on his seemingly endless appetite.

I waited until he had disappeared through the central door. Then I turned back to Andrea, catching her hypnotic gaze in the filtered light. “Are you hungry, mi amor?” I asked.

“Yes, but first this.” She put her arms around my neck and kissed me again, this time with lingering passion.

We shared a late night snack of ham and cheese sandwiches, washed down with pre-boiled water from the refrigerator. We ate in complete silence, staring at our food. Tia Maria was clearly not going to be as forgiving as Andrea had been. I had tried to apologize to her when we first sat down, but she only nodded and moved to the far end of the long wooden table. It was clear she was also angry with Mario.

Roberto was rinsing dishes in the sink when we heard a car pull into the driveway. Like separate parts of the same body, we rose, then moved through the courtyard toward the driveway. I hadn’t brought my weapon. The security guard had not buzzed us to indicate any problems. Mario and Roberto, however, had thought to carry theirs.

The driver was a middle-aged man, thin and gaunt, wearing a worn sports jacket. He left the engine running and jumped out. Without so much as looking in our direction, he moved to the trunk of his Lada and opened it. He lugged out two large vintage suitcases and dropped them onto the concrete driveway. Before any of us could reach the Russian wreck, the driver jumped back in, backed up and was gone.

Mario put his gun down on the rattan table and retrieved the suitcases with a casualness that confirmed this was a planned event. We followed him back into the house, through the kitchen and into a large living area. He put the battered leather suitcases on the tile floor, opening them one at a time. They were filled with used clothes, one with women’s and the other with men’s. Each contained a clear plastic bag through which I

could see toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, aloe vera lotion, and even toilet paper. Andrea and her mother bent over the women's case and began rummaging through the various garments.

Suddenly Andrea straightened and spoke to Roberto. "Where do we sleep tonight?"

"Let me show you," Roberto said.

We followed him through a door in the living room. On the other side was a breezeway, and just beyond it, a separate building. He pointed to the second door of the other building and turned to Maria and Andrea. "There are two master suites in here," he announced. "This is the nicer of the two. It faces the ocean. You'll be comfortable there; you'll have a sea breeze to keep you cool." Then he turned toward Mario and me. "You can sleep in the other suite. I'll have the far bedroom in the main house, and the guard sleeps in a bedroom that has its own entrance right beside the gate."

Andrea turned to me. "Alan, will you carry our suitcase to the room for us?"

"Of course," I said.

As the women stood in the breezeway watching, I walked back into the living room and returned with the suitcase. I then followed Maria and Andrea into their room. Maria hit a switch on the wall. Once my eyes adjusted to the dim light from the lone bulb, I was quite impressed. The entire back wall of the room was glass with sliding doors in the middle. Moonlight poured in and bounced off the polished marble floors. There were two queen-size beds—made up with dark eggplant-colored sheets—with ornate carved mahogany headboards. The doors at the far end of the room, also mahogany, were open and I could see that one led to a very large bathroom, the other to a walk-in closet.

I placed the suitcase on the nearest bed and watched Andrea and her mother begin to unpack, placing the clothes into a long wooden dresser. They would be leaving their country wearing someone else's discarded garments, but these women obviously didn't care about material things. They looked perfectly content with what had been provided. A few times one touched the arm of the other, pointing to something intriguing or comical about one of the garments. They shared several small but sweet smiles as they worked.

Not wishing to intrude, I hustled out of the room and quickly returned to the other building where Mario and Roberto were deep in a discussion. It ended abruptly when I entered the room.

"Am I interrupting something?" I asked sheepishly.

Roberto replied bluntly, “Nothing that would interest you.” Not only the words but their delivery spoke volumes. He had seemed neutral before, but now he was clearly showing he was angry at the way things were going. I couldn’t blame him. He pointed to the suitcase that remained in the middle of the living room floor.

“You and Mario should be able to find what you need in there.”

Anxious to avoid Roberto’s glare, I picked up the suitcase and brought it into the room where Mario and I would sleep. The room was the same layout as the one Andrea and her mother had, but without the large glass windows and doors that opened to the sea. The house was intelligently designed. Windows and hallways funneled cool, clean ocean air in and out of the bedroom at about the same velocity as an overhead fan at half speed.

I put the suitcase down on a large nineteenth-century dresser, opened it and began sorting through its contents. I found a pair of light cotton shorts and a colorful shirt and put them on. After freshening up I returned to the living area to find Mario. As usual he was in the kitchen making buns with ham and cheese. I knew I should really go to sleep. We would have a busy day tomorrow, but the truth was, I wasn’t the least bit tired. Maybe that was because during the last two days, all I had done was sleep. I felt like a racehorse that needed to run but had nowhere to go. There was no point in getting into bed and trying. Sleep was not going to happen, at least not for now.

Leaving Mario to his food prep, I kicked off my sandals and left the room, taking the breezeway into the courtyard to avoid Mario and Roberto. As I went by, I could hear the tension still evident in their voices. I continued walking until I found myself at the edge of the lapping surf.

The waves rolled gently over the jagged coral. The moon was almost full and there were no clouds above to obstruct its light. Off in the distance I could see huge isolated thunderclouds that were putting on a magnificent light show, sending bolts of lightning down to the water. At times the bolts appeared like a spider web, but without the uniformity. I clambered down to the coral and made myself comfortable, watching for what seemed like a long time. This is the kind of lightning that you had to avoid if you were in an airplane or boat. But I was in neither, and from my vantage point, the storm was dazzling. I had loved the subtropical weather in Miami when I lived there. I was sure Cuba’s weather was pretty much the same, but even steamier and stormier. I was just thinking the weather was where any similarities ended between the two regions when I felt a gentle caress on my shoulder, jolting me out of my reverie.

Andrea stood beside me in a flowing cotton dress covered with an array of reds and yellows, blues and greens that glowed in the moonlight. It looked like a painter's drop cloth, full of vivid colors with no overall pattern. Her beautiful dark hair was down, a few stray hairs stirring in the light breeze. She was a goddess and I had to be dreaming.

I got to my feet slowly, my smile wide and beyond my control. We came together instantly, kissing hungrily. When she finally pulled herself away, I said, "Hi, beautiful."

She smiled as she stared into the Florida Straits. The sea breeze felt good. The sound of the waves lapping over the coral and then withdrawing was a perfect backdrop to what we were saying to each other, not with words, but with our lips and hands.

We enjoyed this sign language for quite some time. It brought both pleasure and laughter into our stressful lives. I could have continued forever, but eventually she pushed away from me and whispered, "Alan, I want you to answer a question. Do you think you're capable of being honest with me right now?"

A chill ran through my body. What if my answer to her question took her away from me? "Andrea, I will answer you honestly, no matter what. I will never ever lie to you."

She asked. "Do you really want me, or am I just a distraction?"

I locked my eyes onto hers, desperate to prove my sincerity. I could sense her doubt and I smiled. That was the exact question that had been running through my mind since I met her. We were both filled with doubts. Yet our relationship was advancing at warp speed. The circumstances surrounding us were too complicated.

"Who in their right mind wouldn't want you?" I asked. "The more important question is, can I commit myself to you? I know this has all happened so fast, but I'm willing to completely change my life for you. Now it's your turn. Do you really want to make a life with a vagabond like me?"

She smiled with amusement at my heartfelt words. "You silly man. I don't know what you've done to make me feel this way, but I'm falling in love with you."

She pushed me mischievously and began to laugh. I let myself fall to the coral, pulling her gently to me. She climbed on top and straddled me, pinning my hands behind my head. We looked at each other and laughed a bit more, but then we both got serious and she lowered her head to mine. Her hair fell forward on both sides of her face, creating a dome of intimacy that muffled the sounds of the surf and the sea breeze.

“Did you hear me?” she whispered, her lips less than an inch away from mine. “I said I love you.” Before I could answer, she kissed me deeply. Mesmerized, I savored her sensuality.

Where the time went that night, I will never know for sure. We talked, touched, laughed and planned a future together with the energy, optimism and innocence of teenagers. As the sun began to boil up out of the Atlantic, I stood and helped her to her feet. We walked to the house hand in hand, as physically close as two people could be and still be able to move. We must have looked like a pair of teens going steady. We stopped outside her door.

“I would love to sleep the day away with you, Alan, but I think my mother might object.”

“I can wait,” I replied, enjoying her understatement.

She smiled her perfect smile as she opened the door and began to slide in. But I still had her hand, unwilling to part with it. For a moment we stood like that; she in her room, me in the breezeway, connected by our palms, then our fingers, then our fingertips, neither of us wanting to be the first to break the connection. Even when it did break, even after the door had gently clicked shut, I stood there a moment longer, waiting, hoping she would open the door and appear again. After a moment of silence, I shook my head hard like a dog shaking off water and walked down to the second bedroom and jumped into the vacant bed.

15. READY

Opening my eyes to the sight and feel of Andrea lying beside me was a dream come true. When she saw that I was awake, she delivered her soft, full lips to me. I pulled her on top of me and returned the favor.

"This is how I want to wake up every morning for the rest of my life," I said, holding her beautiful face in my hands.

Her answer, quick and simple, was, "Okay." Then she laughed playfully like a schoolgirl.

We played on the queen-size bed until the sound of a car pulling into the driveway brought us back to reality. "They're back. Come on, let's go," she said, suddenly becoming serious. We jumped up, straightened ourselves, and walked to the courtyard to meet Mario and Roberto. "When are we leaving, cousins?" she asked as we approached them.

Roberto turned to me and answered, "By evening we'll have two Sea-Doos here. I picked up two cans of fast drying black latex paint. We'll paint them as soon as they arrive. If the weather keeps, you'll be able to leave tonight."

Andrea furrowed her brow. "Who'll be leaving?"

"Don't worry, Andrea. You'll ride with Alan on one Sea-Doo, and Mario will ride with the extra fuel on the other. It's too dangerous for Tia Maria to go."

With her lips curled back, she demanded, "What the hell are you talking about, Roberto? The only thing that's too dangerous is staying here."

"She can stay right here for now. It's safer."

"She isn't going to like that at all. If that's your decision, Roberto, then you'll have to tell her yourself. Good luck." Andrea's face had the meanest, nastiest look I had ever seen. I was glad she wasn't looking at

me. If looks could kill, I guarantee Roberto would be dead. Understandably, she wasn't the least bit happy about leaving her mother behind.

"I'll tell her. I know she won't be happy about it, but I'll convince her it's safer this way." Roberto shuffled as he spoke, trying to avoid Andrea's glare. For the first time since I'd known him, he gave me the impression that he was unsure of himself.

He changed the subject. "One of my men will deliver the fuel. He should be here by early evening. The only thing we're missing is the wetsuits. We're trying to get three black wetsuits with face gear to protect your eyes from the salt spray. The wetsuits will also help you stay warm and make you harder to spot. After two, the moon will be down. If the weather stays good, that will be the best time for you to leave. Agreed?"

"That'll be cutting it a little close," I said. "It'll be sunup by the time we get to the Keys. And what about a compass?"

Roberto pulled two archaic brass-framed Russian-made military compasses from his pocket and handed them to me. Through the discoloration on the inside of the glass casing I could see the two compasses pointed at least twelve degrees apart. I couldn't help but laugh. I would have to use the North Star to find out if either of these beauties was telling the truth.

We needed them to navigate between Havana and the Florida Keys as there would be currents that would affect us, sometimes moving as fast as six knots. That may not sound like much, but given that our average speed on the Sea-Doos would hopefully be thirty knots, six knots from any direction would be huge when calculated as a percentage. Add in the wind speed and direction to the formula and that would be our heading. We needed to take the most direct route to Key West with the limited fuel we'd be carrying. There would be no room for error.

As if he were reading my mind, Roberto asked, "Are you sure you can handle the navigation, Alan? I know it's only a hundred miles, but many people have lost their way and were never seen again trying to cross that short distance."

"Were they using compasses like these?" I inquired, holding them out so he could see they were pointing in different directions. "No wonder they got lost. Don't worry about it, Roberto. I'll calibrate them with the stars. After that, navigating shouldn't be a problem." That was the only answer I felt inclined to offer. He didn't need to know the details.

I might have been a man of many shortcomings but one thing I knew

how to do well was navigate. I had perfected the skill years ago when I moved from British Columbia to southern Alberta, flying as a check pilot for Stampede Aviation at the Calgary International Airport.

In my mind's eye, I could picture Cuba and the area that made up the beautiful Florida Keys. Once I calibrated the compasses, the navigation part of the trip would be easy. I'd been a lucky person all my life; that's the only thing that could account for the fact that I was still alive.

"How long will it take us to get to Florida?" Andrea asked.

I had been so busy thinking in solitude that her question startled me.

"That depends on what kind of Sea-Doos they are and how smooth the ocean is," I said. "It also depends on where and how fast the wind is blowing, and from what direction and speed the current is flowing." I smiled and turned to Roberto. "I'm guessing we'll need a minimum of one 150 liters of fuel. Will your man be able to get us that much?"

"That's a lot of gasoline, Alan. But, as I said earlier, I'll have it here by early evening. I don't know what model the Sea-Doos are, but I do know they're almost brand new and very fast. I think you're going to like them." He smiled broadly. "They were made in Canada." His gaze swept to Mario and Andrea. "I'm going to be gone most of the day. Please, everybody stay indoors as much as possible. You need to stay out of sight from boats passing along the coast." He put on his most serious expression and aimed it directly at Andrea. "Castro has everyone looking for us. For months now his top security personnel have been installing Chinese-made, high-resolution cameras at strategic intersections throughout the city. Some have a zoom range capable of two hundred meters. There are none out here that we know of, but that doesn't mean there aren't some we don't know about. I've been informed that the Interior Ministry has two people monitoring each camera 24/7. They want us bad."

He glanced at his car. I could see that he was anxious to leave. "Just one more question before you go," I said, speaking quickly. "What happened to the people that drove the Sea-Doos from Florida to here?"

"They didn't know about the radar installations on top of the tallest buildings along Havana's Malecón. The Sea-Doos were picked up well before they entered Cuban waters. Police met them and the two Cuban women they were coming to pick up only minutes after they beached. Do you want to hear the real funny part?" Without waiting for my answer, he continued. "The Canadians were detained and questioned, then sent back to Canada. The two Cuban women were sent to prison. Remember, the Castros are clever and ruthless."

I nodded, picturing the capture. A moment later, we were watching

Roberto drive away from Casa Azul in his rickety old Lada. We all agreed that he was right. The Castro brothers would use every means at their disposal to find us. What worried me most was, what would happen if they succeeded? Better not to think about such things right now. It was better to stay focused on the Sea-Doos and the inner map that I was plotting.

We found Tia Maria busy in the kitchen making a stew with whatever was available. While we waited for her to finish, Andrea and I sat in the living room and she questioned me about what our future life would be like. It was a good way to pass the time and keep us from focusing on all the bad things that might happen if we were captured. We were like kids sharing a dream. I added so many details to our domestic fantasy that it almost felt as though it already existed. We carried on like this for a long time.

Too soon she was beckoned to the kitchen to help prepare lunch. My curiosity, mixed with boredom, got the better of me. Ignoring what Roberto had said to us about staying inside, I went out to where the shadow of our building ended and sunlight began. I stayed in the shade, confident that I appeared only as a dark figure in the shadow. I reached into the sunlight and stuck two pieces of wood about ten inches long into the ground. I used their shadows to track the sun. Almost instantly, I determined which of the two Russian compasses was working correctly. I disassembled the compass that was twelve degrees off and found that the post the needle was mounted on was bent. I straightened it as best I could, ironically with a rusting pair of pliers that I found earlier in the kitchen. When I rechecked it against the other compass, there was only a one degree of difference—accurate enough for me.

My mind kept turning back to the Sea-Doos. The Southern Lakes of British Columbia are filled with PWCs (personal water craft) of every make and model. My younger brother had a Sea-Doo as his PWC, and I had driven it many times. Because there were so many different Sea-Doo models, I'd have to wait for their arrival before I could figure an estimated trip time to the Florida Keys. The crosswind would determine my desired heading, but I needed to see what cruising speed they were capable of before estimating out trip time.

During lunch Mario entertained Maria and Andrea with stories of Miami. When he talked about the supermarkets, with foods from almost every part of the world in stores that were larger than the biggest buildings in Havana, they shook their heads in astonishment. They questioned us and we answered, painting a picture of a life that had

always been unattainable to them. It soon became obvious that Tia Maria didn't know that the plan was for her to stay behind. I wondered when Roberto was going to tell her.

