



## PROLOGUE

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He held the pistol six inches from the pilot's head as the plane continued to lose altitude.

"Put it down on the runway." Red lips twitched behind his matted moustache. The quivering voice betrayed his amateur standing in Castro's July 26<sup>th</sup> movement.

"I can't," the pilot said calmly. "She's out of gas. We're going down in the bay."

The clamor of wailing passengers permeated the cabin. The other three militiamen shouted orders while they flashed their Browning automatics and struggled to stand in the aisle.

“I can see the landing strip; we can make it,” the pistol-happy revolutionary bellowed. His comrades passed the word to the panicked travelers, who now realized the four hijackers were diverting Cubana Airline Flight 495 instead of the scheduled landing in Varadero. The announcement of an approachable runway turned the vacationers cries to prayers. A hushed murmur crowded the space.

The captain and co-pilot were composed, relying on their training where skills engage automatically without fear. They glanced at each other knowing they would have to ditch.



## CHAPTER 1

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### *The Find*

#### *Lina*

Lina Ponte was running down the narrow walkway on top of the sea wall when she spied something large and brown bouncing in the waves.

“Emilio, Angela—come look at this!”

The older children dashed over to peer at a rectangular box banging against the coquina-rock wall to the beat of the lapping bay. Seven-year-old Lina had already leaned over too far trying to reach it.

“Get down from there right now,” Angela ordered. “It’s too heavy; it’ll drag you off.”

Lina jumped from the barrier and landed on the grass two feet below. Angela helped her up.

“I’ll go find a pole. Maybe we can pull it to shore,” Emilio said.

He soon returned with a boat hook. Climbing on the ledge, he stretched down while Angela and Lina held his legs. He managed to slip the hook through the handle of a large brown leather suitcase, heavy with salt water. He stood up and dragged it to the beach at the end of the sea wall. The girls rushed to meet him at the water's edge.

The three stood on the wet sand, staring down at the find. Angela, almost twelve, was the tallest. Her long blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin contrasted sharply with Lina’s short dark hair, green eyes, and olive coloring. Emilio, next in height, had just turned nine. With his dark complexion and deep brown eyes, he looked more a typical Cuban than his playmates.

“Let’s open it,” Lina said as she knelt on the damp ground and jiggled one of the two snap latches. “It’s locked,” she said, fingering the keyhole between the latch and the adjacent button-like knob. “We’ll have to break it. Do you have a pocketknife?” she looked up at Emilio with excitement beaming in her eyes.

“No, I can’t have one ‘til I’m ten, but I’ll go look for something.” He darted off, hoping to find a screwdriver near the dock where he had found the boat hook.

“Where do you think it’s from?” Lina asked Angela, who sat down next to her.

“I don’t know, but it looks expensive. These are brass latches and I think this fancy stitching comes only on top-quality leather. Let’s turn it over.”

They flipped the bag over, away from the creeping water. On the newly exposed side, there was a large round sticker with a picture of Big Ben and a British flag. They both sank to their knees.

“It may be from London,” Lina said, touching the label. “At least its owner probably went there.”

Emilio returned with a straight round stick and a clamshell.

“These are all I could find,” he said, holding them out. He joined the girls huddled around the mystery bag. He wedged the makeshift wood nail against the round button and pounded it with the palm of his hand. “If I can push it sideways the latch should pop open.” He picked up the shell and hammered the dowel against the small brass disk. “It moved,” he said just as the stick splintered.

The three paused, looking at the broken dowel.

“We probably should take it to our parents anyway,” Lina said as she got up and brushed the sand from her knees.

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The adults were spending their Sunday afternoon at the Ponte's, relaxing in the lush tropical garden. The flaming royal poinciana trees blanketed them with early November shade. Bougainvillea and croton exploded in a kaleidoscope of color. Rustling palms swept the gentle sea breeze under their graceful fronds. The men clicked ebony and ivory dominos on the hardwood game table, puffed fresh Cuban cigars, and talked about the local cockfighting establishment. The women compared notes on their offspring's schooling and latest antics as they sipped Cuban coffee and sampled guava-and-cheese bites.

