

## BOOK I – SONS OF CUBA - HOMECOMING

### PROLOGUE

THE Havana moon glowed high in the star-laden sky illuminating the palace courtyard below. Yellow mariposa and red bougainvillea vines cascaded over the wrought iron balcony to the arched colonnades surrounding the botanical gardens.

Felipe Cardena rested one foot on the stair-stepped base of the marble statue and scrutinized his own youthful image bathed in the moonlight. The artist had captured the passion burning in the young rebel's eyes – the statue's physique was strong and sturdy - determined. Felipe stroked his graying beard and glanced up toward the heavens. The winking stars mocked him. He turned away; his shoulders slumped. Only the memory of that man existed now.

The cool evening air seeped into his muscles and joints. Felipe sat on the statue's base and stretched one leg out in front of him relieving the stiffness settling in his hip. He rubbed the old gunshot wound throbbing in his shoulder – memories of his past haunted him. He had made many choices over the years, but had he made the right ones for the country and for himself?

After more than thirty years, Cuba was once again on the verge of revolution. Where had it gone wrong? Felipe leaned back against the statue's base and shut his tired eyes. His mind churned searching for answers hidden in his past.

### PART I - Felipe

#### CHAPTER 1

"FELIPE ... Felipe Cardena," the old man whispered, shaking the young recruit. "Wake up, you must hurry."

"Wha ... what is it?"

"*El Presidente* is sending the Cuban Navy to intercept this ship. He canceled the invasion of Santo Domingo."

Felipe yawned and rolled over "So what? Maybe he changed his plans."

The man dug his fingernails deep into Felipe's shoulder. "Yes, there's been a change in plans. A revolution may start any day and you're on the wrong side."

Felipe rolled over on the hard steel deck of the frigate's makeshift dormitory, fought the sleepiness lingering in his head. He grabbed his heavy boots and shoved them on his feet trying not to wake the nearby soldiers.

He looked over at the old man. "Who the hell are you?" he whispered, fumbling with his laces.

"That's not important. What's important is Salabarría's police shot and killed Emilio Trò. Fires are burning in the streets of Havana; mobs are overturning cars and buses. The rumor is that the troops on this ship are heading back to Havana to overthrow the Cuban government instead of liberating Santo Domingo. No one on this frigate is to be trusted. That includes you, my young *amigo*."

Felipe rolled his sleeping bag, picked up his machine gun and backpack. He waited a moment for his eyes to focus in the darkness. Sounds of snoring and the odor of week-old sweat saturated the stale air in the lower deck. He stepped over and around sleeping soldiers, the daze clogging his brain slowly subsided. This could be Ellen W. Martin 14 serious if President Grau no longer trusted the Caribbean Legion, he thought. If he ignored the old man's warning and stayed on board ship, he could be executed for subversion. But if the old man was lying and he jumped ship, he could be shot for desertion. No matter what he did, he would be in trouble. A cold sweat beaded his forehead. He had joined the Legion to fight for freedom, but not at the cost of being treasonous to his own country. Damn! This old bastard better be telling me the truth.

"Hey ... watch where you're sticking that stinking boot!" A soldier snapped.

"What's going on?" another growled.

Felipe's heart drummed in his ears. He took a deep breath and tried to settle the panic seizing him. "Sorry, just going to take a piss," he whispered. "Go back to sleep."

The light sleepers grumbled, rolled over and began to snore.

The ship creaked and groaned. Felipe stumbled around in the darkness trying to keep up with the old man. They reached the bulkhead, hugged the wall searching for the passageway leading topside. A soft red glow filtered through a crack revealing the hatch. The two men stepped up and over the hatchway knee-knocker and moved with haste and vigilance up the metal stairs toward the top deck.

The old man cracked opened the companionway and peeked outside. With caution, he and Felipe stepped out onto the main deck.

Water lapped against the hull of the sleeping ship. The moon cast a long reflection across the ceaseless waves moving to shore.

Felipe inhaled the fresh sea air to clear his head. He grabbed the man by the arm, faced him eye to eye. "Now ... who are you and why are you helping me?"

The old man didn't flinch. His eyes were kind and he spoke in a warm reassuring tone. "It's a long story, my young amigo. Many years ago, your father escaped the grip of poverty. His destiny changed, but he never forgot his roots."

"You know my father?"

"Yes. Antonio was one of the lucky *labriegos*. He worked harder than most peasants, saved his money and was able to buy land. When your father no longer needed his donkey and cart, he gave them to me. These simple gifts saved my life and helped provide for my family." A toothless grin rippled across the crevices lining his face. "I return the favor by saving his donkey of a son."

The grin faded. "You come from a good family; shouldn't get mixed up with los *gángsteres*. They're trouble and will be the death of you, or worse, you'll become one of them. Listen to this old man, Felipe, stay away from them all. Go back to Mayarí and marry a nice girl. Help your father and brothers with the business of running the sugar plantation. Politics are a cruel and ruthless game."