The storytelling continued into the early evening, coming to a close when an older, black Toyota 4Runner was allowed onto the property. We watched from inside the house as a young policeman, wearing a well-pressed blue-gray uniform with a beret sitting sharply on his head, exited the vehicle. He walked to the rear of the truck, opened the back and unloaded six bright orange twenty-liter plastic fuel cans. As quickly as he had arrived, he was gone. I hustled out onto the porch and examined the fuel cans. If all six were full and the Sea-Doos arrived with full tanks, this would be more than enough fuel for our trip to the Keys. But if they didn't arrive full, it could be a real problem.

It was early evening when Roberto returned. By the hurried manner in which he parked his car and made his way into the kitchen, we knew something was up.

"I want everybody to stay back from the windows," he commanded. "A truck will be arriving in a few minutes with the Sea-Doos. The police who are bringing them won't be comfortable if they see anyone watching them. Everybody stay out of sight until they're gone." He looked at each of us individually. We nodded, confirming we understood his request.

Mario turned the lights off inside the room and pulled the shutters closed. Because it wasn't quite dark yet, we were still able to see one another in the dim light. Roberto went outside to make sure we couldn't be seen from outside. He reappeared and gave us the thumbs up sign.

We didn't have to wait long before we saw an olive green five-ton truck pull into the courtyard. It came to a stop and several men in blue uniforms flowed from the back. They organized themselves without speaking, as if their actions had been rehearsed. Long aluminum poles were pulled from the back of the truck. Like magic, a large, lightweight frame was snapped together and covered with a thin material that hooked onto it. Two of the officers lifted the lightweight canopy and carried it to the end of the manmade slip, quickly transitioning it into a well-camouflaged hiding spot. After anchoring the canopy they deftly returned to the back of the truck where they formed two lines with four people on either side. A colorful Sea-Doo slipped smoothly out the back of the truck into their waiting arms—like a baby being born. They strained with the weight of the machine but managed to coax it into the water underneath the camouflage canopy. They repeated their action and brought forth its twin, all without speaking a single word. Never in my life

had I seen an operation so smooth. It was seamless.

Wow, I said quietly to myself, These guys are good.

Watching from the other side of the same window, Mario nodded in agreement, never taking his eyes off them. But when I looked to see if Roberto was also impressed, he put his finger to his lips, reminding me to remain quiet. We watched as they emptied the fuel cans into the Sea-Doos' tanks. A knot formed in my stomach when I saw the last of the fuel being emptied. The Sea-Doos had not been delivered full, and that was the last of the fuel. I touched Roberto on his shoulder and mouthed the words "more fuel." He sighed, then nodded, hesitated, then nodded again.

It was almost dark when the red taillights of the truck disappeared from the driveway. Roberto was noticeably nervous as he barked out instructions. "Alan, you're with me. Everybody else, please stay indoors."

I followed him down to the water and slipped underneath the canopy into the darkness to examine the Sea-Doos. One was tied to a piece of coral that served as a natural tie down. The second Sea-Doo was tied to the first. Roberto produced a flashlight with a red lens cap and handed it to me.

"Do you know these machines?"

"Give me a few more minutes and I will." I opened the front compartment of one of them and was relieved to see two orange, yellow and red lifejackets, one of which had the DESS (digital encoding security system) cap and lanyard still attached to it. The DESS cap functions like a key in a car, only slightly differently. When the DESS cap is snapped into place on the DESS post, the coded computer chip inside the cap talks to the onboard computer, which turns the ignition on. If the driver is thrown from the machine, the lanyard, which is secured to the life vest, pulls the DESS cap from its post and the engine quits. That's why it is commonly called a kill switch; it kills the motor. If this happens, the Sea-Doo will come to a stop, hopefully close enough to swim to.

I was elated to see the dash lights illuminate when I snapped the DESS cap onto the post. The batteries still held a charge. With a bit more searching I found the operating manual, a small tool kit and a large unused roll of duct tape. A quick read through the manual told me these were the GTX models with 155 horsepower three-cylinder four-stroke engines. Their fuel capacity was almost sixteen gallons, about sixty liters. This answered the question of where the fuel went. When these machines arrived in Cuba, they had to be bone dry, running on fumes. The Canadians who rode them over here didn't have time to refuel before

they were captured.

I did a little more reading and discovered that these wonderful little machines were capable of going sixty miles per hour. That was good, but at what rate of fuel consumption? The manual was vague on this point, but it did say the optimum speed for fuel economy was thirty-two mph. No wonder the Canadians were able to make it here from Key West in three hours. Their plan probably would have worked if not for the radar.

Holding my breath I pushed the start button and was thrilled to hear the motor turning over. Within seconds the engine came to life, sounding as if it was brand new. With Roberto watching intently, I pulled the DESS cap off its post, shutting the machine off. I moved over to the second one and received the same results.

Surprised by how well these machines were running, I asked Roberto, "How long ago did the Canadians attempt this rescue?"

"Almost two weeks ago."

Only two weeks ago. What a bonus! Both machines were virtually brand new and ready to go. I believed our chance of making it to Key West in these mini speed boats was very good, if not excellent.

"I know it's not easy finding fuel, but we need another twenty liters for each machine. That'll give us room for error. Can you do that?"

"I'll get you the gasoline myself," he said. "You and Mario can paint these machines while I find the gas."

"That works for me."

He turned at once and headed for the Lada. A moment later he was pulling out onto the road. I stayed a few minutes longer to make sure the wetsuits were in the front compartment and to secure the boats with quick release knots. It was dark when I popped out from under the lightweight canopy. Mario was waiting for me at the door to the house.

"Roberto has gone for more fuel. Grab the paint and let's get to work. This is going to be easy. The bottoms of the Sea-Doos are already black. It will only take us a few minutes to paint the upper part."

With the women watching patiently, Mario grabbed the two cans of black paint and the large brush that was lying on top of them. Quietly, as if not to awaken someone, we walked to the canopy and slipped underneath. It was pitch black. I turned on the flashlight so we could see what we were doing. I watched in disbelief as Mario opened the cans, only to find a solid chunk of latex in both. The lids hadn't been airtight and the paint had hardened. Painting the machines was no longer an option. We looked at each other questioningly. Then it hit me. I saw in my mind's eye the dark sheets on the two beds in the women's bedroom.

"I've got an idea," I said, emerging from under the canopy, and I couldn't help but smile. "We need your purple bed sheets," I said to Andrea and her mother. Then I turned to Mario, who was just behind me. "We can use the duct tape to wrap them around the upper part of the Sea-Doos. This will be even better than painting them. When we get close to the Keys, we can tear the sheets off and look like normal Americans, out boating in the morning sun." I smiled again, proud of my quick thinking.

Without a word Andrea and her mother went into the bedroom and pulled the purple sheets from the bed. Mario and I carried them out to the Sea-Doos, and in less than an hour, we had erected what looked like small dark tents over them. I wondered at what speed the wind would rip the sheets from our little boats. I knew I'd find out soon enough.

With the Sea-Doos well wrapped, Mario and I returned to the house to find Andrea and Tia Maria holding hands and looking very serious.

"Mama says she's coming with us tonight," Andrea said, "and I agree with her. Those are big boats and my mother doesn't weigh very much." I could see that she was adamant. There would be no convincing her otherwise.

Not wanting to take the blame, I said, "I'm not the one who determines who goes and who stays. I just want everyone who's going to realize there is a high degree of danger to this."

Maria snapped back at me, "We're in more danger of being caught with every second we stay here. I don't have time to tell you my life story, but I will tell you this. Fidel Castro wants me more than he wants you. When we're thirty kilometers from here, our degree of danger, as you put it, will drop like a rock. I'm going on one of those boats even if I have to drive it."

"You can ride with me, Tia," Mario said, smiling. "Dress warm, okay?"

The pressure of the moment was gone, but the seriousness was not. "After about an hour out of here," I said to Mario, "you should see a glow on the horizon, close to a compass heading of zero-two-zero. The brightest spot will be Key West. I don't think you'll be able to miss it."

Mario laughed. "All that time and effort determining the right heading and now you say just look for the lights?"

I answered seriously. "Not quite. First you need to steer zero-two-zero for at least an hour, then look for the lights. If you don't see them, stay on that heading until you hit land or run out of gas."

Tia Maria was right. Our success hinged on escaping Cuban waters without being detected. It would be at the beginning of our trip where

the stakes would be highest.

Except for the sound of an occasional passing car, everything was silent. No one spoke for what seemed like a long time.

“One other little thing,” I said, trying to be funny and serious at the same time. “If we get separated, you continue as planned. It’s probably going to be too dark for me to find you out there. If we get separated, Andrea and I will change course and slow down to avoid a collision. Mario, do you know Key West?”

“Of course, the Company has an expense account at the Hyatt. It’s on the west side of town. They have their own marina. Take a hard right after the cruise ships. We’ll meet there.” He spoke casually, as if we were planning a night out on the town, a nice dinner and a few drinks to follow a midnight joyride. His eyes twinkled. He looked so pleased with himself that we all began to laugh, nervously.

16. SIX MINUTES OUT

A ruckus at the front gate brought us to full attention. In the quiet that followed we could hear the sound of booted feet, a pair of them, moving along the slate walkway. Mario went swiftly and quietly for the guns. I went to the front entrance hoping to secure it before the intruder got there. Just as I reached for the lock, the door burst open. There stood Juan. The last time I saw him, it was through the sights of an AK-47. Now the roles were reversed. He was the one with the gun, and he was pointing it at me. Mario came up behind me and in a matter-of-fact tone said, "If you shoot him, I'll shoot you."

"Roberto sent me," Juan stated humorously. He looked at me and cracked a smile. "Do you like having a loaded weapon pointed at you?"

"Not really."

Juan's smile broadened. "Neither do I."

"Good. I'm glad we agree," I said solemnly.

Andrea appeared out of nowhere and jumped between Mario and Juan. "We're all on the same side here, right?" she said firmly. She turned her head from one to the other and lifted her hands to shoulder height, palms pointed in the direction of both guns. "Lower your guns," she demanded, putting her hands down as if to show them how. Staring at each other, Juan lowered his 9 mm Beretta while Mario lowered his AK-47. With the weapons finally down, we learned the reason why he was here.

"I have instructions from Roberto," Juan began in a cautious tone. "Something has gone very wrong. He told me to tell you that you need to leave immediately."

Mario walked up to Juan and spoke an inch from his face. "Do they have him? Is he in jail? Where is he, Juan?"

"Ministry troops were dispatched to carry out an arrest order that came straight from Fidel. There was a shooting and a chase. Roberto managed to escape. He radioed me and told me to give you this message. You need to leave now. Too many people know about this place. Someone is talking."

Mario stayed positioned with his face in Juan's. "What's going to happen to my brother?"

“We have a plan just for this scenario if he makes it to our safe house.”

It was clear to me that Juan didn't like to give out information. He was noticeably uncomfortable with what he was saying. Looking aside, he took a step away from Mario. “You don't need to know anything else. Roberto stressed that you must leave now. Go while you still can.”

Juan turned. The second he was off the stoop, he was gone, rushing, by the sound of his boots, to get away from us and the house. Something has gone terribly wrong. No shit, Juan!

There was no point in debating the situation. “Let's go,” I ordered.

“The wetsuits?” Mario queried.

“No time for that!”

“What about the extra fuel?”

“If the Canadians were able to make it from the Keys to here on one tank, then we should be able to go from here to the Keys on one tank. If we don't make it, we'll be damn close. At maximum speed, we'll be out of Cuban waters in less than fifteen minutes. Once you know you're out, slow to thirty-two miles per hour. That's the optimum speed for range. With a little luck, we'll make it. Let's go.”

Andrea and Tia Maria collected their handbags and some cotton blankets and headed immediately out the back of the house toward the boats. Mario and I were right behind them. Cautiously, we made our way under the camouflage cover and onto the Sea-Doos. I had just finished tightening my multi-colored lifejacket when I heard the distant but familiar sound of a Russian helicopter. Quickly it got louder, much louder. The searchlight from the helicopter touched down in front of us for a split second. It lit us up like daylight under the thin nylon canopy. Then it was gone.

“Mario, are you ready?” I said as I snapped the DESS cap onto the post.

He answered me with a solitary nod and started the three-cylinder motor without me having to show him how. With him and Tia Maria wrapped in the dark blankets, and the Sea-Doo wrapped in bed sheets, they idled their way almost invisibly into the black water. I did the same, using a little more throttle to try and catch up.

“Hold on,” I said to Andrea. When I felt the tightening of her grip around my waist, I pushed the power lever to the max and left it there.

The Sea-Doo sprang like a tiger. In seconds, we were leveling off at sixty mph on the calm water. About thirty feet ahead of us, I could see Mario was doing the same. I was surprised at how bright the foam was from the splash as it blasted off his hull. It looked fluorescent white against the dark ocean. Wanting to get a better look, I powered back a

little. It was bad. Illuminated by the moon, the high pressure water that propelled the little boat forward was creating a froth that made a glowing line as far as I could see. Slowing even more, I looked behind us, only to find that our boat was leaving behind the same evidence. The phosphorescence produced by the stimulation of plankton in the water by the boat looked like white railway tracks against a dark background. I slowed to about forty mph and pulled in line behind Mario. At least now we'd only leave one track.

With the blankets wrapped around them, I couldn't see Mario and Maria at all, but I could plainly see their trail. I had no problem following them, even though they were at least two hundred meters ahead of me. I could only imagine how easy it would be for a helicopter to spot us. Now it was a race against time. I looked down at my Timex. It glowed 12:03 a.m. At our current speed, all we needed was another twenty minutes. The distance behind Mario lengthened and the glow from his wake began to diminish.

"See you in the Keys," I mumbled and I hoped to God I would.

Our Sea-Doo cruised flawlessly. I pushed a little harder on the thumb-activated power lever and we accelerated effortlessly to fifty miles per hour. We were a good two minutes out. By now we were the prime targets on the monitors for the shoreline radar. In the short time I had spent in Cuba, one thing had become painfully clear; the Castro brothers might not know much about how to run the economy efficiently, but when it came to the military, it was a different matter. Their military was well trained. We were gambling against some pretty big odds.

Time passed slowly, but it was passing, and I began to believe we might actually make it to international waters without a mishap. But six minutes out I heard a roar and saw the glow of a single afterburner. A MiG 21 had passed only a short distance in front of us. I assumed it was directed to our location by ground radar. At this speed, we were still at least eight minutes away from international waters. I wondered what type of equipment the jet would have on board besides radar. We gave off a heat signature, but nothing in comparison to the long visible white line we left behind us. Keeping an eye on the well-lit MiG, I slowed the Sea-Doo down to idle. A quick scan of Havana's illuminated shoreline revealed an approaching helicopter with a bright searchlight off its starboard side. I felt like a mouse with two cats about to pounce on me. I looked around, but there was no sign of Mario. I could only hope that he and Maria were far enough ahead so that by the time the Cubans finished with us, they'd be safe in international waters. Judging by the

ferocity of the attack, I was betting the Cubans would assume we were the only game in town.

“Andrea, I want you to hang on real tight,” I yelled. “Our only chance is to outmaneuver them.”

I applied full power to the little boat and we took off perpendicular to the oncoming helicopter. We sped away for almost twenty seconds, then made a ninety-degree right turn and watched the helicopter fly right by us. I laughed sharply.

“They can’t see us. They have to be told where we are by the land-based radar.” Andrea acknowledged my words with a quick tightening and release of her grip.

The Russian helicopter was flying at approximately two hundred feet above the water at some forty mph, its searchlight swinging randomly from side to side. I applied full power again, and almost instantly our little Sea-Doo was skimming the surface at sixty mph. When we were under the helicopter, I slowed in an attempt to hide in its shadow. Having two targets, one tiny and the other huge, in the same place would raise hell with their ground-based radar.

For almost two minutes we followed the helicopter north before it made a hard right climbing turn. I powered back to idle and watched the air show. Andrea placed the dark sheet over my head, making it difficult for me to see. I adjusted the sheet above my eyes just in time to see the helicopter leveling off above and beside us.

The strobe effect from the tracers as they left the muzzles of two Gatling guns, blasting away in our direction, earned an instance reaction. Within a millisecond of seeing the flashes, I applied full power to the Sea-Doo and started an accelerating turn in the direction of the helicopter. I glanced down at the speedometer. Again we were doing sixty. That’s when I felt the shock wave from an explosion behind us—a missile must have been fired by the MiG. It hit the water and blew up, missing us by what seemed like only a few feet.

We were lucky. Our jet boat was being shoved from directly behind. Water from the explosion hit us hard, shooting us forward, pushing the little boat faster than it had ever gone before. I recovered from the push and continued on at full power for at least a minute before stopping to watch the helicopter start a climbing turn away from us. I looked around in all directions and immediately saw tracers coming at us from a second helicopter on my left side. I didn’t wait to see how close their bullets would be. I applied full throttle and started another high speed turn in the opposite direction, counted to thirty, then turned hard right and

powered back to idle. Looking behind me, I was happy to see that our glowing wake had come to a sudden stop. The chopper that had been following it passed less than a hundred feet over our heads.

