

Excerpt from Chapter Fourteen—FLYING TO NEVERLAND—*Palm Trees in the Snow*

My flight was scheduled to leave at 10:30 a.m. At Rancho Boyeros airport, parents rushed around with their children in tow, anxiously looking for their flight information. Walking the crowded hallways toward my KLM gate, I passed several younger children wearing nametags. I strained to read them as they passed by. Underneath their names were the names and phone numbers of the people meeting them when they arrived at their destinations. A little boy lagged behind his father, holding on tight to his hand. On his tag, under his name and age, it simply stated, "Please take good care of me." Some children were crying; others did not say a word. No one seemed too happy to be leaving. The air was notably tense, and the word "*vacación*" was heard constantly.

At the KLM check-in counter, we were told my flight had been delayed. The time of departure would be announced when available. Two hours later, there was still no word. My mother asked my grandparents to go home since we did not know how long it would take.

"We will stay with you until she leaves," Bibi told her, sitting next to me at the gate. *Milicianos* patrolled the airport hallways and escorted people to interrogation rooms. We soon found out that was the reason for the delays. It was the government's relentless attempts to find any reason to prevent Cubans from evacuating the island. They periodically stopped by our gate, calling someone's name off a list to come with them. Each time they did, my mother's face tensed up, Bibi's jaw clenched, and Mama prayed under her breath. At that moment, I began to have second thoughts about my trip. After a grueling twelve-hour delay, my flight was finally ready to board. It was almost 10:30 at night.

Despite the long, tense wait, my family had remained upbeat throughout the day, cheering me up about the trip. When it was time for me to go into *la pecera* — the fish-bowl — as Cubans called it, where the soldiers did final passenger checks before boarding, Mami held my hand tight, so tight the rings on

my fingers hurt. She and my grandparents walked with me to the doorway of the glass-enclosed room. Bibi clasped me to his chest. I could feel him drawing a deep breath. He held my face with both his hands. I searched for the usual twinkle in his eyes, but instead they were brimming with tears.

"*Pa lante, como el elefante, Yoyi.*" Forward like the elephant. He smiled, quoting a favorite *refrán*, and kissed my forehead.

Mama hugged me and gave my cheek a kiss. "*Que Dios te bendiga,*" she sniffled. Then I said goodbye to my mother. She hugged me to her, tight, and kept me in her embrace while people going into the room bumped into us. Looking me in the eyes, she said, "Everything will be all right, *mi amor*. Have a fun vacation and I'll see you in two weeks."

I sat in a chair next to the glass wall where my family could see me until I left. By then, my excitement had fizzled out, replaced by a stomach-tightening sensation. The room was filling up fast as *milicianos* yelled at teary-eyed parents to leave the room if they were not on the flight. I clung to the box of cookies Mama had given me as soldiers milled around. The *milicianos* paced the aisles back and forth, their expressions glaring defiance. I did not look at their faces as they passed me, so close I could see the worn releases on their holstered guns. The *miliciano* standing in the front of the room spotted my tin box. He walked slowly toward me, his eyes fixed on the container.

"*¿Que llevas ahí, chiquita?*" He snatched my tin with a swift, hungry movement. My heart was beating in my neck. I watched his black-rimmed nails all over the lid as he forced it open. *Get your grimy paws off my cookies, asqueroso!* I wanted to yell at him. I stared at the man, despising every inch of him. I glanced at my family just as Mama crossed herself and Bibi's eyes tore into the *miliciano*. But Mami's eyes, calm and unblinking, were on me. *Be brave*, they were telling me.

"Who gave you these?" he growled.

"*Mi abuela.*" I looked up at his face. He seemed so young underneath the bushy beard. Another *miliciano* called him from across the room. The young militiaman grabbed a guava turnover and stuffed it in his mouth, half of it hanging out. Slamming the lid back on, he thrust the box at me. I finished closing it and set it back on my lap, placing both my hands over it.

Two girls close to my age hurried into the room and sat next to me. They were sisters going on vacation, of course, to visit relatives in Miami. I envied them having each other. I wondered if Carmen had still felt excited about her solo trip as she sat in the same room to board her plane. Had she changed her mind and felt like I did? I wanted out—no vacation. I wanted to go home to my dog. I turned to look at my mother. Her eyes were unusually brilliant. Was she fighting off tears? How could I be happy about going on vacation when parents and relatives were so visibly upset? What was going on? How could I know of the agony that plagued my mother that day, not knowing if she would ever see me again.

A *miliciano* slammed the door shut and yelled at us to get up and prepare to board the plane. *Why do they have to be so rude?* I reluctantly picked up my train case. Another door opened at the far end of the room and people rushed toward it. My head spun sharply to look at my family. Bibi stood between Mami and Mama, his arms around both their shoulders, drawing them close to him. He smiled at me while Mama gave little waves. I nervously smiled back, waving goodbye, but my eyes were riveted to my mother's as I got up to leave. *Be strong*, they were telling me this time. A man hurried by me, banging my train case hard into my knee. Strangely, I felt no pain. I summoned what remained of my courage and moved slowly toward the door to give the agent my boarding pass. I turned to look at Mami one last time but couldn't see her through the people piling behind me. I stood on my toes, craning my head while everyone wove around me. Over someone's shoulder I spotted her face for a split second, then I was pushed sideways and it was gone.

The plane was packed with children of all ages, many traveling alone like me. They walked down the aisle as if in slow motion, their eyes widened with curiosity. *Is that what I look like?* I wondered. The stewardesses were shepherding them towards their assigned seats while adults spoke loudly to each other in confusion, shoving their way to their rows. I inched my way down the cramped aisle, letting everyone pass me. I had memorized my seat number but could not find it with so many people around me. Finally, a stewardess helped me to my seat. It was 11:30 at night. I was sleepy, but sitting by a window perked me up. I pressed my forehead to the pane in hopes of seeing my family, but my window faced the runway and the menacing darkness of the night.

The engines started up. Slowly, the aircraft cruised down the runway. I stared out my window again. Nothing. Looking across the aisle out the other windows, all I could see was a blur of lights. The louder the engines rumbled, the more I wanted to scream: *Stop the plane! I don't want to go on this vacation.* The vibrations in the cabin caused my train case to shimmy too close to my feet. As I bent down to push it further underneath the seat in front of me, one of the two pearls on my *tú y yo* ring popped off and bounced on the floor. In one suspended moment, it seemed to gleam in midair in the moonlit cabin. I watched helplessly as it disappeared. My fingers felt the empty spot on my ring where the pearl had been. I could not know then that I was losing another pearl that night—Cuba, the pearl of the Antilles.

The propellers revved up, and as the plane turned one last time to head down the final runway, I could barely see the airport through my tear-filled eyes. In a flash, the airport lights were far behind me as the plane sped into the humid night. A tall royal palm, la *Palma Real de Cuba*, was silhouetted in the moonlight as I watched my homeland disappear amid the sleeping clouds.