Felipe released the man's arm. "You'd better be telling the truth, old man. My life depends on it."

The young rebel glanced over the railing, but saw only blackness and the reflection of the moonbeam on the water. "Where's the boat?"

The old man said nothing.

"You want me to jump and swim to shore? You're crazy! My equipment will drag me under."

"I'm sorry, but it's the only way," the old man said. "You mustn't leave any trace you were here. Besides, the swim is less than a half mile. The moon is full and the shoreline is visible ... Now be quick before we both are discovered and shot."

Felipe shifted his backpack and gun, settled them in a more comfortable position. He took a deep breath and gripped the edge of the ship's rail. His fingers froze in place, his knuckles turned white. Trying to ignore the knot twisting in his gut, Felipe climbed up and straddled the railing. He turned and looked one last time at the old man. "What about you?"

"My destiny has been fulfilled," the old man said. "Go with God, *mí amigo*."

Felipe shut his eyes, took a deep breath, and jumped. The wind whistled by his ears. His inner voice screamed, *what have I done?*"

He hit the water with a bone-crushing jolt. A burst of bubbles rushed upward. Gravity and the force of the jump dragged him downward ... downward deep into the water – terror gripped him.

Felipe kicked until he thought his thigh muscles would rupture. Time stood still as his body moved inch by inch ... foot-by-foot toward the surface. His chest grew tight ... tighter until he thought it would explode.

The unbearable pain squeezed his lungs, and then stopped. Felipe's tense muscles relaxed and welcomed the desire to slip into a dream-filled sleep. He looked up one last time before surrendering to the sea.

The moon reflecting on the water above beckoned him. He pushed hard one last time, forced his weary, listless body upward. His head broke the surface. He gasped for air, his arms thrashed, keeping him afloat. Felipe slung one heavy arm after the other struggling to find a workable rhythm to stay above water. No matter what stroke he used, the extra weight dragged him under.

With each tenacious stroke, Felipe searched the horizon for the shoreline, willing it closer. Suddenly, an uneasy feeling clutched the pit of his stomach – he wasn't alone.

A shark fin sliced through the water toward him on that moonbeam path to shore. A dark cloud passed over and concealed the moon and the fin barreling down on him. Felipe's arms carved through the water with more urgency.

A swift, forceful shove rammed his back. Felipe lashed out at the shark, but it was gone. Moments later the creature returned and brushed against his leg. He kicked hard striking the beasts' back with his booted foot. The shark darted away.

He heaved his arms through the water with renewed determination, congratulated himself for not abandoning the extra burden he carried. The cumbersome weight of his boots, machine gun and backpack had been the shield against this menacing foe.

The moon peeked from behind the passing cloud and illuminated the sandy beach – only a few hundred more yards. A surge of small swells pushed Felipe closer to shore. With each firm stroke, he encouraged himself: I'm strong ... A short swim won't defeat me ... Nothing ... no one can defeat Felipe Cardena y Pérez ... No matter what kind of shark it is.

Darkness faded. First light welcomed the new day. Felipe lay on the beach – motionless – the sea lapped at his feet. A small wave broke and rushed over his lower body. He raised his head, brushed away the sand clinging to the side of his face. He squinted at

the rising sun. Slowly Felipe crawled from the water's edge dragging the backpack still clinched in his fist. He collapsed onto his belly and passed out.

Sea gulls squealed overhead. The warm morning sun penetrated the back of his olive green uniform. Felipe rolled over, sat up. He gazed out to sea.

A gut-wrenching knot clutched his stomach. What had he done? He was a deserter. Well, not really a deserter. He wasn't officially in the Cuban military, just a volunteer in the Caribbean Legion off to save another Latin country from its dictator. But would that matter in the eyes of his friends and fellow students? Time ... he needed time to think. He slumped onto the sand.

A sea tern raced toward the water's edge; a small wave rolled in and chased the bird to dry sand. With each new surge of current, Felipe watched the tide pull his machine gun into its depths, but he didn't care. He had decisions to make ... what was he going to do? ... Where would he go? He couldn't return to the university – things were too unsettled in Havana. Home was only a day's walk, but his parents may still be angry that he left school in the first place. One thing for sure, he couldn't just sit there trying to figure it out. He grabbed his backpack and headed south.

The sun moved from east to west and slowly descends behind the mountains in the distance. Felipe trudged along the road – not looking back only forward. Three oxdriven carts loaded with harvested sugarcane rolled along the winding dirt road leaving a wake of dust. A lean, weary Felipe stopped and watched them pass.

He shielded his eyes and looked up the road toward a house. Smoke curled from a chimney, curtains blew through an open window, chattering, and laughter danced on the late afternoon air. Three milk cows wandered into stalls beneath the stilted house. A rooster flew up and landed on a bale of hay, stretched its neck and crowed. Felipe rubbed the stubble on his chin and whispered, "I'm home."