

New Life in New Cuba

It Ain't Over 'Til it's Over

FH Spector

Guardian

Florida

Guardian Books L.L.C.

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A wish for all those still hoping.

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CHAPTER 1

FIREWORKS AND BONFIRES

“UGH!” Carmen couldn’t get her carry-on bag under the bench in front of her no matter how hard she shoved.

“Ma’am. Ma’am. I’m afraid that won’t fit under there. If you hand it to me, I’ll put it in the overhead compartment for you.”

She handed the flight attendant her bag while shooting daggers, then whispered to Mary, “I can’t stand that a twelve-year-old is telling me what to do.”

“Stop. She’s not twelve. Maybe thirteen,” laughed Nina.

Carmen threw herself into her seat on the small plane. The kind that skims the water at takeoff. She then fidgeted with the seatbelt strap before clipping the ends, pulling it tight and anchoring herself to the vinyl. She tied, untied, and retied her hair tie as the flight attendant pulled down the long handle, securing the fuselage door.

Steeling herself, she held a deep breath at the sound of the vacuum as it locked. Wiping her hands on her jeans, she glanced to her right and left, flooded with relief that she didn’t have to fly alone. She exhaled and smiled at her two best friends.

“I’m getting too old for this.”

“Nonsense. That’s saying we’re too old. Because we’re not!” said Nina.

“Exactly. We’ve much to do,” said Mary as she eyed Nina behind Carmen’s shoulder. One look and they both knew what the other was thinking. ‘After all this time, his stupid comment is still zig-zagging through Carmen’s brain.’

Nina and Mary had been Carmen's confidants for most of her life. The three were the only Cuban girls in her predominantly American neighborhood. Each supported the other through life's ups, downs, and sometimes sideways, always a phone call away. And in recent years, some of the most difficult Carmen had gone through in her entire life, had both friends ready to jump in at a moment's notice, determined to get her through.

Since high school, they'd met up often to catch up, enjoyed countless girls' nights, and even traveled together, selecting destinations in a ritualistic way.

They'd each write a destination on a piece of paper, fold and drop it into what they called the 'Ceremonial Coconut.' Whoever's turn selected a creased strip from the shell, their next trip, a journey they'd make together.

This vacation took them to Jamaica, not too far from their home in Miami. The not so hot November weather in the Caribbean provided a nice getaway. Including all the sun, sand, and rum they could take, their love for wine aside.

Nina returned with a deep tan, and her hair was in beaded corn rows. Determined to flaunt it at the next staff meeting, she sought ways to make the hairstyle last a few more days. A lover of shock value, she found fun in the little things, always supplying herself with oglers and endless giggles.

Mary couldn't stand her clothes grazing against her. Despite applying layers of sunblock, her fair skin got sunburned, making her resemble a cooked whole lobster. She radiated the absorbed heat, and still, she remained positive. And as usual, her smile lifted everyone around her.

As the plane took off, skimming the deep azure and turquoise of the ocean, Carmen grabbed her friends' hands, squeezed her eyes shut, and said her silent prayer for the passengers' safe travel to Miami.

The three stared out the airplane window and saw people dotting the beach. The water skiers and jet ski riders bounced over white caps, catching air before landing and soaring again. More than a few boats zigzag foamy trails through the deep blue aquamarine waters of the Caribbean.

Nina held in a laugh at sunbathers on the sand, no doubt applying more sunscreen, while Mary winced. Her friends were on opposite ends of the spectrum, different as can be.

Mary taught fifth grade, so she enjoyed her quiet summers. She loved her profession and took up the slack whenever needed, remaining silent about handsy principals or sloppy co-workers, and though she worked for an organization that disrespected and underpaid teachers, she showed up in her classroom with a smile on her face, not giving it a second thought.

Nina worked as a personal shopper for one of the fancy stores in Bal Harbor. She never bragged about the wealthy people she helped dress. They were all the same under the labels. Wrinkled skin, fake tits, and skin pulled so tight from so many repeated plastic surgeries they left no remnant of who they used to be.

Unlike Mary, she couldn't keep silent. Nina loved telling stories about the older men that hinted about penis pumps, or how virile they claimed to be. Her constant smiles and laughter relieved any tension, often commenting, "not minding the little things."

For Carmen, her thriving business ran itself. Her partner took care of the techy stuff she couldn't wrap her head around and she felt at ease with that. Every day she said a silent 'thank you' that she could count on him, though sometimes she felt guilty for leaving him with the bulk of the work.

He'd taken on half the burden of responsibility, and she'd be forever grateful. His contribution to the business gave

her time to travel, garden, and craft. Not considering herself an expert at any one thing, she loved to dabble in diverse kinds of matters.

Carmen giggled as she swiped through the camera's picture roll. "I see a theme here, Nina."

"Let me guess..."

"Oh, I know!" Mary raised a hand.

"We have got to be more selective with our drink choices," said Carmen.

After a brief ride, the plane landed without a fuss. The ladies said goodbye, climbed into their respective Ubers, and headed home.

Carmen dragged her suitcase up the steps to her comfy home in North Miami. She'd bought it a few years ago when things had gone cockeyed, to say the least. The cottage was just the right size for her. Two rooms with two full baths, plus a bonus room in the back for her hobbies. A good-sized kitchen, and a small yard where she can garden.

The mail carrier left a basket of her held mail on the front porch, just outside the door. Carmen felt more secure having her mail held until her return. She hated burdening anyone with mail or package collection and avoided it when possible.

She moved herself to a kitchen stool, and poured over the enormous pile, separating it into read now, read later, and toss piles, still smiling from the jokes she'd shared with her Girlz. "Girls with a 'z,'" she'd say.

As she sorted through the pile, her heart thrummed at the sight of every envelope stamped 'PAST DUE' in red. All except one. A large manila envelope, which she tossed aside, ignoring the metallic clank it made on the counter.

The one from her mortgage company concerned her most was the first to be torn open. Carmen blanched, her smile melted away. She sensed the blood rush through her legs and

out the bottom of her feet. As she went limp, her body felt like it was separating from her. Like she was standing outside, looking at herself.

Carmen forgot how old she was when she determined herself too old. Her exhausted mental calculator glitched, tired of estimating how much time she'd wasted. At her age, it was too late. The signs were there. Regrets consumed her thoughts, suffocating her in a mess of wine-stained notes, post-its, and magazine clippings.

As of that morning, she'd become aware the person she counted on, conned her. The time she put into her business, and the future she dreamed of, gone, betrayed. Her accounts ran dangerously low, and that was just the beginning.

Carmen aspired to create something solely hers. So, having to take on an associate hadn't satisfied that deep yearning. Upon meeting him, he offered her an arrangement that would help her create the lifestyle she wanted. It dawned on her that the opportunity had been too good to be true.

On New Year's Eve, Carmen stood waving a pile of papers over her head, screaming at her partner. He stared through her, apathetic toward her tears, angering her more.

She threw the files and papers at him from across the room, marched over to the front door, and threw it open. The freezing wind whistled past, but her skin remained unresponsive. Underneath, she boiled. Her scowl burned white hot, unblinking.

Behind her, in the distance, fireworks screamed, and holiday lights twinkled. A virtual light show through car windows. Sweater-clad neighbors blew air horns and walked up and down her block, waving streamers and broadcasting happy

wishes for the new year. The typical banging of pots and pans Cubans use elevated the celebratory clamor.

For the moment, the noise cut off the shouting coming from inside her home. She pressed at the corner of her right eye to still the fidgeting nerve, blocking his face. The temptation to knock him into next week grew stronger.

Alongside the entry table, he collected his briefcase and dropped the mail and papers he'd picked up from the floor. The loud clunk shook Carmen. As he approached, he gripped her shoulder. "I know it's not much, but for what it's worth... I'm sorry."

She shrugged, slapping his hand away, and gritted, "Get. Out." through clenched teeth. She watched him step off her porch stairs, mingling into the hoopla of the street.

With as much restraint as possible, she shut the door behind him, locking every latch. The high-pitched scrape of the chain across the bar sealed her away. Without delay, she slunk to her room. Beside the lamp, she tossed her glasses, and they tumbled off the nightstand.

