

# **S**T RIDES OF D E S T I N Y

Loly Trelles Garriga

*To Avery, Our most precious gift and the reason for writing this  
story. With all my love, Abi*

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# CHAPTER 1

## LEAVING CUBA

VARADERO AIRPORT, AUGUST 28, 1969

# STRIDES OF DESTINY



With the children before leaving Cuba (1969)

## LEAVING CUBA

The irresistible beauty of the endless white sand outlining our teal green sea captivated all my senses as a magnetic force engraving forever in my mind this unforgettable place. Varadero Beach, a natural treasure located on the northern coast of the Province of Matanzas, was once a favorite vacation destination for all Cubans and travelers from every part of the world. Alongside its beautiful beach stood exclusive, luxurious state-of-the-art hotels, condominiums and residential grounds that contrasted sharply with the modest hotels and private homes nearby.

During our summer vacations, my parents, younger brother Robert, sister Conchy and I would drive to this beautiful place. Our hearts would pound rapidly as we impatiently waited to see the ocean rainbow with its many shades of blues and greens, the tall pine trees, blossomed sea grapes and, above all, the plush white sand as pure and soft as our sweet sugar cane.

The excitement of being there would awaken us early every day, prompting us to get into our bathing suits to savor the embrace of the early morning sun's rays sparkling like diamonds on the surface of the transparent sea. A comfortable old wooden colonial home welcomed us every year. I remember entering the roomy wooden floor lobby where white ceiling fans refreshed the warm summer atmosphere. There we would sit on the veranda to contemplate the moonlight's reflection in the sand and the coconut palms' static silhouettes, only disturbed by the movement of its leaves. In the dark waters, the light delineated an endless path that disappeared in the horizon. At bedtime, we lay underneath our mosquito nets in the spacious first floor rooms overlooking the magnificent beach while listening to the soft sounds of the waves rushing to the shore and feeling the tropical breeze impregnated with the smell of jasmine. When vacation time was over, we could not hide our sadness and longing to return once again to paradise.

My yearning to come back to paradise was now replaced with grief, and even the bright sun hid behind the dense clouds to avoid witnessing our despair and agony. I felt an intense pressure on my chest and a knot in my throat suffocating and silencing my cry.

## STRIDES OF DESTINY

That morning of August 28, 1969, my husband Alex, our two daughters Beatriz and Vivian, our aunt Luisa and I traveled to Varadero in our blue and white 1956 Ford Fairlane to a friend's house that offered us lodging in the hours before our departure to the airport. It was forbidden for Cubans abandoning the country to use hotels and restaurants that were now property of the state, and we considered ourselves fortunate to stay with friends. Shortly after arriving, the owners of the house greeted us and apologized for having no food to offer us except a bowl of soup for our baby daughter Beatriz. Food was tightly controlled by the government and the small portions allotted were sufficient to feed only the persons of the household. By now, it had been more than eight hours since our last meal and we were fatigued and hungry, so we decided to look for a street vendor. Near the house, we found a small food stand crowded with people. As we approached the crowd, our ability to move forward was blocked by everyone fighting to get in front of the line, desperate to eat. We had to struggle our way forward to get a piece of bread with chorizo and a shaved ice cone.

Time seemed to pass more quickly, so we had to hurry to arrive at the airport on time. The long-awaited moment was near and we felt the anguish and fear of the unknown. After years of struggling to be free to start a new life, the uncertainty of our future weakened our resolve.

Our five-year-old daughter Vivian, tall with long brown hair and eyes, seemed much older due to her mature disposition. Although pampered, she was docile and well behaved. She had always been in love with the sea and had a hard time understanding why we were so close and yet we could not go for a swim. Vivian kept pointing to the water, wanting to go to the beach, so Aunt Luisa offered to take her for a few minutes while the rest of us got ready. As soon as Vivian returned, I remember her saying, "Mami and Papi, I embraced the sea." In that moment, her words were a blessing and a sound of joy.

The road heading toward the airport was heavily congested with long lines of cars moving slowly. Everything appeared to be unnaturally calm and still. I looked around to find only deep sadness on the faces of the people traveling beside us:

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there was no light in their eyes and a look of distress invaded their visages. Our freedom of expression had been taken away, and the silence of the people hurt us deeply.

