

A young Cuban-American businessman tries to solve his money problems with the Miami Mafia by springing his father from a Castro prison. He's soon in hot water with Fidel, the CIA, the Mafia -- and with the local hotties, too.

**Me and Fidel: Cops, Spooks, and Comic Hijinks, as a Young Cuban-American Tries to Spring his Father from a Havana Prison**

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## **ME AND FIDEL**

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## CHAPTER ONE

I was an idiot. A damned idiot. In 1989, I had dreamed of owning the hottest retail electronics business in the Calle Ocho district of Miami. But startups are always more expensive than you think. I needed more capital, but the banks laughed at me.

So I turned to Uncle Paco. Now, that was really stupid. Oh, Uncle Paco made use of his contacts in the Cuban Mafia all right, and the “Association” did agree to lend me the money. But then by the spring of 1990, all this new technology—VCR’s, cell phones—had come along, my inventory and service costs had gone sky high, and I found myself over two weeks behind on the first quarter’s interest payment. Suddenly it looked like doomsday for cockeyed optimists like me.

Desperate, I went to look for Uncle Paco. Uncle Paco isn’t my real uncle, he’s my girlfriend Amelia’s older brother and also was at the time my mother’s boy friend—even if he was thirty-seven and she was forty-five (going on fifteen).

I found him in the clubhouse at Hialeah, where he was just tearing up a ticket on the third race.

Uncle Paco: What a dog! Never bet on a dapple-gray, Chucho.

Me: I’m running a little behind on the loan, Paco.

Uncle Paco: So I hear.

Me: I’ll get the money, don’t worry.

Uncle Paco: Jesús, the Men trust you, they’re your friends, they’re not upset. But you know, they’re naturally a little concerned about their money. They told me you should have a plan.

Me: But I can work my way out of this, Paco. In time.

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Paco twirled at his gold chains, letting them clink about and slap around on his oily brown chest. "Gee," he said, "you better not let it slide for too long."

Me: For how long, do you think?

Paco (forehead wrinkled): Better do something pretty damned soon, I guess.

Me: Oh God.

Well, I thought, there was one obvious person that I might be able to get to lend me the money. Maybe. Possibly.

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"But *mamacita*, it would just be until the receipts come in from the big sales around Christmas and New Year's." It was the next morning, and I was floating in the middle of the overstuffed cushions of the chartreuse loveseat in the family room of my mother's house in Coral Gables.

My mother smoothed back her Chinese-orange hairdo from her temples and inserted a long violet-tipped fingernail to prop open her place in her Danielle Steele novel. "I just have to finish this chapter, and then I've got my poker game with the girls, Chucho."

(My full name is Jesús Revueltos, "Chucho" for short.)

"I don't want to keep you, *mamacita*, but there's more at stake here than just losing my business."

"Your business, your business!" Her voice rose in a melodic wail. "I've got my own business to worry about." Mama and her big real estate deals. "And when it comes to money, like I told you, I just can't spare a *thing* right now. I have some big investment opportunities in the mill." She frowned at a large photo of my father on the far wall, his spectacled face looking plain and bland against the pink and aquamarine wallpaper of her living room.

"It's a matter of life and death, *mamacita*."

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She waved the dramatic phrase away with her hands as if it were an aside about the weather. "I won't do anything without Paco's advice, he has good business sense." My mother was the only person in the world that would even pretend to think that Paco Santos had any kind of sense about anything except gold chains and white powders.

"Oh, Mama, wake up. Paco is a part of your *problem*."

"*Ay*, Chucho! Can't you men settle this among yourselves?" She got up. "I have to go now, I'll be late for the first deal." She shook her head as she picked up her car keys and opened the outer door. The door slammed in my face and on my hopes.

In my frightening situation, I knew I needed to talk to the smartest person I knew: Amelia—who was also my mother's lawyer. I called and asked her to come over ASAP. At three-fifteen that afternoon, through the convex peephole in my front door, I got a distorted view of the familiar mop of curly brown hair, ballooning gracefully out and down toward her elegantly clothed figure. As I opened the door, there she stood, one thin black eyebrow slightly raised, one foot pointed sideways like a model's, the smile beginning and then growing like a Siamese cat's grin.

"Hey!" I said. "Am I glad to see you! My mom turned me down—flat."

"Well, you know how she is, Chucho."

"And you know how totally screwed that leaves me."

She took a deep breath and blew it out in a loud puff. "If only your father were here."

When we came to the States in '69, when I was eight, my father had stayed behind in Cuba. Well, "stayed behind" doesn't quite describe it adequately: in fact his residence there was in one of Fidel Castro's maximum security prisons. Since 1967, he had been undergoing "re-education" for political crimes against the Cuban state.

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"Yeah." We were sitting on the brand new black leather and chrome sofa, and she put her soft little hand on the back of my neck. A cool shiver ran down my back. "My father. Yes, I guess," I said.