There on her bed, Carmen hugged her knees tight to her chest. The panic attack squeezed and crushed her twisting insides while she rocked herself back and forth. After a time, she calmed herself enough to sit at the precipice of her lofty bed. Her unpedicured feet dangled as she stared into the abyss below them.

Next to her, she grabbed the nearest tie and pulled her hair back in a tight ponytail and rubbed her face. Panic hit again, and she sucked the air out of the room as she slid to the floor, sobbing, and pulled the linens from the bed. Beneath the covers, Carmen cocooned herself. There, not even her shadow peeked out.

Carmen felt gratitude for the noisy distractions out on the street, and the cushy carpet that comforted her until the tears dried. At once, the noise stopped, and the gates opened.

In the quietness of her room, her mind raced, memories surged, and just like that, her accomplishments disappeared. Everything she'd wish for won't ever happen. Endless lists of ideas, plans, and everything in between, gone. She berated herself for being so trusting. A believer in signs, Carmen angered over her naivete. How had she missed the red flags? She realized they were there all along, and the crushing reality of it had her stupefied. Dumbfounded, she didn't know what she would do next.

Most days she paced around the house, ignoring the dust and the growing supply of empties on the counter. Whenever she opened another bottle, she'd push the old ones back further, not even taking a clean glass.

Add to this, the constant ringing of the phone annoyed her. The screen lit up with text after text. Profound shame kept her from talking to anyone. The humiliation, more than she could bear.

Why aren't you answering the phone?

Don't make me come over there!

If you don't answer, I'll call 911!

Indifferent to the caller, she turned off the phone.

No matter how hard she tried, ideas raced around, and she couldn't catch a single one. Without so much as a nibble of nourishment, she lied in bed, hoping sunrise would shed some light, bringing a new perspective.

In the morning, she stood at the counter, staring at the pot, willing the water to turn to coffee faster than it was able. "Hurry." As she leaned her head on the machine, she inhaled

the aroma of the fresh ground beans, rolling her eyes at the sheer pleasure.

Carmen stared at the front of her mug. A gag gift from Nina. The bold lettering on the front warned, “No talking ‘til I’ve had my thinkin’ juice.” Pouring in a splash of low fat milk, she pulled the carafe and poured before it had finished brewing. “Thank you sneak-a-cup feature.”

She’d wished for a new perspective and it hadn’t happened. A restful night’s sleep escaped her once again, and the tension mounted.

Carmen massaged her neck and shoulders. While sipping her ‘thinkin’ juice,’ she made her way to the kitchen table, placing the large mug in front of her. The steam wafted into her nostrils, warming her face. The earthy blend soothing her spirit.

She looked up and spied tainted memories everywhere over the rim of her black glasses. She exhaled, lowering her forehead to the wood, hard. Her line of sight caught the trash can, cowering in the corner. Upright once again, she held the cup to her dry lips, opened her eyes and steeled herself.

Carmen’s anger festered until she exploded. She pushed away from the table, gouging the wood floor. Her nose turned up at the deep ravine she’d carved, frustrated her more. Yanking the innocent trash can from its hiding place, she flicked off the lid with her index finger, sending it crashing into the wall, leaving a similar marred effect.

For the next hour, she walked around with the pail in tow. She pulled picture frames from the walls and ceremoniously dropped them into the garbage. Shattered glass scraped over photographs, leaving scars in their aftermath. The effect, a dismantling of every memory from the last five years.

Photos of her and her partner in front of their office, award nights and dinners. Research trips that became vacations, expunged from view. He’d become a confidant. A work

husband. She stowed the pictures of her children and her family in a drawer somewhere, and she'd halt at images of her father, staring into his green, green eyes. "If you were here, you'd have protected me." A single tear wove its way over her half smile. This well of tears, the ones for her father, seemed to never dry up.

"Time for round two." Carmen meandered from room to room. She swiped memorabilia from desktops, side tables, and nightstands like an old-time magician. On the entry counter, she pushed the mail to the floor. Another loud clank. She ogled the large manila envelope and picked it up. Annoyed, she smacked it on the foyer table with the red docketed envelopes. When the trash can overflowed, she grabbed a large black construction garbage bag and continued removing objects from her view. The bag grew heavier with each swipe, leaving a void in its wake.

But the biggest catharsis came from round three. In her loungewear and black silk robe, she dragged the few things that belonged to him to the front yard and arranged them into a pile. There weren't many items. They weren't a couple, just partners. In any case, he'd made himself at home, leaving behind an array of unimportant minutia.

Carmen's fury burned so deep she didn't notice the chilly, late January weather. Her robe billowed away from her body with each gust. The silk fabric creating an ominous black cloud that undulated in the wind.

As though it were a ritual, she slammed each item into the pile, followed by a 'FUCK YOU.'

Neighbors gawked at her from a distance, concerned over the severe changes noted in her over recent days, but made no move to intervene. Her dead stare beyond the discarded browning Christmas trees lining the road kept them at bay. Flecks of tinsel escaped, carried by the wind, reached new

berths. No doubt they'd end up in a landscaper's trash bag or tangled in their gas powered trimmers.

Unkempt, the breeze didn't find its way through her knotted locks. The oldest lady on the block mustered up the courage and walked over, trembling. Her quad cane steadied her, and the gray wisps of hair she had left oscillated as though they were under water. Carmen's head swung toward her, glaring a severe warning.

The old lady made an about-face, closed her sweater tighter around her waistline, and retreated the way she came, rescued by onlookers. Their murmurings in Spanish, and wild hand gestures, annoyed Carmen to her core. She could never master this form of communication, distinctive to her native people. Hands at her waist, she turned back to her task and her fire lighting.

Above the mass, Carmen set logs and kindling from the shed. After emptying, she threw the bottle of lighter fluid on the pile. Next, she poured a nice glass of Cabernet, then lit a match and guarded the bonfire from her porch rocking chair. She remained unmoved until it burnt to zero, then raised her glass, shouting, "No turning back now."

While she watched the stack burn, she spotted the neighbors retreating to the safety of their homes. Even though the rampage provided a cleansing effect, the embers of her anger continued to smolder deep in her soul.

Inside, the bleak desolation froze her. Instead of a warm and welcoming abode, the blank walls and display areas, were devoid of assorted chachkies, turning the entire space cavernous. In their place, hollow dust rings. In fact, the vacuum drained her, and she dreaded going back in whenever she'd stepped out.

The following week, without warning, he appeared to collect his things. Carmen knew he'd turn up one day. 'Smug

bastard.’ She threw open the door with utter contempt, stared at him, masked with wrath. Her right hand gripped the shovel she kept nearby, resisting the temptation to swing. He recoiled. Speechless, Carmen pointed at the ash pile in the yard and tossed the trowel at his feet before shutting the door in his face.

There, among the ashes, were the remnants of his laptop, and a couple of awards he’d won. She kept track of him through curtained windows. His shoulders hunched, and head hung low, he lingered too long before setting the tool on the lawn and leaving. In the distance, his car turned the corner, and Carmen’s ire eased.

After weeks of wavering between rage, misery, and self-aversion, Carmen’s mother and friends appeared at her door. They met up, thinking that together, they could stop her from getting away. “Ugh! What?” She crossed her arms and averted her gaze.

They didn’t speak, but if looks could kill, Carmen would be a pile of ash. The three pushed their way past her. “You haven’t answered the phone or returned calls. That’s unacceptable,” said her mother, Gloria, slamming her purse on the table. “And Nina, what’s with the short skirts?” She took off her Marlin’s baseball cap and tossed it on the entry table.

“What? It’s kitschy. Besides, you know what they say, ‘the less fabric you wear, the thinner you look,’” she giggled. The miniskirt hit a smidge too high on her thighs. Its colorful animal print pieces overlapped, layering like a furling sunflower. Her three-inch pumps stressed her sculpted calves, and a brown top stretched over her bust. In fact, Gloria’s right eyebrow shot up, noticing her top might have been one or two sizes too small.

“What’s that smell?” Mary asked. “Gloria, what’s that smell?”

The women passed knowing glances as they walked to the kitchen. They shrugged at outlines of missing portraits and

picture-hanging hooks and nails on the walls, then shook their heads. The furniture held dust ring reminders of earlier tenants. Carmen followed stoic behind them, slumped forward with her hands in her robe pockets. The top edges stained. Her glasses hung at the tip of her nose. With her index finger, she pushed them back up the bridge.

