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**Adventures at the Boat Show: The Castro Diaries**  
By Dale Robbins

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# ADVENTURES at the BOAT SHOW

*The Castro Diaries*



**Dale Robbins**

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## Introduction

As Alex Barton, Junior (or AJ) to his friends and family, walked home that beautiful North Carolina spring afternoon, he had many thoughts on his mind. Until the previous night, he had always assumed that his college professor father and charity fundraiser mom were two of the most average, if not on the boring side, parents a boy could have. His wasn't a bad life. They lived in a nice home, and drove nice cars in a nice neighborhood in a bedroom community of Charlotte, North Carolina. His hometown since his birth, Salisbury had not always been thought of as a part of greater Charlotte but, as the city grew in every direction, smaller towns (once with their own identities) simply became part of "greater Charlotte." Many times, AJ wished they simply lived *in* Charlotte where they would be closer to the "action." But, no. Instead of being in a city that boasted NFL Football and NBA Basketball teams, as well as one of the larger campuses of the sprawling University of North Carolina system he lived in sleepy, boring Salisbury.

It was an old city. Somewhere in the downtown area, there was a plaque that proclaimed, "George Washington Slept Here!" Across from his old elementary school was once the site of a notorious prison. (He had always found it ironic that his school was close to what had been a prison site.) Charlotte's UNC campus had over 22,000 students while Salisbury's predominantly white college, Catawba, named after some forgotten Native American tribe, had about 1,200. The HBCU school, Livingstone College, had barely 1,000 students. In middle school, he had once Googled, "famous people from Salisbury, N.C." The Google search returned the names of 30 people that perhaps even his history professor father would not recognize.

Last night, though, AJ made what was, for him, an eye-opening and even head-turning discovery. His family were very strong members of the local LDS ward. Alex Senior had actually served as the congregation's bishop until last year when he was honorably released and, for the first time in his teen years, his dad had been able to sit with the family during Sunday worship instead of on the stand as the "presiding officer." AJ's youth group had been challenged to find out more about their family history. His queries to his parents had always yielded very brief answers. AJ had never met his grandfather who, according to what his dad had been willing to share, must have been a real character in the years before Alex Senior was born. There were only vague references to "most of the first half of his life as a career criminal," with the suggestion that he was, perhaps, even a gangster.

AJ's Mom, who he considered not only the most important person in his life, was still in her early 50's, and one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Sure, he knew most boys thought *their* moms were beautiful but, in his case, Carmen Roja-Barton really was stunning. When AJ pressed her about his grandparents on her side, the answers were even more vague. She had been born in Cuba, and smuggled off the island to live with relatives in Miami when she was a small child. She would only say that her pa pa and ma ma were "no longer living." Likewise, the Tio and Tia (Uncle and Aunt), who had raised her from early childhood, "had passed away." He thought his dad had been born a member of their church but he had been offered no details on how the son of a possible gangster, and a mother who was even less talked about, went on to become a missionary for his church.

There were a lot of unanswered questions in his parents' background. After his discovery last night while looking for family history information in the attic, there were even more questions. Like many

LDS families, they had information on distant relatives. He knew he had some ancestors who walked across the plains with Brigham Young to re-establish the church in the valley of the Great Salt Lake. He knew that he had relatives on his mother's side who, at one time, received land grants in Cuba from the King of Spain. But, his immediate grandparents were never discussed nor was his parents' courtship and marriage that happened over 10 years before he was born. After his birth, there was a five-year gap before his younger brother and sister, fraternal twins, were born.

The banker's box he had opened read simply, "The gap years 1994-2006." The box contained pictures, files, notes, fridge magnets from all over, some sort of trade show directory from the "Miami International Boat Show," and a thick bound copy of what appeared to be some kind of diary written in Spanish. His mother spoke fluent Spanish and his dad spoke what his mom referred to as "gringo Spanish" from his days as a church missionary in South America. It was like a treasure trove of his parents' past, of which he had never heard them mention. What startled him most were the pictures, including some ancient Polaroids. (He had seen a Polaroid camera only once in his school's 'cameras of the past display.) Aside from the age of the pictures was the shock of seeing his parents as he had never seen them (or even imagined). There were beach pictures of his mom with long, raven-black hair cascading past her shoulders, and a bathing suit so small he blushed. There was his dad, also with jet black hair as opposed to the salt and pepper he had always known – shaggy, and over his ears. Then there were other pictures, his mom with very short reddish blonde hair, wearing a formal outfit, again revealing more skin that he could have ever imagine her showing in public! One of the pictures was clearly a formal function and they both appeared to have mixed drinks in hand for a toast. He was left almost speechless. These were pictures of a bishop of the church and his wife. This was not the modesty and decorum he had lived with all his life.

Dad's Prius was in the driveway and his mom's hybrid Rav4 was gone. She was probably out with the twins on a Wednesday afternoon at whatever enrichment activity in which they were currently enrolled. AJ saw his father in his study, took a deep breath, and figured it would be a good time to ask his dad about the treasure trove of memories he had uncovered. He knew that his dad did not have any classes on Wednesday evening as it was the last week of the Spring term. Seeing his dad in his study he called out, "Dad, I'm home... Have you got a few minutes?"

He knew the answer before he asked the question. His father would always make time when one of his children needed to talk. "Sure, son. Pull up a chair. I was just working on 'This Day in History.' Do you know the significance of May 10<sup>th</sup>?" AJ didn't, but knew by the enthusiasm in his father's voice that he soon would know. He also knew that every day was a significant day to historians like his dad.