“They can’t see us very well,” I said again.

“How do you know?” Andrea shouted over the noise from the helicopters and two very noisy low-flying jets with their afterburners on.

“Well, because they haven’t hit us yet. If they could see us, we’d already be dead.”

“Do you have any other good news?” Andrea yelled.

“Yes, in fact. It looks like we’re the only party in town. I’m pretty sure Mario and your mother didn’t get chased. They should be well into international waters by now.” I turned my head to get my mouth as close to her ear as possible. “I’m going to start zigzagging toward the north. What I need you to do is look beside and behind us. If you see something on our right, pinch me on my right side. If you see them coming on our left, pinch my left side. With a little luck, we’ll make it out of here.”

“I hope you’re a lucky man,” Andrea shouted

“I’ve got you on the back of my Sea-Doo, don’t I?” I shouted back.

On an adrenaline high, I applied full power once again and felt the rush of the little speedster accelerating. I remembered shooting skeet with my brother John years back. The clay pigeons would be changing direction and speed as they flew farther from the house. I felt like one of those clay pigeons. Any chance of success meant that we had to keep as far away from the Cubans as possible. Assuming they would fire on us again at any moment, I aimed the Sea-Doo to the northeast. Twenty seconds later, I abruptly turned to the northwest and started a long arcing turn. Meanwhile the brutal facts of our situation were sticking in my gut like a sharp knife. We were under attack by two jets and two helicopters, all faster than us, with deadly weapons.

It was a full two minutes before I felt Andrea pinch my right thigh. I looked behind in time to see the unmistakable blast of a missile exploding—but nowhere near as close as the first time. I increased my turn rate and pushed as hard as I could on the throttle. We turned west for twenty seconds, then east, all the time keeping the lights of Havana behind us. A helicopter fired on us with its Gatling gun, spraying bullets in our general direction. One of the shells passed so close I could feel it whip by my head.

Slowing the little boat to a stop, I turned to Andrea. “Are you okay?”

“They’re getting closer, Alan. I felt one go by!”

“I know. I did too. Listen, we have about ninety seconds from the time

they fire on us until they can reacquire us. I'm going to go straight north for a minute and a half, then I'll start evasive maneuvers. Hold on very tight."

I used the illuminated dash-mounted compass to find north, applied full power and started counting. After ninety seconds, I threw the little boat into a sharp right turn and counted off a half minute before slowing to an idle. My timing was almost perfect. I watched with a grin as a MiG went by, firing its cannon where they believed we should be—about forty meters away from where we were actually located.

With Andrea holding on tight, we blasted off again, heading north. This time we only managed a little over a minute before the searchlight from one of the helicopters captured us. I pushed even harder on the power lever and started a tight left turn, watching the light as it continued going straight. I swung the little machine back to the right and again came in behind one of the helicopters. They had seen this maneuver before and immediately pitched their machine up into a hard right climbing turn. I continued north at just over sixty mph. At night, on water, it felt like we were doing two hundred.

Just when I thought we had a chance I was proven wrong. Flashes of light came from my right, lighting up the night sky like fireworks. The light was caused by missiles sliding down their guide rails. This MiG was firing everything it had at us. I turned the Sea-Doo as hard as I could, but it was too late. The exploding missiles were just too close this time. We were lifted out of the water and thrown through the air. My ride through space ended when I hit the water face first. I started tumbling like an out-of-control downhill skier. It seemed like a long time before I was able to take a breath. With a ringing noise blaring in both ears, I tried to open my eyes. At first all I could see was blurry white. It took some time before I was able to recognize the night sky above me. Then, like a switch being turned on, the pain started. It became difficult to focus on the stars. They seemed to be moving. My head was pounding so bad that I started to feel nauseous.

Even through the pain my arms were flailing, feeling for Andrea. "Andrea!" I yelled. "Andrea, Andrea!"

"I'm here, Alan. It's okay. I'm here."

Her voice was close; she was right behind me, holding on to me in fact. Maybe she had never let go. Thanks to the lifejackets we were both afloat. Maybe we had survived the mad tumbling together. "Breathe, Alan. That's it, deep breaths."

Her words brought back the memory of our first encounter only a few

days ago—sitting in her cousin’s room, her presence alone making it hard for me to draw a breath. I did what she told me, and after a few more deep breaths I was back in the present.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay,” she said. “The explosion that did the most damage was in front of us. It hit you hard. You were unconscious when I got to you. Can you feel your hands and feet?”

I probed for a minute. To my delight I was able to connect with all my extremities. “Yes, I can feel them. It’s my head. It hurts like hell.”

I had to concentrate to make my body move. I pushed my hand up and under Andrea’s hand. She gripped my fingers. “I was unconscious?”

“You’ve been in and out for a while. When we were blasted off the Sea-Doo, your body protected me. It took me a while to find you. You were face down in the water.”

“I’m okay now. What about the Sea-Doo? Did you see where it went?”

“It wasn’t very far from here. One of the helicopters spotted it. They fired on it with their guns until there was nothing left. Since then, they’ve been combing the area with searchlights looking for us. The good news is the jets are gone.”

In all, that wasn’t really good news. I don’t know why, but I raised my left arm to look at my watch. To my surprise it was almost 2:00 a.m.

Andrea glanced over her shoulder. “Does it sound to you like that helicopter is getting closer?” she asked. Before I could answer, she placed the purple blanket over my head and pulled me tight to her.

I strained, but all I could hear was a ringing noise. Even Andrea’s voice sounded like it was far away. The brightness of the spotlight arrived without much notice. It was so close that even with my head covered it hurt my eyes. Fortunately the light missed us—by only a few feet—and they went on with their wild search.

“Alan, we need to think about our situation.”

“What part do you want to think about? We’re swimming somewhere off the coast of Cuba with helicopters manned with professional soldiers who have orders to kill us. Am I being sarcastic?”

She said nothing. I had no right to be bitter toward her. I quickly remembered that this was my fault. If I had said the word no, back when Fred had first come to me, none of this would be happening. “Andrea, I’m sorry.”

She still didn’t speak. When I looked at her, I saw that she was busy looking around at the night sky. The two helicopters were moving away, heading back toward the lights of Havana. The search for us, it seemed,

was over.

She turned me so we were face to face. "What direction is north?"

I pulled the Russian compass from my pants pocket, and using the glow from my Timex, I was disappointed to see it was filled with water and now worthless. Looking up into the night sky, I located the Big Dipper. Using the two stars that make up the pouring side of the pot, I made an imaginary line. About one dipper length along this line was the North Star.

"See that star?" I pointed at it. "That's the direction we need to go."

"Let's start swimming before the sharks get here."

That made good sense. "Get in front of me. I'll yell if you get too far ahead."

We shed the purple blanket and started swimming. The water felt warm and my headache was now a dull throbbing pain. My ears were still ringing, but my eyesight was improving. I could easily make out Andrea swimming in front of me.

We swam at an easy pace so as not to overexert ourselves. When we finally stopped, it was almost 4:00 a.m. "Where do you think we are, Alan?"

"Maybe a little past halfway," I lied.

"Do you think Mario and my mother made it?"

"I'm sure of it. There's no reason why they shouldn't have. We got all the attention."

"Can you keep swimming?"

It was the darkest part of the night by now. "It's getting harder to see you," I said. "I don't want us to get separated." How very much I didn't want us to be separated hit me in that second, and I pulled her close and kissed her. She kissed me back. I wrapped my arms around her back inside her life jacket. We drifted together with my head on her shoulder and her head on mine. Occasionally a small wave would come along and wash over us. It was a lovely warm night and the water was a nice temperature. If not for the fact that we were drifting in shark-infested Cuban waters with the prospect of more helicopters at sunup, I would have counted myself the luckiest man alive.

We were like a cork bobbing in the water. We said nothing, just held each other and waited. Eventually a glow appeared on the horizon and I couldn't help but smile. I was alive to see another sunrise. We bobbed for another twenty minutes, until the orb of the sun lifted just above the horizon. Then Andrea turned to me with a frightened look. "Do you hear that?"

Over the ringing that was still going on in my ears, I could hear the

thumping noise from the rotors of a large helicopter. They were back. I looked north in the direction of the sound, and then smiled. "I've got good news. The helicopter is orange with a white stripe."

I waited until they got a little bit closer, until I could be one hundred percent sure. "It's the U.S. Coast Guard, and it's headed this way. Splash as much as you can."

We released each other and waved and splashed, doing our best to make ourselves seen. The helicopter was off to our right and it appeared that it might go past us. We splashed and waved frantically. I even began yelling. They still didn't seem to see us. They passed us, but I kept up the commotion and was rewarded with the sight of the helicopter making a sharp right turn. It then began a descent in our direction. When I was absolutely certain they had seen us, I stopped splashing and allowed myself to wallow in the pleasure of the moment. We were about to be rescued.

The bright orange helicopter hovered at about fifteen feet above us, the wind from its rotors blowing sharp needle-like drops of salt spray into our faces. The door opened and a neoprene-clad diver immediately jumped out. We both ducked. It looked as if he would land on top of us. He landed barely five feet away and swam strongly to us.

He removed his snorkel from his mouth and yelled over the noise of the helicopter, "Are either of you injured?"

Andrea and I shook our heads. The diver studied us for a moment as if to determine whether we were telling the truth. Then he signaled the helicopter. Immediately a cable with two bright orange loops attached to it was lowered over us. Our rescuer retrieved the loops and helped Andrea and me to get them around ourselves. He gave his crewman above a thumbs up and the cable began to retract. Andrea and I collided as we were yanked from the water. The second time we collided, she was ready for me. She grabbed me by my life vest and planted a quick kiss on my cheek. The crewman who assisted us onto the flight deck smiled as he pulled us inside. He expertly removed the harnesses.

He yelled to make himself heard above the noise. "Are there any others?"

I thought for a minute about Mario and Tia Maria before answering. "No, just us."

Then he set about lowering the harness to pick up the diver. As he was pulled in, I held Andrea close to me. "We made it," I whispered.

Once the diver was on board, I could feel the power increase as the nose of the aircraft dropped. We were accelerating. The coastguardsman

who helped to pull us onboard pointed to seats in the back. Then he mouthed the word “seatbelts.” We happily complied. Adjusting his tether so he could reach us, he asked, “Are you both American citizens? Reading his lips more than hearing him, I nodded and yelled at the top of my voice, “Yes, we live in South Kendal in Miami.”

“I know where that is. I just wanted to make sure you’re American citizens. We’re going to take you to the hospital in Key West.”

I nodded and gave the thumbs up. I had lied about us being American citizens, because to tell the truth would be far too complicated, especially in a noisy helicopter where half my words would be lost. I was counting on Fred to help us out once we landed.

It was about a twenty-minute ride to the hospital landing pad. The crewman held his hand up to indicate that we should stay in our seats until the rotors had spooled down. Then he helped us from the aircraft and led us to an elevator. When the elevator door opened, there were two emergency personnel, both young women, standing inside. Since neither got out of the elevator, I guessed they had been sent to accompany us.

Once inside the elevator, I asked the Coast Guard officer, “Did someone named Mario or Fred send you?”

“No, we were sent by Homeland Security. They informed us that something big exploded near your location last night.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “That would be our boat. It blew up. Thank you. Thank you very much for saving us.”

When we reached the first floor, one of our medical escorts guided me to an emergency examination room while the other took Andrea to a similar room across the hall. Inside the small examination room, a pleasant young woman handed me a hospital gown and politely asked if I would put it on. When she turned to leave, I stripped out of my wet clothing and complied. Minutes later a young male doctor entered and instructed me to lie down on the bed. He dutifully took my blood pressure and then looked in my eyes with a bright light. When he pulled away from me, I saw that his expression was troubled.

“What happened?” he asked.

I offered him the short version of the story: the boat I was on blew up. He took my blood pressure a second time, his features still contorted with concern.

“You have a concussion,” he said and sighed. “Your blood pressure is way too high. I’m going to give you a shot to bring it down before you have a heart attack.”

The fact that he wasn't asking my permission, just telling me what he planned to do, scared me. He filled a syringe from a small clear vial and injected the liquid into my arm. In seconds my headache was gone, replaced by a warm feeling. I closed my eyes and quickly fell asleep. In my dreams I was back in the ocean, gently bobbing. It was dark, very dark.

17. I'M BACK

I heard voices and tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids wouldn't cooperate. The voices sounded distant, but after a while I realized they

were near to me and familiar. Then it came to me; they belonged to Mario and Andrea. Mario was explaining that this afternoon she and her mother would be going to the Chrome Avenue Detention Center. I was only getting bits and pieces, but as I came closer to full consciousness I put it all together. Fred had arranged for their citizenship. Unless I was dreaming, Mario was saying that it would only take a few hours to do the paperwork. After that, they would be American citizens.

I was very happy to hear this. Although my eyelids were still too heavy to open, I felt my lips stretch and I hoped I was smiling.

"Damn, that's fast," I mumbled, though I doubt my words were coherent.

I could smell Andrea's clean fresh fragrance and feel her warm breath on my face. Knowing she was so near gave me the impetus to give my eyelids another try. Sure enough, they opened this time, though slowly. So slowly that I had to wonder how long I had been asleep. Her image was blurry at first, but as my eyes adjusted, I was overcome anew by the sheer magnitude of her beauty. I could feel my energy returning.

Gently she took hold of my wrist and felt my pulse. Her touch felt as light as an angel's. "Take deep breaths, Alan. Breathe," she whispered.

I had to smile. She was always telling me to breathe. As if she had read my thoughts, she smiled and whispered again, "Breathe."

I was now fully awake, or at least I thought so. I nodded to Mario, who was standing at the foot of my bed. "I'm okay. I'm awake," I said. The curtain that surrounded my bed parted at once, revealing Fred, who wore a big grin on his face.

"Welcome back, my Canadian friend." He moved beside me, grabbed my free hand and shook it.

"I'm not sure I want to be your friend. Who abandoned us in Havana, Fred?" I uttered. "Some friend you are. You could have sent one of your top secret mini-sub's to pick us up."

Mario turned to Fred at once and asked, "Do we have subs like that?"

Fred looked at him in disbelief and answered sarcastically. "Sure, Mario. But we're fresh out this week. Give your head a shake. If I requisition a sub, someone would want to know what the hell I wanted it for. We work with what we have—airplanes. We have a small proven team with no leaks." He quickly shifted to a more enthusiastic expression. "Welcome to the team, Alan."

"Oh, good. I made the team. Let me guess what position I play. The expendable pilot?" I asked guardedly. "Does that mean an increase or a decrease in pay?"

“Don’t worry. You’ll be well taken care of. We’re going to give you full medical coverage, starting today.” He laughed. “I know you Canadians are big on the medical thing.”

How could I resist? With all the tests they had run on me, the bill would be off the scale. I sat up, only to be rewarded by a sharp pain shooting through my head. I cringed. Andrea saw the look on my face.

“Headache? I’ll bet that hurts a lot.” She laughed lightly as if it was funny that my head was still pounding.

“Why are you smiling? Are you happy that my head hurts?” I asked. I realized I was coming off grumpy, but I couldn’t help myself.

She looked astonished for a second, then her face relaxed. “Alan, I’m just happy that’s the only thing that hurts! Considering the blast you took, I’m amazed you’re still in one piece.” She bent over me and kissed my forehead. “You’re a lucky man.”

“Yes, you are,” Fred interjected. “Looks like the Cubans got tired of chasing you around the island and brought in a fully loaded MiG-29. Actually we were quite surprised when they fired on you with all their missiles at once. Do you have any idea what one of those missiles is worth? You cost Fidel a small fortune. It was a spectacular explosion. Hard to believe you’re still alive, either of you.” He shook his head as he spoke.

“How do you know all this?” I queried.

He lowered his voice. “We have a dirigible very near here. It’s tethered at 13,000 feet with down-looking radar, infrared, and a couple other things I can’t tell you about. It’s so advanced we can see how the traffic is on the Malecón in Havana 24/7. We saw you leave Casa Azul. It looked like you were going to make it. Hell, you would have if it hadn’t been for that MiG. But all’s well that ends well, right? We’re so relieved that you both made it. Actually, more like surprised, to be honest. They must have thought that you were Carlos Lage and company making a run for it.”

“Relieved?” I countered. “Fred, if you were watching all the time, then you knew we were in big trouble. Why didn’t you send help? Especially once we made it into international waters. Wouldn’t it be normal operating procedure to send a jet to have a look? Like you said, it was a big explosion.”