“What happened in here?” said Gloria.

“Are you having a yard sale?” Mary wasn’t as tall as Nina or as thin, though always positive and cheery. Her bosom stretched at her unassuming blouse, and the embroidered Ralph Lauren sweater wasn’t hiding anything. Even her simple trousers hinted at the few extra pounds she put on from their last adventure.

She pulled at the pink bow in her hair that matched the top, and in a nervous voice, “I can help.”

“You know Carmen doesn’t like yard sales. That’s her sister, Sara. Listen. I know what you’re going to say, and it’s not over. You need to snap out of it. Start something new, on your own.” Nina twirled one of her long black curls, then continued. “Isn’t that what you’re always telling us?” She glanced at the ends of the curl and flipped it onto her back.

“Yes. You must have known deep down somewhere that this wasn’t the right person to go into business with,” said Mary.

Carmen peered at them as they measured her. “Except I didn’t. I didn’t know. I didn’t catch the signs.”

The kitchen counter had become a graveyard of empty jugs of Tito’s and several wine bottles. The assortment of dirty glasses matching their recent inhabitants begged to be cleaned.

“Kitchen’s a mess! That’s the odor,” said Gloria. She used the abused trash can to throw away half eaten takeout containers and Uber Eats bags. With the sponge from the sink, she scoured the counters of stuck on food, spraying lemon

scented 409 everywhere. “This is not like you, disgusting.” She held up the sponge as solid evidence.

“Mami, you don’t have to do that, I’ll clean it up... someday,” said Carmen. She’d lost several pounds and her hair had tangled into a knotted nest. Severe wrinkles, coffee, and wine stains in her clothes showed other truths. The girls’ eyes traced over her shirt. Carmen caught sight of the mess and tied her robe closed, tight.

“You should talk to someone before jumping into a new project,” said Mary.

“Did you throw everything away? A lot of those things were antiques and worth money,” her mother chided. “It’s just like you to make decisions without thinking.”

“You know, for a girl who believes in signs,” began Nina.

Carmen snapped up, keeping her anger in check. “Whoa, don’t say it.” She held up a stiff hand. The helplessness of the last few weeks drowned her in self-pity. “It’s been a while since I’ve been ‘a girl.’ Someone my age can’t start something new. Besides, I’m going to go look for a job this week. That’s that.” Her right eye began its nervous dance once again.

“Don’t you dare say that!” said Gloria. “If you’re too old, what am I? COÑO! Stop wallowing. You’re wasting your life, damn it!”

The front door opened and closed with a thump. The women leaned into the doorway. “By the way, your sister is coming.”

“What? Why? Ugh!”

The deep echo of heeled boots on the wood floor grew louder. Wide-eyed, Nina and Mary stepped back in unison and waited, leaning together on the counter furthest from the kitchen entryway. Mary began twisting her hair, and Nina tugged at the bottom of her skirt, avoiding eye contact with anyone, both crossing their arms.

Sara always wore boots, and they always matched a leather belt sporting a large western buckle. She was country all the way. She plunked her vintage leather hobo on the table. “What the fuck is happening? Are you letting this ruin your life?” Sara’s voice bounced off the walls and rose as she tightened her long, braided ponytail. “So you lost your business? Make another one.” She snapped her fingers. “Can’t you see that as a sign? Your life isn’t over. You’re being melodramatic. Now you’ll create something that’s just yours. Oh, hey Nina, Mary.” Her older sister could be short-tempered, and her sharp comments always cut to the core.

“I appreciate you all ‘coming to the rescue...’” Carmen air quoted, “...but I’m fine.”

Sara hooked her arm into Carmen’s and pointed toward her room. “You’re not fine. GO. Shower. Wash your hair, and put on clean clothes ‘cuz ya stink. What happened to your stuff?”

“I needed to do some...spring cleaning.”

“I saw the ash pile out front. Looks more like arson to me.”

Gloria went to the hall table and picked up the mail. As she flipped through, she found every letter stamped ‘past due’ in red capital letters.

Under the envelopes, she found realtor advertisements, and magazine subscriptions headlining ‘The New Cuba,’ and she gasped.

Annoyed, she guffawed and picked up the stack, stomping back down the hall, and into the kitchen. “Your bills are past due! Do you think this is ok?” She waved them around like flags that represented foreign countries.

The open document at the bottom caused the most alarm. “Foreclosure? Your house is in foreclosure? How could you let this happen?” As she waved it around, her mother’s voice escalated to octaves she’d never experienced. Not even

when her sister took her for driving lessons without permission and she came too close to hitting a dumpster.

“Do you mind?” She grabbed the stack of envelopes and foreclosure notice and moved them to a pile of newspapers on the table. “The only one past due here is me,” she said under her breath and pressed her right eye, swallowing the lump in her throat.

“You are exasperating!” her mother went full on Spanglish. “Tienes que hacer tu happiness!”

“Make my own happiness? I WAS! I refuse to stand here and be told what to do. At my age, I’m entitled to make my own decisions. BUTT OUT! All of you!”

Sara slid the mail around, passing quick glances at the senders.

“I knew something wasn’t right with him. He’d changed so much. Listen, I didn’t drive over here to fight with you. You know we love you and just want to help.”

“Mija,” ‘my daughter’ Gloria always called her, “Por favor, move forward.” She said in a whisper, accompanied by a firm hug, then backed away. “What are you going to do?”

The tension in the room became unbearable, resembling the hissing of a pressure cooker whistling its loud warning. Steam needed to escape, but if you took the lid off too soon, its contents would blow out on everything. She wasn’t in the mood to be bullied by her mother, or shoved around by her friends, let alone harassed by her sister.

“I can’t handle this... badgering.” Carmen gritted her teeth, turned and stormed out, slamming the front door. It being her house, she believed she had the right to slam anything she pleased, for now anyway. The waft of the crisp, late afternoon air fluttered her robe, and the engine of her aged Mustang awakened her sexy butterflies as it rumbled to life, sending luscious vibrations everywhere.

She took her usual route on A1A along the beach, Led Zeppelin blasting. She craved the silence of her family's voices. 'They should all keep their opinions to themselves.' Her age, a pendulous weight, flattening her every thought. What could she do?

Carmen settled on a spot facing the shore, got out and leaned on the grill, crossing her arms. The chill of the sea air current summoning giant goosebumps. She slid her hands behind her, and jumped up and back and sat on the hood, elbow to knees, propping her feet on the front bumper. Carmen watched beachgoers pack up their gear and head out as the sun began its gradual decline, dipping below the horizon.

Further out, the ocean consumed a flaming orange sky that stretched to the horizon before her, darkening as the night fell on the sand. She inhaled the briny air, a mix of sea and salt. In the distance, children's laughter brought memories of her own kids playing. 'So long ago.' She closed her eyes, imagining she had no problems, at least for the moment, still craving more from her life.

She hopped off the hood and took off her flip-flops. The sand shifted and slid around between her toes. She felt the grains slide and pile, then slide again. She squeezed them between her feet until they cascaded on opposite sides, always seeking escape. Her clothes flapped in the icy breeze, and shivering, she wrapped her robe tighter.

As darkness fell, stars shone. Twinkling and bright, no two alike captivated her attention. Out on the water, container ships line up as they approach the port of Miami. In the distance, a cruise ship returning from its sea-faring voyage loaded with, well, 'loaded' passengers. The lights' reflection danced on the ocean, dots of yellowy color.

She slid her feet into her shoes, when from underneath, a small treasure poked her instep. A large scallop shell. Carmen marveled at the ridges and the colors. She palmed it into her

robe pocket. In the distance, loud voices cautioned her to take her leave. She felt no urgency to get back. Still, she'd calmed herself enough, and left.

Night had fallen, and her family and friends had gone. On the street, she passed the remnants of the holiday trash. Empty cardboard boxes, before a home for a toy or flat screen tv, sat in organized piles for bulk pickup day. She noticed at least three houses holding on to their dried out Christmas tree, hanging on to the last vestiges of cheer. Carmen laughed to herself, thinking the lights were saying, "Enough already! Let. Me. Down," in their blinking pattern.

Streetlights came on as she pulled into the driveway and turned to hear mothers calling their children in from play, harking memories of bygone days.