As we approached the airport, two military soldiers in olive green uniforms gave us orders to bring down our luggage and then move our car out of the way. Only those who were traveling were permitted to enter the building, allowing no time to say goodbye to avoid delays. I carried my baby Betty in my arms and Vivian was holding onto my dress. Behind us, Alex carried our duffle bag where we had packed only what they allowed us to take.

Together we walked inside the airport where we expected them to check our documents and luggage. We saw hundreds of people waiting there, mostly women, children and the elderly. We already knew that by law men between the ages of 15 and 27, as well as professionals or specialized technicians, were not allowed to leave the country.

One by one, each traveler was called to the front desk, and finally it was our turn. All of a sudden, a cold sweat ran through my body as I tried to hide my anxiety and fear. Alex handed our documents to the immigration officer who carefully examined them while staring at us.

He addressed Alex asking, "Are you a physician?" Alex responded with hesitation, "Yes, I'm a doctor." The officer told him, "Do you know that you are considered a traitor by wanting to leave the country?" Alex and I exchanged looks, not knowing what to say. His voice, with an edge of sadism, stated, "You cannot leave the country; you have not been authorized by the Regional Health Department." Alex firmly replied, "My permission has been granted by the National Health Department, isn't that enough?"

With disapproving arrogance, the officer turned to a comrade beside him and they both began to review our documents. The officer derisively told Alex, "You cannot leave here without the permission of the Regional Health Department! If you want your wife and children to leave, sign this Power of Attorney."

Alex's hand shook as he reached out to grab the paper. We looked at each other to find strength, then we walked to a

nearby corner table in the waiting area to read the document. My vision blurred with uncontrollable tears as I begged Alex, "Let me stay with you so we can all leave together." Alex assertively told me, "I prefer to know that you and the girls will be safe, and this may expedite my departure." He looked at me, imploring my support, and without further hesitation, he signed the document and turned it in.

The officer sarcastically ordered us to "kiss each other and say goodbye." All I wanted was to hold on to Alex; I did not want to live without him. He looked deeply into my eyes full of tears. We hugged each other so tightly that I could feel the warmth of our bodies melting with one another. Our daughters were looking at us, not knowing what was happening, but sensing our distress.

We could not let our emotions seize control of us. We had to be strong for our daughters and for each other. Our sobs and despair would not change the decision already taken. An intense pain pierced my heart as Alex whispered, "Be strong and never forget me." He kissed his daughters and hugged them tightly. Nervously squeezing a small handkerchief, Vivian asked her Dad, "Papi, are you coming with us?" Alex told her, "I will be right behind you on the next flight." Vivian insisted, "Let Betty and Mami go together, and I can come with you." Alex, about to lose his composure, walked away.

At that point all I could think was how could life continue when our world had just collapsed? Betty started to cry, raising her arms, asking to be held; she looked tired and weak. Her cries got louder as I hugged her close to my heart, now without holding back my own sobs. Without warning, a strong hand pulled me by the arm and said, with an authoritarian pitch, "Go outside until the hysteria is over." We stood in the dark patio surrounded by a wire fence that was only visible when illuminated by the few headlights that passed us by.

After a few hours, the three of us, exhausted from our emotions, were asked to come inside to identify our luggage. Holding Betty in my arms while Vivian held onto my dress, I dragged the duffle bag to the officers waiting to inspect it. A fellow passenger offered to help and placed it on top of the

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counter. All of the items were separately taken out and thoroughly checked, even the hems and seams of our clothes, to make certain we were not hiding any valuables. I was asked to remove my wedding ring, which they decided to keep. I do not know where I found my courage and strength to ask, "Can you please give it back to me? As a jewel it does not have much value, but it means everything to me!" My own audacity surprised me, and, without much thought, the officer returned the ring.

It was only nine o' clock in the evening; if we got lucky, we would be catching the first flight out at nine o' clock in the morning. A long night awaited us. Vivian sat next to me and Betty stretched her body on my lap when I noticed her diaper needed to be changed. The bright lights and loud noise in the room prevented Betty from falling asleep, so she became restless and started to cry, asking for milk and refusing the water I tried to give her. I looked around and in the far end of the waiting room I saw a cafeteria that was closed, but there was a lady cleaning. When she saw me, she advised me they would be distributing food later. I told her, "All I need is milk for my baby." Cautiously, making sure no one detected her, she walked toward the refrigerator and filled my empty feeding bottle all the way to the top. I felt grateful to know caring people still existed. I thanked her before leaving, and she told me to come back if I should need more milk.