“Your operation had to remain clandestine. We still needed deniability. Besides, you were still inside Cuban waters when they opened up on you. Believe me, there was nothing I could do. I dispatched a Coast Guard chopper as soon as we saw you swimming.” Fred grinned again, but it looked phony to me. “You’re here, you made it. Well done.” He must’ve noticed that I wasn’t smiling because his smile got bigger—and

phonier. "Be happy," he exclaimed. "You made it back!"

I looked at Andrea, and when I saw her smiling, I managed a little laugh. He was right; we had made it. But others hadn't. I thought of Roberto and Juan. Then I remembered Mario. I didn't know a thing about his trip.

"How was your ride over here?"

"Smooth as silk," he replied. "You were right. I could see the lights of Key West after about an hour. I think we set a new record. We made it in less than three hours."

"That's good. Any idea why you had such a smooth trip?"

His black brows descended. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind," I said. It was time to change the subject. "What's going on with your brother?"

He stared at me a moment longer, seemingly still trying to work out the hidden implication behind my earlier question. Then he spoke.

"Roberto made it to the safe house. Juan and his family had to go there too. There are also some blacklisted politicians with them who need to get off the island. It looks like the whole organization built by Carlos Lage and Felipe Perez has been taken down." Mario looked at Fred. "We were so close."

Naïvely, I asked, "What went wrong?"

Fred pulled up a chair and sat down. "This is a failed coup d'état. For decades now the Castro brothers have been ripping off every country and corporation they've ever traded with. They owe billions that they have no intention of repaying. The Castros think everybody owes them because of their ideology and the resulting embargo. They've been the biggest fraud in the Caribbean for half a century." He shook his head in disgust.

"Before he got to know them, Hugo Chavez, the president of Venezuela, was trying to help his socialist brothers by selling them oil on the never pay program. He was doing it because he knew it would piss us off. Fidel and his brother were refining the oil in Cuba and then selling the gasoline to the president of the Dominican Republic, Leonal Fernandez, for hard currency at much less than what it cost from Venezuela. The story gets better. Leonal Fernandez resold the same gasoline to Haiti and made a fortune. When Chavez found out, he threw a fit. He called Castro and asked him to explain. After hours of talking, it was agreed that Cuba would send even more doctors to work in Venezuela as partial payment for the Venezuelan oil. As I'm sure Andrea knows, this has left Cuba with a very real shortage of doctors."

I glanced at Andrea and she nodded.

“President Hugo Chavez, the Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage and his friend Foreign Minister Felipe Perez met at a summit in Caracas sometime later,” Fred continued. “It’s rumored that Chavez instigated a takeover, more than happy to take a chance and back Felipe Perez in his bid for the presidency. Chavez wants to do business with Cuba. The only problem is that the two brothers are impossible to deal with. Fidel’s nickname in the business world is Never Pay Fidel.

“Lage and Perez made their move two days ago, but the Castro brothers were waiting. They were tipped off by the president of the Dominican Republic, who had been recruited earlier by Chavez to back Perez as the next president of Cuba. This was a huge mistake by Chavez. The president of the Dominican Republic was benefiting greatly from the cheap fuel deal. To show his appreciation, he phoned Fidel to personally tell him what he knew. It was like a set of dominoes; one person after the next was going down, confessing, making deals to try and save their asses, giving up everything and everybody they knew. As far as we know, everyone is still alive. Thankfully, that little rat face Raul is afraid to do anything dramatic because the entire world is watching. The only thing that’s keeping them alive is the world media. As you know, the Cuban economy is based on tourism these days. He doesn’t want to rock that boat with bad press.”

“What does all this have to do with us?” I asked.

“Nothing, really.” Fred smiled sheepishly. “You guys just had bad timing.”

I looked around for the pants and T-shirt I had arrived in. “Do you know where my clothes are?” I asked, turning to Andrea.

“I’ve got your wallet. The hospital incinerated your T-shirt and shorts. They didn’t want to take a chance they might have been contaminated. For now you don’t need any clothes. Just lie back down and relax. You’ve been through a lot.” She held my hand as she spoke. I was content to do as she instructed. Fred, however, was not.

“I brought a suitcase full of clothes just for you, Alan,” he said. He got up, stepped to the other side of the curtain and came back into my little alcove with a sizeable black suitcase in hand. It looked heavy. “I’m sure you can find something in here that fits.”

Andrea turned to her cousin. “Mario, not today, okay? He has to stay at least one more day for observation. He was unconscious for a long time. I’ll stay with him. If he’s up to it, we can meet again tomorrow. For now, everybody has to leave.”

It pleased me greatly to know she was protecting me. Fred studied her for a moment. Then he shook my hand and congratulated me one more time. Before leaving he placed a cellphone on the table beside my bed. "This is for you. Call anybody you want. If you need anything, my number and Mario's are programmed in. Call me for anything."

I wondered aloud, "Fred, why are you being so nice to me?"

"Well," he answered, "to be honest, this isn't over yet."

I was in no mood to try and decipher what that meant. And neither was Andrea, apparently. She had spoken with constraint up until now, but enough was enough. She let go of my hand, stood and began to hustle Fred and Mario to the door. When she returned, she took my blood pressure and looked into my eyes with a bright light. Her proximity felt very intimate.

But she was all doctor now, focused on her examination, not at all entertained by the way her patient was acting. I tried to explain to her that it was actually her presence that caused the elevation in my blood pressure, but she wasn't buying it. She helped me up from the bed so that I could walk to the bathroom. The ringing in my ears was diminishing, but even taking a few steps made me nauseous.

I returned to bed and soon realized I was hungry. Andrea left the room and came back about fifteen minutes later with a nurse carrying a bowl of chicken soup and crackers. Before I ate, she gave me a shot for the nausea, which made me feel warm and languid. I ate a little and then slipped back into a deep sleep.

I awoke at almost 4:00 a.m. in the semi-dark room to find Andrea asleep in my arms, curled up like a contented kitten. It was comforting to feel her so near to me. I covered her with my thin blanket. Kissing her parted lips, I whispered, "I love you." Then I drifted back to sleep.

When I awoke later that morning, she was gone. A doctor I hadn't seen before came in and gave me a thorough checkup. He had me get up from the bed and walk around the room. This I did easily and I told him I felt fit to leave. He pressed his lips together, shook his head and confessed that he hoped I would stay for at least one more day, but the decision was mine. I thanked him for the invitation but assured him that I was feeling well enough. As a going away present he gave me a prescription for Gravol to control any nausea, and some serious painkillers. He guaranteed I would need them to control the pain in my head.

As soon as he left the room I called Mario to let him know I was ready to go. I showered and shaved with a cheap hospital razor. Checking out

the suitcase, I was surprised to see what a fine selection of clothes Fred had provided, all about the right size. I dressed quickly in a pair of khakis and a tan T-shirt. It felt good to have clean clothes on again. Once I had packed up Fred's Samsonite, I was ready to leave. I buzzed for a nurse, and the one who had brought me the soup the day before appeared and escorted me down the elevator to the hospital lobby. Andrea, wearing a colorful new sundress, was waiting for me with Mario and Fred.

"Beautiful dress." It was easy to compliment her.

"Thank you, and thank you again," she said smiling.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm thanking you for the compliment and for buying me some very nice things."

Confused, I laughed. "If I could have, I would definitely have bought you that dress. But I've been in a hospital since we got here."

"Mario showed me how to use your Visa card. It's amazing. I give them this plastic card and I get whatever I want."

"Amazing isn't the word. Thanks, Mario."

"She needed clothes; she's your girlfriend now," he said defensively.

"She's your cousin," I shot back.

Andrea glared at me. It was obvious I had insulted her. "I thought you loved me."

"Oh, I do," I said, surprised, reminded of my Uncle Chuck's famous words: Sex is cheap, love is expensive. For years, I wondered what he had meant. Now I knew. "It's not the money, Andrea. We have lots. It's because the card is in my name and I'm supposed to be the only one authorized to use it. You could get in trouble. As soon as we have an address, I'll have the bank issue a credit card in your name."

She thought about that for a minute, then smiled her irresistible smile. "Keep talking," she said. But before I could say another word, she walked up to me and hugged me tight. "Thank you for everything. I love you," she said.

"Where is your mother?" I looked at Mario. "I hope she's out shopping using Mario's credit card." Everyone but Mario thought that was funny.

Still laughing, Andrea said, "Mario is safe. My mother is with her sister Lia. She has a beautiful home in Coral Gables."

Fred barged into our conversation. "How are you feeling, Alan?"

"That depends on what you have in mind. First, I want to fill these prescriptions, in case you give me another headache."

"Good, then. Let's go. We can pick up whatever you need on the way to the airport."

As the doctor predicted, my nausea appeared as soon as the Crown Victoria started to move. Luckily the pharmacy was close, and a few minutes after taking a couple of Graval, I was good to go.

On the ride to the airport, Andrea proudly announced, "American citizen now and the medical board has accepted my Cuban certifications. Soon I will be a practicing surgeon in the United States. Thanks to Fred." From her new handbag she produced the paperwork to prove it. After a quick look, I turned to Fred. "Where's mine? That was part of our deal, remember?"

Fred sputtered for a moment, proving he was unsure how to answer. He had made a deal with me. I wanted to make sure he remembered. Finally he said, "It would be best for everyone if you stayed a Canadian citizen. For now, at least."

"That works nicely with your deniability program, right? Listen, all I care about is not being deported as an illegal alien. I don't need to be an American. I'm happy being a Canadian."

"Alan, I guarantee there will be no deportation." Fred got serious then. I could see something big was coming. I had been anticipating it all morning. "What needs to be done now," he said gravely, "is very dangerous, but a lot of lives are at risk. We need you to go back to Cuba and bring out more people."

Total silence followed his statement. I was the one to break it. "How do you want to do this?"

"We've got some ideas, but I was hoping you'd tell me what yours are first."

"How many people need to get out?"

"At least thirty."

"Are you feeling okay, Fred? When I signed up for this job, you told me there were two baseball players. When we arrived in Cuba there were over thirty people waiting. Now you tell me there are thirty more. How many does that mean in your language?"

"Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor. The truth is, I don't know. I'm not going to lie to you. We're talking multiple trips here. We have a plan. I'll brief you when we get to Miami. You'll like it."

I laughed. "That's what you said about the baseball players."

He continued as if he hadn't heard me. "I want you to work as an independent contractor. That means you work for me, not Uncle Sam. As you know, some people would say that what we're doing is not exactly legal. I like you and I trust you, but I'll still need deniability."

"Where does Mario come in?"

“He’s stays a Cuban citizen for now. Like you, he’s an independent contractor. You guys will work together. Is that okay?”

Before I could answer, the Crown Victoria pulled up to a waiting twin-engine Bell helicopter. Exiting the car, I mumbled, “Let me think about it.” But of course, I already had.

18. ALBATROSS

The scenic trip over the Florida Keys gave me time to think about what I was getting involved in. There were a few good reasons to work for Fred, money being one of them. More important than money was the woman who sat beside me holding my hand. My argument with myself continued for the entire twenty-minute flight.

The Bell helicopter touched down smoothly in front of the now familiar hangar at the Opa-Locka Airport. We waited for the rotors to come to a complete stop before exiting. Almost immediately I found myself in the shadow of the Grumman Albatross that I had become so fond of. I admit it, I’ve always been a sucker for the Albatross. I looked at

Fred.

“Too bad we couldn’t use this Grumman for one trip. In and out. I’ll bet if we strip out the interior, she can easily carry forty, maybe fifty people.”

“Do you want to use this Albatross?”

“Yeah. I want to use it, but it’s not a stealth airplane. This thing was designed before they invented radar. They’ll be able to follow us from the time we take off.”

Fred nodded and smiled that oversized disingenuous smile of his. Then his eyes opened wide. He had an idea; it was written all over his face. I hoped it would be something I would live through. Raising his hand, he announced to everyone, “You all go ahead. We’ll meet you in the conference room. I want to have a little chat with Alan.”

Andrea and I had been walking together, her arm in mine. She withdrew immediately, which surprised me. Clearly she didn’t want any part of this. I smiled to reassure her.

“I’ll only be a minute, promise,” I said. “We’ll be right in. Don’t worry.”

She walked toward Mario, who had stopped to wait for her.

I followed Fred around to the far side of the Albatross where we had an unobstructed view of the active runway. We stood under the wing between the motor and the fuselage, making it our personal conference room. “First, I have to know if you are a hundred percent with us.” He stared at me.

I stared back in disbelief, making him wait for my answer. Then I broke into a grin. “Haven’t I proven myself? Give me a break, will you? You know more about me than I know about myself. You tell me, Fred. Am I on your team, or is it possible that I’m a spy for that piece of shit Castro? What do you really think?”

“Stop,” he interrupted, holding his hands in surrender just as I was getting going. “Sorry. Sometimes I get a little carried away.”

“No shit,” I uttered critically.

Without missing a beat, he went on. “We can use the dirigible I told you about near Key West to monitor most of the Cuba’s communications. We can also use it to jam the Cuban radar. We do this once in a while to monitor the consistency of their responses. Our guys love it, because it really pisses Fidel right off.” He stopped to laugh. “Normally, it’s twenty minutes before the radar station informs their superiors that they’re being jammed. After thirty minutes, you have a ten percent chance that they’ll dispatch a MiG. Those odds change to a certainty within the hour. How much time would it take for you to get this airplane in, make a pickup

and get out?”

“I love the Albatross, but she’s slow. It sounds like a one-way mission to me.”

As if he hadn’t heard a word I said, he asked bluntly, “How much do you want?”

I had flown airplanes in southern Florida for a living over the course of several years. Many times I was approached by smugglers who wanted me to fly contraband for them. Not wanting to piss them off by declining outright, I would act like a professional, telling them a price that was ridiculous. It was usually around a million dollars, with fifty percent up front. I led them to believe that was my going rate, which others were willing to pay. That price was steep enough to scare them off. While I would love to fly an Albatross again, I was also very much aware of my prospects for a normal life with Andrea. That would only be possible if I could keep myself alive. Maybe if I asked for an enormous amount, Fred would realize he could find someone cheaper and I’d be off the hook.

“If I’m going to do this, it’s going to cost you a million per round trip, with half a million up front, in cash. The other half has to be deposited to the same Bahamian account where the \$250,000 went. If I’m an independent contractor, I’ll contract out one job at a time. I want you to guarantee that I’m free to leave at any time after this is over. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he said without hesitation. “I’ll have the cash for you tomorrow. When will you be ready?”

I shook my head at the outcome of my bluff and half turned toward the Albatross. “That’s a lot of money, Fred,” I reminded him. “Who pays Mario?”

“Don’t worry. We pay Mario.”

“We’ll need people to go over the Albatross and make sure everything checks out.”

“I can give you the Coast Guard’s maintenance crew. These guys are good. They used it for years out of this airbase. They still have spare parts here, and some of these guys used to work on them. They’ll have her checked out and running flawlessly in no time.”

“Another thing, Fred. For us to get in and out of there at night, I’m going to need a copilot who knows this airplane. Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Are you kidding? You’re the only one I know who’s crazy enough to fly this thing.”

“Listen,” I said loudly. “This isn’t a joke. If you really want this mission to succeed, I’m going to need someone who knows this airplane to act as

my copilot. If you don't have anyone, I might."

He thought for a minute. "This could be a problem. I don't have anyone. If you know someone who's qualified to fly her, give me his name, and if he checks out, you can use him."

I gave him my friend Bruno's full name, and as a bonus, added his birth date. He pressed the keypad on his cellphone and was soon relaying the information. In less than a minute, he closed his phone and said, "Bruno's good. Call him."

Using the cellphone he had given me, I quickly keyed in Bruno's number in upstate New York. He answered on the second ring.

"Bruno speaking."

"It's Alan. How's the family?"

"Hi, Alan! The family's good. How's everything with you?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. But more about that at another time. Listen, I've got to ask you a question and you have to consider your answer carefully. I've got this important flight coming up and I want to use that Grumman Albatross I told you about. I'm looking for someone who knows the airplane well enough to fly with me. But the mission is going to be extremely dangerous. I wouldn't call it a suicide mission, but it's not that far off either. Do you feel like doing something dangerous?"

"Do we get to land her on the water?" Bruno was fearless, always had been.

"You bet. As many times as you want. She's being serviced right now and should be in flying condition within two days. I want to be ready to go in four."

"Give me a minute to talk to Diane." The phone was silent for less than a minute. "We can be on an airplane tomorrow," he said. "What airport do you want to pick us up at?"

"That was quick," I grunted. "Who's 'we'?"

"I'll be bringing Diane with me. She's been nagging me about needing a vacation."

I racked my brain for any possible reason why he shouldn't bring Diane but couldn't come up with one. Fred was watching me, listening carefully. He didn't seem to have any input either. "I'm okay with that. Tomorrow will be perfect. I'll pick you up at Miami International. Phone me when you have your flight number and ETA." Bruno confirmed my phone number and we said goodbye. I slipped the phone back into my pocket and turned to Fred. "He's the only person I'll need. One other thing. Why pays for Bruno?"