I hadn't seen my father in all these years, and I remembered mostly tiny details like his wire-rim glasses, always staring past my head instead of looking into my eyes. The periodic letters we'd gotten from him from Fidel's prisons read like a textbook example of how to write a formal family letter—except at the end there were always some spooky phrases about the future of Socialist Man. You see, the odd thing was, my father wasn't any right-wing *gusano*, he was a loyal communist—at least in theory. It was just in practice he hadn't always been able to get along with Fidel: he believed in Marx and Engels, instead of only in Castro. Poor, naive *papacito*!

"My father"—I said to Amelia. "Well, that would be a new experience, anyway."

Amelia, who knew how frustrated I had felt as an overlooked child, kissed me kindly. Her hand stroking the soft hair at the back of my neck felt better and better. I tried to insert my own hand into the small gap between her starched, close-fitting bodice and the smoothness of the skin between her small plump breasts. She looked at me, surprised, and gripped my fingers, halting me. But then I saw her face change, she smiled and she let go of my hand, undid the buttons on her blouse, and guided my fingers all the way around her left breast, the underside moist on my fingers.

"Oh," she said in a loud whisper. Then she sighed. "Now about your problem."

"Yes—oh!" I said. "Is there time?"

Her milk-white brow furrowed. "Let's put on our thinking caps."

I shook my head. "Never mind."

"But Chucho, those Association creeps!"

"Never mind. Later. Is there time?"

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"There's always time."

Amelia has always been a sound thinker on the things that really count in life. The air conditioning felt cold on the backs of my arms as I got undressed and into bed. But once I got myself positioned between her legs, I had to reach back and struggle to pull the damned sheet off *my* legs—the sweat lay in pools on my back and especially on my butt, dripping down along the thick body hairs that I'm kind of self-conscious about but that Amelia seems to like.

"Oh, Chucho," she said, gripping what a Romance novelist would call my manhood.

"No, stop!" I said.

"It feels so good."

"For God's sake, stop!"

"Ohhh."

Dammit, before I could do anything else, I came all over her smooth white belly.

"Oh—Chucho."

"Yeah. Oh."

I collapsed, feeling myself falling into a coma-like drowse. But then I felt my shoulder being shaken.

"Shi-i-i-it, Chucho!" Amelia said in a screechy whisper.

"What?" I said articulately.

"Don't you dare leave me this way."

I groaned. Insult to injury. My eyes not even open, I pulled myself down, head between her legs, my tongue straining to its roots. "Oh, that mustache of yours!" she cried, groaning. Sweat was pouring down my forehead. It can be hard work being the perfect lover. Then that sweet aroma of hers began to rouse me, and I felt myself getting ready to give it another go, when she suddenly stopped groaning and made three little yelps. "Oh, God," she said.

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"Yeah," I said. "God." I lay there a few moments and then I subtly began prodding my modest second-growth hard-on into the flesh of her thigh.

She wrinkled her nose again, pushed my dong away, lifted her thigh away from me, pulled up the sheet, and lay there. "Not now, Chucho. You know, I've really been worried lately about Paco. I'm unhappy about all the coke—and the crazy gambling."

"*Paco!* Amelita, how about worrying about *me* for a minute? The Association is breathing down my neck about that loan."

"They're bad men, I suppose."

"Real bad!"

"No police, eh?"

"No police. That would just make them *really* mean."

She asked whether they were liable to break my legs.

I told her maybe. "Or they might simply ask me to pay with my worthless hide," I said briskly, head held high

"I don't know..." she waggled her head mournfully.

"*Mamacita* could sport me the coin if she would."

Amelia was pulling on her slacks. She leaned over and gave me a kiss. Her breast encased in the pink brassiere nudged my arm. "Maybe I can do something with her."

"Really?" I said. "Really?"

"How much do you need?"

"Twenty £ will pay the interest of the first quarter."

"No promises." She smiled. "But let's see."

By the next day I had put it all out of my mind. I had the business to worry about, VCR's to sell, while I tried not to think about broken legs—I couldn't let myself fantasize about the probabilities of separating my mother from some of her loot. Then at two-thirty, the phone at the store rang. It was Amelia, breathless. "Congratulate me, Chucho, it's all set."

I perched on the side of a counter displaying the new model VCR's in order to steady my trembling legs. "Hey, that's my girl."

"Anytime. The money will be over tonight."

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“Great! How did you manage it?”

It turned out she had shown my mother how to refinance a block of condos so that she could save some twenty-five thousand dollars over the near term. What a genius Amelia is, I thought.

“Paco will drop an envelope by your place tonight.”

“Paco!”

“I know, I know, but Elena didn’t ask me, she just sent him off to the bank to cash the check.”

“But Amelia!”

“It will be all right,” she said, tentatively.

“Amelia!”

“You worry too much.”

That evening, I started out watching *Accidental Tourist* on TV, but I couldn’t concentrate. I called Paco’s number, but I only got the answering machine. It was almost ten o’clock when I turned away from staring out the window at the traffic on the boulevard and realized that the TV was now showing an infomercial on floor polish—and Paco still hadn’t showed. And still nobody home at his number. Then I turned on some music, starting with Mozart’s “Jupiter,” and got out the bottle of Scotch. I’m not usually much of a drinker, but by 12:45 I had finished off a third of the bottle and I made a last attempt to call, gave up and went to bed.