"On May 10, 1869, the Golden Spike was driven in Utah, marking the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad," he said with the unbridled passion that only a man with four degrees in history and several published books could explain!

AJ had inherited a lot of his dad's interest in history but it never ceased to amaze him how his father could have knowledge about such a vast amount of information. Here, he needed to tread carefully – too much excitement and he would get far more of what his dad called, "the rest of the story," and they would never get to the box, the memories, and the pictures.

"Now, I remember. Mr. Smith mentioned it in his class today..."

"Clarence is a good teacher, good man, I'm glad you have him this year. But, something else is on your mind. What's up?"

“Uhh, I’m not sure where to start, Dad...”

“I don’t know son. The beginning is usually not a bad place to start.”

“Okay, Dad, you and Mom rarely talk about your parents. We know more about your great-grandfather than we know about our own.”

Alex studied his feet. As was normal in his home, he was barefoot. His son had kicked off his own shoes right inside the door. “Aaaj (a nickname that had stuck since his young sister was only a toddler; she couldn’t form the letters A and J) is complicated. And, I guess we have never felt you were really old enough, or needed to know...”

“I know, Dad, but it is almost like there is no history of your life prior to when I was born. No wedding pictures, no college pictures, nothing about your life; everything is after the twins and I were born. We now have family pictures every year, framed school pictures, videos of us, records everywhere...”

“Son, your mother and I had been married for 12 years before your arrival. It is safe to say we were different people than we are now...”

“I saw the pictures.”

Puzzled, Alex looked at his son, and asked, “The pictures?”

“I was looking for some family history stuff for our youth group at church and there is a box in the attic.”

Alex shook his head, offered an awkward smile, and asked, “The Gap Years box?”



“Uhh. Yeah. And, I guess I should have brought it to you when I found it, or least the things in it.”

“It’s okay. I guess the time has come to let you know some of our more immediate family history. Your mom and I have known someday you would find out that we indeed have what the world calls *a past*.”

“It looks like it was a very adventure-filled past...”

“AJ,” he began. “It didn’t start that way. My father was 42 when I was born. Your grandmother was 40. I was not a mistake, but certainly a surprise. For various reasons, their relationship didn’t last and I grew up with aunts, uncles, and stepparents. If there was a good thing, one of these was an elderly aunt, my dad’s oldest sister, who was a member of the church.”

“But, you have ancestors who walked across the plains.”

“True, several generations back we had relatives in Kirkland and Nauvoo. But, a few generations later, their children had left the Saints and returned to the south, primarily Alabama and North Carolina. Some of our relatives on my mother’s side had always lived there, which is why we also have blood kin who fought for the Confederacy.”

“How...what? I’m confused.”

“I’m giving you the big picture son. It’ll take a long time to fill in all the details.”

“Okay, let’s stay with you and Mom. You were a member, she wasn’t. When, how, what? I, I don’t know what to ask first...”

“I was baptized when I was 14. The ward had a great youth group and a bishop who made this *cast off* kid feel like he had finally found home, a family. When I graduated at 17, I took a year and a half at the local community college, finished my AA in history, and then, at 19, volunteered to serve a two-year mission for the church. The mission, in many ways, changed my life.”

“All I know about the mission is it was in South America and Mom, who I know was born in Cuba, says you still sound like a gringo when you speak Spanish.”

Alex grinned, and continued, “She is right. Two years in Paraguay, often in the village, did not really prepare me to speak Spanish with a native-born Cuban. I was also raised by a native-speaking Aunt and Uncle.”

“So, how did you meet and why have I never heard the story?”

“That’s where it gets complicated. To say the least...”

“Please, Dad. More.”

“I returned from my mission and the aunt who had introduced me to the church was now in memory care. I applied to my first-choice school, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. Our Alabama relatives were all big Tide fans even though most of them had never finished high school. I had a 1295 on my SAT, a 3.9 with honors classes in high school, and a 3.96 for my associates from community college. With scholarships and Pell Grants, I graduated in three and a half years, *summa cum laude*.”

“So, that history degree was number two?”

“Yes.”

“Have you always wanted to be a history prof?”

“Gosh no. I wanted to be a history teacher on an Indian Reservation...”

“What?”

“Probably still in the missionary mindset of taking care of indigenous people...”

“So, did you go for a teacher’s certificate?”

“No, life kicked in. I was working part time as a theater manager, researching grad schools, and checking out what starting teachers were earning...”

“So, did you go to grad school for your master’s in history?”

“No, that comes later in the story, I lost the dream for a while. I took the LSAT, applied, and was accepted at the University of Miami Law School?”

“REALLY? Isn’t that a weird switch?”

“Not really. A BA in history works great to get into law school.”

“Miami makes sense now but you’ve mentioned you lived in Miami though I know Mom lived there when she left Cuba. But, like you, she has never talked about it...”

“Get comfortable, son. This may take a while. It will answer a lot of questions but, in their place, you’ll want to ask at least 100 more...”

With that, Alex began the narrative that only he, Carmen, and a few others throughout the world knew about.

