

CHAPTER 1

“FIRING Squad ... *Atención* ...”

A dozen heels clicked together; the drum of boots tramped in unison against the sun baked soil. Felipe tugged and pulled against the tether securing him to the death post, but the rawhide cut into his wrist and ankles, holding fast.

The stench of death and haunted wails of ghosts from past executions swirled around Felipe. Memories of family ... lost love ... and battles in victory and defeat with his compatriots scrolled through his mind's eye at warp speed.

A soldier dressed in army green with a chest decorated with medals approached the prisoner; a smirk plastered across his face, the Colonel spat and laughed as spittle slid down Felipe's cheek.

The words *how could this be happening* spun out of control through Felipe's head. This had to be a mistake. It was HIS destiny to be Cuba's future.

A sneer twitched the corners of his mouth; certainly not the fraud veiled in the shadows of the observation tower. Who could he be? Who did he think he was killing ME, Felipe Cardena y Pérez?

Before the decorated soldier wrapped the black silk blindfold around Felipe's eyes, Felipe strained to catch a glimpse of his executioner. Even though the tall, muscular frame was cloaked in a dim light, there was something familiar about the man. If he didn't know better, he would swear he spotted a mirror image of himself.

A sword rattled as it was pulled from a scabbard; the swish of the blade cut through the air as the raspy voice of

the Colonel bellowed, “Ready ... Aim ... Fire.”

“Wake up, Felipe, wake up,” panic laced Ileana’s voice.

“You’re having a nightmare.”

He jolted upright, snatched Ileana’s wrist. “Wha ... what the hell ...?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she exclaimed. “You ... you’re screams frightened me. I thought we were under attack.”

Felipe released Ileana’s wrist then brushed the perspiration dripping from his brow. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled; his hands still shook.

“Let me get you a cup of coffee,” Ileana offered. “I could add some brandy if you like.”

He glanced up at her and smiled, “Just coffee.”

Ileana took a step, stopped reached back and placed a hand on Felipe’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Without looking up, he patted her hand and nodded.

Ileana gave his shoulder one last squeeze and left the room.

Felipe couldn’t shake the foreboding that gripped his insides tighter than a boa constrictor coiled around its prey. He shook his head and whispered to the ghosts in the room, “Trying to invade my dreams again Rafaella with your so called warnings?” he scoffed. “They become more ridiculous each time they occur.”

He stood and snatched a jacket hanging over a dining chair and said to the vacant room, “Well, I don’t buy your nonsense. Find another *idiota*.”

As Felipe opened the cabin door, a gust of bitter wind

rushed past. He buttoned his coat, reached over and picked up the binoculars lying on the veranda railing and scanned the horizon as daylight peeked over the mountains.

Cactus and rocks dotted the landscape, and ascended toward lush pine forests high in the *Sierra Madres Oriental*.

Great columns of smoke from the snowcapped volcano, *Popocatepetal*, towered high into the clouds. The rugged terrain was the perfect training ground for the rebels, and it all was within a fifty-mile radius southeast of Mexico City.

He blew warm breath into his hands and returned to the ranch house shutting the door behind him. Cold air whistled and seeped through cracks and crevasses of the old structure and the wood-beamed ceiling creaked.

Felipe stumbled over a loose floor tile, caught his fall and said, "For Christ's sake I don't know whether the conditions are worse in here or out in the field."

He sat down at the long dining table and opened the account books; the numbers had not changed. Money was gushing out, little was coming in. Weapons, uniforms and other equipment needed to be purchased, not to mention the bare essentials such as food and living quarters. The men existed on eighty cents a day – which was less than Batista's army spent on their horses. Somehow, someday they needed to increase their intake, he thought, or their revolution would wither and die.

Ileana Calleri handed Felipe a steaming cup of coffee.

Her shiny, raven hair was pulled back in a tight bun and accentuated her warm brown eyes and smooth golden skin. Her shoulders were wrapped in a royal blue and gold wool shawl. The hem of the Aztec patterned skirt covered the tops of her polished leather boots.

“Thank you,” Felipe said, welcoming the cups warmth on his numb fingertips. “I needed this.”

Ileana walked to the window and gazed out. “Did you see any sign of Emilio and the men?” She asked as she pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders.

Felipe shook his head and closed the account books. “I need to be in the field with the men instead of searching these damn books for nonexistent funds.”

She touched his shoulder, “In time you’ll be with your comrades, Felipe ... when it counts. Right now you’re needed to make important political contacts and raise money.”

He patted her cold hand. “Perhaps, but my heart is with my men.”

“I still don’t understand why you left the comfort of Mexico City to stay in this run down shack,” Ileana shivered.

“Batista has spies everywhere,” he said with a bitter scowl. “The city was getting too dangerous.”

“True,” Ileana said, “but at least in Mexico City you had access to modern communication and rich sympathizers.”

“I’m needed here,” Felipe insisted. “More men are arriving from Cuba weekly, and it is getting difficult to find safe houses for these recruits. More importantly, this area is similar to the Cuban Sierra and much easier to maintain discipline.”