I returned to find that our seats had been occupied, so I looked around to find a place where I could feed Betty who was already holding the bottle. A long line full of women holding babies were waiting to enter another room and I decided to stand in line; when my turn arrived, a woman officer stared at Vivian, whom I held by the hand, and stated, "The older child is not allowed in this room." I replied, "The three of us are traveling together and I have no one to look after her."

The officer denied us access, but a woman nearby overheard our conversation and offered to watch over Vivian. Before I could say anything else, Vivian began to cry, pleading, "Please do not leave me behind." By then, we had delayed the line and it had doubled in size. Vivian's cries exasperated the officer

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who rudely pushed me inside, adding, "All right, but the bed is only for the baby!"

The long, dimly lit room was filled with folding cots and chairs along each side of the wall. I placed Betty on top of the first available bed and changed her wet diaper while she continued sucking the bottle of milk. Vivian sat at the foot of the bed falling asleep. I told her, "Lie down in the bed," and caressed her. When they both fell sound asleep, I moved my chair against the wall to lean my head. My body was too restless and numb to fall asleep. Too many thoughts came to my mind and I asked myself, "What will become of us?" To calm myself down and make time go by, I closed my eyes trying to dream about the happy moments in my life.

## CHAPTER 2

MY HOMETOWN CIENFUEGOS

1957

## STRIDES OF DESTINY



Alex and I when we were dating in the early 1960's

## MY HOMETOWN CIENFUEGOS

Like a movie, I can see the images of my loved ones and the city where I was born. I spent my childhood years in Cienfuegos with its wide avenues, beautiful parks full of laurel trees that provided plenty of shade and our dearest Paseo de el Prado where we used to play. From my balcony, I had a panoramic view of one of the most popular spots of the city, and I felt privileged living across from El Prado.

All around El Prado you could find numerous cafeterias and restaurants where they brewed the finest aromatic Cuban coffee and made the best ice creams, tropical fruit shakes, Cuban sandwiches, Cuban hamburgers and fritas, all for the cost of a few cents. The scent of all the different foods gave the place a distinct flavor that invited the appetite.

In the morning, the elderly would gather to share the latest current events while getting their shoes shined. In the evenings, the younger generation invaded the place. Some of the benches belonged to certain groups who habitually gathered in the same spot night after night. They enjoyed looking at the beautiful girls strolling by and improvised compliments and flirtatious remarks, all delivered in good taste.

During weekends and holidays, our favorite pastime was to walk up and down the nearby La Calle San Fernando, the biggest business shopping district, where you could find, among many other stores, the famous "Ten Cents" where the young people would meet to drink an ice cream soda or purchase any item from a pencil sharpener to clothing and cosmetics. In January of 1957, new faces began to arrive into town, many of them students returning home after the University of Havana had closed due to the political instability of our country. President Batista's regime was losing ground more each day as student opposition manifested in the organizing of riots that culminated in an assault to the Presidential Palace. Many well-respected student leaders lost their lives, prompting the University to remain closed indefinitely.

On one spring afternoon, my friends and I were enjoying the fresh air, watching the coming and going of people walking by without any rush. We were all taking our customary stroll along La Calle San Fernando when, unexpectedly, a group of

young men, newcomers, closed our path. As they passed by us, my eyes were fixed on one of them that gazed back with an intensity that made me blush. He was slim and tall with black eyes and hair, and a beautiful smile. He wore a guayabera, or Cuban linen shirt, light-colored linen pants and two-tone black and white shoes. Once they had passed, I pointed him out to my cousin Marie who was walking beside me and I said to her, "I want to meet him!"

The next morning when I woke up my first thought was of the young man I had seen the day before. I was intrigued and wanted to find out more about him. I was busy day dreaming when I heard my mother's voice saying, "My friend Hilda was telling me how dangerous Havana has become, her nephew who studies at the University of Havana Medical School returned home uncertain when and if the classes will resume." I looked at my mother and commented how we had seen a group of young men who were probably students of the university.

Days passed by and even though I went out on several occasions, I did not see him again. A few weeks later, Pedrin, Hilda's son, called to invite us to his house to play Bingo. He was getting a group of friends together and it was going to be a fun time. The invitation was a blessing from the sky since there were fewer parties now due to the increasing threats of sabotage by the members of the revolution.