# **Chapter One**

While his gaze was on AJ, in reality he was looking past his son, and bringing up memories of over two decades in a hidden past as he started his story:

I had moved to Miami two years earlier, and was then in my third year of law school. As I was driving home, the moment I changed lanes, the distinctive sound of a Mercedes horn blared loud and long. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, I saw a beautiful, although enraged, young woman giving me the finger, and a piece of her mind. My first thought was what an amazing phenomenon it was that only beautiful women drove Mercedes sport coupes. Judging from the animated use of her hands, and her raven black hair, she was probably Hispanic.

Miami was then, and even more so now, one of the most cosmopolitan melting pots in the Western Hemisphere. As I said, I was born and raised with relatives throughout the south, honors grad from the University of Alabama. With a two-year church mission under my belt, I knew that graduate schoolwork would be different. But, nothing prepared me for the great cultural differences that abounded in that city. Even though I spoke passable Spanish after being a missionary for two years in Paraguay, the Hispanic- and especially the Cuban-speaking part of the community really confused me. Clearly, the only thing that Asuncion, Paraguay, and Coral Gables had in common was that the locals both spoke Spanish. Even after a couple of years, it was an example of a cultural gulf simply being too much for me to fathom.

Glancing back in the mirror, I saw that the young, Hispanic beauty in the Mercedes was still denouncing me with great vigor. It was a mistake. I hadn't meant to cut her off but my mind had been wandering and I hadn't realized till the last second when I was about to miss my exit off the turnpike. I'm sure, to her, I looked like just another rude guy cutting in, and changing lanes at the last possible moment. As we crept down the exit ramp heading onto Kendall Drive, I spotted one of

the seemingly ever-present street vendors coming towards me with a handful of fresh-cut flowers. Stealing a quick glance in the mirror, I saw the Latin lady was still very upset.

Don't ask why but I quickly fumbled for a business card, grabbed one, and wrote on the back, "I'm sorry. Give me a break!" Then, I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my jeans pocket. The young woman with the flowers approached as I rolled down the window. The light would change at any moment so I quickly shoved the note and the five-dollar bill in the vendor's hand, and said, "Give 'em to the lady in the black car behind me."

The flower seller looked puzzled, and said, "Perdon, señor...no entiendo. No hablo ingles." [Pardon, sir...I don't understand. I don't speak English.]

Trying to switch, and think in Spanish, I said, "Señorita (I hoped) en coche negro." Using my body as a shield, I pointed to the car behind me. [The woman in the black car.]

The vendor's eyes lit up as she said, "Si, si señor. Para señorita. Muy bien!" [Yes! For the lady. Very well!]

I watched in his rear-view mirror, and prayed as the flower lady approached the black Mercedes, and motioned for the aggravated woman to roll down her window. At first, she tried to wave her off but the flower lady was insistent. Just as the light changed, the window of the Mercedes came down and the driver managed to take the flowers and the card.

Miami had been hit with a wave of drive-by shootings and I didn't, at that moment, know if what I'd done was a good move or not so I hit the gas, and sped off to leave the lady in the black Mercedes stunned

as she read the note. Regretfully, common courtesies were, like in most big cities, not really that common in Miami. And, out-and-out apologies practically never happened.

At the next light, she caught up to me, and looked me over with those piercing black eyes. At that time, I was driving an aging Nissan 280ZX, which had seen better days. That was when I got my first close-up look at your mom. The anger had at least melted off her face. I guessed that she was between 20 and 25. I was close. She was almost 23. Happily, I noticed there was no ring on her left hand. "Well, at least there wouldn't be a mad husband to deal with," was my first thought.

Slowly, she grinned, and motioned for me to roll down the window. Even though she looked very Hispanic, she shouted without the hint of an accent, "Forgiven. Pull in at the next gas station."

I was stunned but my eyes lit up and I nodded in agreement. We pulled in at a Chevron station two blocks later, and drove to the back to avoid blocking the gas pumps. The black Mercedes 600 SL pulled up beside me. As the car door opened, I was almost stunned by the beauty of the driver as she got out of the car. At that moment, and until today, to me, she is still the most beautiful woman alive.

Your mom was an absolute vision of loveliness. Her hair was jet black, and fell halfway down her back. She was tall and her legs seemed to go on forever. Her complexion was perfect. Walking over to the car, she noticed the University of Miami parking decal on the front window. Still sitting there stunned by the scene unfolding in front of me, she asked, "UM student?"

"Law school, third year," I replied. "And, you?"



“I take care of myself,” she answered. “My name is Carmen Rojas. And yours, Mr. Law Student?”

“Alex, Alex Barton,” I replied, almost stammering, so I babbled on with another apology, “Hey, I'm not, or wasn't, trying to hit on you. I just wanted to say I was sorry for cutting you off at the exit. You looked mad and I just wanted to make sure you didn't shoot me.”

Your mother is so quick on her feet that she knew she had caught a young Mr. Barton very much off guard. So, she continued playing along. “Does that mean you are trying to hit on me now?”

“Well, I, I, uh...” I stammered.

Still very formal, she wet her lips, and said, “Relax, Mr. Barton. I'm not going to bite you or shoot you. The roses are lovely and I love roses. I just wanted to see someone who took the time to apologize for anything in Miami. Tell you what, buy me an espresso at the cafe up the road, and we can talk some more.”

“Sure,” I offered. “Hop in.”

“I'll meet you there.”