Inside her empty house, she tossed the keys on the hall bench on her way into the kitchen to make herself a drink. With a flip of the light switch, her mother's cleanup efforts showed. She'd left the place spotless. They'd even thrown out her empties and left her a clean glass next to a bottle of gin on the dinner table. She plopped herself in a chair and pulled the stack of mail closer.

Carmen flicked aside assorted overdue bills and advertisements. Raising her right eyebrow at the clank of the heavy manila envelope, she pulled it back, tearing the top open. As she shook the pouch onto the table, a set of keys marred the weathered wood top. She picked them up, tossing them around in her hands, then dropped them back on the table.

Inside, a few bunches of clipped pages accompanied the keys. Carmen read aloud the sender, "From the Law Offices of Machado and Sons, Pinar del Rio, Cuba. Hmmm. Not in the mood today." She put everything back in the envelope, gathered the rest of the mail, and crammed it into the kitchen junk drawer. Drink in hand, she went to bed.

Carmen lay there staring at the ceiling, praying for a sign. In the silent moments of the night, she often talked to her father. The all too often habit, brought awareness to the enormous abyss left in the wake of his death. The unbearable anguish squeezed without end.

‘None of this would have happened if you were here,’ she thought. Turning away, a different view might bring a new idea, though she didn’t count on it, until she drifted into an uneasy sleep. No signs, no guidance.

The next morning, Carmen committed to moving forward. Dressed to impress, she hit the street, looking for a job. The look of her bills piling up depressed her, so she shoved them into the jammed kitchen drawer where they joined the rest. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

There were plenty of businesses advertising, ‘Help Wanted.’ In fact, it seemed everyone had a job to offer, just not anyone her age. “This has to be age discrimination.” She slammed her purse on the passenger seat, and fired up the ignition, lightened her mood.

Back home, floating dust particles welcomed her to the bleakness of the house. The phrase ‘Spring cleaning’ still drifted around in her head. She figured it might give her inspiration, or, at the very least, clear out the cobwebs that plagued her brain. A fresh start. Carmen’s resolve fortified at the merest reminder of everything she’d lost, strengthening her cause.

Carmen spent the rest of the day clearing out every drawer in the house. Except the one in the kitchen, which she abhorred. Emptying it onto the counter, she came across the piles of mail she’d thrown in there. Assorted paper clips, post it pads, and long forgotten corks mixed into the heap. At the bottom, she found the manila envelope. “I forgot about you.”

Besides the keys, the bulky package had a substantial weightiness. Tearing it open, she spread the clipped portions

out on the cleaned table. There was a cover letter, and each fastened packet had its own cover letter. She grabbed a bottle of cabernet and a stemless glass, then sat at the counter and poured, splashing wine out of the glass. With an easy swipe of her fingers, the crimson spill was gone. As she read the cover page, her heart drummed faster and faster, and her mind raced, then she slid off the chair.

Trembling, she set the cup down where it teetered and tipped. The dark maroon fluid ran unfettered over the side of the table, dripping to the floor. At the counter she leaned, “This must be a mistake.”

CHAPTER 2

DESPAIR ON ICE WITH A TWIST OF HOPE AND A PLAN

Carmen stopped to call her mother for an explanation. “Why the secret? This is a BIG secret, Ma. How could you keep this from us?”

“Stop shouting. Why dredge up long forgotten history?” Gloria claimed ignorance to end anyone’s quest for answers. “We believed everything would be gone forever. Alfredo never spoke of it, so I never asked, and his insane sister always told stories. We believed nothing she declared. She used to tell people she hid her money in the yard at her house. Ridiculous!” she laughed.

“Wait, you ‘believed’ what ‘everything would be gone forever?’”

“Cuba. Anything we left in Cuba. Anyone we left in Cuba.”

“What happened to ‘we don’t keep secrets in this family?’ Does Sara know?” Carmen pulled a bottle of wine from the rack and set it on the counter with a thump.

“Like I said, we never discussed it. It’s forgotten. No one knows, and it’s nothing now.”

Carmen’s burgeoning despair had her so stressed she grasped the bottle by the neck like she wanted to choke the wine out. Her past due bills and foreclosure plight had her on edge, and she needed to relax. Something stronger, perhaps over ice, would be more adequate.

Next, she phoned her sister to give her the news and lack of information from their mother, and together they agreed to meet with someone that could find out if the documents were legitimate.

The building where they met with the attorney loomed ominously above their heads. Smoky mirrored walls made the long ride to the 48th floor a quiet one. The sisters stole telling glances in the surrounding mirrors.

The attorney's assistant greeted them at the elevator when the doors opened. She was as Cuban as Cuban can get. Her colorful, tight pencil skirt stressed a very full bottom. 'Secretary spread,' Carmen mused. Her high stilettos, untamed hair, and as much Spanglish as she could throw together, all quintessentially Cuban. She introduced them with a wave and a wiggle, and promptly left.

His office, an intimidating space, had the sisters clutching their handbags. There were rich grain tufted leather sofas with brass nail heads and enormous clawed feet spread throughout the office. Carved agarwood side tables sat perched next to each seat, its perfume still lingered among the hides in the room.

On the far end, floor to ceiling windows overlooked downtown Miami. In front of them, a long conference table with swivel chairs that matched the sofas. The chamber had a musky air to it. "Essence of man," she smirked in a husky voice. He even had a bar boasting Baccarat crystal glasses. Beside the cups, a bottle of Henri IV Didognon Cognac. She'd seen a special edition episode on the cooking channel.

On the show, chefs reviewed high-end specialty restaurants serving the extravagant liquor.

Carmen felt conspicuous staring at it as they streamed past the expensive decanter.

She and Sara shook his hand over his desk. Carmen caught her sister scanning his very tall and well-built physique, and laughed to herself, earning a quick glare from her sister.

"These are legit. Many people are getting similar documents. Now that Cuba is a state, and big business is

growing, everyone wants a part. Kudos, if you own land there.” He sounded happy for their good fortune.

“Is there any other family?” said Carmen.

“That’s something you’ll have to research on your own. You should at least see for yourself. From what I read, it’s a remarkable gift. The deadline for claiming the property is fast approaching, so you need to contact the attorney who sent the documents, this... Mr. Machado. I’m sure he can enlighten you more than I.” He shuffled the papers together and slid them back into the envelope. Then, with his long reach placed them across the table in front of them, and sat back in his leather chair, tilting back, hands squarely on his lower chest.

Sara turned to her sister and whispered in a suggestive tone, “Master of everything he surveys.”

“Wait, what about the warnings? They say it’s not safe enough yet,” Carmen asked, ignoring her sister’s zesty comment.

“What place is safe these days? Just consider it. Maybe you two go together.”

Sara couldn’t hold back. “Do you remember how horrible the visits were? You couldn’t put toilet paper in the toilets! ...So gross. No hot water for showering, are you kidding me? No. I’m out. We slept in the heat on ancient uncomfortable mattresses. YUCK! NO! Where do I sign?”

Sara had a knack for making split-second decisions and sticking to them. No one dared to contradict her. She believed her way was the only way, even if she was wrong.

“Why don’t you come with me? Might be worth your while. Come on, please? It’ll be an adventure.” Carmen’s excitement caught Sara off balance. She worried her sister might never get over her recent failure.

“No. I want no part of this.” Taking a deep breath and wrangling patience, she exhaled, “Carmen, what are you thinking? You aren’t going to live there. What’s the point?”

Carmen became agitated by her sister's reluctance to support her. "Of course not! But it might be worth my time. Papi left it to us."

"You're wrong. He gifted it to his other daughter. I'll remind you, one we were unaware existed? He didn't include our mother or anyone else. Why can't you understand this? Nope, I'm not going."

Carmen saw this as a sign. She studied the coffered ceiling, searching. Pausing, she inhaled a deep breath and looked back at the attorney. "Okay. I'll go, alone."

The more Sara argued, the more Carmen pushed back. "To avoid any repercussions, we need to put it in writing since you're not interested," said the lawyer.

Sara interrupted his speech about repercussions. "I. DON'T. WANT. IT. Where do I sign?"

Within a few minutes, the man produced a quitclaim deed, which her sister signed. "I support your decisions, and I want you to have something for yourself, and be happy and all that blah blah blah. *This* is not a good idea. I'll never go to Cuba again. Ever. I don't care how great the vacation ads tout it to be."