The phone rang at 8:30 the next morning. It was Amelia.

“Chucho, I’m so sorry, really I am.”

“Oh, Amelia! No! The money?”

“Paco lost it all at Hialeah yesterday.”

“Owww!” I yelled.

“Don’t howl like a dog, darling.”

“What do you expect?”

“Well, I did tell you I was worried about his gambling habit. It could ruin his future.”

I told her that at least Paco had a future to worry about.

“Don’t worry, Chucho. Something will turn up.”

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"Yes, my fair white body floating face down in the Inland Waterway."

That night, at about 9:30, on the way back from the store after closing out the cash registers and pulling the barred shutters over the display windows, I glimpsed a car's lights swing into my rear view mirror. They hung on and on, around every turn. Finally I stopped in the middle of a block. The lights stopped behind me. I started up again. The lights resumed following. At the next intersection, I had had enough. I stopped and the car with the lights pulled up beside me. It was an older, but very long and very shiny black Lincoln. A man in a wide-brimmed Panama hat leaned out of the window and motioned to me with one long index finger. I opened the window. In the yellowish glow from the sodium vapor lights I could see that, under the thin-mustached lip, his front incisors were gold-capped.

"Do you know the way to Hialeah?"

"No," I said.

"Too bad, I like to know which way I'm headed."

"What?"

"Nice car."

I said nothing.

"Beats walking."

"Yes, sure."

"Hard walking without kneecaps—you bet!"

My stomach cramped.

"I think we'd all better keep our eye on the ball, right? You know how it is, don't you?" He moved his lips as if he were chewing something chunky and viscous. "Yeah, I can tell you do, Mr. Revueltos."

I stared at him, he smiled, waved a hand with what looked like a Rolex showing on the wrist, closed the window, and the car drove off, his tail lights red, fading in and out inside the faint yellow tents under the lamp posts, then reappearing bright in the receding darkness.

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It was like watching my vital signs fading out on the monitor in some hospital ward.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"BOOM!" Paco smiled, his mustache raising its brisk little hairs along his fat upper lip.

"Oh, come on, Paco," I said. He had been explaining the plan for a prison break: the idea had evidently stemmed from Mr. Marcus or one of his gang of spooks. "And keep your voice down," I said. One of Pierre's many friends had saved a place for us in line at Copelia, so we had only had to wait a half hour to get in. We were jammed into a corner, working on mango and pistachio sundaes. I spooned up a big gob of butterscotch and chocolate syrup over a disappointingly small Cuban-style mound of ice cream and tried to make the sweetness soothe my mind as well as my tongue.

"Boom"! Hell, it was like listening to a little kid. Outside, in the park, we passed teenage boys with their arms about each other, horsing around, laughing. I felt a pang for my high school days. "Paco, you can't blast a hole in the wall of La Cabaña and drag my father out. This is a major prison we're talking about, not some sheriff's hoosegow in Dodge City."

"Mr. Marcus says you can get out of any jail if you go about it the right way."

"Like Alcatraz."

"La Cabaña isn't any Alcatraz."

I had to admit that I had read about escapes. "Yes, but still..."

"Yes, but what?"

"Maybe you can successfully escape by bribing the commandant or some of the guards. Or smuggling in a weapon or something to Pillo. But not by blowing the place up!"

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"Oh Chucho!" He made a face.

"Felipe," I said. "And I'm working on my own plans to get them out. Legally."

"Felipe, Felipe. Yes, yes, but is your way certain to work?"

I thought about my troubled cogitations on the great Revueltos-Castro reconciliation scheme. "Well, not for certain."

"There you are. Anyway, we won't be blowing our way out of La Cabaña, it will be a diversion. Domínguez or one of his friends will help me. Meantime, you're to get your father and Pillo out through the visitor's entrance. A couple of well-timed bangs—wow!—and no one will be watching you." He giggled. "They'll be too busy shitting in their pants, wondering whether the *yanquis* are finally bombing Havana."

I couldn't help smiling. "I guess the *yanquis* would be, at that"—both Paco and I were American citizens now.

He clapped me vigorously on the back, making me stumble. "That sounds more like you, Chucho—I mean Felipe." I saw him glance over his shoulder. It was getting to be dusk, but following his glance, across the street I could see a fellow I'd seen before, a guy with brooding eyes and a long narrow bald spot, peering down at the tall piles of paper cones at a chitling vendor's stand.

"Paco, that guy..." I said, whispering. He shook his head and hurried his pace. I jogged to catch up with him. "Is he G-2?" "G-2" was the name everybody called the espionage section of MININT, the Cuban version of the KGB.

He shook his head no. "One of ours."

"You know him?"