As our two cars headed west on Kendall Drive, my mind was racing a hundred miles an hour. The girl who promised to wait for me on my mission married my best friend six months before I came home. A college girlfriend (a professor's daughter) evaporated when I was accepted at the University of Miami. She made it clear that Miami was not her kind of town. This helped me decide she was not my kind of prospective wife and it ended. But, two years since I'd moved here, my love life was going nowhere. I had only dated a few girls I met on

campus but they all seemed interested in finding a doctor, lawyer or other rich professional, not an impoverished law student.

And yet, here I was, getting ready to have a cup of coffee with one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen, who, judging from the car and the jewelry, already had plenty of money, or at least access to it. We pulled up to Cafe Havana. It was located in one of the endless strip malls that line the main roads of every suburb in America. The difference in Miami, unlike Birmingham, Atlanta, or Kansas City, was there would be a Cafe Havana. If not so named, there is something similar in every shopping center in Miami-Dade County.

The first year of law school is designed to make students' eyes bleed from the amount of reading that is expected of them. The rigors of study, and picking up the habit of coffee to burn the midnight oil, were the primary reasons I had drifted away from the church. For that moment, though, I put the thoughts behind me. In Miami, they give Cuban coffee to preschoolers so to not drink an espresso with this young woman would not have served me well. I was wrong but at that moment I didn't care.

AJ took his dad's confession with an open mind and heart. In his almost 16 years, he had never seen his father have a cup of coffee, smoke, or have even a single beer, even at faculty parties. And drugs were just out of the question. Seeing his dad as a human with temptations, and choosing not to follow the rules, didn't diminish his respect for him. It made him feel a little older just knowing his father would share this with him.

So, I ordered two espressos and we took a seat by the window. Up close, she was even more beautiful. She wore tight-fitting designer jeans, a simple red silk blouse, and very little makeup. I looked at her jewelry. She had the obligatory Rolex on her left wrist, three simple

gold chains on her right wrist, large diamond stud earrings, and a heavy gold rope necklace. When I joined her at the table, your mom started the conversation by saying, “So, Mr. Barton, tell me about yourself. Do you always cut people off on the expressway, buy them roses, and then try to pick them up for coffee?”

My face turned red as I replied, “Well, no, I, well...never until today.”

As the conversation progressed, I got used to her aggressive form of conversation, and became less intimidated by it. We talked for almost an hour. During that time, I found out that she was turning 23, was very single, that she loved Cuban coffee, fine dining, exciting nightlife, and lived in the Gables.

Meanwhile, your mom revealed that I was pretty much a loner and this was the most daring move I had ever made on a woman. She knew I had just turned 25, had grown up with several different families, the last one being a devoutly religious home, but that I hadn't practiced my faith since moving to Miami. I also shared that I missed the family that I was still in contact with, that I was having a hard time juggling school, and that I clerked for a law firm when I wasn't studying.

Since she had my business card, she knew the name of the firm I worked for and I gave her my home number. Remember, this was when we still had landlines and answering machines. I also gave her my address. Realizing that she knew a lot about me and I knew next to nothing about her, I finally asked, “What about you? I've done most of the talking. Tell me about you.”

She replied softly but firmly, “You know enough for now. I'll call you tomorrow.”

She got up, and walked to the door, leaving me somewhat dumbfounded. “Thanks for the coffee,” she said as she walked out the door.

Staring down at my cup, I asked myself, “What just happened?” All the way home, I replayed the morning’s events in my mind. Sure, I finally made a daring play on a beautiful woman. It turned out to be a great pick-up move and then I didn’t even get her number!? I was a third-year law student, not a high school sophomore. But, I sure felt like one on the ride home.

AJ grinned at the thought. He was a high school sophomore, and was almost afraid to speak to the cheerleader types in his own grade even though he had known many of them since middle school. Maybe he came by it honestly, he thought to himself.

His dad then continued. Late that night, the ringing phone interrupted my studies. Rather than pick it up, I waited for the answering machine to screen the call. As the machine beeped, I heard a female voice that I didn’t recognize, “Alex, let’s do dinner tomorrow night. Monty’s in the Grove at 8:00 p.m., and be on time. I’m unlike most Latinas. When I say 8:00, I mean eight sharp.”

Suddenly, I realized it was Carmen’s voice. I grabbed for the phone but all I got was a dial tone. “Damn. I still didn’t have her number.” Alex saw the puzzled look, and shot his son the answer, “Because we didn’t have caller ID then,” he said with a smile.

I knew I had a test two days later but I also knew I would be at Monty Trainers the next night. What I didn’t realize was that I would never get her number.

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The next few weeks proved to be my young life's most exciting and frustrating. Carmen and I dated two or three times a week. But, it was always on her terms. We found we could talk for hours, and often did. The conversations spanned a vast universe of topics but, if it ever started getting up close and personal about herself, Carmen would find a way to take the subject in another direction. Alex smiled, recalling, "Even then, she always called the shots on when and where we would meet, and the destination."

It was so frustrating in so many ways! After six weeks, I still didn't have her phone number or address. I knew very little personal information about her at all. But, she filled a major void in my life and that she was the most beautiful woman I had ever dated certainly didn't hurt matters. Honestly, I was smitten, and falling deeper in love every day.

Many of the night spots we hit had been way out of my league, and out of my price range, in the past. On the other hand, your mom was well known in all these places and, usually, a bill never appeared. If it did, before I could reach for my wallet, her platinum American Express Card was already lying on the table. I was surviving on scholarships and student loans. These outings would have broken my meager savings.