When I arrived at Pedrin's house and walked into the dining room, everyone was already there waiting for us. The only available chair was next to *him*. He quickly rose and cordially extended his hand to introduce himself, "My name is Alex Garriga and I am Pedrin's cousin. I believe I saw you a few days ago." I paused before answering, thinking how he had remembered me, "Yes, I do remember you. My name is Loly Trelles and it is a pleasure to meet you." And without another word said, I sat next to him. Thankfully, the game was beginning sparing me from having to make conversation.

During the game, very few words were exchanged, but once the game was over, we stayed talking about the existing problems at the university and the motives that influenced him

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to return home. He really believed that this was a temporary situation and that soon he would be able to continue his studies. At the time, I was thirteen years old and I admired the way he conducted himself, how he spoke softly and confidently, appearing older than his nineteen years of age.

When the moment came to say goodbye, I only wished that I did not have to wait long to see him again. The Bingo games became more frequent, sometimes at his house or at mine, and we continued to see each other this way. I was falling in love with him and even though he did not express his feelings, I could see in his eyes that he liked me too. Just the simple touch of his hand accidentally brushing against mine made me feel a different sensation never experienced before. I could not wait until our next meeting and only the idea of being away from him made me feel uneasy and impatient. I needed him in my life and dreamed about our first kiss. What would it be like?

The summer months on our Island were warm. To cool off we would spend a lot of time at the beach or at social clubs that provided swimming pools and enclosed baths in sea lagoons. There we would meet our friends to listen to music generated by a jukebox with hundreds of popular records: The Platters, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Nat King Cole. We loved to listen to American music and romantic Cuban boleros. We enjoyed bowling or simply sitting and talking in the open deck under a canvas top that protected us from the sun.

Bathing and swimming in the freshwater pool at the Cienfuegos Yacht Club was our favorite pastime. It was August 27, 1957, and as usual my mother sat underneath the umbrella by the pool to chaperone me. Alex and I shared intimate glances as we talked, when suddenly his tone of voice grew serious and he asked me if I would like to be his girlfriend. My face started to break out into a sweat from my nerves. I was shocked to hear his question and did not know what to reply, so I asked him to give me some time to think about it. Conceivably hurt by my response, Alex replied, "No problem," and began to swim away from me. At that moment, I felt silly and wanted to die. I loved him with all my heart and was not willing to take a risk, so right away I called out to him,

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"Alex, okay!" I felt so embarrassed by my childish behavior that I did not say another word. Immediately, I looked at my mother sitting across the pool, but she was clueless. Knowing she would disapprove, thinking I was too young to get into a relationship, I decided I would keep it to myself.

That evening I waited impatiently for Alex to arrive while sitting on a bench at El Prado across my house. I was wearing my favorite yellow cotton halter dress bringing out the summer suntan of my body, my long hair was up in a pony tail, and I applied some light make-up. I wanted to look attractive for him. I anxiously wanted to hear him say that he loved me since we were now going steady, and I needed to tell him how happy he made me. Mama was watching us from the balcony as Alex arrived and did not give us any alone time when soon she called, "Why don't you come up and talk here in the terrace?"

Every evening, a radio show called "Chisme Swing" ("Gossip Swing") played popular songs and related the latest happenings and gossip. All of us were paying close attention to what was being said, when suddenly we heard: "Why was Alex so happy today? Could it be that Loly gave him a yes?" There was a long silence in the terrace where we all sat, and I could feel my mother's piercing look upon us. Although Mama never asked us directly, and we never talked about it, she knew. That evening, as soon as Alex left our house, she told me I could continue to see him as long as it was at home. From that moment forward Alex would visit my house every afternoon and my mother would chaperone. At five o'clock I would look out from my balcony, my heart beating fast, and as soon as I saw him coming I would run to meet him at the top of my stairs where sometime we would kiss without my mother noticing.