"No, but you can tell by his clothes." The fellow had on a drab brown sport shirt and trousers. "The MININT guys wear bright stuff they buy in the dollar stores."

Paco himself was elegantly turned out in an electric blue *guaybera* and canary-yellow slacks. I wondered what he considered "bright." A tall girl in faded jeans looked at him and pursed her

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lips in a speculative way—Paco had that effect on a lot of women, I wasn't sure why. Anyway, I thought, lots of luck, girls.

I supposed I'd rather be followed by "our" side than by Fidel's bunch—but I suddenly recalled the unpleasantness with Mr. Gómez's motorist friend in Miami. It was like getting used to living in a problem dream, there seemed to be no waking up. Whichever way I turned, first my debts, then the Association, and now this wild trip to Cuba posing as somebody else. A small part of me liked all the intrigue—but most of me was scared shitless and would have been far happier home in bed—with my sweet Amelia.

On our way back to the hotel, Paco kept going on and on about the explosives scheme. He sounded like an assistant film director planning stunts and special effects shots—and maybe in a way that's what he was. O.K., I thought, it might work, maybe he and a friend or two could create enough of a distraction to make an escape possible. But an escape for the benefit of Father, who didn't even want to get out of jail, and with me playing a key role? Me, boy entrepreneur, who wasn't cut out for this kind of thing at all?

What a mess. Was this worse than the trouble I was in Miami? "The Men" might conceivably decide they'd rather frame me than kill me—at least that was a possibility. And if I went to a U.S. jail, at least I'd be alive—as long as they sent me to some white-collar facility where I wouldn't be raped or get a knife stuck in my gut.

But the Cuban alternative? Suppose Castro caught me being involved in a prison break. With dumbbo Paco one of the masterminds behind this plot, that seemed more than possible. Even if I didn't get shot (or blown up) during the attempt, I could see myself getting tortured by one of the sadists in G-2 and then being stood up in front of the *paredón*.

Not for me, I decided. I'd hold out for a safer, more rational way of getting the job done. Let Paco play with fire. What I should do was play *along*. So I nodded absently as he went over the

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plans for bribing guards, setting plastic charges in the prison laundry and in the guard cell next to the visitor's room. Over the next days, he went out "scouting around," returning all giggly from Cayo Hueso with more plans, involving maybe the kitchen instead of the laundry, or a different guard to be paid off. I would listen and show enthusiasm, meanwhile I'd be thinking of ways to put a spoke in his wheel and scotch the whole misbegotten plot.

Given Paco's modest mental equipment, it shouldn't be too hard to ensure that his plans got screwed up. As an electrical engineer, I figured that I could either jam the mechanism in the new-style electronic detonators—or maybe better, set them off prematurely, thus scuttling the whole operation before it became too serious. A nice explosion on the beach road would do the job—but it would be quieter and safer if the small charges inside the detonators could be set off without disturbing the main explosive. Instead of a "boom," you'd have a few puffs and pops—and Paco and his friends would find themselves fresh out of ways to startle the La Cabaña guards.

The one day, I returned from an errand to the Hilton and got myself a seat on a lounge chair close by the giant star-shaped pool. As I watched, a reddish head of hair suddenly rose out of the water on the other side of the pool. A large but definitely feminine mop of hair, dripping water. I stared, it was like catching sight of a statue in a fountain. Then the head disappeared in a splashing fountain of white water, and a welter of long arms and legs churned through the pool coming toward me. I became certain of who it was as she turned her face aside to breathe.

Wow. A kind of paralysis hit me. Her hair and then her eyebrows appeared, she brushed the water away from her eyes and stared, then smiled. "Felipe!" she whispered, gasping, then she coughed. "Comrade!" she said more loudly, in the soprano voice that had always seemed too high-pitched for her size.

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I could see again the dark blue waters of Lake Coatepeque under the cloudy afternoon skies of El Salvador. "Pepita?" I said stupidly, as if there were any question about her identity.

She pulled herself up smartly onto the edge of the pool, her Rubenesque thighs flattening out into fleshy ripples on the tiles. She laughed merrily. "You seem so surprised. Didn't you get a cable from the Committee?"

"Committee? What committee?"

"The Democratic Physicians Committee for Freedom and Progress in the Americas. We're holding a meeting here." She brushed away a straggling strand of red hair from her face and frowned. "You don't seem, well..." The frown turned into a pout.

I tried to get control of my face. I reached up, patted her lightly on the face and blurted out what I hoped were some reassuring words. The pout smoothed out into a reluctant smile, and her entire magnificent body in its black swimsuit slowly eased up from the water like some great smooth sea lion out of a tide pool.

I didn't know how I was going to handle this new turn in my life in Havana—the mixed-up existence of Felipe-Jesús—but as I peered at the faint outline of her nipples under the fabric of her suit, I had the frivolous thought that the condemned criminal could still hope for a fine last meal. And, if experience were any teacher, a good swift bruising into the bargain.

"*Hola, Chucho!*" Paco's voice was throaty, his darkly tanned body glistened with oil, and his gold bracelet jangled as he slapped me on the back.