We would go for long walks on South Beach and Key Biscayne. We would often stroll hand in hand, or wrapped around each other's waist. We would kiss, and embrace under the moonlight, with the waves gently breaking at our feet as we embraced. My resolve to stay chaste before marriage was pushed to the limit. But, if my hands attempted to stray below her neck or back, she would gently, but firmly, push me away.

Though I had abandoned many tenets of our faith, I still felt very strongly against pre-marital sex, at least when we weren't in one of those embraces. Honestly, she was so excited that, at times, I questioned even this value. AJ looked down as his dad was explaining what every teen knew, but couldn't imagine; his mom and dad having sex. The young man blushed as his dad continued the story, admitting, "Yes, I wanted to make love to this woman more than anyone I had ever known. But, secretly, I was glad at least one of us had the control to stop."

"Sorry, son," Alex said with a smile while interrupting the narrative. "I know every generation thinks they are the first ones to discover sexual attraction but you and your siblings, and all of us, are proof that isn't true."

Regarding sex, your mom told me, clearly, "Only with my husband and, then, not until I'm married." When I pushed for a reason, she smiled, and said with a half grin, "I promised my pa pa." It was the closest thing to a window into her soul that she ever allowed to open.

In times like these, both father and son were grateful they had always been able to have open and honest conversations.

During his dad's narrative, AJ said practically nothing. Indeed, he was sitting in stunned silence as his dad opened up about the beginning of a relationship. Less than an hour earlier, he had no clue even how his parents had first met. And, now, he was totally blown away as his dad continued.

"Our relationship continued this way for several months. She was a beautiful, mysterious woman and I was a handsome law student. Your mom always kept her cards very close to her chest. Occasionally,

a window would open, I would peek inside, and then she would close it again.”

During Christmas break, under a full moon, sitting on the beach on Key Biscayne, I told her for the first time that I loved her. She was lying on the sand with her head in my lap. She looked up into my eyes, and said, “I love you, Alex, but you don't know me. You can't love me.”

“Damnit,” I replied. “It’s not fair.”

“Life's not fair, Alex. We found each other and we are together. Maybe someday...”

I implored her, “Let me know you. I want to know the woman I've fallen in love with!”

“Alex, you don't understand. I can't tell you. Not yet, but the time will come. Until then, let's enjoy what we have...”

She reached up, and kissed me. My hands wandered through her thick, long hair, and past her neck. She was wearing a backless dress and I gently touched her bare skin. Let’s just say, at that moment, I am grateful that your mom’s resolve to do what was right was so much stronger than mine. Quickly, she sat up, took me by the hand, and then we walked back towards her car. Let’s just say it was a wonderful and totally confusing time in my young life.

Your mom was on everybody's party list in keeping with her public lifestyle. We went to a party almost every night between Thanksgiving and the Super Bowl. She always picked me up, and turned her keys over to me. I always drove until it was late into the evening and then, by midnight, she always dropped me off at my student apartment.

While I joked about her being my “Cinderella,” I was grateful because it was my only chance to study. At the parties, recreational drugs were always present but she never showed an interest and her friends never pushed.

Once, when I was complaining about needing to stay awake to cram for a final, she said, “I can get you something for that. But, in the long run, you'll be better off to stick with the espresso.”

Alex got up, walked around, put his hand on AJ’s shoulder, and said, “I hope this isn’t either disappointing you or boring you to tears. You seem awfully quiet.”

“Dad,” he quickly answered. “It’s the most amazing story I HAVE EVER HEARD. Mom and the twins aren’t home yet. PLEASE go on!”

“Okay, here is where it will get even more interesting.”

AJ shook his head in disbelief, and asked, “Even MORE interesting?”



## **Chapter Two**

So, picking up where he left off, Alex continued his narrative.

The holidays were a blur. Thanksgiving was spent serving food at a homeless shelter in downtown Miami, just past Little Havana. It was her idea but it reminded me just how much of a gulf there was between the middle class, the rich, and the very poor in South Florida. I made a short, obligatory trip over Christmas to Alabama though I would have much rather spent it with your mom in Miami. As was expected, she was very vague about her Christmas plans but we spoke several times by phone when I could track her down. Remember, these were pre-cell phone days.

After the New Year, as January rolled into February, your mom told me she would be busy a lot during the coming month but that she'd "call me." She offered no details and, when pressed for specifics, she would only say, "Alex, it's business. Trust me."

For almost two weeks, my phone didn't ring. Finally, one Friday afternoon, I got a call at work. It was your mom.

"Come over to the beach at 5:45, and meet me at the Convention Center."

I thought for a minute, and asked, "Isn't there a boat show this week?"

"Yes, it's here. But, don't worry. Come to the registration in the B lobby. Look for me."

After several months of these types of adventures, this seemed almost normal. So, at exactly 5:45, I walked into the lobby and, surprisingly, saw your mom sitting behind a registration counter. She

offered only the slightest smile of recognition. I glanced at her ID badge. It read Michelle Lewis.

I started to speak when I was greeted by a bubbly, short, Jewish lady, who was explaining the show was almost over for the day but I could get my badge, go in for a few minutes, and come back tomorrow.

Your Mom spoke up, and said, “I have his badge right here, Mrs. Curtis.”

“Thank you, Michelle. You're such a dear,” replied Mrs. Curtis.