\* \* \*

## MY HOMETOWN CIENFUEGOS

Alex was an orphan at an early age, but his parents had made a gorgeous couple. His mother Zeyda was very slim, fair-skinned, and blonde; she appeared fragile next to Ignacio's tall and dark, athletic physique. They shared an immense love that gave birth to his older sister Ivy and to Alex, three years later. My parents were good friends and my mother remembered visiting during the births of their children. In fact, she had held newborn Alex in her arms without knowing that years later he would become part of her family. Their death was a tragedy; they were full of life and had so much to live for. Ignacio was only thirty-two years old when he developed a perforated ulcer that was misdiagnosed. After his death, Zeyda became very depressed: losing him so suddenly worsened her lifelong heart condition and she died four years later. Ivy and Alex were left under the care of their maternal grandparents.

As I look back and reminisce about how my parents got back together, I believe the hand of God destined Alex and me for one another, even before we were born. Dad was a very handsome man over six feet tall with light brown hair and beautiful almond-shaped green eyes. My mother was a slim brunette, five-feet five-inches tall with big, bright brown eyes, and the sweetness of her smile made her special. Mama was friends with Alex's aunts and their father Juan Garriga who felt much affection for my mother. My parents had been engaged to be married until my father went on a date with another girl and my mother found out and broke their engagement. My father regretted his actions immediately and asked for her forgiveness, but full of pride she told him that everything between them was over. When Juan learned what had transpired, he asked his daughters to invite Mama for a snack at his house and he invited my father. My father was hiding when she arrived and Juan asked her if she still loved him. My mother replied, "Yes, but what he did hurt." Juan asked her, "What would you do if Roberto promised to be true and to love only you?" Before she could reply, Dad came out and with the help of the old man Juan, they convinced her to take him back. Juan was the first witness at my parent's wedding. As destiny had it, his firstborn grandson Alex married the first child from that union.

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I believe it was God's way of rewarding him by uniting our two families forever.

\* \* \*

As the months passed by, each day became more dangerous. The increasing instances of threats and sabotages emptied the streets and closed businesses. Most people avoided going out, fearing a terrorist's attack. The people were revolting against Batista in different ways, distributing propaganda and planting bombs in public places, and his army was taking strong measures to keep order and peace. If you looked suspicious, they apprehended and detained you until a full investigation was completed.

One night a new movie Giant starring Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean and Rock Hudson was premiering at the old Prado Cinema and we finally convinced Mama to take us. My siblings, my mother and I went and sat in the special balcony reserved for our family on the second floor. The movie had just begun when all the lights and sound abruptly went out. Mama advised us to stay seated, and if the electricity did not return we would go home. Nearly twenty minutes later the public began to get up and leave.

We began to feel impatient and a sensation of nervousness invaded us. Since bombs had already exploded in places where people gathered, we felt apprehensive. Our mother stood up and told us to start exiting toward the stairs to reach the first floor. She started to walk in front of us, and, in that precise instant, a loud explosion went off. The people panicked and began to push us down, trying to escape. I could feel the fear all around us. They did not care who they ran over, they just wanted to get out and save their lives.

Mama pushed us against the wall to let the mass pass by. Frightened, I started to scream and two slaps hit my face. I thought my mother was inhumane; it took me a few minutes to recognize that her quick thinking had actually saved our lives. Once we were outside, we could see a dead, trampled body lying on the floor, and we could hear the nearby screams of

## MY HOMETOWN CIENFUEGOS

pain from a woman who had just lost her foot – the bomb had been placed near her seat. I never forgot the sensation of fear that this incident caused us.

\* \* \*

Christmas in 1958 would differ from prior years. It was always our tradition to celebrate at my maternal grandparents' in a small town named Cruces, twenty minutes from our house. The whole family would get together and dine at a very long table headed by my grandparents Pepe and Concha. Concha had two single sisters, Pilar and Beatriz, who lived with them, and they were the most generous and sweetest aunts I have ever met. Our trips to visit them were a blast; they always had small surprises for us and gave us their undivided attention to make us feel loved and welcomed.

Our Christmas Eve celebration was a grand party that started the day before with the seasoning of "el lechon" (which consisted of garlic, cumin, oregano, salt and pepper, and most of all lots of sour orange juice. I remember the delicious black beans, the yucca with garlic sauce, the famous turrones and the red Spanish wine.) After the meal, it was time for the "sobremesa" where the adults remained seated and gathered around the table to enjoy the conversation. Meanwhile, the children played. At midnight, we would go to Catholic Mass and afterwards to bed. My grandmother and aunts would put us to sleep telling us stories of other years.