"I'll take care of that," Fred said. "How realistic is your estimate of four

days?”

“If your mechanics get on her tomorrow and don’t find any major problems, I think we can be ready in four, possibly three days. Maybe even less. I won’t know for sure until we take a look.”

“I’ll have the mechanics here within an hour. You tell them what to do and how to do it. They’ll do exactly as you say. Does that work for you?”

“Yeah, that works for me. I’ll stay with the airplane. What about living accommodations? Where is Andrea staying?”

“She and her mother are staying with Maria’s sister, Lia. Did Andrea tell you about her?”

“Not really. Only that she lives in Coral Gables.”

“She came over in 1960 with her husband. He was very successful in business up until a few years ago when he suffered a fatal heart attack. His life insurance made her a rich woman. She has a nice new place that’s very spacious. Andrea and her mother will be very comfortable there. I’ll have them under twenty-four-hour guard until it’s safe for them to be on their own. You, Mr. Lucky, get to stay with Mario, just like old times.”

That was Fred, trying to be funny. “You know, when I was sitting in that hospital room with my head pounding, I had this vision of my future. It wasn’t what you just described.”

“I know how you feel, but right now we need to focus on getting this job done. You’ll have enough money and free time when we’re finished. Think of it. You’ll have the American dream: money, a beautiful woman, and time to enjoy both. I know you just came through a fairly traumatic event and a little time off would do you good. But, my friend, we don’t have that luxury right now.”

“Fairly traumatic event?”

He looked at me a moment with a faraway look, obviously trying to find the right thing to say. “Let’s go tell Mario and Andrea.” And we headed off toward the hangar.

Fred described his plan. With Mario and a couple of Fred’s men standing there, I had no chance to let Andrea know how much I hated the sleeping arrangements part of it. I hoped it showed on my face. She smiled sadly and kissed me on the cheek before leaving with Fred and the others. Mario and I walked out to the Albatross and made a list of things I needed the mechanics to do.

After about forty-five minutes three men in blue overalls arrived. I told them what I wanted checked or changed on the plane. Once we got them started, Mario and I went to his apartment. I took two painkillers to stop the pounding in my head. I lay down on the queen-sized bed and lapsed

into a deep sleep, not waking until the morning sun made it impossible to sleep. For a few seconds I was confused about where I was. After a quick look around I realized I was in Mario's apartment—not in some place where I was being hunted like an animal, but in downtown Miami, one of my favorite places in the world. I smiled. After everything that had happened in the last two weeks, it felt like something of a miracle. Somehow my headache had disappeared during the night and for the first time in days I was pain free.

I lay there a minute more, listening to Mario banging around in the kitchen. The aroma of fresh coffee filled the apartment. For lack of anything more pressing to do, I started going through a list of people I knew, trying to determine whether any of them showed signs of being lucky or unlucky. It dawned on me that Fidel Castro was actually luckier than I was. How many times had someone tried to kill him? He was living proof that luck can last a lifetime, and that even a deranged, corrupt, murdering dictator could have a lifetime of good luck. I started wondering if I too might have a lifetime of good luck. How much longer could I keep rolling the dice without crapping out?

I knew I was pushing my luck with this next mission, but it was better that way, going forward with a positive attitude. Then, if the shit hit the fan, I'd have luck to pull me through—or at least I would believe luck was on my side. It always had been.

I sat up. Still no headache. I felt good. After a quick shower I joined Mario in the kitchen. The hot coffee smelled great and tasted even better. While we drank, he filled me in.

"Last night at about eight, Andrea was here," he announced. "She checked your pulse and blood pressure. She thinks you're going to live."

I couldn't believe I had missed her. Then I remembered Bruno and wondered if I had slept through a call from him too. "Mario, did anyone call last night on my phone?"

"Yeah, I talked to Bruno. We pick him up at ten today, American Airlines flight 247. We need to book him a hotel."

I looked at the clock. It was a little after eight. We had lots of time. I got up and began to rumble through Mario's cupboards, taking inventory. The place was well equipped. The refrigerator was full of fruit, vegetables, bread and of course beer. I found some English muffins and a ripe melon along with a jar of mango chutney and put them out on the table. Mario managed to rummage up a box of cold donuts.

After breakfast he made a call and arranged for a driver to take us to the airport where we would pick up Bruno and Diane. I phoned Andrea

from the car and we agreed to have dinner together, everybody, the whole family.

With only carry-on baggage, Bruno and Diane were waiting for us on the sidewalk of the domestic arrivals ramp at MIA. Leaving Mario in the car, I stepped out to greet them. After some small talk about their uneventful flight, Bruno asked, "Who are we working for Alan? Langley?"

I looked back at the car. The windows were up, keeping in the cool air. "Here's the deal, Bruno. I work for a guy named Fred. I believe that's his first name, but I have no idea what his last name is.

"Okay," Bruno said nodding his head in approval

"The one thing I do know for sure is that he's the CIA Station Chief in charge of the Caribbean. He doesn't like me asking a lot of questions. He can supply us with airplanes and money. And of course, the guy in the car is Mario, who you met at your house in New York. He's tied in with them too. We're what they call independent contractors."

"Yep, that's Langley," Bruno said.

"Fred wants us to fly into Cuba at night and pick up some people, then fly them back out. He says they have the ability to jam Cuban radar, but only for a short amount of time. I can fly the Albatross solo, but not at night. For that I need a copilot, and you're the only one I know who can do it."

"I knew it had to be something crazy. Let's take a look at the airplane. Then I want to meet this mysterious Fred."

We moved from the curb to the car. I opened the back door and Bruno and Diane slid in beside Mario. I hopped into the front seat for the ride back to Opa-Locka, leaving Mario to entertain our friends.

On the way to Opa-Locka Diane said she would like to stay in one of the best hotels Miami Beach had to offer. Our nameless driver, who I didn't recognize, professed to know just the place. He volunteered to book it for them and picked up his phone. I was a little surprised to hear him book two premiere side-by-side units, facing the Atlantic. When he was done he looked over his shoulder and said to Bruno, "I will be in the room next to yours with another agent. Anything you need, just knock on our door. We're there for you."

Bruno and Diane shared a long smile. Then Bruno mumbled, "Cool. Langley. Very cool."

For the rest of the ride, Mario talked about all the great nightspots in Miami Beach that he thought Bruno and Diane should visit. Diane seemed a lot more interested in what he was saying than Bruno did. When the car pulled up under the left wing of the waiting Albatross, Bruno began to

smile again.

“Oh, yeah! She looks great,” he whispered.

The four of us worked together on her for the rest of the day, taking breaks only to eat. Bruno, who knew the mechanical part of the Albatross better than anyone, smoothly took charge, instructing the maintenance people. This plane was different from the last Albatross I had flown. She had a new instrument panel with the latest in avionics. I consulted the manual to be sure I knew how to use them correctly.

It was almost four in the afternoon when Fred finally arrived in a convoy of cars. One of the drivers was the same one we’d had earlier in the day. Fred, Mario and I walked around to the far side of the airplane under the wing, my conference room of preference. Fred handed me a large heavy flight bag, which I almost dropped.

“Money’s heavy,” he said, grinning widely. “Half a million, just as we agreed. On top of the money is a deposit slip for the other half million.”

I wanted to jump into the air screaming for joy. I had more money than I had ever dreamed of. Then it hit me. What could I do with all this cash? Dropping the heavy flight bag, I asked, “Ah, where can I leave this?”

“Put it in the trunk of my car. It’ll be safe there,” he said and laughed. He hesitated a moment, then asked, “When will you be ready to go?”

“Are you sure your guys can jam their radar?”

Fred’s expression changed, his smile disappearing. He seemed insulted. “Absolutely! For backup, we’ll have an AWAC with the latest jamming equipment. Their radar won’t be a problem. When can you be ready?”

“Too early to tell. What’s the weather forecast for the next few days?”

“Too early to tell,” he said sarcastically. Then he got serious again. “Your friend Bruno, he’s good, real good. I just got the full printout on him. Do you know what he did for NASA? Our intel was sketchy on that.”

“He had some involvement with the Apollo missions, something about crystal windows. Why?” I started to laugh, remembering some of the wild stories Bruno had told me.

“As long as he’s here we’ll supply him with a car and driver. I’ll explain our security protocol. With his background, I’m sure he’ll understand. I’ll be in the pilots’ lounge. Bring Bruno and his wife there. I’d like to speak to them in private.”

I placed the money in the trunk of his car before returning to the cockpit to tell Bruno and Diane of Fred’s request to see them. Mario led them over. It was obvious I wasn’t welcome.

An hour passed before Bruno and Diane returned to the plane. “It’s a

deal. We're definitely going with you," Bruno said smiling.

Not sure I had heard him correctly, I asked, "What do you mean, 'we'?"

"Diane and I are going on the mission with you."

"Did I miss something here?"

"It's simple. If I die on this mission, chances are she dies with me. That's how we want it. Besides, we need a radio operator and she's qualified."

"Damn," I said puzzled. "This is getting stranger by the minute."

With that settled, I told them I would be attending a family dinner and was unable to escort them around the city that night. I was happy when Bruno said he really didn't want to hang out with a bunch of people he didn't know anyway. He was quite content to take his wife on a stroll down Miami Beach alone. Well, almost alone. Security would be shadowing them.

I touched his arm. "Did Fred talk to you about money for this?"

"Don't worry, Alan. We have an arrangement with him."

Work on the airplane was progressing better than I expected. We had to search hard to find even small problems. With so much money in hand, I decided to replace the older Jet Skis hanging from the wings with the best and fastest available. I phoned a Sea-Doo dealer and negotiated a cash price for two RXT255S models, 255 hp, painted flat black, with extra fuel tanks built in. Within an hour, the dealer was at the airport. I showed him the money that we had agreed on and gave him half. The other half was his tomorrow when the machines arrived. He happily agreed and we sealed the deal with a handshake.

Under Bruno's supervision, Mario and the crew from the Coast Guard base had removed every piece of the Albatross' custom interior. Completely empty, it was huge inside. She was ready to fly. We could have taken her out that night, but everyone was tired, so we decided tomorrow was a better idea. Before leaving the airport, Bruno and I agreed to be wheels up by 8:00 a.m.

It was after seven when we all sat down for dinner at a high-end restaurant tucked inside a hotel somewhere in the middle of Miami. This was definitely not the Nikki Beach Club, but more like a businessman's hotel. We would have been early, but Mario had last-minute clothing emergencies. Sometimes, I wondered about him.

The restaurant was impressively decorated with lots of mahogany and soft lighting, and even a colorful Renaissance-style painting on the ceiling—and an abundance of staff rushing from table to table, smiling

and happy to take orders. Before being seated, I was introduced to Tia Maria's sister, Lia. I was amazed at how much those two elderly ladies looked alike. They could have been twins.

Over dinner, Andrea said, "My mother and aunt married young. The two couples were close friends with Fidel when they fought together for democracy from their mountain base. As the revolution became a reality, Lia and her husband witnessed the change in Castro, from Fidel the Liberator to Fidel the Dictator. They saw the writing on the wall early, sold everything in Cuba and left for the United States just before the deranged bastard completely took over everything." She lowered her voice to a whisper and continued. "For a long time, my mother and father believed that Tia Lia and her husband Ricardo were traitors to the revolution. My mother had to find out the truth about the Castros the hard way. It was as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders when she was able to tell her sister that she had been wrong. Tia Lia was gracious and reassured Mother that it wasn't her fault. Today the world knows Fidel is nothing more than a conman."

We looked at the two sisters sitting at the opposite end of the table. They were laughing like school kids. They were finally together, after more than forty years apart.

"They cried off and on all day," Andrea went on. "The two of them hugging, crying, storytelling, and more crying. It was hard for all of us. I'm glad to see that's over."

She stopped talking and started to get choked up. A tear ran down her right cheek. I reached for her, wanting to hold her, but she moved away. "My uncle Ricardo died of a heart attack at sixty. He was a businessman with a large life insurance policy. My aunt is now very rich. Her house is on the shore in Coral Gables. It's absolutely beautiful. Tia Lia told mother and me we can live there forever. Besides us, Roberto and Mario are the only living family she has."

My mind wandered off as I listened to her. If the mission failed, at least she would still have her family and a beautiful home to live in.

19. LIGHTHOUSE

Throughout dinner, Maria and Lia were engaged in their own conversation. Mario and his new girlfriend couldn't keep their hands off each other. Andrea and I continued to have an opportunity to talk. But rather than professing her undying love for me, she used the time to talk more about her family and her obligation to them. I tried to hold her hand every chance I got, but somehow it always seemed to flutter away before I could catch it. Was I imagining it or was she being less affectionate?

We finished eating and I paid the bill. As we walked to the exit, Mario's girlfriend tried to persuade him to come back to her apartment, but he stood his ground. He sent her home in a cab. We both knew we had to be at the plane early and that Fred would tolerate nothing less than us being a hundred percent. There were two dark blue cars waiting outside for us. Andrea kissed me on the cheek and hurried into one of them along with her mother and aunt. I climbed into the other with Mario and immediately asked him, "Is there any reason you can think of that Andrea might be pissed off at me?"

He snorted. "Yeah, I can think of one."

"What?"

He made me wait before he answered. "Do you remember when I told you she came by to check on you last night?"

"Yeah. So?"

"And you were already dead to the world?"

"Go on."

"Well, I think she would have stayed the night—"

"You mean, she got mad because she couldn't wake me?"

"No, man. She got mad because you were talking in your sleep."

I turned my palms up and nodded to let him know I wanted to hear the rest.

"I don't know if I should be the one to tell you," he mumbled.

"To tell me what?"

"To tell you what you were talking about in your sleep."

"Just tell me." I didn't realize how loud I was getting until I saw the driver's smile flash in the rearview mirror. He was enjoying this.

"Jenny," Mario said quietly with a trace of a smile on his face. "You were really on a roll. She called me in as a witness. You were like, 'Jenny, Jenny, Jenny. Why, Jenny, why?'" He snickered. "She tried to wake you. Your eyes popped open a couple of times but then they rolled back in your head. It was as if you had no idea who she was."

"And how long were you standing there watching this show?" I asked, angry and embarrassed.

"I only stayed for a minute. I was uncomfortable for you and left the room. Andrea came out a while later. Her eyes were filled with tears. She tried making excuses for you. She said you were incoherent because of the painkillers." He shrugged. "You hurt her. I could see that she was keeping her distance at dinner. Think about it, Alan. You've known her for less than a week. New love is fragile. Maybe she's not for you."

I was angry, maybe angrier than what the situation called for. I was really pissed off. "Listen, Mario. You're wrong. You're dead wrong about this!" I was having a hard time speaking, I was so mad.

He shrugged again, pretending to be interested in something out his window.

I continued. "I realize I've only known her for a short time, but I have genuine feelings for her. I love her, damn it!"

He turned back to me. "I know how you feel. It happened to me once." He grinned. "Well, more than once. Don't worry, you'll get over it. What were you expecting from her anyway? She's a doctor."

“What do you mean by that? She’s a doctor and I’m a what? A lowlife pilot? You don’t think a doctor can love a pilot? What does that have to do with anything? We talked. We made plans.” What I was feeling now was acute misery.

“The plan you need to be thinking about right now is how you’re going to get that old airplane in and out of Cuba in one piece. You have to get her out of your mind.”

I sat back in my seat. We were both quiet for some time, peering out our respective windows. His last words hung in the air like smoke. Finally I said, “Do you know what I’m thinking right now?”

“What?”

“I’m thinking you’re right.”

He glanced at me, one eyebrow raised. I’d probably never said that to him before.

“We should be thinking about what to do if patrol boats or a helicopter happen to come along at the wrong time. Are we taking any weapons?”

“Do you want weapons?”

“You’re funny, Mario. Of course I want weapons. What I want isn’t your normal police or military issue. I want the fancy stuff that you buy downtown in expensive gun stores.”

“Alan, you can have whatever you want. All you have to do is go down to the best gun shop in Miami and buy them. Just remember to take a lot of money with you.”

I had to smile in spite of my misery. “I keep forgetting that I’m a rich, independent contractor for the CIA, responsible for my own expenses.”

Mario laughed. “What kind of weapons do you want to take?”

“Those free ones that you get from the government. They’ll work just fine.”

For the rest of the ride to his apartment we talked about the equipment we wanted to take with us. He assured me I would be pleasantly surprised when I saw who and what he was bringing.

As for Andrea, I started to think I had jumped the gun emotionally by acting like she’d just broken up with me. That wasn’t what had happened. As a doctor, she had to know better than anyone that a man can’t be held responsible for what he mumbles in his sleep after taking strong painkillers. I thought about Jenny for a while, wondered what she was doing at that moment. I tried—all too successfully—to conjure up her face. When we finally arrived at Mario’s apartment, I went straight to bed, exhausted by the long day.