The sisters left the attorney's office. In the elevator's silence, they rode 48 floors. Out on the sidewalk, "I can do this," said Carmen. Sara brushed her sister's hair out of her face and sighed, gave no response, and they parted, going separate ways.

Carmen sat behind the steering wheel. "He's right. I have to see it for myself." The word 'gift' kept floating around, a flashing neon sign. Key in the ignition, the rumble of the engine startled a heavy set woman passing her car. Poor thing leapt back at least five feet. She was holding the most adorable pup that gnawed at her fingers. "Sorry!" Carmen called out the window, and turned off the car. She leaned her head back on

the headrest and watched the puppy deliver hundreds of kisses to its thrilled owner.

As Carmen took in the scene, an idea crept in.

Her empty house depressed her. Like an alternate universe with an alternate version of herself; someone she didn't recognize awaited her every time she walked through the front door, so she avoided going home for as long as possible.

A couple of minutes later, she grasped the key to turn the motor back on when she noticed movement in her peripheral vision drawing her up the street. Someone dressed as a large beagle juggled an advertisement sign for a dog rescue. The spinning arrow directed her to a nearby location, prompting her to lock the car and make her way to the kennel.

With a firm grip on the metal handle, she held the door for a family of four, accompanied by two puppies and two excited children. She waited, taking in the utter joy encircling the family, wishing them 'good luck' as they passed through the doors.

Inside the overcrowded enclosure, chaotic barking, dogs jumping, and kids begging filled the air.

Carmen wove her way through the crowd to the front counter and picked up a brochure announcing the adoption event. Countless rescues needed people to give the pups their forever home.

Carmen stepped through the myriad of cages, her heart aching to see so many animals confined. She observed a variety of dogs in each cage, including cheerful, sad, and the most hopeless-looking ones. If only she could rescue them all, she thought.

As she walked through, something brushed her leg. Without looking, she tried to wipe it away.

Over and over, she'd stop to study a dog and something touching her leg had her bending sideways to swat it away, as a fly at a picnic.

Several times she stumbled over the same dog, then a persistent whacking on the back of her leg gave her a full halt as she stared below her crossbody. Soft, pleading eyes on a fine Australian shepherd gaped up at her. The dog's tail wagged against Carmen's calf. Her fur had different colors, one blue eye, and one hazel eye, and this girl with the 'all over the place' look stole her heart. Her tag said 'Spring.' The dog clamored for Carmen's attention. She knelt, knees crackling the whole way, jabbering a reminder to be careful. "Do you want to go home with me?" she asked the pup. The dog's tail wagged as if to answer 'yes', followed by the sloppiest slobbery kisses ever recorded.

"I see you chose a pup," the kennel worker said.

"Hmmm...I guess she picked me." Remaining at attention at the counter, the dog peered up at her, knowing full well she'd be leaving with Carmen.

Before she realized it, the leashed animal sat shotgun, with an enormous bag of dog food, on the seat behind them. Carmen purchased a dog bed, treats, and everything her new companion could need or want.

As the front door cracked open, the dog pranced in, making herself at home. She inspected every room in the house. Carmen smiled as the emptiness dissipated.

Together, they sat on the soft couch, and the pooch cuddled in right away. "What should I call you? Your old family called you Spring." The pup whined and dropped her chin. "Maybe... Calliope?" Her head popped up, and she jerked it away. "You are so full of personality. Phoenix?" The dog sprung up, barking at the sound of her new name. "Okay then, Phoenix." Carmen leaned back, taking in her surroundings. It's still not the home she once had.

Phoenix proved to be an entertaining roommate. Every morning, she'd run her bathroom routine. She trotted through the yard, sniffing bushes and checking behind the shed and

under the car. If Carmen watched her, she'd wait for Carmen to look away before doing her business. "Okay Phoenix, I'm not looking." Her bashfulness gave Carmen the cackles.

Afterward, Phoenix would walk the inside perimeter of the fence, and stop for a tidbit from Carmen's neighbor. Sometimes she earned a dog treat, others a piece of leftover chicken or steak.

"You're spoiling her!" Carmen called out from the front porch, and Phoenix rebounded back inside with no argument.

Carmen and Phoenix were inseparable and wandered everywhere together. Despite getting her a dog bed, she'd decided she'd sleep next to Carmen on the bed or under the covers, and no one could convince her otherwise. Even her friends noticed she spoke to the dog as though the pup could verbalize an answer. "Look at her. She's a person." The dog turned her head as though she understood every word Carmen uttered, but lacked the vocal skills to answer.

Phoenix's habit of disappearing, then returning when good and ready was getting old. One day, at the dog park, Carmen threw a tennis ball, which Phoenix always retrieved, except this time. This time, she didn't come back. Carmen spent the next couple of hours looking for Phoenix. She'd even enlisted other people to help find the dog. Her panic lurking just outside her body, waiting to take over at any moment.

The fenced-in playground prevented her from leaving. Out of nowhere, Phoenix bounded back at Carmen's side, the tennis ball in her jaw. "Explain yourself, missy. Why do you keep disappearing?" The dog provided the companionship she needed, but an unseen weight hovered just behind her.

The strange inheritance and her future occupied her thoughts. Dragging them with her, they got heavier as the days passed. With a deadline fast approaching, she was floundering, still rudderless.

Carmen's burning wish to understand why her father kept these secrets his whole life agonized her. She had so many questions. What else didn't she know? Were there any other children and were they in contact? A 'why' followed every new question. She decided to call her mother.

As usual, Gloria refused to divulge any information about her husband's existence before her.

Carmen realized she spent the whole of her life swimming in a sea of unanswered questions, secrets. She set her mind on digging for answers herself.

"Oh, here we go. A plan. And you got a dog?" said Gloria. Carmen inhaled a deep breath and held it in, forcing herself to keep her mouth shut.

Exhaling, "Yea, isn't she cute?" Carmen bent to pet and cuddle her pup. "You told me to get over it. I'm trying! You spend so much time telling me to 'move on,' 'make good choices.' This is my choice now, so I'd appreciate your support."

"You cannot allow your frustration to lead you in the wrong direction. This is a dangerous plan. Cuba has a habit of keeping people. You've seen the reports." Mary's voice trembled. "You're safer staying here. Let it go."

"I disagree. The attorney expects it's fine for her to go over there if she wants. I think it's a good idea for Carmen to investigate," said Sara, with a nod from Nina.

Carmen smiled at the support she had from her sister and one of her best friends.

"Excuse me, am I so old that you assume I need to be protected from myself? Sara, you're older than me! Since when do you dictate what I do? Mary, Mom, stay here and do what? My kids are living their own lives. Travel, work, promotions, moving. My grandkids are in college. There has to be something

more. What am I doing? Waiting to be visited by the grim reaper? Plus, I don't want to be a burden."

"That's not what I meant when I told you to find your happiness. Do you realize the dangers you'll face? You're always running away!" Gloria argued. "It's not yet safe enough. Besides, there's nothing there."

"You told me you knew nothing. Now you're saying there isn't anything there." Carmen didn't engage further. Instead, she edged out the door like a scolded toddler.

At her table, Carmen studied magazine articles praising a thriving 'New Cuba.' Grabbing her laptop, she went into a deep dive.

In her research, Carmen found online photographs marking the day Cuba became the 52nd state. There were celebrations in every province. Crowds of smiling families dancing in colorful garb, flooding the streets. At last, help arrived, bringing hope to the people of Cuba. Carmen couldn't contain the pull of her heartstrings. She understood the soul of her countrymen well.

Now, traveling to Cuba is as easy as moving between landlocked areas of the U.S.. Gone are the days of living in a constant police state.

She recalled a frightening stop at a military checkpoint out in the middle of nowhere as her uncle drove her back to the airport to fly home.

Her heart pounded again as she visualized him being yanked out of the car. The soldiers shoved him against the side of the '54 Buick. One searched him while the other held his AK-47. An old man, he didn't seem afraid. She supposed he was used to it. Carmen looked away, replacing the memory with one of them having a Cristal on the porch her father had built for him. The overwhelming experience kept her from returning for another visit.

Shaking off the image, she continued reading. Carmen scanned page after page of articles describing the boon.

A few of the features honed in on how investors flocked to the island.