Unfortunately, this year we would stay in our house due to rumors of military soldiers taking over the roadways. The general outlook was that the provinces of Oriente and Camaguey were under the power of the rebelling army, and they would enter the province of Las Villas in a matter of days. That year, for the first time, we ate alone. It was a sad Christmas.

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, my parents, siblings and I celebrated the end of the year at our house. Alex came over and we waited for the New Year together. After the twelve bells rang on the clock, my mother opened a bottle of champagne and we ate the twelve grapes. Every year we would make a wish. This year

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we all agreed it would be for peace to prevail and for the family to always stay together.

## CHAPTER 3

THE TRIUMPH OF THE REVOLUTION

1959

## STRIDES OF DESTINY



Alex parents Zeyda and Ignacio



## THE TRIUMPH OF THE REVOLUTION

During the first sunrise of the year 1959 we all slept soundly, when unexpectedly I felt a strong shake and heard my mother's voice telling us, "Get up, come hear the news: Batista has left, leaving the military forces in charge of the country. They are giving the news on the radio and on television." I shook my head because I thought I heard incorrectly, but the broadcaster's voice clearly repeated the same news again and again. There was no doubt we were now free of a dictatorship.

On that same day, the rebels entered Cienfuegos with rosaries and scapular medals hanging from their necks. They wore the familiar olive green uniforms and drove caravans of trucks, Jeeps and automobiles through the towns, raising their rifles while screaming, "Viva the 26<sup>th</sup> of July and Fidel!" Masses of people followed behind them in their march of triumph.

The women of the town wore red and black, the colors of the revolutionary movement. From the balcony of my house we could see hundreds of soldiers marching by and we waved at them enthusiastically, full of happiness. At that time the Cuban's sentiments were divided: those in support of Batista's regime were fearful about the possible reprisals against them, while Castro's followers were full of hope and excitement about all the promises and plans to improve the lives of the less fortunate and allow the citizens to choose the right leaders to guide our country to a brighter future. Although I never sympathized with Fidel's ideals, that day I was moved by the contagious feeling of hope and happiness surrounding us. Everyone wanted to contribute to the prosperity of our Island.

Alex did not trust them and worried about the ideas of the "Fidelistas." He would say, "They are going to be worse than the ones who just left." I did not want to believe him and hoped that he would be mistaken.

In Havana, the members of Batista's government were leaving in planes and yachts; many were caught by surprise when they woke up to the morning news. The looting got out of control at many residences belonging to supporters of Batista's regime. People were burning personal objects and furniture on the streets. Days after, the rebel forces entered Havana and Fidel was claimed a hero.

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Addressing thousands of Cubans, Fidel gave his first speech promising peace, freedom and equal rights for everyone. And, respectively, these were the first things that would be taken away from us.

The rampant public trials and executions that we had never experienced before now became common all over the island. The people began to doubt the system because, obviously, it did not respect the rights of others. Laws were taken into the hands of individuals and prison sentences and punishments were imposed without first proving guilt.

When the university resumed classes, Alex returned to Havana. Being away from him was pure torture, but we looked forward to his graduation and the culmination of our dreams. Days before his departure, he asked me to wait for him: he wanted us to get married. There was nothing more important for us than being together.

We had not yet recovered from one nightmare when another one began. We heard rumors that our government was Communist. We kept waiting for the government elections to take effect, but they never did. Unhappiness and mistrust kept growing all around us. The government started expropriating land from the rich landowners with the excuse that they needed to share them with the poor farmers, a policy called Agrarian Reform. Later, they decided to do the same with the houses: if you had rental property, the tenants became the new owners under the policy of Urban Reform. Soon everybody was deprived of their right to ownership, and the government became the exclusive proprietor. We did not know what Communism meant, but we knew it existed in remote countries such as the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland and other places where war and oppression were patronized; it was certainly not possible in our happy peaceful Island ninety miles from the Americans. Fidel tried to convince the country and the rest of the world that his revolution was as green as the palms and not red like some said.

As the situation worsened, many of our friends and family abandoned the country. The more powerful enterprises began to transfer their bank accounts to foreign soil. Many were

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able to take jewelry, money and valuable objects out of the Island. There was talk of the government enacting a law to gain authority over children below the legal age. Panic struck many families, and parents began planning for their children to leave the country.