Mario woke me at 6:30, and after a shower and breakfast we were on

our way to Opa-Locka. We arrived at the airport a few minutes before eight o'clock. The fuel truck was just pulling away from the plane as we parked. Bruno and Diane climbed out of the cockpit through the pilots' overhead hatches onto the left wing. They stood waving, looking like proud parents. A Coast Guard officer emerged from the hangar and escorted us to the plane. As we walked, he explained that his people had gone through the aircraft thoroughly and it was airworthy.

I nodded to Bruno. "She's ready?" I asked.

"Yeah, she's ready. How about you?"

"I've been practicing all night in my sleep. It should be a piece of cake."

We decided the day before to spend as much time in the Albatross as possible. We would only stop if a mechanical problem forced us. Otherwise, we were going flying, landing and taking off on the open ocean in this huge amphibian. I could hardly wait.

The engine start was uneventful. Both engines roared to life, singing a song I never tired of hearing, a rumbling sound from a time long ago. This was the second Albatross that I was privileged to fly. Most pilots just dream of riding in one.

I was surprised at how easy she was to taxi. Unlike my last Albatross, the brakes worked like new. Bruno and I went through the checklist carefully and found no faults. After receiving our takeoff clearance, I pushed the overhead throttles forward. The cabin filled with the immense roar of the two Wright Cyclone 1,425 horsepower nine-cylinder radial engines going to full power.

After a short roll down the runway, the airplane lifted off by itself at eighty-five miles per hour. It was very easy to handle and light on the controls. The high degree of maintenance showed. Instantly I was at home in this airplane.

We were only ten minutes south of the airport when Mario received a message from Fred on the radio. When he was done talking to him, he got my attention by tapping me on the shoulder.

"Something big is going on in Cuba. Fred wants to know when we'll be ready to go."

"Damn it, Mario, we've only been airborne ten minutes. Tell him to give me at least an hour."

Bruno and I went about checking all the systems. When we finished, Bruno spoke into his intercom. "This bird is perfect, no snags." Both engines ran flawlessly. Working as a team, we performed five takeoffs and landings within an hour. Fred called back right on time. He and Mario talked before he passed me the phone.

“When will you be ready, Alan?”

“Can you give me one more day?”

His answer was curt. “I don’t think so. We need to talk privately. How soon can you return to base?”

“We’re about twenty-five minutes out.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in twenty-five minutes.”

That was Fred’s way of giving me an order. I explained to Bruno that we were returning to base. On our way back, we agreed that the flying had gone very well. He and I had taken turns flying, landing and taking off from the water. The airplane performed like new, but we still wanted more practice.

Twenty-five minutes later we found Fred inside the hangar briefing room, standing silently in front of a large map of Cuba. He didn’t speak until we were standing beside him.

“Diane, gentlemen. The shit has hit the fan in Cuba.”

The way Fred spoke sent a chill down my spine. I immediately thought of Mario’s brother. “Roberto?” I asked, hoping for good news.

“It looks like the safehouse went down. We’ve lost communication with Roberto. From the radio traffic we’re intercepting, it doesn’t sound like they’ve caught him. The bad news is that the Castros are putting every resource they have into finding him.”

Mario’s face was frozen with anxiety. I could see he was incapable of talking. I couldn’t speak either. It was too much to think something could happen to Roberto. Fred lifted his hand and placed it over his right ear, blocking the noise from entering the wireless earpiece he was receiving incoming intel on. He spoke into an invisible microphone.

“Say again.”

As Fred listened his eyes darted left and right, his gaze circling the room. I could see he was totally absorbed in the conversation. Then he looked at us. “This needs to happen tonight. Can you do it?”

“Fred, the airplane flies beautifully. There’s no problem taking off and landing in the daylight. But we haven’t practiced night takeoffs and landings.”

Fred’s jaw dropped.

“I’m not saying we can’t go tonight,” I continued. “I’m confident we can do it. I’ve landed on water with a floatplane at night more than once. It’s dangerous, but with Bruno as my copilot, we can do it. “

Fred looked at Bruno and me for at least ten seconds before he spoke. “What about you, Bruno?”

Bruno spoke up. “We’ll fly with Alan, right, Diane?”

“You know the deal,” she answered adamantly. “If you go, so do I.”

While we debated with Fred, Mario was speaking in rapid Spanish into a cellphone. When he finished, he was very excited. “I just talked to Roberto!” he exclaimed. “He’s alive and hiding out a hundred and fifty kilometers west of Havana in a small village called Santa Lucia. Everyone involved is living out of their cars, hiding. We’re their only chance. Roberto says it has to be tonight!” He was almost pleading. “We’re ready to go, right?”

“Right, Mario, relax. We already agreed we’re going. You’re panicking.” If it was my brother, I might be panicking too. “Right now you need to focus on getting us weapons. Can you do that?”

“I can do better than just getting us weapons. I’m going to bring some of my friends with us.” His determination and anger were showing. He looked into my eyes and asked, “What are you going to be doing?”

“I’m the pilot, remember? I’m going to make sure we have fuel and oil, and I might even have a look at a navigational chart. Don’t worry about me. I’ll have the airplane ready when it’s time to go. You do your thing and I’ll do mine. Go.”

He turned and left without another word.

On my request, Fred’s mechanics had returned. They were crawling all over the plane, checking for leaks, loose lines, or anything else they could find that might have occurred during our test flights. I was thrilled when I saw a red pickup truck and trailer arrive with the pair of 255 horsepower Sea-Doos I had ordered the day before. I paid the dealer the balance of the money we had agreed on.

I oversaw the mechanics as they removed the older, wing-mounted Jet Skis, replacing them with the brand new RXT255S Sea-Doos. As agreed, the dealer had painted them flat black and installed extra fuel tanks in the forward storage compartments. That gave them more than five hours endurance at sixty miles per hour plus. He guaranteed a top speed of over seventy, warning me that at that speed you had to really hang on. These were our emergency escape vehicles. If something were to go wrong with the airplane, my plan was to land on the water, then head for the States on the Sea-Doos just like before, only faster.

It was after noon when the mechanics finished with the plane. The Albatross had enough fuel for seven hours and was ready to go. I joined Fred, Bruno and Diane in the conference room. All three were studying the map, with Diane taking notes. They didn’t seem to notice me approaching.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked.

Bruno explained. "Diane will ride in the jump seat behind you. On approach, she'll read off our altitude and airspeed so you won't have to look down at the instruments. Trust her, she's very good at this. I'll take care of the power settings, flaps, fuel selectors and hydraulics. All you'll have to do is fly the airplane."

It was pretty hard to argue with this logic. Having an experienced flight crew would make all the difference in the world. I looked up at everyone and smiled. Trying to lighten the moment, I asked, "Do I need to know where we're going?"

Totally into the mission, Diane pointed to a lighthouse approximately a hundred miles west of Havana. Even though I knew she was a very capable person, it still seemed a little crazy that she was coming along.

"This place is perfect. It's close to where Roberto and the others are hiding. There's only one problem," she explained. "Our ETA puts us on the beach at low tide. There are shallow reefs all around our landing zone."

"How shallow?"

She looked closely at the map. "In some places the reefs are only two to three feet below the surface. That's why this place is perfect for a pickup. With the shallow reefs, there won't be any patrol boats. I've programmed the GPS with the coordinates for our touchdown. It's going to be close. There's a reef on either side of the landing zone, and another just before the shore. The good news is they're soft, not rocky. Worst-case scenario: crushed reefs. The environmentalists will hate us." She smiled brightly.

Bruno smiled too, obviously proud of his wife. I was totally impressed with what she had just shown me. To say the least, she was a professional.

"Is the plane ready, Alan?" Fred asked.

"Yes, it's ready. What time do you want us there?"

"As of right now, we're planning for 0200 hours. As you already know, there won't be much moonlight tonight because of a heavy cloud cover. Mario is bringing his assault team with him. They'll be assembled and ready to go at 2300. What time do you want to leave?"

This was the first I heard about any assault team. But I put it aside; I'd ask later. "We'll file a flight plan from Miami to Cancun. This routing will bring us within forty miles of the lighthouse. If you want us there at two, we should plan to be in the air by midnight. Are we going to have communication with you during the flight?"

Fred's eyes shifted. For a moment I thought he wasn't going to answer

me. "Yes, we'll have communication. I'll be talking to you after you pass Key West."

"Fred, my main concern right now is that we know for sure their radar has been jammed."

"I promise you, Alan, I will personally make sure their radar isn't working."

"Okay, I believe you." I turned to the crew. "When we're forty miles from the lighthouse, Fred will disable the radar. Once he confirms it's down, we'll turn toward Cuba and push the Albatross to her maximum speed all the way to our GPS touchdown coordinates. That should take us about fifteen minutes. If all goes well, another ten minutes to taxi to the beach, load up and leave. With luck we'll be out of Cuban airspace within thirty minutes."

Fred appeared to be deep in thought. "Okay, we all agree, wheels up at midnight. We have beds at the back of the hangar. Why don't you all try and get some rest before you go?"

To my delight, I found a fully stocked kitchen beside the long room with the cots. Diane whipped up a salad and sandwiches. Afterwards I lay on a cot near the door in the air-conditioned room. Surprisingly, I fell asleep to the hypnotic music of aircraft arriving and departing.

At 11:00 p.m. someone shook me awake. When I opened my eyes, I saw a painted face leaning over me. I had no idea where I was for a second. I was about to lunge at the intruder when I realized it was Mario. His face was painted black and he was dressed in digital camouflage with light body armor.

"What's with the war paint?" I asked dryly.

He wasn't impressed with my lack of seriousness. "Get up. We're ready to go." He turned and left.

I used the bathroom before catching up with the rest of the group, all of whom had awakened before me. Someone had made some strong coffee. I poured myself a large cup and waited for anybody to notice me. Fred handed me a shoulder holster with an ugly-looking pistol in it, plus two full clips. I had never seen one of these before.

"What kind of gun is this?"

"It's a Russian Makarov nine mm. It's what they're using in Cuba. Almost all of the weapons you will be taking are Russian made. If we leave anything behind, it might confuse the Cubans about who is involved. I doubt it, but that's the plan."

I had to smile. Good thinking, Fred, I thought. Or maybe this wasn't the first time they had done this. I put on the holster. "Thanks, I

appreciate it.” He smiled back at me.

I turned to Mario. “How many people are you bringing?”

“Sixteen, including me.”

“Sixteen! Are you out of your mind? Where are we supposed to put the passengers?”

“Don’t worry about that. We won’t be coming back with you.”

“Oh, really? What are you going to do? Bring sixteen people back on two Sea-Doos?” I asked, shaking my head.

“I’m not supposed to tell you this. These guys are Navy SEALs. They’re the best assault team on the face of the planet. We’ve already loaded two inflatable boats and motors into the Albatross. You just do the flying. Let us take care of the rest.”

My past experiences with Mario had left me a little wary of his leadership abilities. I turned to Fred. “Are you okay with this? This seems more like an invasion force than a rescue mission.”

“I agree with him. This mission is far too important to go in without his team. You don’t have a problem with that, do you?”

I was experiencing a wave of *déjà vu*. “I’m just not big on leaving Mario behind again.”

“Don’t worry about it, Alan,” he said. “You’re the pilot. The reason we’re using you isn’t because we like you, it’s because you’re great at what you do. The same goes for Mario and his team. They know what they’re doing.”

Bruno interrupted my inner debate by volunteering to phone flight services and file our flight plan to Cancun. This was fine with me. I had no intention of putting my name and pilot’s number on this flight plan, though I was confident Fred could fix any problems that might arise.

At 11:35 we began walking to the plane. Amazingly, it had been painted flat black in the time I had been sleeping. I commented to Bruno, “Wow, she looks great. Very stealthy. It looks like a different airplane. I know you paint airplanes, Bruno, but how did you do this in four hours?”

Incredibly, Bruno and Diane were holding hands as if they were walking down Miami Beach on their honeymoon. We were almost at the plane before he answered.

“Wasn’t even a challenge. We used four industrial paint platforms and thirty-five soldiers to spray on quick-drying enamel. We got them and the paint from Homestead Air Force base. It’s the same paint they use on their stealth aircraft. Should be dry any minute now.” He laughed, proud of himself. “Except for the heat signature from the engines, we’ll be invisible in infrared.”

The smell of fresh paint was strong as we entered the Albatross through the rear door. I was surprised to see the cabin almost full. Two twenty-foot-long tubes with "Pull Here" written underneath large red handles had been placed in the center of the aircraft. Near the rear of the plane were two large, well-wrapped packages, which I assumed were motors for the inflatables. Fifteen fully camouflaged heavily armed Navy SEALs surrounded them. In the dim light I could see they were all extremely tough looking and fit. Clearly, this wasn't their first mission. They were well equipped with the best Russian weapons available.

We carefully made our way through the cabin to the cockpit. After strapping in I turned to Mario. "I'm impressed. Those are the kind of weapons I was talking about." He nodded at me as if to say, Well, of course. What else did you expect? He passed custom-made headsets to Bruno, Diane and me, all with a little antenna on top and LED lights pointing forward.

"Once we're on the ground, we'll use these for communication. My team members are all numbered. I'm Number One, my lieutenant is Two, and so on. We'll refer to you as the flight crew. Fred will be able to hear everything said on these radios but we won't be able to hear him. That we'll have to do through the aircraft radio. Keep the chatter to a minimum."

I could've said something smart but didn't. Nodding was enough. Seeing how professional everyone was made me feel good about our mission.

Bruno and I went quickly through the pre-start checklist. In less than five minutes both engines were running. At two minutes before midnight the control tower cleared us for takeoff. The Albatross performed perfectly in the cool evening air, seemingly unaffected by the weight of our passengers and their gear. Less than ten minutes after takeoff we leveled her at 6,000 feet, on a direct course to Cancun. Some thirty minutes later, we passed Key West.

Air traffic control ordered, "November one-four-five Alpha, contact Miami center on frequency 125.5. Goodnight." I tuned in the new frequency and was surprised to recognize Fred's voice. "November one-four-five Alpha, how do you read me?"

Diane tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I would like her to take care of communications. I nodded in the affirmative. Diane spoke into her mike.

"Center, this is November one-four-five Alpha. We read you loud and clear. Go ahead." Her professionalism on the radio was music to my ears.

“November one-four-five Alpha, you are cleared as filed. Remain on this frequency.”

“Roger, one-four-five Alpha, will comply.”

Normally I flew alone. Having a flight crew to share the workload with was something new to me. I was reminded one more time, I was just the pilot. This was a team effort. I was necessary, but replaceable. Over the intercom I commented to Bruno about the strange sound that Fred’s transmissions made. Mario informed us that Fred was transmitting through the dirigible. That’s how we’d communicate for the entire trip. That Fred had not informed me of this was no surprise. These guys were pros. I was still being informed on a need-to-know basis. With Diane handling the radios and Bruno flying the airplane, I asked Mario, “Tell me the truth about Andrea. Did she say anything positive to you about us?”

“You know how I feel, Alan. She’s my cousin. I don’t want to see any harm come to her.”

“I understand that. I know she’s your family. I don’t have any plans to cause her harm.”

“Yeah, right. You always start out that way, but there never seems to be a happy ending.”

It was a stupid conversation to be having 6,000 feet above the water on a clandestine mission to Cuba, but I couldn’t help myself. I’d suppressed all thoughts of Andrea for the last twenty-four hours. Now that they’d broken through, I couldn’t shed them.

“Just tell me one thing, Mario, my friend. Are you going to give me a chance, assuming she does?”

There was silence over the intercom as he thought about this for a while. “I’ll give you a chance, Alan. But if you screw up with her or cause her harm in any way, I’m going to pound you so hard—”

I jumped in before he got carried away with the threats. “That’s all I ask for. Nothing more.”

Like clockwork, every fifteen minutes Fred checked in, sounding like a typical controller following a normal flight. This made good sense to me, as we were close enough to Cuba for the Cuban controllers to monitor our communications. As we flew west into the glowing sinking moon my thoughts continued to stay focused on Andrea.

Eventually the GPS told us we were almost at the waypoint where we would need to be making our turn to Cuba. But just then the radio came alive.

“November one-four-five Alpha, slight delay. Continue on your present heading for approximately thirty minutes.”

Something had forced a change in the schedule. I looked back at Mario. He was shaking his head in disgust.

It was thirty-five minutes before we heard Fred's voice again. "November one-four-five Alpha, make a one eighty degree turn and maintain your present speed."

Diane replied with a simple, "Roger."