I looked at Pepita's surprised face as she heard my real nickname. Getting up, I frantically waved at a bald man, a stranger sitting across the pool, the sun gleaming on his bald pate, "Hi, Chucho," I yelled, "I didn't see you."

I saw the man's face begin to change, but I was concentrating on Pepita who also stared across the pool, while I punched Paco

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in the belly and whispered shush to him. My fingers felt greasy where they had touched his lotioned body.

Pepita looked back at me. Paco said, "Oh, yeah, Felipe." He stared at Pepita. "Friend of yours?"

I introduced them. He took her wet hand and held it, saying to her, "'Doctor'?"

"Are you Cuban, Mr. Santos?" she said.

"Uh yes. I mean no, well, that is..."

"Paco lives in the States now," I said.

"Oh," she said in a disapproving tone. Her face turned sour. The bald man on the other side of the pool was getting up and seemed to be heading in our direction.

"Come on," I said to Pepita, who was toweling off, "let me buy you a drink—see you, Paco." We went off toward the terrace bar. I tried to take Pepita's arm, but I'd forgotten the Prussian side of her personality. She shook off my hand, frowned, and gave me a grim, steely smile.

But a couple of daiquiris changed her mood, and we soon found ourselves back in my room. There, I found that her psychological armor plate turned out to be barely skin deep.

And that hairless skin—sometimes I think that it's all about skin. The surface of life. You know, everybody puts down the surface of things. Amelia: "Chucho, all you think about is basketball (I wasn't tall but I was fast on the court) or flying an airplane, or girls." As if there were so many better things. Don't knock surfaces, I always say.

Lying there, scrunching myself up in the massive, chlorine-scented arms of Pepita, I felt contented. (Except for a new pain in my shoulder—I hadn't been able to duck all of her love pats.)

"The Struggle," whispered Pepita in my ear.

"What?"

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She raised herself up, one breast still under the sheet, the other open, golden tanned, giving her a deliciously lopsided look. "The Struggle!"

This time I caught the capital letter. "What?" I said articulately.

"I hope you're finishing up your project here soon. The Struggle at home needs all its best fighters. Critical times."

"Oh?" I said articulately. I felt as if I were losing my ability to converse. "You're never at a loss for words, Chucho," Amelia always used to say to me. But the tenor of my life was beginning to leave me speechless: I like variety, surprises, the same as the next man, but there is a limit.

"No," she said as I grasped one of her broad nipples and began to press on it, trying to knead her nerve endings into a non-Revolutionary mood. She pulled gently away, dragging her nipple with her. "No, I'd rather talk, Felipe. I want you to understand the situation of the comrades at home."

"Quiet!" I said.

"What?" she said.

Me: The Life Force, Pepita.

Her: What?

Me (adapting some of Pierre's little speeches on Anarchism): The Revolution heightens the healthy, vibrant feeling between male and female comrades. (I raised a finger and waggled it.) It leads to the glorification of the Life Force and the infusing of the wisdom of the flesh into the drive to create a New Man. (I frowned, then I improvised.) Engels. (I trusted nobody but my father was crazy enough to actually *read* Engels.)

Her: Oh, Felipe. (She sighed and let her fingers droop gently over my cozily bulging genitals.)

Me: The Revolution is Sex.

Her: And of course babies, new comrades.

Oh, God. "In time," I said, "in time. When the situation is optimal for the emergence of such new comrades."

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"Of course there's my work," she said. She frowned. "But Comrade Felicia Suárez had her baby and was back in her forward observation post the next day, nursing her infant."

I kissed her hard on the lips. She sighed. "A true heroine of communism."

"Felipe?"

"Yes?"

"Don't think of me as a communist always, think of me right now as a woman, a person of the feminine gender."

"I'll try, Pepita—comrade—I'll try."

"Good!" she said, and gave me a solid punch on my breastbone and a quick back-handed slap on my chin. She sighed deeply. "I guess," she said, "I really needed a little break from the Struggle."

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Meanwhile, Marcus or whichever spook or Mafioso was in charge of this operation had sent around some character named Llemo Durán, a driver of a Turistaxi, a former bartender at a downtown café, and the part-owner of an export-import business in the bad old days. Durán claimed to have some contacts in the Prisons section of MININT—you had to guess that he had made his contacts by the direct route, from the inside of a penitentiary cell. He and Paco became thick as thieves, and I felt increasingly relegated to the background. In one way that was fine with me and in another it was kind of worrying. God knew what screw-ups Paco and his pal could get into.

Fortunately, Paco had asked me to design the wiring circuit for the detonators, so I was able to kind of keep track of their various changes of plans and schedules, like which guards were going to be on duty when, and what dates were holidays when the prison staff might be at reduced strength.

One night I had a call from the lobby. It was Pierre. A friend in the police had notified him that most of the heat was off, and he'd

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sneaked into town on an errand. I went down and we had a drink in the bar off the lobby. He was wearing a gray wig now, and dark glasses. He pulled two barstools together to accommodate his fat butt.