By this point, the majority of the people knew they had been betrayed by Fidel. My parents realized they had to act fast if they wanted to protect our rights to be free. Divisions among families, even between parents and their children, were created, encouraging some to denounce those not in agreement with them to the government. Families started to separate and hate flourished, damaging the most valuable of our possessions, loyalty.

Before the revolution, my family had belonged to the upper middle class, and besides the benefits from a good livelihood, the prestige of our name was undoubtedly our biggest asset. Prior generations had laid their positive tracks before us by cultivating access to the most influential and respected people of our community. My father was a well-regarded businessman, owning and running the most popular establishment of the time, the theaters. We enjoyed a very comfortable life-style, and we had a live-in nanny Daniela that helped my mother with our care; she regarded us as her own and stayed with my parents until they left the country. My mother was always in charge of supervising and selecting our meals and clothing, and helping us with school assignments. For every holiday and special celebration we gathered together, as family was a very important part of our lives.

My parents wanted us to learn English, so my sister and I started attending the classes of the American Dominicans, also known as The School of Our Lady of the Rosary, at a very young age and continued until our graduation from high school. Our school was run mostly by American Catholic nuns and our fellow students were like sisters with whom we shared most of our lives.

Soon enough, the new government forced all the private and religious schools to close down and expelled their religious personnel. Slowly they were tearing us apart from the breast

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that had fed us, and we cried bitterly saying farewell to our teachers amid the deserted hallways of our schools. We knew our happy, worriless lives would never be the same.

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One evening, my sister and I had gone to see the premier of "A Summer Place"; American movies were still allowed and the theater was full. Young people loved everything American: movies, music, actors, as well as other performers, they all had a very strong influence on our country and on us. As we were walking out at about eleven o'clock, I could see a crowd congregating at our house across the street. "Hurry, something is happening," I told my sister and we started to run. We arrived out of breath and met Mama and Papa as they were coming down the stairs. They told us, "Your brother has just been arrested and taken away in a G2 (Bureau of Investigations) Jeep...we did not know what happened or where they took him." My sister and I immediately said, "We will go with you!" My mother responded that it would be best if we stayed at home in case any calls came in. My brother was the youngest of the three of us—he was only twelve years old—and not capable of doing any harm. This had to be some sort of misunderstanding.

A group of neighbors stayed with us at our house, and as the hours slowly passed, we got restless. At last, we heard voices and footsteps; we ran towards the stairs to find my parents with my brother talking amongst themselves. My brother was white as a ghost. I asked my parents what had happened while I hugged my brother who replied, "I was sticking labels to protest against the government that read, 'Down with the red boot!' when two military soldiers grabbed me and took me away in their Jeep." Thankfully, when he was searched the soldiers could not find any evidence because that sticker had been his last one. Even so, they took him to a detention center, interrogated him and put him behind bars. When my parents arrived, they decided to let him go, but not without advising him to behave, because if there should be another incident,

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things would not be resolved so easily. Mama added, "After this warning, I believe the safest measure is to prepare the children's documents and send them to the United States." With my eyes wide open I said, "I do not want to go." Mama replied, "The three of you are minors, therefore we will decide what is best for you." At seventeen, I was still underage, and she had the sole authority to determine my future.

That night I could not fall sleep; I could only hear Mama's words repeating themselves that we had to leave the country. After a while, I calmed myself down by reasoning that tomorrow all would be forgotten, that she had overreacted to my brother's incident. On the contrary, the days that followed were dedicated to getting our documents ready for our trip; the three of us would be leaving as soon as possible for the United States.

We started our preparations for departure by applying for our passports, as well as U.S. visa waivers. Our wardrobe for the trip had to be planned, and my mother was in charge of buying special material for our clothing from the black market, as the stores lacked everything. Only by paying more could you find what was needed.

I called Alex in Havana to tell him of our trip, and he was not surprised; he had been fearing this possibility. We both felt desperate and began seeking some kind of solution. I knew there was nothing I could do without my parents' approval. Alex's grandparents were old and he did not want to leave them behind after all they had done for him; moreover, he knew they could not endure the pain of not seeing him again. There was time left before our documents were ready, so maybe by then we could find a way to resolve the situation.

# STRIDES OF DESTINY

CHAPTER 4

BAY OF PIGS

1961

## STRIDES OF DESTINY



My parents Lolita and Roberto

## BAY OF PIGS

Every day new measures were being imposed by the government: radio, TV and newspapers were expropriated and censored, and people were apprehended and put in jail without any legal rights. In response, the opposition against the regime was growing stronger. Citizens began organizing clandestine meetings and arming themselves inside the Island; many speculated they were planning an invasion to remove the Castristan government.