“Possibly,” Ileana said, “but this old fortress couldn’t possibly house more than a few dozen men.”

Nonsense,” Felipe said. “With the outlying barns and stables we can billet more than a hundred, if necessary. Need I remind you, we’re not here to live in luxury? These ninety-six square miles of fields and mountains are similar

to the Cuban Sierras and are perfect for forced marches, simulated combat and guard duty situations.” He smiled,

“What more could a rebel ask?”

Ileana bit her bottom lip and looked out the window.

“But, Emilio has been gone for days. They took little food and water with them.”

Felipe got up from the table and stood next to Ilena. He glanced down at her, “It is crucial guerrilla fighters walk for long periods in adverse conditions with very little food and water. They need to climb mountains and carry heavy packs. It’s all part of the training. How did you think revolutionaries trained?”

Ileana shrugged.

“Once we return to Cuba and join the main force, every soldier must be physically fit and resistant to fatigue.”

“I know you’re right,” Ileana signed; her ample breasts tugged against her embroidered blouse, melancholy washed across her face. “I miss Emilio.”

“What would your husband, Faustino, say to that?”

She looked down at the floor and tugged at her gold loop earrings. “He lives his life ... I live mine. Anyway, he’s in Spain producing another movie and will be gone for months. I’m sure that Spanish harlot,” a smiled played at the corner of her mouth, “I mean starlet keeps him company.”

Felipe laughed. “Does he know his house in Mexico City has been a haven and shelter for a band of Cuban revolutionaries?”

“He doesn’t ask and I don’t offer the information,” she said. “I’m proud of my Cuban heritage and will do whatever it takes to help the cause.” Ileana stretched her five-foot

two frame; flecks of gold blazed in her brown eyes, “Like I said, my husband doesn’t monitor my life ... I don’t question his. Besides, if your revolution is successful, I’m sure he’ll produce a movie about it.”

Ileana picked up the binoculars sitting on the dining table, went back to the window and searched the landscape.

Felipe followed her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “We truly appreciate everything you’ve done, Ileana. Cuban women like you will make our victory possible.”

She looked up and smiled. “It’s nothing. You’re the one who makes a bigger sacrifice. Emilio told me you pawned your only heavy coat and used your entire meager monthly allowance to finance the printing of your latest manifesto.”

“I’d sell my soul if I thought it would help get the message out. Monies flow in slowly ... if at all. The funds needed to come from somewhere.”

Ileana smiled and looked up at Felipe. “Maybe it’s time you accepted ex-President Prío Socarrás generous offer. He personally told me he’d meet you or Luis in McAllen, Texas with a check. It’s that simple.”

“No!” Felipe barked. “He’s no better than Batista. The money he offers was also stolen from the Cuban people.”

Ileana furrowed her brow. “Try to look at it this way,” Felipe, “she said. “Socarrás is returning a portion of the people’s money and putting it to good use.”

Felipe pushed back his rising annoyance. What did this woman know about rebellion? He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it. “If I take his money,” he said, “Socarrás will expect something in return. Our goal is to rid Cuba of

tyrants not replace them with another.”

“Be realistic,” Ilena said. “If you don’t have an alternative financial plan, you need to consider his offer.” She rubbed her hands together, “How can you stand this incessant cold?”

Felipe closed his eyes; bit back the words nipping his tongue. He grabbed two split logs and kindling and placed them over the dying embers. In moments the dry wood ignited into a blaze warming the chill in the air.

“As soon as my visa is approved,” he said, “I’m going to the U. S. ... My American contacts have arranged speaking engagements in the Cuban communities up and down the eastern seaboard from New York to Miami. I have faith the expatriates won’t fail me. Their support is an investment in their future – their children’s future. Success will help them all eventually return to their homeland.” A spark ignited in Felipe’s eyes, “The donations will come, or I’ll die trying.”

The front door flew open and slammed against the cabin wall. A brisk breeze rushed in and fanned the flames in the fireplace. A tall, lean figure, mud and grime caked on his clothes and face, dropped his backpack on the floor.

“Buena’s días! Qué pasa?”

“Emilio!” Ileana exclaimed.

As they embraced, Felipe turned and looked into the fire giving Ileana and his friend their private moment.

Emilio slapped Felipe on the back. “Great exercise, *mí amigo*. You would have been proud of the men. We get closer to our goals every day.”

Felipe pulled a cigar from his pocket and handed it to Emilio. “Now all we need is more money and transportation back to Cuba.”

“Luis should be returning soon with news about the PT cruiser,” Emilio said. “If that option falls through, we’re working another angle.” He struck a match, touched the flame to the cigar tip and took several puffs. A twinkle glistened in his eyes. “We’ve come a long way these last several months since you’ve joined us in Mexico,” Emilio said. “It won’t be long now, my friend ... it won’t be long.” Ileana handed Emilio a cup of hot coffee, “Bet you could use this?”

Emilio kissed the top of her head and said, “That, a belly full of food and your warm body next to mine.”