As business opportunities expanded, European and American corporations returned to Cuba, and were prospering well.

Endless websites boasted pictures of CEOs shaking hands with their Cuban counterparts. There were even exports stamped, “Made in Cuba.”

The more she read, the more comfortable she became with traveling to the island.

There were even reports about the resumption of oil well operations along the coast.

The rigs produced more than enough crude to supply the island, and the overabundance yielded untold financial opportunity, as the state exported copious barrels of material.

She recalled passing the cordoned off pumps by the coast when she visited, and a new understanding blossomed. The potential had always been there.

It surprised Carmen to see the speed at which Cuba improved. The biggest development being the travel industry. Given recent news reports, it shocked her to read that tourism had grown to its highest point in over seventy years.

Visitors from across the globe arrived, and hotels marketed themselves as the ‘Most Luxurious Tropical Destination,’ urging early reservations, resulting in full bookings.

“This must be what Sara meant. Not caring how much they ‘tout it as a vacation spot.’” Ferries carry vacationers and their vehicles and packages to and from the Florida Keys to various ports in Cuba.

There were even pictures of cruise ships docked in Havana, that were on constant rotating dock assignments; one leaving while another waited offshore.

Visitors from every country migrated to bask in the soft sand of the stunning beaches, eclectic culture, and delectable food that defines Cuban life.

“This isn’t so dangerous. They don’t know what they’re saying.”

It enthralled Carmen to learn the positive aspects of ‘New Cuba.’ Saddened by others that painted a contrasting picture, giving her pause.

Besides the rampant poverty, thefts, and kidnappings, dishonest tradespeople were everywhere.

She’d read many warnings describing random criminals taking advantage of the naïve traveler.

“Hmmm. No different from here.”

Carmen contacted Mr. Machado, the attorney who’d sent her the documents, a specialist in retrieving confiscated assets in Cuba. He explained how the failed regime seized and burned documents and banking records, nationalizing everyone’s property.

The papers in his possession were certified copies of the originals. When she asked who’d hired him, he declared it had been an anonymous person who wanted to ensure Carmen received the papers and claimed her rights to the estate. His fees included. She gave him her arrival date and time.

“Very well, Carmen, I’m not sure how comfortable you’ll be, but I’ll have the power and water started. You can call on me whenever you need.”

A few days later, her suitcases sat by the door, ready to leave. She called Nina and Mary for an impromptu girls’ night. In reality, she planned to tell them her plans, with no idea of when she’d be returning.

“You’re going? Why? Gloria said there’s nothing there. Don’t you think it’s extreme? There are still warnings of subversives.” Her eyes widened and welled while she twisted her blond hair and tossed it behind her. The word subversives coming out in a whisper.

“OOOOOO, ‘subversives,’” Carmen mocked, waving spooky fingers.

“Now wait a minute. Why do you think it’s extreme? It’s time Carmen shakes things up,” Nina says with her usual party girl wiggle. Her short skirt showed off her long, tanned legs. She never dressed her age. “Are you taking this gorgeous lady with you? What will you do for food? Coffee? WINE?”

“I’ll bring my girl’s kibble, bottled water, and a trunk full of my creature comforts. It’s not that far away and I’m not staying there. I’m sure I’ll at least find the necessities. Haven’t you seen the videos of the progress over there? I bet it’s the same as being here.” Carmen looked at Mary and threw her arm over her friend’s worried shoulder.

“Bet it’s not. You missed the videos of the destruction. How can you be so calm?”

“I’m not afraid. And everyone is always telling me to ‘move on,’ ‘find happiness.’ If this isn’t a sign, then I don’t know what is. And yes, Phoenix is coming with me. Number two, there’s a deadline. I promise, if I don’t feel safe, I’ll come right home.” She took the house keys from the envelope and clipped them to her leather dragonfly keychain.

“Yeah, if they let you out,” said Mary.

CHAPTER 3

NINETY MILES AND THERE'S NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

As Carmen waited to board the ferry in Key West, she hung out her car window, taking in the sea air and appreciating the familiar Keys hangouts.

The tiki bars with thatched palm fronds hunching over the sand, resembling giant land crabs. Vacationers leaning on their weathered wood, enjoying Mai-tais and daiquiris sporting umbrellas. Others held tropical drinks decorated with fruit skewers, unbothered by the chill in the air.

She could make out loud speakers playing Jimmy Buffett songs on one end of the beach and salsa music on the other.

Closer to the water, there were countless beach umbrellas and tents on the sand. Carmen watched as sunbathers applied tanning lotion and sunscreen, proving there's more to life than worry and disappointment.

Glancing further over the pier, she spots the giant red striped buoy marking the 'Southern Most Point' that pronounces 'Ninety Miles to Cuba.' "So close, and still so far." Phoenix sat shotgun taking in the sights, turning to look at Carmen as though she understood, bowed her head. Now and then, Carmen could hear a low whine and her dog's tail whack against the seat in rhythm with the waves that crashed against the pier. A soothing melody.

The ferry lurched southward through the choppy waters of the Florida Straits as Carmen's hands white knuckle the steering wheel on the unsteady ride from the Florida Keys to Cuba, bring on a wave of nausea.

Being prepared, she opened a sleeve of her saltine crackers and nibbled, calming the queasiness.

Carmen listened as the ferry's speakers play Spanish music. There were songs she recognized, others she didn't. Then the captain cut in to welcome travelers. The intrusion temporarily squashed the otherwise enlivened vibe.

She knew they were being played for the vacationers on board to enjoy, readying them for their island escape, and not for the twitchy older woman who still wondered what the hell she was doing on that ferry.

Arriving at the port, the harried bustle enthralled Carmen. Once a major stop for shipping lines, it has regained its former fame.

Farther out, Carmen spotted large vessels carrying freight lined up to be unloaded, mirroring any other port in any other first world country. No doubt bringing food and supplies that now flood the previously empty markets.

Every time she'd visit, she bring her family much needed food and medicine. Clothes and bottles for babies, and medical equipment for the infirm. Once, she even brought enough homemade lasagna to feed all 87 people in her family. It was no simple task to get it all past the checkpoints at the airport.

On the other end, enormous cruise ships lower their planks and unload passengers.

Once on the pier, passengers climb into excursion buses that will take them inland to visit living history. Security seemed tight, but Carmen was thankful no one was over-armed with assault rifles.

Driving toward the port exit, Carmen spotted a row of small shops. The typical tourist trap hangouts were packed with travelers hustling for last-minute souvenirs.

As she glanced overhead, a large rum depot sign advertised last minute specials.

Carmen read an article that focused on using Cuban molasses to make Cuban rum. She imagined their returning to Cuba must have ushered in a new renaissance, attracting connoisseurs of fine spirits.

The thought of people finally going home to a place they'd given up on buoyed her. Their dreams of returning, actualized.

Taking the A4, Autopista Este-Oeste Road off the ferry toward Pinar del Rio, everything looked different.

She spotted new construction on both sides of the road. On one side, the state was constructing a massive luxury marina with super high-rise condominiums overlooking the sea. "Those will cost a pretty penny, huh, Phoenix?"

On the other side of the road, they're building an enormous outlet mall. It appears to sprawl the breadth of the road leading to the interior of the island. She guessed it would be a big draw for visitors.

Carmen drove on, impressed that she drove on roads with no potholes and freshly painted divider lines, reminding her of a visit where her cousin explained that they only painted the road lines until they ran out of paint. And they always ran out of paint. After that, you had to figure out how to stay in your lane.

The thought of 'staying in her lane' made her laugh. This whole thing was way out of her lane, and being here, alone... also way out of her lane.

Signs everywhere advertised the "Restoration of Cuba" or inviting people to be "Contributors to the Rebuilding." Everywhere she looked, evidence of rebuilding popped up.

Driving past the older buildings, she noted the remnants of the conflict bleeding through holes, no doubt made by gunfire. Carmen couldn't imagine what happened when the ordinance fell, blowing everything apart, and killing faceless people. Children. Farmers running for cover and families being

tortured for being sympathizers ripped at her soul. Everything she'd seen on the news, also clear. She felt blessed she didn't live here when the last invasion took place. Eyes pooling with tears, she dared not blink.