The Ponte house was a few blocks from the bay and the Preston Sugar Mill dock. The playmates had taken off in that direction. Emilio's sister, Ana Maria, who was not quite three, noisily objected to staying behind with her mother and father. She was the first to see the older children dragging the waterlogged suitcase toward the garden.

"Mami, Emilio," she said as she pointed and ran to meet her big brother. The adults saw them, but they were too absorbed in conversation to notice what they were bringing until it was dropped in front of them.

"Look what we found," Lina said to her father. "It won't open."

José Ponte took out his pocketknife as everyone gathered around. He used its point to pick at the left keyhole. The latch popped open. He repeated the procedure on the other side. José raised the lid, revealing layers of soggy women's clothing and a small silk pouch. When he opened it, a strand of

pearls, two large cocktail rings, a gold necklace, and several pairs of earrings spilled out on the grass.

“It probably fell from a party yacht and washed ashore,” José said in a concerned voice. “We’ll have to find its owner.”

At that moment Angela’s mother, Olga, who had walked the two blocks from the hospital where she was a nurse, arrived at the gathering. She had been called earlier to help with a medical emergency. Felix Jiménez, her husband went to greet her.

“No, not a party yacht,” she said, sounding exhausted.

“Lina, why don't you and your friends go into the kitchen and help yourselves to cookies and fresh lemonade?” Carmen Ponte said, sensing Olga’s uneasiness. “Take Ana Maria too.” Her expression was so serious that they didn’t hesitate to obey.

Felix took his wife’s hand and led her to one of the white wicker chairs. “*Mi querida*, you look drained,” he said.

Olga was visibly shaken. With her hands over her face, she began to relate the events of the morning.

“I’m not sure what’s happened,” she said as she wiped away tears. “The place was swarming with Batista's soldiers, and we were told to keep quiet. Mrs. Billings, one of three survivors, told me they were flying from Miami to Varadero for their honeymoon when four passengers in olive uniforms pulled out guns and forced the pilots to fly to Preston. The gunmen

claimed to be in Castro's July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement. She guessed the plane ran out of gas because it went down in the bay near the mouth of the river." Olga looked up at her husband with sadness in her soft blue eyes. "Felix, you know how bad the sharks are there—they mangled most of the bodies."

Twice a day the moon pulls the water out of the Mayari River into Nipe Bay. The hungry predators line up at the river's mouth to fill their bellies with fish sucked out with the current. Low tide was not a good time to be in those waters.

"Batista's men wasted no time getting to the crash sight." Olga caught her breath and continued. "They used their machetes to cut off the victims' fingers so they could steal their rings. By the time I got to the hospital," she whispered, "it was a lost cause.

"I overheard one of the soldiers say Mrs. Billings and the other two survivors would be turned over to the U.S. Consulate." Olga paused. "I don't think any of this will be in the newspapers."

José pulled a packet of wet papers from the suitcase. "Take a look at these—cards addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Billings. This is her valise." He gently returned the envelopes. "I'll take it to the vice consul tomorrow. He's a friend of mine. I know where he stays when he visits Preston. He'll make sure she gets her things."

Felix helped Olga to her feet. Almost six feet tall, he provided a strong pillar for her to lean on.



“We'd better head home; you need some rest,” he said. He turned to Lina's mother. “May Angela stay a while longer?”

Left speechless by Olga's story, Carmen Ponte simply nodded.

An hour later Lina said good bye to her friends. Her father walked Angela home, and Emilio left with his little sister and their parents.

Lina wondered what had caused the adults' somber mood. She asked her mother why Señora Jiménez was so tired.

“Why was she called to the hospital? Does the suitcase have something to do with the way everyone is acting? What will happen to it?” Lina continued to pry, but her mother's evasiveness turned her curiosity to fear.