"Still surviving in the land of the big bad Castro?" he said. He was still drinking rum—just two. But his face looked less puffy, he seemed fitter. I wondered what he was up to. But I didn't ask—I didn't think I wanted to know.

"Surviving? Barely," I said.

He nodded his head several times, gravely. "Despite everything, Felipe, I think you *are* a survivor."

"I suppose." I wanted badly to believe him.

"I have a feeling we'll end up working together yet, Doctor Elizalde," he said. "We'll see."

Fifteen minutes later, as he left, first adjusting his wig in the mirror over the bar, I wondered whether I *would* be seeing him again—at least before either he or I ended up in a Cuban jail.

Meanwhile, Pepita had become busy with her meetings—they elected her chairperson of some committee on anti-social/pathological personalities. One day I was in the lobby of the Presidente saying good-bye to Pepita after we had had lunch together. She was excited, she had had a long interview with Fidel that morning, and they had gotten along very well. "He told me he had heard of my work!" she had told me. Just then I spotted Mama getting out of an elevator in the hallway off the lobby. I quickly took Pepita by the arm and led her out the front door while my mother was entering the lobby—maybe I could have handled the meeting, I thought, but women are so smart about each other that it would be better not to risk it. I looked back and saw *mamacita* glance at us as I led Pepita out into the foyer. I gave her a peck on the cheek, a sharp good-bye slap on the fanny, and hurried back into the chrome-and-fluorescent lobby. Mama had thrown herself into a gigantic leather chair; in her print dress she looked like a flowery toy doll left in a chair by a

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thoughtless child. She raised an eyebrow at me and said, "It's a good thing Amelia isn't here, I suppose." But before I had to come up with an answer, her dark brown eyes lit up, and she said, "Men are all the same."

"Well, I don't know."

"I do, look at Paco, I've seen him eyeing that girl you were with just now."

"Hell, Mama..."

"It doesn't matter, I'll straighten him out when I get a minute. What matters is that I've *done* it."

"Done what?"

"I'm going to see *Him*."

"Fidel."

"Everybody calls him the *Comandante* here. Or the Horse. The big Red stud, I suppose!" She giggled.

"Lots of luck."

"You don't have any faith in your mother, shame on you. I'm good at doing things like this."

Actually I was never quite sure what my mother could do. She had never stayed home and made cookies, she didn't go out and practice some important profession, she just *was*. But boy, was she! Like a force of nature that the average person couldn't cope with. Maybe it would work with Fidel—trouble was, he was obviously also a force of nature all to himself. "I have faith, Mother. I have a lot more faith in you than I do in Uncle Paco."

"Oh, Paco. It's true, whatever he does turns into a disaster." She smiled. "But he is cute, just like a bright-eyed little boy—though I don't like to tell him so. Swells his empty little head."

"Keep an eye on him, will you *mamacita*?"

"I always do, but right now I'm depending on my son to do that." She smiled mischievously. "When he isn't too busy chasing the local girls. Looks like you have yourself an Amazon this time."

"She's just a friend—or rather a friend of 'Felipe's.'"

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"All this mumbo-jumbo. You and Paco, playing at being secret agents or something. I have a feeling Fidel will listen to reason. He always used to. And I do know Mirta's family, after all."

"He doesn't hang around with his first wife much anymore."

"Oh, I know, but that isn't the point. Castro's got the big head, he comes from plain country folks and it shows, but he knows how to be a gentleman, he was educated by the Jesuits—which is more than I can say for you, Chuchito."

Jesuit education or no, I felt that I was about to burst with hidden knowledge about the boom-booms. "Mama."

"What?"

"I'm afraid Paco is going to get out of control."

She patted my hand. "Leave everything to me, let Paco have his fun."

"Fun"!

I didn't dare tell her about the explosives.

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In the event, she did at least a little better with Fidel than I. But you wouldn't have known it from the guarded expression on her face as we ate dinner together two nights later.

"Your 'Horse' said he'd look into it."

"That sounds good."

"I told him how loyal Federico was to him, 'loyal in the true sense of the word,' I said. I was pretty smooth, I thought. And he seemed to take that in, he raised his head, fingered that nasty, scruffy beard of his, and nodded. 'You can't have that many comrades left who really represent the old ideals,' I said then, 'men who really think about the little people.' 'Yes, yes,' he said, 'you are absolutely correct. It is a constant struggle to build a true socialist consciousness.' I started to explain to him I wasn't a socialist, but a believing catholic. 'Of course, I know that,' he said. He broke in and explained to me, rather wetly—he sprays little clouds of spit when he gets excited—that the ideals of the Revolution were the ideals of Christ, of the best elements in the Church, and so on and

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so on. A convergence of disparate ideals, and so on. He does like to talk, I must say."

She went on describing their conversation. It sounded as if she had insisted on doing a lot of the talking—not the easiest thing to do with the *Comandante*. "He treated me with respect, of course," she said. "And consideration. 'Elena,' he said, 'you are one of the most intelligent women I've ever known.'"