I turned the airplane around. We were now headed back to Miami with no idea what was happening. We flew on in silence. My questions were answered when Fred came on the radio almost forty minutes later. "November one-four-five Alpha, you are cleared as filed. Start your turn now."

Diane replied, "Roger, Center, November one-four-five Alpha, cleared as filed."

The time had come. I was ready for it. Bruno set the throttles to maximum cruise power while I lowered the nose and took up a heading to the lighthouse. We were entering Cuban airspace at almost 250 miles per hour. Remembering my last visit to Cuba, I spoke over the intercom to everyone, maybe with a little too much attitude.

"Keep your eyes open. We'll soon find out if the Cubans have any other type of detection systems, something Fred doesn't know about." I stared at Mario.

He just couldn't resist an opportunity to bang his chest. "Don't worry, Alan. We've taken care of everything," he said smugly.

"When have I heard that before?"

He didn't reply.

Tension heightened in the cockpit as we neared Cuba. Staring intently out the front window I could see the flashes from the lighthouse. At two hundred feet altitude and two miles from the GPS touchdown spot I told Bruno I had control of the airplane and began slowing to approach speed. When the airspeed had slowed sufficiently I instructed Bruno to lower the flaps to the landing position. After setting the propellers to fine pitch and the mixtures to full rich, I checked to make sure the landing gear was in the up position. I was ready to put her down on the water. Diane continued to call our airspeed while I reduced power to control the big amphibian's descent. We touched down within a few meters of the GPS waypoint.

The calm water helped make the landing smooth as silk. As soon as the hull was on the water I pulled the power levers into reverse and was rewarded by the amazing breaking effect from the engines. Within seconds we were at a full stop. I pushed the throttles slightly forward,

bringing the propellers out of reverse. I began steering the Albatross toward the lighthouse, clearly visible less than a hundred meters away. Mario gave orders for his snipers to prepare to climb onto the wing.

With the power set at low idle we slowly moved forward. With less than fifty meters to go, we heard and felt her come to a quick and sudden stop. We had run aground on a shallow coral reef. Instinctively I pulled the throttles into reverse to back her off. This only made things worse. Backing up caused the Albatross to dig itself deeper into the coral. It didn't take long to realize we were stuck.

20. ALL OR NOTHING

I turned to Mario. "We're too heavy. We have to lighten the plane."

He spoke into his intercom, instructing his crew to launch the inflatables. Before he left the cabin he directed two of his men into the water to receive my Sea-Doos that Bruno was already lowering from the wings. The cabin had come alive with activity. In less than five minutes Mario's team had the inflatables in the water, each with a large two-hundred horsepower Mercury outboard mounted on its transom. Diane was occupied with transmitting our progress minute by minute over the aircraft's radio to Fred.

Bruno announced into his intercom, "We have swimmers in the water heading this way. They appear to be friendlies."

"Oh, shit," I said into the voice-activated headset. The people we had come to pick up were now swimming in desperation toward the plane. I quickly shut down both engines to prevent anyone from having their head cut off by the big propellers. I spoke loudly into the headset.

"Mario, tell your guys to get on the Sea-Doos and turn these people back before someone gets hurt."

His reply was almost instant. "We're on it." In high speed Spanish, he asked his men that were on the wing, "Snipers, are the swimmers a threat?"

Looking through their night scopes from a vantage point on top of the wing, they replied, "Negative, they're unarmed."

Mario continued. "Flight crew, are the Sea-Doos in the water?"

Bruno replied, "Sea-Doos are almost down." When the PWCs hit the water, the Navy SEALs that were assigned to drive them climbed on and released the attachment cables. I watched the two SEALs cautiously pilot

the Sea-Doos toward shore, helping the swimmers that were having difficulty and yelling for others to turn around.

Almost immediately the rest of the SEALs were in the inflatable boats and slowly moving through the shallow water toward the beach. They too were picking up swimmers. As they touched the shoreline I could see that Mario had been the first one off. He gathered the Cubans together, those coming out of the water along with the people who had stayed on the shore.

He had one of the SEALs lead them toward an area of thick mangroves where they could find cover. The rest of his men spread out to secure the position. The intercom was filled with short coded chatter. Like clockwork his men reported and their response was good news.

“In position, all clear.”

After unfastening my harness, I ducked under the dash into the nose compartment of the aircraft through a small portal under the windshield. I opened the front hatch and popped out into the humid sea air and quickly attached two docking lines that had been in the nose compartment. Then I used the intercom to instruct the two SEALs on the Sea-Doos to position themselves in front of me so I could throw them the lines. Once we had coordinated their positions and they had the lines attached securely, I instructed them to try and drag us off the reef.

The night air was filled with the sound of the PWCs at full power as they began to drag us, scraping through the coral. When we were within an aircraft length of the shoreline, I instructed the Sea-Doo drivers to turn the airplane around. One at the front and the other at the back pushing in opposite directions, they spun us around like a top. Now the tail was pointed at the shore. Next, I instructed both PWCs to position themselves in front of the Albatross. With the bow bumpers pushing against the airplane’s hull, they used full power to push us backward. With a loud crunching sound we came to a sudden stop on the soft coral shore.

The armed drivers with night vision goggles in place rode their Sea-Doos in opposite directions, carefully scouting the land and sea for unwanted guests. I hurried from the nose compartment, following Bruno to the back of the airplane. He had already deployed the steel ladder. Instantly we were greeted by a man with a little baby.

“Thank you, thank you, Señor,” he said over and over. I moved him to the front part of the airplane and told him to sit down while Bruno continued to help people board. Many were dripping wet from their desperate swim.

We had about ten people on board when we heard Mario.

“This is Number One,” he began. “I’m on the cell with my brother. He and two others are unable to get past a roadblock five clicks from here. They’re involved in a firefight with mounting forces. Numbers Four, Five, Six and Seven, check the cars that these people came in to see if they have keys in the ignition. If there are no keys, find the owners and get them. We need these vehicles NOW! Snipers, stay where you are and secure the airplane. Flight crew, leave as soon as you can.”

A flurry of responses was heard over the radio by the differently numbered troops.

Mario instructed his team while Bruno and I hurriedly helped people on board. There had to be at least fifty men, women and children. It was ten minutes before we got everyone in. Diane signaled me to the cockpit.

“Fred says it’s time to leave.”

“Tell Fred we’ll be out of here ASAP. Keep jamming the radar!”

She nodded and relayed the message.

Bruno pulled the ladder into the Albatross, shut and locked the back door. The cabin was almost full. I jumped into the captain’s seat and belted in with Bruno right behind me. I could hear Mario giving orders to his team members. They had arrived at his brother’s position and were engaging the Cuban police. Equipped with pistols only, the cops wouldn’t have a chance against an assault force like the one Mario was leading. But if the military showed up, that would be another story. I informed the snipers still on the wing above us providing cover that we were ready to leave. They made their way to the back of the plane and jumped into the shallow water.

The last thing I heard from them was, “Sniper team is clear of the plane. We’ll cover your six. Good luck.”

I replied, “Rodger, same to you.” Then I replaced Mario’s fancy headset with the aircraft one. I would no longer have communication with the assault team.

Throwing caution to the wind, Bruno and I performed a quick start on the large radial engines. They were still warm and fired up without complaint. I instructed him to turn on the landing lights, hoping I would be able to see the shallow coral reef, allowing me to move around it. When the lights came on it was like the sun had just risen. The light reflected off the coral and back into the sky with long rays.

“They’ll be able to see us for miles,” Bruno commented in a calm voice.

“Yeah, the cat is out of the bag now, Bruno.”

I wasn’t worried about people seeing us. If they didn’t see us when we

applied full power, they would surely hear us.

“Diane, any chance you can give me a heading that will keep me between the reefs?”

After a couple of seconds of studying her handheld GPS, she instructed, “After you pass this small reef ahead, turn to a heading of three-one-zero degrees. That should keep us between the larger reefs.”

With a slight crunching and tugging, we passed over the shallow reef into deeper water. The airplane was heavy. I looked to Bruno before speaking into the mike. “Are we ready to go?”

“Fuel pumps on, mixtures rich, propellers full fine, flaps are set for takeoff. She’s ready to go when you are.”

This had to be one of the quickest preflight checks ever done—only the necessities, nothing else. I pushed the throttles forward and almost immediately the airplane started to porpoise violently. The nose went up, then slammed back down into the water. I pushed the yoke all the way forward and then all the way back, trying to counteract the bouncing. It wasn’t going to stop. There was too much weight in the back of the airplane. I pulled the power back to idle, and immediately the bouncing stopped. I turned, looking back into the cabin, yelling for the first person whose attention I got to come forward. A balding man about sixty came forward and asked what I needed.

“What’s your name?”

“My name is Carlos.”

“Carlos, I need you to bring people forward. There’s too many in the back. Get them as close to the front as possible, now. Go!” I could see fear on this man’s face as he hurried into the cabin and started yelling orders in Spanish. The other passengers complied quickly. Once they were settled in their new positions, I yelled to Bruno, “Let’s go.”

This time when I applied full power the nose lifted into the air and the engines pulled us smoothly up onto the surface of the water. We were skimming at over forty miles per hour and accelerating. As long as we didn’t hit a shallow reef, we would make it. As the airspeed indicator passed eighty, I applied slight back pressure to the control yoke. The mighty Albatross lifted effortlessly off the water. The people in the back started cheering and clapping as they felt the flying boat rise into the air. As I pulled the power back to the climb setting, I called to Bruno, “Landing lights off, flaps up at five hundred feet.” I was really starting to enjoy having a quality copilot.

Diane informed Fred that we were airborne. All I had to do now was fly the airplane back to Florida. Once I felt safe, my thoughts went to

Mario. I reminded myself that his team definitely had the Cuban police outgunned. But if the Cubans were to find out what was really going on, they'd soon have Mario outgunned. Time was crucial. They needed to get out of there as soon as possible.

At five hundred feet I watched Bruno put the flaps into the up position. We were established in cruise climb, gaining almost 1,000 feet of altitude per minute. Everyone had their eyes out the windows looking for unfriendlies. At 3,000 feet I lowered the nose and retracted the cowl flaps. With the power set at maximum cruise, I steered her toward Key West.

I was just thinking that this mission was over for those of us in the plane when tracer bullets passed through the wings and the fuselage with loud thumps. We were being fired upon by a jet fighter. I looked at the GPS. It showed us eight miles off the coast, still in Cuban airspace.

I yelled into the microphone, "Fred, why aren't you jamming their radar? We've got a MiG shooting at us."

"Listen carefully," he said. "I guarantee with my life that their radar is jammed. They must be using infrared. Take evasive action now!"

"Control, this airplane is a sitting duck. There is no evasive action. This guy will turn us into tinfoil on his next pass. What about some kind of backup?"

"You're three miles from international waters. I've scrambled every fighter we have in south Florida. Hang in there. I'll let you know when they have you covered."

I turned to Bruno and spoke into my intercom. "I've got an idea, but you might not like it."

"Any idea will do; we only have seconds before he makes his next pass."

Before he even finished his sentence I had already reached up to the power levers and pulled them to flight idle. I informed Bruno, "I'm shutting down the engines. We'll glide down to the water with the engines off. With this fancy black paint, she'll be invisible to their infrared. By the time we land, the engines will be cold."

I moved both propeller levers into the feathered position. Instead of pushing the airplane, the propellers were now parallel with the wind, offering no resistance. Bruno lowered the flaps to the landing position as I pulled the mixtures back, starving the engines of fuel. Without any questions, Bruno turned the fuel pumps and magnetos off. Both propellers came to a slow stop. The Albatross was now a big glider.

The airplane went quiet. Even the passengers, who had to be scared

to death, were absolutely silent. The only voice was Diane's, telling Fred what we were doing.

"Good luck," he said to her, and she repeated it, softly. "Good luck."

I removed my headset and listened to the wind noise as we headed down toward the dark water. Believing the MiG had turned left, I put the airplane into a hard left turn, hoping to throw him off further. We were descending at almost eight hundred feet per minute. If everything worked out, in just over two minutes, we would be landing on the open ocean as a glider.

Bruno looked at me smiling. "This'll work." He knew exactly what my plan was without me speaking a word.

Listening to the noise of the wind took me back to when I was a young air cadet in Canada. I spent most of my summers back then at Camp Penhold, an Air Force Base in Alberta. When I was only thirteen, I had my first ride in the backseat of a glider. A Cessna L-19 Bird Dog tow plane pulled us on a long rope, up to 4,000 feet above ground level. When we were on tow behind the airplane there was lot of noise and turbulence, but when the tow rope was released, it became silky smooth and almost silent. There was only the wind noise as it entered the glider through tiny cracks around the hatch and windows. This Albatross wasn't a lot of different, especially the wind noise. With its huge wing it made an excellent glider.

Everyone had to be thinking the same thing as we descended toward the water: MiGs.

We passed through five hundred feet without incident. With no wind, I was sure the water would be smooth.

"Diane, as we pass through one hundred feet read out our GPS altitude twenty feet at a time. I'll monitor the airspeed."

At one hundred feet, she started her count. My eyes moved from the artificial horizon to the airspeed indicator and back again. I was maintaining one hundred miles per hour indicated airspeed. I held her steady until Diane said, "Forty feet." I pulled back very slightly on the control column, lifting the nose, bleeding off speed.

We touched the water with a nose up attitude and wings level. Although we were moving fast, I couldn't have asked for a better landing. The sound of the hull hitting the water replaced the wind noise. This was the first time I had ever heard this sound. Under normal conditions, I would be wearing a headset that blocked most of the outside noise. The three of us in the cockpit understood what was happening, but the people in the back were in the dark, literally and figuratively. Just as the

Albatross came to a stop, Carlos showed himself again.

“A bullet passed through the cabin breaking a side window.”

“Is anyone hurt?” I asked.

He shook his head and gave me a disgusted look. It was clear he wasn't happy that we were on the water, especially when I explained we were still in Cuban waters.

Bruno interrupted while I was still talking to Carlos. “I'm going up on the wing to check for damage,” he said. He opened the hatch above his seat and skillfully climbed through it carrying a large flashlight. While he was gone I continued to try to explain our strategy to my very rattled passenger. The conversation ended when I heard Bruno running on top of the wing, returning to the cockpit in a big hurry. He dropped through the overhead hatch, landing feet first on the copilot seat.

“We've taken a lot of damage, especially the tail. The good news is that we're high in the water, no leaks.”

I felt a huge surge of relief. “Well done, Bruno. Now, if a helicopter doesn't find us, we have a chance.” I hadn't finished speaking before he disappeared into the front storage compartment. With him gone, I asked Diane for our position.

“The GPS shows us eleven miles offshore. One mile inside Cuban waters.”

“Have you informed Fred?”

“He knows we're down inside Cuban waters. Other than that, he's being pretty quiet.”

Bruno pushed a large long black carrying case up toward me and yelled, “Take it and put it on the wing.” Without questioning him, I pulled and pushed, struggling with the heavy object until I finally had it up on the wing. Bruno pushed a second identical case through the copilot hatch. I grabbed it and pulled it onto the wing. He climbed through the overhead hatch onto the wing. It was just after four and there was no moon to be seen. It was pitch black.

I took a quick 360-degree look around. There were no lights nearby. Without him asking, Diane handed Bruno a pair of night goggles through the hatch. He used them to look for patrol boats. I turned my attention to the sky. I could hear the jets, not one or two, but many. There was an air war going on just above us. I watched a missile being fired from one of them, then flares dropping from its target. The missile took the bait and exploded when it hit the flares.

The night sky lit up for miles around. It was like a huge fireworks show, only many times more powerful. There was a dogfight going on directly

above us and Bruno and I watched in awe.

I asked him, "Who do you think is firing at who?"

"Those are American fighter jets up there—F-16s and F-15s. There must be fifteen or twenty of them. If these Cubans are smart, they'll go home. They don't have a chance."

I had to smile. "As soon as Fred tells us our air space is clear, we take off and continue to Key West. Let's just hope we don't get visited by one of those Russian helicopters. My last experience with those guys wasn't very enjoyable."

"Fred gave me something that might change that." He pointed to the cases. There was no doubt in my mind what was inside.

"Sorry we didn't tell you, but as you know, everything is on a need-to-know basis." He quickly opened the first case and pulled out a Stinger anti-aircraft missile from inside. I was amazed. I'd seen a lot of weapons in my life but never one of these babies. And I certainly wasn't expecting to see one now. Bruno pushed a button that brought the LED screen to life. Then he handed it to me and did the same with the second Stinger. I had to laugh.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Hold onto it and if I do need to use this one make sure you're not behind it when I fire."

After taking a good look at what I was holding I could feel my fear of the helicopters diminishing dramatically. We sat on the wing watching the air show above us for almost ten minutes before we heard the now familiar sound of a Russian helicopter. Their searchlight, randomly scanning the water, was only two, maybe three miles away. Bruno sat on the wing calmly with the Stinger resting on his shoulder. When the helicopter was almost on us, he fired.

