

## May 1939, Havana, Cuba

'It's so warm, Papa. It's still night, but it's so warm!'

Professor Carl Mueller smiled down at his daughter, holding his hand at the rail of the S.S. St Louis, the ship that had been their refuge, their salvation, as it slipped slowly through the darkness towards the sleeping city. A sense of relief washed over him, like the caress of the tropical breeze.

'We're in the Tropics, Anna. It's always warm here.'

Anna gazed at the shimmering lights of the city strung out along the shore. 'Look! It's like one of Mama's diamond necklaces!'

'She hasn't got them anymore!' snapped her elder brother, Hans, in German. 'We had to sell them to get on the boat!'

'Because of your stupid Nazis!' replied Anna fiercely.

'The Nazis are not stupid!'

'Children, children, don't fight!' said their father firmly, but gently. 'And please remember we must speak English now.'

Hans snorted his annoyance, but said nothing.

As the deep throb of the engines slackened below their feet, they fell quiet. The scent of wet palms and exotic blooms filled Anna's nostrils. She breathed deeply. At twelve years old her life was beginning again. She breathed deeply once more. It was the smell of freedom.

'It looks so beautiful, Papa. Our new home.'

'It isn't our home!' retorted Hans. His father looked at him. Hans continued in English. 'Germany is our home, isn't it, Father! Our Fatherland.'

'Perhaps one day, my son, it will be again. Until then...' Professor Mueller's voice tailed off.

In silence, they listened to the dark swell slapping against the iron ship, each momentarily lost in their own thoughts, dreams and fears.

'Is that a fort, Father?', asked Hans suddenly.

The dim bulk of El Morro, its huge cannon guarding the entrance to the harbour, loomed out of the black water, hunkered against the lightening sky.

'It looks like it, Hans'.

'Who built it? Is it still used? Do the cannons fire?'

Carl Mueller smiled. 'I don't know. We shall have to find out.'

'I want to explore everything, Papa!' Anna said excitedly. 'I shall learn Spanish and learn everything about Cuba!'

Her father smiled at her again, but beneath the smile there was deep sadness. There was one person who could teach Anna everything about the island. A charming, lively, intelligent man who would make the perfect guide to their new home. He didn't know if the man had ever returned to the island, his home, but if he had, Carl Mueller fervently hoped that they would never meet him.

The cab splashed to a halt, waking Freddie Sanchez as he was thrown against the back of the driver's seat. Streetlights dazzled him from the wet, empty sidewalk. He felt disorientated and a little sick. That last daiquiri was one too many. The last half dozen, really.

'Thank you, Carlos,' he muttered, groping for the door handle. 'Put it on my tab.'

'Señor Sánchez –'

'Mañana, Carlos. Mañana, I promise.'

'I have a family to keep, Senor Sanchez –'

'You're a lucky man, Carlos. A lucky man. I have no one.'

He stumbled from the cab, ignoring the muttered Spanish oath behind his back. Freddie understood. Being half-Cuban, of course he understood. But at such moments he leaned on his English side and played the colonial.

The cab squealed into a turn and roared back along the deserted sea-front towards the casinos.

Leaning against the harbour wall to support himself, Freddie remembered falling headlong down the stairs of the Hotel Nacional, and the young policeman catching him, saving him from breaking his neck.

'You have to be more careful, Senor Sanchez', said the young man as he helped him to a taxi.

'Thanks, Ramos,' he had said. 'I'm...er, just a little tired.'

Freddie recalled the flash of gleaming white teeth, the sarcastic smile. Why did he still pretend with people like Ramos, who must know as many gutter secrets as anyone on the island. Ramos could care less about him being a drunk, so why did Freddie pretend? Perhaps because the years of excess still hadn't quite left their tell-tale traces, and the last thing to leave him was his vanity. From his medical training, Freddie knew he'd been born lucky. He had a constitution like the sea wall he was leaning against. Solid, resistant, able to take anything that life threw at him. In body at least, if not in mind.

The faint strains of 'Moonlight Serenade' drifted from deep inside the narrow streets of the Old City. In the dark blue of the West a lone star was fading. Fading like him. But in broad daylight it would still be there, shining invisibly, long after he was gone. Freddie Sanchez would leave no trace.

The klaxon on the S.S. St Louis broke into his self-pity. Out in the dark ocean, like a birthday cake ablaze with candles, the S.S. St Louis stole into the arms of the harbour, the smoke from its stacks ghostly wraiths against the night sky. It looked as if it was headed straight towards the second-floor window of his tiny room by the harbour.

Nearly a thousand refugees, the papers said, escaping from the Nazis. German families like the one he once knew as a student in London. Where were they now? Safe, he was certain. Professor Carl Mueller's family would be safe...Despite the warmth of the night, at the thought of that family, Freddie shivered. After so many years, the cold chill of self-disgust still lingered.