Images of her parents escaping on her second birthday flooded her mind. Her mother kept her close in her arms as they boarded one of the last planes that left Varadero Airport. 'One diaper, one blanket, one bottle' her mother always reminded her. Those were the only things they allowed her parents to take when they fled. A single hot tear carved a path onto her cheek.

She remembered the family her parents left behind, along with the ties of family and home she could have had. They've gone from here now. Losing her father snuck up on her again, unbearable grief pressed on her chest, choking her as tears she couldn't hold, waterfall from her eyes. She didn't grow up here, but she was born here, never knowing where she belonged.

Similar to so many ex-pats, it's a strange feeling to have your feet on the floor, yet not feel firmly planted. Displaced. One foot here. One foot back home. Many left, futilely holding on to that fantasy that one day they'd return and pick up where they left off. Then again, so many closed and locked the door, leaving it in the past, their anger welding it shut.

The GPS coordinates led her to a royal palm-lined road. Like any road off the main highway, La Carretera Central, orange clay dust flew everywhere. Pulling in front of the house just past dusk, the darkened building menaced in front of her, she looked out her window, up to the top floor. "This might have been a bad idea... hmmm, too late now, Phoenix."

The windows didn't bare the common wrought iron bars that most houses in Cuba featured. Staring, Carmen shoved the gearshift into park, and something inside her pulled.

Sighing long and heavy, she squints through her bifocals to check the coordinates included in the instructions in her GPS. She'd visited family on the island as a teenager, leaving with memories she'd cherish for the rest of her life. But searching out her windshield, she just didn't remember this place.

She recalled walking at her Tio's side through his banana plantation. The day was hot, but in the shade of the banana trees, the breeze kept them cool. "La Vega," as the family called the farm, was everyone's favorite place to gather.

His house wasn't fancy, just a shack with a screened-covered patio, but it was heaven on Earth. The memory of those paper-thin, crispy, fried plantains her Tia fried made her stomach growl, and her heart ache.

Soon after, memories of the oppressive heat creeped in, and she remembered sweating profusely. The discomforts becoming irrelevant as she was distracted by the closeness and love of a family she didn't have back home.

Few people had wall air conditioners installed in bedrooms. The lucky ones only used them for the hottest nights, and only for sleeping. Those had Russian settings. Carmen couldn't read Russian, but appreciated the relief from the heat that seared her shoulders during the day.

Being grateful she'd arrived while the coolness of the winter months still hung in the air, she sighed. Staring at the house brought out a longing she'd long ago packed away, like winter coats you can't use in the tropics.

Shifting back and forth, he studied her through the window of the large empty dining hall. He didn't want to touch anything so filthy. Careful not to lean and mess up his linen clothes, he set eyes on her as she got out of the car and stretch,

and the ground shifted under his feet. Breathing out heavily, he stubbed out the last of his cigar, grinding it hard into the floor. She had that entitled look Americans carry when they visit the island, like they own everything.

He remembered the day the foreign military made landfall. So much confusion. His family had been scrambling to get survival supplies together, no simple task when food was so scarce, all the while they argued where to hide.

Reports were released, saying that the new invasion would be the last to take over the country. Someone had warned his family of an imminent attack. Cuba had suffered so many conquests, it became hard to discern where one ended and another began.

Sweat dripping on his back, he could not pinpoint any one feeling. He had a job to do. This will complicate it. He slithered out an eastern window and waited for her to get inside before leaving.

Searching her deepest recollections, this place eluded her. The Key West-style house appeared to be shaped like a sphere, maybe an oval. It seemed so run down, a sudden breeze could disperse it as though the wolf had blown on it in *The Three Little Pigs* or a house in the movie *Twister*. She couldn't help feeling pressed. Her creaky car door opens, and she reluctantly turns to exit the car. A wave of panic hits as it occurs to her she's here alone, but the why she's here escapes her.

Going through her regular coping mechanisms, she calmed her nerves. Leaving her feet on the edge of the door-opening, she props her elbows on her knees, deliberating as she stared at the gravelly driveway.

After a long exhale, she clasped her hands to her forehead and says aloud, "What was I thinking? I'm too old and broke to start again." Phoenix let out a loud woof that made her

jump. Her weary green eyes stare at the ground. “Okay. I’m here. Let’s get this over with.”

Exiting the car, her Merrell hiking shoes crunch on the gravel outside her Mustang. The deep navy paint job was now covered in dust from the drive.

Creaking joints popped and snapped as she stood. An icy, dusty wind wafts a warning through her light brown hair, and psithurism sounds around her have her looking in every direction. Dragonflies zip around her in their forwards and backwards rhumba, rounding out the desolation.

Brushing the last of the saltine crumbs from her colorful bohemian top, they cascade over her torn jeans. Staring up at the three-floor house, she reached high, stretching her back. Grabbing her cooler and the manila envelope from the back seat, she turns to the house again. The keys inside rattled loudly with the slightest jostling. It didn’t sound like the clanking of regular keys. These sounded morose, echoing a warning of something just out of sight.

In the front yard, mostly dead, overgrown brush and weeds took over. To the right of the porch stairs sat a faded red 73’ Corvette Stingray. Treading lightly through the brush, she sidled next to the car. “Hey baby. I’ve always wanted one of you.”

Carmen ran her hands along the side of the dusty car. “I know sexy butterflies, we’ll get to it.” She walked on, leaves played tag across her shoes, taking to the sky now and then sailing on whirling currents.

The yard stuck out as clean as the Everglades swamp. Fearing snakes, frogs, and anything reptilian, she continued until she reached the bottom of the wooden stairs. From this vantage, the main road appeared a million miles away, down a long, straight drive. Turning back to the house, she gazed up and blew out her unease.

At the top of the steps, a wide plank porch stretched in front of her and beyond the end of the house, unseen in either direction. Looking up, green mold and ferns grew from between the planks in the ceiling. A disgusted, “Ugh, gross,” escaped her lips. Turning toward the door, she calls out, “Phoenix!” Her pup jumped from the car window and bounded through brush and tall weeds, landing just near the bottom step with an enormous dust-up, wagging her tail.

With a few excited leaps, she made it to Carmen’s side and sat statuesque. Looking at her, Carmen rubbed her ears with an encouraging ‘good girl’ smile, and in turn, got rewarded with a rhythmic tail wagging that beat against her leg, Phoenix’s love language.

She paused, thinking about home, and started to-do lists in her head. Things to accomplish once she got back. “Stop it! Finish this and get out of here.”

As much as she wanted to be home, something tugged at her to see this through. She had to handle it so she could move forward.

Carved wood made up the massive double doors. Cobwebs and cocooned insects made it difficult to discern the design. She took the sweater from around her waist and batted the silk threads away from the lock and doorknob. Another step forward inflicted an uncomfortable cracking sound beneath her feet, and Phoenix retreated behind her and gave a low whine.

Gingerly, she stepped on different planks, fearing they’d cave in at any moment. Each step complained with a crack so profound it reverberated through her spine and up to that place between her shoulders where all her worries and fears sat thick.

Rolling her shoulders and her neck, she got the keys in the lock with a modicum of trouble. The rusty doorknob forgiving the sudden intrusion turned without a bother, but the oxidized hinges weren’t as cooperative. It took a forceful push to get them to concede entry. The rasping and fracturing sounds

of the door opening sent shudders to her feet. Looking at Phoenix, she exhaled, “There’s no time like the present.” Tail wagging, the dog did not hesitate to make herself at home and trotted past Carmen to do her own inspection.

Breaking through cobwebs, the impending darkness enveloped the space. A chilly wind whistled an unfamiliar tune through the open section at the center of the house, spiking goosebumps on her spine. Anxiously, she turned on the lights to her immediate right.

“Oh HELL NO! There’s no way we’re staying here.” Phoenix bounded back, stomping, staring, and whining at Carmen to get her point across. “I know, sweet girl.”

As he approached the house, he saw a car in the driveway. Nervously, he hopped the wood beamed fence and crept through the high shrubbery and abandoned vegetation to get a better look. It wasn’t the strange man he’d seen lurking around the house.

He spotted her stretching, then walk over to the old Chevy. She lingered, her hand caressing the sloped edges of the wheel well. Her hair blew in the cool breeze, and turning toward the house, she made her way up to the door. Something about her drew him towards her. Knowing he couldn’t get close, he backed off, staying low. From where he stood, he let his eyes drift over her face, to her body, and he held his breath, feeling a rush he worried he couldn’t control.