When Mrs. Curtis was not looking, your mom mouthed, “I'll meet you inside.” Confused but, by now, at least accepting I would always be confused around her, I took the badge, and walked in the door.

The show was overwhelming in size. At lunch, I read about it in a special section of the Miami Herald. The article explained that the main convention center building alone had over 500,000 square feet of display space, and another 1.5 million square feet of boats and accessories were spread throughout the City of Miami Beach, in various marinas and land displays.

Seeing boats up to 90 feet long inside a building was an incredible spectacle. I had heard this was the largest boat show in the world. It was held every year but, as a struggling grad student, it never crossed my mind to attend.

What was even more confusing to me was what was your mom doing here? Certainly, she didn't support her lifestyle working as a registration girl at trade shows. Thinking back, there were several times when we met on the beach after six in the evening.

As those thoughts ran through my head, suddenly, your mom walked up beside me. As I started to blurt out a dozen questions, she put her finger to her lips, and said, “Shhh. Not now. Follow me, and don't ask any questions.”

Quickly, we walked to a pod in the center of the building. There, an escalator led up to a glassed-in crossover that connected the meeting rooms on the upper floors of the building.

Instead of taking the escalator, she quickly opened a service door in the pod, and motioned for me to follow her. We were immediately confronted with a set of steep cement stairs. This area was clearly the “back of the house.” No paint, a lot of cobwebs, and a year-old folded newspaper.

“What are we doing, Carmen, or Michelle, or whoever?” I asked, with almost a demanding tone.

“Relax, these steps go up to a service corridor connecting the second floors. The public crossover is on the third floor.”

“Alright but I repeat, what and why are we doing this?”

“Look, you wanted to know everything,” she replied, “I had to get to know you. I had to know if I could trust you.”

“I'll try again. We've done a lot of things, but never against the law. Now, what are we doing?!”

“Shhh. This isn't against the law. Well, not really. Come up the stairs. There's a storage room and I'll show you the big picture.”

We made our way up the dimly lit stairs into another barren hallway with me muttering under my breath on every step. The area must have connected directly to the cooling system as it was as cold as a meat locker and the air conditioning was blowing hard enough to lift your mom's hair. Turning down another side corridor, we came to a door. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a key, and opened the door.

I shook my head in disbelief. Then, she felt along the wall for the light switch. She reached into another pocket, and pulled out the special tool, which allowed her to turn on the lights. The bare fluorescent bulbs lit the room in pale white.

"Alright, Alex," she began. "You've wanted to know about me for months. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I've got a cause I'm dedicated to. I'm not supposed to fall in love. But, I did. As I said, I had to know everything about you before determining if I could trust you. Alex, I'm into some heavy stuff. If you want to walk, now's your chance. You don't know where I live, or anything else about me."

"Is it drugs?"

"No."

"Is it illegal?"

"To which government?"

"Carmen, is that your real name?"

"Yes."

I told her, “Carmen, I don't want to play 20 questions. I told you at Christmas, and I meant it, that I'm in love with you. Let me ask this. Is your life in danger?”

“I'll give it to you in a nutshell with no specifics. Then, if you want to stay, I'll give you all the details. But, if I do, there's no turning back for either of us. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“My name is Carmen Rojas. My parents had me smuggled out of Cuba when I was six months old. They stayed behind. A wealthy aunt and uncle raised me. I've seen my natural parents three times in my entire life. But, their quest has become mine since I was 12 years old. Alex, I want you to want me but I'm afraid you'll run when I give you the details.”

“Go on,” I said, without hesitation.

“In a nutshell, it involves Castro, it involves rogue elements of the CIA, it involves Alpha 66, it involves certain New York 'families,' and it involves the Kennedy assassinations. With piercing black eyes, she stared at me, and said, ‘What will happen here tonight might change the face of our country and planet. If you stay, I can promise you that life as you know it will never be the same.’”

My mind raced back to high school. I had been the class valedictorian. I spoke of change, and the courage of conviction. I served two years as an unpaid missionary for our church in regions where no one had ever heard of our faith. There, I stood up for my beliefs even though no one seemed to care. At college, as the President of Student Government, I spoke of doing the right thing, at the right time, and for the right reason.

But, it was mostly words. I went to law school to get my degree, and practice International Law. Along the way, I planned on getting comfortably wealthy, and having a magnificent home in a restricted upper-class suburb. Changing the world, literally, had not been in my plans.

But, then, neither had your mom. I had always felt I would someday return to the fold, get my life in order, marry a “nice” girl, and have 4.2 kids with a minivan and a dog. She had shown me a side of myself I never knew existed. A side filled with passion and intrigue. The fact that we hadn't made love just consumed me with even a greater desire for this mysterious woman. But, change the world?

“So, Alex,” her voice brought me back to the reality of the moment. “Are you with me or is this goodbye?”

I answered with the strongest words of conviction that I could muster. It sounds sappy now but I said, “You're the most exciting woman I have ever known but, more important than that is that, for the first time in my life I love someone more than I do my own goals and ambitions. Tell me where we're going 'cause I'm going there with you.”

“Alex, my father is one of Castro's closest lieutenants. He was with him from the early days of the revolution. During one fierce battle, my father was hit, and seriously hurt. He was only 17 at the time. The others said, 'Leave the kid.' But, Fidel went back for him, and saved his life.”

“So, your dad's loyal...”