"He called you 'Elena'?"

"I'd met him before."

"Oh." I supposed she meant at some soiree of Mirta's.

But when I asked her whether she had gotten any idea of precisely what Fidel was going to do about my father, she smiled with her lips clenched and shrugged. "We'll see."

"Well," I said, "at least you've tried."

"Tried! That isn't enough, just to try. Remember that! Chucho, you always give up too easily."

I thought about my present situation, masquerading in Cuba, a fugitive from the I.R.S. and the Cuban Mafia in the U.S., and wondered whether she was right. "Nice guy" Revueltos strikes out again and again and again—you wouldn't see Errol Flynn doing that. Cutlass in hand, back to the wall or the yardarm or whatever, first he would give you one of his sparkling smiles, but then the white even teeth would take on frightening sneer, and you'd know that you weren't going to get the better of *him*. The trouble is, it would be easy enough to figure out how to bull your way out of things if you're following a movie script. But in real life—lots of luck!

My mother had that faraway look on her face. "So you're going to wait?" I said.

She shrugged. "Patience is a virtue." She grimaced as if at an odd smell. "But virtue can be overdone, can't it?"

She was right—It sure as hell can be. On the other hand, the way it turned out, I wish my mother had *exercised* a little patience instead of just talking about it!

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Pepita was safely out of Havana on a tour the next weekend, and Valeska and I went out on the town Saturday night and ended up at a jai alai player's hangout near the old Country Club—now the School of Art. We saw Arnoldo, who was having a spirited conversation with some of his fellow players. Then he saw us and looked as if he'd like to get his *cesta* out and fling a *pelota* or two at my head. I suggested to Valeska that we leave. She pooh-poohed the idea, saying that if Arnoldo was going to be a bore about it, he was always free to take off and leave us alone. As it was, Arnoldo decided instead to make up to a redhead sitting across the way. When that didn't get a rise from Valeska, he slumped down in his seat, head in hands, and ordered another bottle of rum.

I saw a waiter with a big mustache bring the rum to Arnoldo's table and then head our way. His walk was familiar. Then, as Valeska left me to go talk to a friend, the waiter came over. It was Mr. Marcus, his brown hair parted in the middle and slicked down with oil. The mustache was slipping slightly to one side.

Him: Act natural.

Me: Oh, God.

Him: Dr. Sánchez-Schulz is in Havana.

Me: Now you tell me.

Him: Just verifying the information. Also, your mother has been observed near one of Castro's locations.

Me: Can you actually give me some help, Mr. Marcus, instead of just telling me things I already know?

Him: It's not easy.

Me: I know it's not easy.

A customer called for him and he waved back at him, saying "*un momento*" as if he were talking about a souvenir. He leaned over and whispered to me:

Him: If this all goes smoothly, I should be in line for chief of station in Mexico City.

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Me: Congratulations.

Him: We don't mind your having a little fun, but don't get distracted from the mission.

Me: I wouldn't for the world jeopardize Mexico City.

Him: I appreciate that. Remember you have not one, but two persons targeted.

He pursed his lips, turned, and left to attend to the customer. We left the club soon after that but still didn't get back to my room at the Presidente until 2 A.M. When I woke up Sunday morning, Valeska was still asleep on the other side of the bed, her hair like a floppy nest of some exotic bird, one gently sloping breast looking at me blindly with its purplish-dark nipple. Her nostrils quivered, her breath rippled the frayed edge of the pillow slip. She stirred slightly, and I grew conscious of a knocking on the door. "*Un momento*," I said, sounding to myself almost like Mr. Marcus. I noted that it was almost nine as I pulled on my robe, yanking the sash tight.

The lily-scented perfume that Valeska had been wearing seemed to grow stronger as I stood up. I opened the door a crack, just on the chain. A large shadowy form filled the space behind the crack. It was Pepita.

"*Salud, compañero!*" she said.

"Oh, hey."

"How are you, Felipe?"

"Hi, yes, wait just a minute, will you?"

"Too early?"

"Yeah, maybe a little later."

"I'll just be a moment." She pouted. "It's important." She pushed firmly at the door.

"Well..."

"Please, Felipe."

"Just give me a minute." Heart pounding, I shut the door and took a deep breath. Then I shook Valeska awake. While she was

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rousing herself, I whispered at Pepita through the door I'd just be another minute.

"Are you kidding?" said Valeska, when I asked her to hide in the closet.

"Just for a minute, I'll get rid of her, I promise."

"Who is she?"

"It's business," I said, "just business," gathering up her clothes and prodding her into the closet.

"What a bore!" said Valeska. "I'm tired—and I've got to pee!" I shut the closet door. Then I pulled up the bedcovers, combed my hair, and opened the door.

Pepita strode in like a princess on an inspection tour, moving her lips, subjecting the room to an assessment—decidedly negative. She was dressed in a stylish but no-nonsense dark blue blouse and slacks outfit.