At the top of the steps, she called a dog. He regarded it, “Beautiful animal.” Realizing he couldn’t go inside until she left, he made his way around the western side, keeping low. He’d wait, watch.

Staring through the elongated house, the pair trudged through into the back, finding the kitchen, where Carmen set her cooler atop a bed of dried leaves and twigs. She brushed aside the mess, revealing a rusty old andiron. After inspecting it, she dropped it with a clank among the debris and rubbed her hands together, ridding herself of the orange iron oxide residue left on her fingers.

Just then, a very loud screeching sound came from the cabinets at her feet. Grabbing the andiron, she opened the door -which fell off the hinges- and two of the biggest rats she had ever seen jumped out, shrieking and fighting their way across the floor.

Phoenix barked in defense, then reared back. Carmen screamed while the rats continued their squabble. Scrambling, she jumped onto the nearest chair, clutching the top of her blouse and gagging. Her eye twitch returned with a vengeance. The rats scampered straight into a hole in the hallway closet door, completely out of sight. Before she could calm herself, she heard sounds coming from the back door.

Still on the chair, breathless and gagging, the back doors violently flew open, and her body flinched toward the sound.

The dark silhouette of a man emerged, wearing gloves, what appeared to be a stiff leather apron, and aggressively waving a shovel, reminiscent of a horror movie villain.

He took an oppressive rock-like step into the house. Running towards him, a ferocious Phoenix jumped between Carmen and the stranger, growling and barking wildly in a defensive stance, slobbering through gritted teeth. "AHHHHH!" she screamed louder.

The man dropped the shovel with a loud clank and held up his hands. Carmen continued screaming. Waving the andiron, she gripped it with both hands like a burly baseball player. "WHO ARE YOU?" she screamed. The man stepped into the kitchen light.

“WHOA!” he yelled. “I’M THE GARDENER,” still holding his hands up in surrender.

“HOW DO I KNOW YOU’RE THE GARDENER? YOU’RE IN MY HOUSE WAVING A SHOVEL!” Carmen screeched, still winding up her swing, and still standing on the chair.

As calmly as he could, he said, “I’m wearing gloves, and I was waving a shovel, not to mention I’m covered in mud!”

After a long pause, she took a deep, shaky breath and tilted her head. “Oh... I’m sorry. You scared me.” Fixated by the sight of the other, their bodies immobilized. Carmen slowly lowered the andiron, then looked at the floor, readying herself to step off the chair.

Cautiously, she climbed down when he darted forward to help her, at the same time removing his soiled glove. Tentatively taking his hand, a spark fired between their fingers, and she gripped her makeshift bat. Carmen noticed the softness of his hands. His hazel eyes bore through hers, all the way to the deepest parts. Places she allowed no one. His breath caught, and all notion of time fell away.

Carmen attempted to shake it off. “Well, the rats scared me. You came in a close second. Who are you?” She stared at him, scrunching her eyebrows, as she stepped off the chair. He stood close, too close. Still holding hands, they froze until she let go and backed away. Her eyes relaxing. The man took a step back, dropping his gaze to the floor. He breathlessly put his hand to his chest and eyed her feet. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah... yeah. Thanks.”

Her eyes inspected him, drifting over every bit. He had a pleasing yet somewhat satisfied smile that promptly stopped her wandering notions. She’d seen that smile before and it sent her radar scrambling. The man was about her age, maybe a little older. He stared, open-mouthed.

Carmen stepped back as his self-assured steps made their way further into the kitchen, closer to her. Phoenix let out a barely audible complaint. He brushed his ruffled light brown hair back, tight, tying it in a man-bun. ‘Pretentious,’ she thought.

The beginnings of that distinguished gray were showing in his hairline. “The... gardener,” he said, in her personal space, in a voice so deep it curled her toes. He bent to pick up the shovel, tracing over her body, standing too close. As he retreated, he turned back to catch one more peek of her over his shoulder, catching Carmen checking him out.

She caught herself looking at his backside as he walked away, “Nope,” she shook her head, and forced her eyes to look straight in front of her and could hear a snicker as he made his way through the double back doors, Phoenix at her six, she stood in the doorway. He slung the shovel over his shoulder, striding over the steps and out toward his truck, his pace commanding.

“It’s dark out here. I think I’ll head back inside,” she called out to him, but he ignored her. Carmen and Phoenix went back inside, securing the back doors. She gazed out the kitchen window at the red taillights dimming as the distance between them expanded. “Hmmm, weird guy. I think we need to keep our distance.”

In the house’s quiet, subtle echoes reverberated around her. Birds sang the last of the day’s notes, and warm breezes whistled through glassless, shuttered windows. The rolling of dried leaves across the floor rounded out the symphony of nature around her. The two began exploring the ground floor. She sensed the house cry out for help, and that familiar tug grew stronger.

Carmen took too long to go on, so Phoenix marched past her, sniffing along the edges of the ground floor, disappearing into rooms, and popping upstairs, no doubt

making the rounds there as well. After a quick inspection, she trotted downstairs and stood at her side.

The center of the house had a courtyard with an enormous coquina fountain. Crunching leaves across the dirty floor, Carmen heads toward it and looks up to the gloomy top two floors.

The ceiling had domed glass, revealing the night sky. Leaves escaping their prison floated on air from the mezzanine through the stone railings. Rising moonlight lazily lit up the main floor, glinting the crystal in the chandelier above the foyer, casting a kaleidoscope of colors on the fountain, and odd shadows that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention.

Carmen sat on the edge of the bare basin. She slid her fingers across the blue and yellow mosaic tile that made up the bottom of the massive reservoir. Since the fountain appeared to be intact, she hoped the plumbing worked and one day could hear the trickling melody the water played out.

Scanning the center of the house, she noted the upstairs walkways were held up by stately arched columns that wrapped around the ground floor.

Kicking aside the debris, she uncovered a black-and-white checkered marble floor, rivaling the stars that peeked through the darkened sky.

Typically, windows in Cuba didn't have glass, or screens like the ones back home. Though she noticed some rooms did have windows with screens, the entire house appeared to have had the windows open during a wind storm delivering enough leaves to build a forest.

As she walked away from the fountain, she called out, "Phoenix, come." She turned to admire an enormous azulejo mural on the opposite wall.

Despite the surrounding abandonment, someone assembled the painted tiles with great care, and they remained pristine. “This must have really mattered to someone.”

The image depicted a Spanish Galleon unloading crates on a pier she assumed to be a port in Cuba. They entranced her, so she studied every piece. Men and women in period attire waited to board the vessel. Behind the ship, calm seas and a glorious setting sun. The colors bright and spectacular.

A sonorous knock startled her and Phoenix.

“Hello,” she said, peeking from behind the safety of the half-open door, with a guttural protest from Phoenix right behind her. Carmen scanned the person outside the door while replaying the warnings she’d read about back home.

“Hello. I’m Lucrecia. I live in the neighborhood.” She had a serious, downtrodden expression and stared at Phoenix, whose meager grouse sent a warning not to get any closer. Backing away, “Mr. Machado asked me to stop by and make sure you made it in okay.” She wore a calico dress and heavily scuffed flat shoes. Her half apron appeared to be clean, but had oil stains and frayed edges that divulged its age.

“Oh, yes. I made it in okay. How kind of him! And you. I hope you weren’t inconvenienced too much to make your way over here.” Carmen noticed her graying hair needed a visit to a salon, and her hands evidence of someone who’d worked very hard the entirety of their life.

“No, I’m always around...” she answered Carmen in an intimidating pitch accompanied by a sideways glance, then studied Carmen from top to bottom. “Oh, I brought you a flan. It’s a special recipe. I hope you like it.”

Carmen took the offering and thanked Lucrecia for her kindness. After several minutes of silence, she thanked her for checking in and closed the door.

“Weird, huh Phoenix?” She looked at the flan, but the strange meeting didn’t inspire confidence in the custard.

Carmen peeked out the side window and watched Lucrecia walk to the end of the driveway, disappearing in the darkness.

She had no intention of having any. She placed it in the small refrigerator. Though it wasn't an apple, it reminded her too much of Snow White. Turning, she eyed her things and Phoenix. "What are we doing here?"