On the seventeenth of April, 1961, the Bay of Pigs debarkation took place at Cienaga de Zapata on the central southern part of the Island, close to our city. At night we could see the sky turning red from the fire of machine guns. All the activities in the city were suspended, businesses were closed and people remained inside their homes, afraid of being taken prisoner. The citywide curfew meant that anybody in the streets after nightfall could be shot. We lived in terror and confusion.

From our balcony, we could see the display of Jeeps and trucks filled with armed militia all over our city. Hours later, trucks filled with prisoners, many of them our friends and family members, passed in front of our house, yelling to let their families know.

Everyone gathered by the step of the stairs when the doorbell rang insistently, but no one dared to answer it. Through the glass door we could see a group of soldiers yelling at us to let them in. Mama stepped forward, opening the door, and some went up the stairs and others waited below. One of them asked, "Is Mr. Trelles here? We need to speak to him." My father, accustomed to taking an afternoon siesta, was lying down, but he got up to find out what they wanted. They replied, "We need the keys to your theater Luisa; we are placing prisoners there." My father told them to wait and he would accompany them. My siblings and I looked at each other without moving, the aggressive stances of those men had simply paralyzed us.

The militia needed large buildings such as theaters, clubs and stadiums that could hold thousands of people to prevent them from assisting in the invasion. They placed a machine gun by the entrance of the theater as a warning sign for those that may be intending to escape or rebel. Many of the people

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were arrested at their places of employment, at their residences or simply while walking down the street. One of the prisoners was my Uncle Pepito, Mama's younger brother. Dad spoke to the official in charge and asked him to let us bring food for some of our family members and friends; the officer agreed, so we prepared coffee with milk, soups and other foods in our kitchen, and took them to the theater every day that the imprisonment lasted.

The conditions in the theater were inhumane. The prisoners had no place to rest and the bathrooms stopped functioning or overflowed, becoming a health hazard. These people remained imprisoned for many days without food or hygienic facilities, sleeping on floors, many times on top of their own urine and feces. Many started to get sick; nevertheless, the place remained ongoing under these conditions for almost one month. Once the prisoners were freed, the Fire Department had to come in with their high-potency hoses to clean the place. It took days for the cinema to be restored to its previous appearance and start functioning again.

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On the day of the invasion, Alex was in Havana walking with his friend to the School of Medicine to get the results of an exam taken the previous day. Unaware of the recent events, he was surprised to see a pair of military soldiers guarding the entrance of the school. A large number of students, all dressed in military uniforms, were being held inside the premises. A classmate alerted them to the occurrence of the invasion and explained that the militia was confining students to barracks, obligating them to go fight against the invaders.

Alex and his friend were blocked by the militaries standing at the entrance and denied the opportunity to leave. They went to the office of the Student's Association to obtain a pass of safe-conduct permitting them to leave the premises, but it was denied. Alex's friend Gustavo, who was well connected with the government, interceded for them to be let go. As soon as they were back on the street, Alex contacted Justino, a friend

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and classmate affiliated with a contra-revolutionary cell formed by students of Havana University, and they both ended up hiding with five more men with arms in a warehouse, waiting for orders that were never received to support the invaders.

After the failure of the invasion, the dreadful disillusionment arrived. Hundreds were killed and thousands were taken prisoner. An excessive number of persons were transferred by semi-conductors, without ventilation or oxygen, in an intense heat that cost many lives. A colleague of Alex's on call at the Palace of Sports witnessed a truck loaded with fainted prisoners; when he stepped inside to help bring them down, he found five dead from suffocation.

Days later after the invasion, several of the surviving prisoners were accused of being mercenaries; they were demoralized by a panel of journalists in front of national television cameras, but only their patriotism fighting against the tyranny of our government was corroborated. We had received a severe blow, and sadness and bitterness besieged most Cuban homes. In retaliation, the University of Havana decided to expel all students not integrated with the revolution, among them Alex. But Fidel abolished this action immediately, alleging that Cuba needed doctors and other professionals more than ever, since many had already fled the country.

Alex abandoned his counter-revolutionary cell after the invasion failed. Discouraged and without any support, many left the country.