"It is a little early, Pepita, maybe we could meet for breakfast in about an hour."

She leaned over and kissed me casually on the cheek, then stuck her tongue in my ear and swished it around. The shivers went down my legs to my feet—but I didn't feel like the shivering bit just that moment. She smiled at me and whispered: "It's important, darling, or I wouldn't have come. It concerns the Defense of the Revolution."

"Which Revolution?" I said, before I realized that how out of character I was being—all revolutions, in Cuba, China, El Salvador were part of one grand world struggle of the proletariat, etc. She stared at me—I put on an expression that I hoped was comic.

"You and your jokes, Felipe. This is serious. I got back late last night, the meetings today were canceled because Comrade Rubios was sick...." I lost some words of what she was saying as I heard something scrape roughly in the closet. Pepita's eyes widened slightly.

"Too bad about your meetings," I said quickly.

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She waved impatiently. "No, no, it's not that. It concerns a possible plot against the Revolution."

"Plot? What plot?"

"Listen." She had lowered her voice. "You know the corner of the Terrace Bar downstairs, next to the piano and the exit to the pool? I went down to look for you last night when you weren't in your room. I sat down and I heard your good-looking friend Paco Santos's voice. He was talking to that loathsome-looking fellow Durán. They were sitting on the level below me, and they couldn't see me. I started to call to them over the edge of the wooden railing, when I suddenly realized what they were talking about. I almost jumped when I heard the word 'plastic.'"

My stomach felt light. "'Plastic?'"

"Yes, yes, explosives, that's what they meant, you know. I heard that Durán type say something about 'prison.' I lowered my head and got closer. When I peeked over the railing, Paco was looking around and I ducked before he looked my way."

A dull rumbling in the closet. Pepita didn't seem to notice.

"What kind of *gusano* gangsters are you hanging around with, Felipe? Those men are planning to break into La Cabaña."

I held back a gulp. "La Cabaña?"

"Yes, La Cabaña."

"Well. Well."

"Is that all you can say, 'Well, well?'"

"Did they say why?"

"I'm not sure, something about getting out somebody named Pio or something." Something that sounded like maybe a shoe fell in the closet.

"What was that?" Pepita said.

I froze my face, ignoring the closet. "Oh, I don't know, Pepita. Anyway, it all sounds crazy. Probably just wild talk. Paco seems O.K. to me"

"I don't know, I don't trust these pretty boys. Anyway, I had to come to you first, Felipe." She sat down on the bed, which zinged

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with her weight. "I thought you might be able to help the Cuban police. What do you really know about Paco? Is he C.I.A., do you suppose, or..." A moan came from the closet. "My God, what was that?"

"What was what?"—I stuttered on the second "what."

Another moan. The closet door eased open. A maroon-dyed frizzy head of hair appeared, followed by Valeska's dark eyes. "Sorry. I've just got to pee."

Pepita's mouth was wide open, she looked very much like a startled fish. I shut my eyes.

Valeska appeared, covering her lower parts with a shirt of mine. The tips of her breasts jiggled as she tiptoed toward the bathroom. "Sorry, I'm being boring," she said, looking with a mixture of shame and naughtiness at Pepita. Pepita's thin lips set into a hard line and she drew herself up, looking like a Viking princess surveying the underground lairs of the dwarf peoples.

"Go on ahead with your business," said Valeska.

"Felipe!" said Pepita.

"I really, really have to go—bad," said Valeska, making a shaking motion with her heart-shaped buttocks as she went into the bathroom and slammed the door. Then we could hear the splashing rush of her urine.

I wished fervently that time travel had been perfected.

Pepita shook her head as if clearing her thoughts and stood up. "Time for me to go too."

"Wait, Pepita. Wait, comrade."

Her face twisted. "I wish this didn't shake my confidence in your political sincerity, *compañero* Felipe—but it does."

The jerk of the faulty toilet lever was followed by the customary loud but feeble flood of water in the toilet.

Valeska, partly draped in a towel with a ragged edge opened the bathroom door. Pepita stared at her, and then me. "Who is this tart?"

Valeska laughed and turned to me. "What a joke this all is."

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"Yes, a joke," said Pepita. "What bad taste, Felipe!"

Valeska drew in a sharp breath. "Big pasty-faced bitch!"

Pepita sneered and shook her head. "'The New Socialist Man!'" she intoned. She went to the door, swung it open, strode across the threshold as if she were playing a jilted Nibelung bride, and slammed the door with a Wagnerian bang.

Valeska plopped herself down on the bed. "What's eating the big *vieja*?—God, she looks like a monster carrot."

"Christ, Valeska!"

"And what's all this stuff about your friend Paco, anyway?"

"Just shut up about that."

She took a comb in hand and looked into the mirror. "I sure could use a new hair drier."

"Tomorrow," I said.

"Either American—or Japanese."

"I'll buy you one of each." And that would take care of *her*. But it might be harder to take care of Pepita, her jealousy, and her discovery of the Plot Against the Revolution.

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