She continued, “In Latin culture, it is a sacred relationship with someone who has risked his own life to save yours. But, after the Bay of Pigs, my Father began watching all that was going on in the Cuban

government. He realized the 'revolution' was only a dream and that Castro himself had become worse than what they fought to overthrow."

"Why didn't he leave?"

"He couldn't betray the relationship. Without Castro, he knew he would have been a dead man. So, he worked to try and make things better from within but things just kept getting worse and worse."

My head spun and I interrupted, "But, I still don't understand. What is the cause? Why are we at a boat show and how will we change the world by being here?"

Your mom smiled as she continued her story. "I've been waiting for this night for three years. During that period, I have worked for the lady you met tonight in registration at many shows. I've worked for the company running the concessions and I even got my security guard license, and worked overnight security in this building."

"But, why?"

"Access." Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out badges and ID showing she was a boat show staff member, a Service America concession worker, and an Andy Frain security guard. "I've tried to space out the times I worked here so no one will get suspicious. The show closes tonight at 6:00. By 8:00, this place will be empty except for the overnight security guards. We can get past them with a proper staff ID because this show brings new staff members in every year, but doesn't give a roster of them to their security force."

"I'm still confused," I responded. "Why do we want to do this?"



“This is one of the largest international gatherings held yearly in North America. People can get in and out of the country, and not look out of place. Last summer, my father smuggled some documents out of the country. He sent them with a Canadian tourist to Toronto. From there, they went to a boat-building plant in Don Mills, Ontario. One of our operatives then hid them on a boat being built for display at this show. My job tonight is to retrieve those papers.”

“What are the papers?” asked Alex.

“The Castro diaries, written in Fidel's own hand. He is a proud man who relishes in his accomplishments, especially when defeating the United States.”

“Excuse me, he beat us in the Bay of Pigs when we wouldn't provide air cover to a bunch of his ex-revolutionaries. I don't call that much of a defeat...”

“No, Alex,” interrupted Carmen. “The diaries explain how rogue elements of your own CIA wanted John Kennedy dead because of the Bay of Pigs. Organized crime wanted him dead because of the crippling of their machine by his brother Robert Kennedy. Certain ‘agents’ met with Castro in Havana, and planned the assassinations of both John and, later, Robert Kennedy. My father was at those meetings. The assassins were trained on the island.

“Hoover knew some things, and suspected a lot more but, in that era, the CIA and the FBI didn't work well together. It is often whispered that they kept Hoover and the FBI in check by threatening to expose Hoover's gay lover. The new chief of the FBI knows the diaries exist, and is willing to let them be thoroughly vetted and, at some later date, even be made public.

“The CIA, even though they have long since cleaned up their act, could not afford for the documents to be made public because the outcry would be so strong the President would probably be forced to dissolve the agency.

“Meanwhile, Castro didn't want the documents published when his government was teetering on the verge of collapse because he felt the President would have justification for an armed invasion. He knows he could not repel such an attack with the Russian army gone. Furthermore, he knows that the U.S. would want to arrest him, and try him for his involvement in the Kennedy murders.

“Finally, the New York families don't want the papers revealed because they give the names of the young Mafia lieutenants who helped in the assassinations. There is also some evidence that Castro is involved with drug trafficking. Those men are now the bosses of three of New York's most powerful families.”

“Please, tell me there's a plan. Tell me this isn't a suicide mission,” I pleaded.

“When I was younger,” your mom said, “I would have thought about a suicide mission. No, there's a plan; the question is, can we pull it off?”

“So, what's the plan?”

Your mom never missed a beat as she continued, “We shouldn't have any problems getting to the boat. I saw it during the move-in, and know where the papers are hidden. The problem is that Castro's agents, the CIA bad guys, and certain young men with Italian surnames, have been tripping over themselves to follow me around for the past 10 days.”

“My uncle has been a major financial supporter of the anti-Castro movement in this country. Castro's men and others think my uncle is my real father. They all assume I'm meeting someone at the show who will give me the papers. It is thought we'll use the diaries to raise more money to overthrow Castro.”

“My father alerted Castro that the diaries had been stolen when it became obvious that he would be found out. Being the actor he's been over the past 30 years, he convinced Castro of his own innocence. Little do they know the papers have been here for a week. The boat they are in is in the Northeast Hall. My car is parked in the North lot, which is a secure, staff-only area. I flirted with one of the boat show staff guys from the New York office, and convinced him it wasn't safe for a girl to have to park blocks away. He got me a parking pass.”

“We'll get the papers, and drive across the Venetian Causeway. The Miami Herald is there, only two miles away. Sitting in the publisher's office, waiting for us, is the new director of the FBI. He has promised to call the President when I deliver proof. Of course, it'll take some time to verify their authenticity. But, the moment they are in his hands, we go underground. Witness relocation. Carmen Rojas vanishes from the face of the Earth, as does Alex Barton.”

Alex continued explaining to his son, “Remember, this had been your mom's lifetime quest and she had worked out the details over almost a year. I was only 10 minutes into the plan.”

“Will they try and stop us when we leave the lot?” I blurted.

“They might,” said Carmen. “That's why we have a few changes to make. Plus, we'll ditch the Mercedes, and take your car.”

From out of the bag she was carrying, she pulled two red shirts like the boat show staff wore back then, a white skirt, and a pair of white pants in my size. She had read me correctly, and knew I would be on board so she was prepared.