The noise and the flame as the missile left its casing surprised me. I was so close I could feel the heat from its exhaust. Almost like a beam of lightning it rocketed its way to the Russian helicopter, exploding about one hundred feet in front of it. The explosion was massive, like a large fireworks display times ten. I had to shield my eyes from the light. The explosion turned into a massive starburst. I continued to shield my eyes from the light emanating from it. The helicopter immediately turned towards land. As it was leaving Bruno explained that that missile was full of a special magnetic material that would disable their electronics for at least a few minutes. That would result in a temporary lose of control, which he was sure had scared the flight crew.

With that helicopter no longer a threat Bruno turned to me, "Hand me

the other Stinger.” He threw the casing from the spent Stinger into the sea, took the second one from me and assumed a ready position. There was a second helicopter a couple of miles away and gaining on us. Bruno was locked onto it, but held his fire. I was hoping this flight crew would learn from what had just happened to their friends and bug out.

Bruno spoke out loud to the helicopter pilots. “Turn around. You won’t like this.” As if they had heard his words the helicopter turned and headed back toward Cuba. He kept the Stinger locked on its target. Diane jumped up from inside the cabin and cried, “Mario and his men are moving.”

“Did they get Roberto?” I asked apprehensively.

“They’ve got him.”

Our conversation was interrupted by another massive explosion coming from Mario’s direction. We were too far away to be sure if he was taking fire or if it was him using a Stinger against an attacker. Logic told me that if we had Stringers, he did too. With her headset still on, I could hear Diane questioning Fred.

“Mario just brought down a Ka-27 Helix helicopter. That was their last Stinger. They now have a second Helix approaching their location and want to know if we can help,” she said quickly. Bruno, who still had the departing helicopter in his sights, immediately fired his shoulder launched missile. I watched in silence as the Stinger made a long ark through the air, towards the Russian helicopter. We were almost three miles away and yet the explosion reverberated with surprising intensity, crippling the Russian helicopter for just enough time to scare the hell out of the flight crew.

After a long pause Diane took a deep breath and said, “Mario says thanks. It looks like the Cuban Air Force is backing off. Fred thinks they’ve had enough for one night. He wants us airborne as soon as the sky is secure.”

“Me too,” I said, watching Bruno throw the carcass from the missile into the ocean. “Do you have any more of those hidden somewhere?”

“Nope, that was the last one.”

Diane went back into the plane while Bruno and I sat in silence staring out at the lights of Cuba, looking for anything that might be moving in our direction. Again, we had returned to being a sitting duck. We bobbed in the water like a cork waiting for sunup, hoping there would be no more visitors. It was four-thirty when Diane popped her head through the overhead hatch.

“Fred says we’ve got two fast moving Cuban Patrol boats coming our

way. It's time to go."

As Bruno and I were sliding back down off the wing into the cockpit, I saw a flicker of light coming from the sun as it started to make its way to the horizon. We climbed into our seats and buckled up.

I told Carlos, who was waiting impatiently just behind my seat, to inform our passengers that we would be taking off again and to get them seated on the cabin floor like they had on the last takeoff.

Bruno and I went through the same hurried checklist as before. With the Albatross pointed toward Key West, I brought the engines to a high speed idle, wanting the cylinders to warm up before applying full power. I asked Bruno for a thumb up when they were ready. I stared out the window in the meantime, imagining the liftoff. There was now enough light for me to see.

In less than a minute Bruno shoved his hand in front of me with his thumb up. I smoothly pushed the throttles forward to their maximum manifold pressure. As before, the flying boat pulled itself up on the water and started its high speed run. I had to use almost full right rudder to keep the airplane going straight. I had been through almost the exact same scenario with my first Albatross. The big difference was no one was shooting at me that time.

"How much damage is there to the rudder?" I asked.

Bruno saw me struggling and spoke calmly into his intercom. "Don't worry, Alan. The Albatross can take it." He pushed down on the right rudder pedal to help me. The airspeed indicator touched ninety before I pulled her into the air. Once airborne, I lowered the nose to build airspeed, knowing from experience that the controls were more effective in fast-moving air. I kept her only a few feet off the water, gaining speed, not altitude. The faster we went, the better the controls worked. I didn't raise the nose until Diane informed me we were no longer in Cuban airspace.

The Albatross seemed to climb by itself up to about five hundred feet. I pulled the power back to cruise and started to breathe again. Bruno adjusted the propellers and the mixture and then turned to me.

"See, I told you she could take it. That's why the pilots who flew her in Vietnam loved her."

We were beginning to relax when an anti-aircraft missile passed under our port wing and exploded in front of us. Instinctively I turned away from the blast. We flew into shrapnel and flames in a steep right turn. The blast hit us hard. The metal particles from the missile hitting the underside of the plane sounded like large hail in a bad storm. Luckily the hull took the

brunt of the explosion. We had almost been hit by that missile. Believing there were more missiles coming our way, I yelled into the intercom.

“Fred, we’re under fire. Where’s our cover?”

“They fired on you from a navy boat in international waters. We have fighters closing in on them. They’ll be there in ten seconds. Hang on.”

Ten seconds is a long time in such circumstances. Just as Fred finished speaking, the engine fire indicator for the port engine illuminated. The shrapnel had ruptured oil lines and as soon as the hot oil hit the glowing exhaust manifold it erupted into flames. Our left engine was a ball of fire. As I was shutting down the left engine two F-15 fighters screamed past us at supersonic speed in the opposite direction, dropping flares and chaff to counter any further missile attacks. With any luck the Cuban ship that had fired on us would be heading back home in the face of such a strong threat.

Bruno reached up and pushed the fire extinguisher button for the port engine. Looking out my window I saw a cloud of white trailing from the back of the radial engine.

Almost yelling I said, “We’re okay, the fire’s out.”

He immediately disengaged the extinguisher, wanting to save what was left in case the fire re-ignited. I looked down at my hydraulic gauges. They were bouncing on zero.

“The shrapnel from the missile ruptured our hydraulic system,” I said. “The good news is, the right engine is still running.” I advanced the throttle on the right engine to the max and opened the cowl flaps in a losing battle to keep the cylinders cool. The GPS showed us twelve minutes from Key West.

Fred came on the radio. “Your six is clear. I repeat, your six is clear. I’ll be waiting for you at the airport.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said into the mike. “A missile took out our hydraulic system. Flaps and landing gear are not available. I’ll be putting her down on the water.” I looked out the window at my port side, and to my amazement, the float was no longer there. The shockwave from the exploding missile had blown it clear off the airplane, and because of this the Albatross was no longer pulling to the left as bad. When the float was torn off it took with it a considerable amount of drag. I laughed in amazement; we were now flying almost straight. There was no longer any doubt in my mind. The flying gods loved me. I opened my side window and stuck my head out as far as I could. Red hydraulic oil was flowing from the port engine cowling. The leading edge of the wing looked like a piece of Swiss cheese. I turned to my copilot.

“Bruno, the left wing is full of holes.”

He shrugged it off, pointing to the fuel gauges. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t look like the fuel tanks were ruptured. As long as the other engine holds, she’ll take us home.”

I took over the controls from my unshakable friend, who then directed his attention to the gauges to determine if there were any other problems. There was so much damage to the left wing.

I got on the radio to Fred. “We have considerable damage to the port side. The float was blown off. I’m going to put her down close to shore and run her up on the beach. Have the fire department standing by. We might need them. We have fifty passengers on board.”

Fred replied with one word, “Roger.”

The sun was climbing into the sky over Key West as I steered the Albatross toward a long stretch of beach, which I was hoping would be empty at this hour. Ahead to my left I saw splashing from four little dots traveling at high speed through the water. As we got closer I recognized that it was Mario and his team. Incredibly, they had made it. I got on the radio immediately to Fred.

“Center, are you in contact with our boat team?”

There was a slight pause before Fred answered. “Affirmative, I have a com linkup with them.”

“We’ll be over the top of their position in approximately one minute. Advise them of our situation and direct them to follow us to shore. If this landing goes bad, we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“Roger, we’re moving to the helicopter now. We’ll be airborne in less than five minutes. Can you give me an idea where you intend to beach her?”

Using the GPS, Diane relayed our intended grounding point.

I said into the mike, “Tell your pilot to fly south along the shore until he sees an Albatross with smoke coming from it. You won’t be able to miss us.” Fred didn’t reply.

I pointed the Albatross so that we would be flying directly over Mario and his SEAL team. We cruised over them at less than five-hundred feet with smoke still billowing from the left engine. For the first time in several hours I allowed myself to think of Andrea. Maybe it was the long tough night, or maybe I was falling from the adrenalin high, I don’t know, but something told me we were over. Even if I pulled this off, she would start a new life and so would I, but we wouldn’t be together. I was fated to be alone. Jenny used to say that my only true love was danger. Maybe she was right. Andrea was a doctor, someone who was disgusted by danger,

who knew its results. She didn't need me. I would only hold her back. My negative inner voice was preparing me for the worst.

We were less than three miles from the beach. Either way, this would be over soon. I pulled the power back slightly on the good engine and started our descent. Looking back at my passengers, I saw some were praying in rapid Spanish while others were scared silent. At fifty feet above the water I raised the nose to bleed off excess airspeed. We touched down smoothly at over ninety mph, less than 1,000 feet from the shore. Once we were on the water, I pushed the power lever up slightly to keep our speed.

I read somewhere in the manual where they advised against high speed taxiing on one engine for obvious reasons. With less than one hundred feet between us and the shore, I pulled the power back to idle. The Albatross kept skimming on top of the water. It wasn't slowing the way I had anticipated. In a split second I understood why high speed taxiing in limited space should be avoided—inertia. I dared not use reverse thrust with only one engine operative. That would apply braking to one side of the plane and easily turn us sideways. Without the wing float, the possibility of flipping over was real. I needed to park the plane on the beach.

My timing was off by only a few feet. The hull hit the beach at about twenty mph and we abruptly skidded to a stop in the soft sand right in front of a five star resort. The entire aircraft was out of the water, sitting on the beach resting on the starboard float. Behind us in the cabin there was panic as everyone wanted off the airplane at the same time. I shut the engine down as Bruno and Diane fought their way to the back door to unlock it. Just as Bruno was about to deploy the ladder, the aircraft, which had too many people on left side, slowly rotated onto what was left of the port wingtip. There was no need for the ladder now since the door was only three feet above the sandy beach. I jumped through the overhead hatch and up onto the wing. The portside engine was billowing smoke from the hydraulic oil that was burning on the hot exhaust manifolds.

Safely behind a large sign advertising a nearby marina with Diane and the passengers, Bruno had to yell to be heard over the sound of an approaching fire truck already spewing foam from its high-powered water cannon onto the burning Albatross.

"The press will arrive any minute," he said. "We don't want to be seen, and you don't need us anymore. We're going to check into the resort. I'll register under my name for when you need to find us." Without waiting

for my reply, he turned to Diane. They embraced and kissed like teenagers, then walked toward the resort, arms wrapped tightly around each other. I was jealous. I had never seen two people more in love and so right for each other.

I turned back to the plane and saw that the fire was almost out. My eyes were drawn past it to movement on the water. Mario and his team were converging on the shore. I watched as they ran my Sea-Doos and their Zodiacs at full speed up onto the beach. They must have traveled fifty feet on the sand before coming to a stop. Then Mario was airborne, thrown out of the Zodiac by its sudden stop. Somehow he landed on his feet. He looked startled for a moment. But then he threw his arms out and arched his back like an Olympic champion who had just pulled off a perfect dismount. I shook my head. Then I started laughing. Only he could pull off an entrance like that. I started running toward him.

Mario gave me a big hug. While we were dancing with joy, Roberto tackled us, and the three of us fell to the ground laughing. Fire trucks poured onto the beach and pumped foam onto the burning engine. In no time the firemen had the fire completely under control.

Fred's helicopter landed beside my Sea-Doos. Not waiting for the rotors to stop, Andrea was out of the helicopter and running through the sand toward us. Just as we stood up from our first tumble, she threw herself at us, knocking us back down. We had a big, long horizontal group hug. It must have looked quite comical to Fred and Mario's team.

The passengers, peeking out from behind the Marina sign, were amused by our beach reunion and started cheering and clapping. Mario got up first, then pulled his brother to his feet, leaving Andrea and me lying on the beach. With emotions running high, she slapped me hard across the face.

"Don't you ever do something that dangerous again!" Then she grabbed my collar and pulled me close, kissing me hard. Holding my face, she stared into my eyes. "I love you, Alan."

She was telling the truth. I could see it in her eyes, which were brimming with tears. Tears of love. Tears of fear that came with loving me.

"There's something I need to tell you." I looked into the eyes of the angel in front of me. "I've never loved anyone as much as I love you."

We kissed.

EPILOGUE

Six months later, Andrea and I were married at Tia Lia's Coral Gables house. A young Cuban-American girl, who was just starting her floral decorating business, did a wonderful job with the arrangements. She took many pictures and listed them on her Internet site for her prospective clients. Innocently, she posted our names, probably in case someone wanted to contact us for references. And someone did...though not to ask for a testimonial.

But then, that's another story.

MORE EXCITING NOVELS FROM MCTR PRODUCTIONS

JOE PILOT MD

ALAN MCTEER JR.

Dr. Brian Joseph Doyle, a renowned vascular surgeon at Vancouver General Hospital ("Joe," to his friends), spends weekends with Harley, his dog, flying his amphibious airplane to remote villages along the rugged coast of British Columbia, bringing much needed medical care to people who wouldn't otherwise have access to it.

Memories of his deceased wife keep his life from being perfect, but his work is satisfying, his time in the air with Harley is exemplary, and his new partner, Dr. Alexandra Sharapova, a beautiful Russian woman determined not to like him, is showing signs of yielding.

Just when it looks like things couldn't get much better, an administrator, Vivian, who has long been in love with Joe realizes that she has the power to pull the plug on Joe and Alex's relationship. What she doesn't realize is that her deed will set off a chain reaction with consequences more dire than anything she could have imagined.

Joe Pilot was inspired by true stories of first responders who regularly risk their lives to save others. In the hands of Alan McTeer, a lifelong pilot, the story of Joe comes fully to life. Joe Pilot is a tale of incomparable passion—for the thrill of flying, the plight of those in need, and the power of love.

RED ZONE

ALAN MCTEER

The plan is to fly a small plane to Colombia, collect the delivery fee, and return to Miami on an airliner. But ace pilot Alan Richards begrudgingly agrees to deliver passengers as well – a last minute concession that will turn his near-perfect life into a mortal nightmare.

A crash landing in a burning plane, torture at the hands of someone who has mistaken him for someone else, and a forced tour of some of South America's most horrifying prisons are only the beginning of the long journey that will ultimately deliver him (and his copilot pretty-boy Mario Rodriguez) into the hands of drug smugglers hiding out in the region of Colombia known as the Red Zone.

Red Zone, a novel based on events that actually happened to the author, pits two well-intended but humanly fallible characters against some very bad men in an adventure that brims with danger, excitement, humor, insight and veracity.

ESCAPE de CUBA

GABRIELA IBARRA

El piloto Alan Richards ha obtenido un empleo transportando a científicos de Greenpeace en un hidroavión, para identificar barcos de carga y cruceros que estuvieran lanzando desechos por la borda. Cuando una falla en el motor lo obliga a aterrizar en un área de México conocida por el tráfico de drogas (y para la cual no ha presentado un plan de vuelo) opta por abandonar el avión, viviendo en una playa a pesar de correr el riesgo de ser confundido con un narcotraficante.

Esto le dio a la CIA la oportunidad de entrar en el juego. Ellos saben que Richards siempre está escapando de su pasado, y necesitan un piloto adicto al peligro exactamente como él para volar al interior de Cuba, aterrizar, subir a dos jugadores de beisbol y salir antes de que el gobierno cubano tenga información al respecto. Pero cuando Alan y su copiloto (un cubano americano Mario Rodríguez – con su propio pasado-) finalmente inician su descenso, no encontrando únicamente a los dos beisbolistas que estaban esperando, si no a más de 50 personas, hombres, mujeres y niños con la esperanza de ser llevados a Norte América. Y eso fue solo el principio de sus problemas....

ESCAPE de Cuba es un libro de suspenso, en donde se ven involucrados decididos agentes de la CIA, miembros de la marina de los Estados Unidos –Seals- despiadados soldados de la fuerza armada cubana, hermosas mujeres y ciudadanos cubanos intentando escapar sin producir oleaje. Es absolutamente una lectura obligada para cualquier persona que le gusta sentir una descarga de adrenalina mezclada con datos históricos reales.