“Put these on, and turn around,” she said, tossing me the shirt and pants.

I did, but, before I could reply, she had stripped down to her bra and panties, and was redressing in her red and white outfit. Next, she handed me a staff badge with Bob Black's name on it.

“Who the heck's Bob Black?” I asked.

“He's a nice old, retired guy. He still comes back to work this show. He always carries his badge in the outside pocket of his jacket. I lifted it from him one day when we were chatting.”

Pinning her badge on, she became Michelle Formisano. She explained, “This was the woman who ran registration the first year I began casing the show.”

It was now after 8:00. Looking like the rest of the boat show's famed “red shirts,” we went back down the stairs to the main floor, and over to the Canadian boat builder's display. Your Mom quickly climbed up on the boat, and entered the small cuddy cabin to retrieve the package sewn in the master bunk's upholstery.

She excitedly whispered from inside, “I got it!”

As she was climbing down, one of the Miami Boat Show security guards rode over on his bicycle, and asked, “You guys are here awfully

late tonight. I thought the staff were all getting together down at Penrod's."

As always, quick on her feet, your mom replied, "Yeah, we were there when I remembered this guy promised me he'd leave me some additional names for registration tomorrow and Bob was kind enough to bring me back to get them."

"Oh, well," said the security guard. "Course, with a young thing like you, I'd volunteered to bring 'em to you if I'd known where they were."

"You're too sweet," she practically cooed. Motioning to me, she said, "Come on, Bob, let's go back, and join the others."

"Smooth," I whispered under my breath as we walked away. "You're really smooth."

"Yeah, we're not there yet."

We walked quickly across the hall, past the giant Hatteras, Viking, and Bertram Yachts, and stepped out of the north end of the building onto the loading dock. Suddenly, from out of the shadows, stepped a young man who said, "Carmen, you have something that belongs to the people. Let me have it."

Looking down at the man's hand, I saw the reflection of the nickel-plated .38 caliber revolver.

"Carmen, don't be a fool," said the assailant.

What happened next was just a blur. Another figure stepped from the shadows with a lead pipe, and knocked the first gunman to the

ground. Then, suddenly, the boat show's security chief was behind him and, in his stern, firm voice, said, "Freeze, mister, or I'll blow your kidneys all over South Beach!"

Your mom started crying hysterically, and screaming, "Bob, please get me out of here!"

I turned, and looked at Gary, the boat show security chief, and said, "I'll take her back to her room if you'll take care of these guys."

"I'll need a statement from her," said Gary.

Again, your mom wailed at the top of her lungs, "Please, take me out of here!"

"Well, I can get it later after I get the police to book these two," replied Gary.

Things were moving fast. Within moments, we were in her car, abandoning the idea of using mine. Alex explained to AJ, "Though I had seen it before, that is when I found out that her dad wasn't the only good actor as her tears vanished the moment we got in the car. Just as we were headed onto the Venetian causeway off the beach, what appeared to be a large black government car moved to cut us off."

"I spun the Mercedes around, gave it the gas, jumped the curb, and headed for the bridge. Crashing through the toll booth with the black car in hot pursuit, I realized the drawbridge was being raised to let a lone sailboat cruise through."

Turning to your mom, I shouted as if I knew what I was doing, "Hang on!"

AJ continued to sit in stunned silence as his dad continued the narrative.

He said, “By now, I am running on pure adrenaline so, without a moment’s thought, I rammed through the old wooden barricade, and hit the bridge as it was being raised like a giant ramp. The sleek 600 SL went airborne over the 10-foot gap, and landed on the bridge on the other side. The black, government-issued Crown Victoria missed hitting the sailboat as it crashed into the water.”

“Needless to say, I am not a trained stunt driver and this was something you’d see in car crash movie scenes. I fought to regain control of the car. As I did so, I looked up, and saw, on the side of the building at the other end of the bridge, the bright neon lights spelling out THE MIAMI HERALD & EL NUEVO HERALD. As we pulled up in front of the building, and stopped the car, men in dark suits surrounded us. Their leader opened the door and, flashing his credentials, said, ‘FBI, ma'am. The Director is waiting for you upstairs.’ Within an hour, we handed over the material, and were on a government Gulfstream jet bound for an unknown destination. We were assured the proper action would be taken to bring all involved to justice.”

“When?”

“When the time was right. At that moment, your mom felt reasonably sure the diaries would bring Castro to justice. Knowing the publisher of one of the nation's leading newspapers had a copy, and would print them if the government did not act promptly, helped fuel that assurance...or so we thought. But, as a last security blanket, she asked for, and received, her copy of *The Castro Diaries*. They are what you saw upstairs in The Gap Years box.”

On the flight, we were given a preliminary briefing on our new identities and circumstances. I was thrilled and delighted to hear that, in our new identities, we were already married. But, so your mom could keep her promise to her 'pa-pa' and me to my faith, we exchanged wedding vows at 30,000 feet with the captain (also an ordained minister when not flying) officiating.

So, we adjourned to the back cabin of the plane, folded down the seats, and honestly, fell sound asleep. It had been a long day. The plan was that we would wind up somewhere in the west, not North Carolina, and live as just another married couple with a minivan, a dog, and at least three wonderful kids...

AJ was still too stunned to do anything but sit and stare at his dad, trying to process everything he had just heard. Finally, he said, "And, what about the rest of the story?"

The rest of the story is the life that happened on the way to where we are now...





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