

NOVEMBER 15, 1962
Cuban children smuggled into U.S.

WASHINGTON—The United States government revealed today that thousands of Cuban children have been smuggled into the U.S. since the Castro regime took power Jan. 1, 1959.

With the help of the Catholic Church and foreign diplomats, those children, from infants to adolescents, have traveled to Miami with false travel visas. Many of them are now in orphanages and foster homes in some fifty cities in thirty-five states around the country.

The smuggling scheme had been kept secret for the past three years as the flow of chil-

dren continued, but a crackdown by Cuban authorities in the wake of the recent Cuban missile crisis has stemmed the exodus.

“We don’t know when or if their parents will ever be allowed to follow them,” said a State Department spokesman. “Those parents are obviously opposed to the regime and we worry for their safety.”

The children have flown to Miami one at a time or in small groups, without adult accompaniment. Because of that they have come to be known in the Cuban community as Los Niños Pedro Pan, or the Peter Pan Kids.

CHAPTER 1

Willie Cuesta swung gently in the hammock and looked up at a mango that hung heavy on the bough. It was a sweetheart—swollen, golden yellow with just a blush of red on the underside. About the size of a softball, it would be good for at least four frozen mango daiquiris. Inside the house he had stashed away a case of five-star Haitian rum, partial payment for recovering a sailboat shanghaied from the Miami River. He had a bucket of ice and an industrial strength blender too. All he needed to do was nudge that mango and he would have paradise in a glass.

He eyed the mango but he didn't move. From inside the house the CD player spouted a song by a Colombian crooner about thwarted desire.

*My mind is on fire
From always thinking of you*

Willie would have to delay that daiquiri at least another ten minutes. It was not quite six o'clock and he was waiting for a potential client who might still show. He had his rules, even though this had been a busy day already.

First had come a referral from the Miami police on a pair of runaway teenagers from the Midwest. He had spent the morning slogging from one end of South Beach to the other, flashing faxed school photos to lifeguards and bartenders, with promises of shared rewards.

Then came a call from a lawyer in Panama. “A boy from a good family” caught at the airport with condoms full of cocaine in his stomach. It couldn’t be true.

Willie visited a Customs agent he knew who had viewed the X-rays.

“The kid’s stomach looks like a surprise party just before the guest of honor arrives,” the cop said. “Lots of balloons and no lights.”

Willie called the lawyer back, told him there was nothing he could do and billed him for only half a day.

Finally, there had come a phone call from one Ellie Hernandez, a lady who sounded hesitant, nervous and wouldn’t discuss what was distressing her. She would come to his office after work and would get there before six. Willie had provided her with directions. His place of business was right on Southwest Eighth Street, also known as Calle Ocho, the main drag of Little Havana. You found it in a narrow doorway right next to a Cuban coffee joint, across from a Cuban bakery and just down the street from a Cuban Santeria priest’s waiting room. The priest exhibited fortune-telling seashells and human skulls in the front window and a Mastercard sticker on the door.

Willie’s place always smelled of espresso because of the coffee bar next door. The mango tree, surrounded by hibiscus, areca palms and scarlet bougainvillea, grew in the backyard and the hammock hung under that. He had tacked a note to the door letting Ellie Hernandez know he was waiting for her around back. Meanwhile he swung, studied the fat mango above him, felt the air swell with rain and listened to the crooner.

*Don’t make me wait, mi amor.
Or I’ll go up in flames.*

Willie was six feet tall and thin, so that the sides of the hammock curled over him like a cocoon. At the moment he was dressed in cream-colored linen pants and a long green shirt imprinted with large crimson palm trees. His skin was olive, gone a golden brown because of the Miami sun. The eyes were also brown, but flecked with green, eyes still attractive behind a skeptical squint.

“What are you so suspicious about?” his now former wife had asked him when they’d first met. “It’s the sun,” Willie had answered, even though it was night.

In childhood his nose had been straight, but by the end of high school it had developed a break. A schoolmate who had called him a racial epithet had “developed” it. That was in the pioneer days when Cubans were still a small minority in Miami. In return, Willie had endowed the schoolmate with a nose that looked like an obstacle course. This and other such incidents in his early years had left Willie with that suspicious squint.

The only other mark on him was a scar above his left eye, a memento from his days in the Intelligence Unit of the Miami Police Department. A stray bullet had grazed him in the midst of gunplay with some Colombian gangsters. The scar was a faint gash with a tail on it and over the years ladies had told him it looked like a small shooting star. If any of them had wished on that star for something permanent with him, it unfortunately hadn’t happened. Since his divorce years before, Willie had lived alone.

He watched the dying afternoon light turn golden on the mango above. And then he realized someone was watching him. A smallish woman in a flower-print suit stood near the gate, staring. He emerged from inside his hammock, feeling like a tropical Bela Lugosi.

“Can I help you?”

“Mr. Cuesta?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Ellie Hernandez. I hope I’m on time.”

Willie let her in and shook her hand. Standing next to her, he realized she was very small, no more than five one. Her features were small and fine as well. Her eyes were brown, her skin fair, her hair auburn, with maybe a little help. She was probably in her late thirties. Under the suit she wore a white blouse and a tiny gold cross hung at her neck. A small black purse was clenched in her small fist.

She didn’t let go of his hand right away, a bit dazzled by him. Willie led her to a canvas chair under the tree.

“Can I offer you a mango daiquiri?”

“No, thank you.” She shook her head nervously, like a hummingbird.

Willie sat. He would have to wait. In the background the crooner was still longing as well.

“How can I help you?”

“I need you to find someone for me.”

“Who’s that?”

“My fiancé.”

Willie’s squint deepened. Looking for runaway spouses, or in this case a reluctant groom, was not his favorite sport. You could find them easily enough. It was getting them back that was difficult. Ellie Hernandez could apparently read his thoughts. Umbrage and intelligence flashed in her eyes.

“It isn’t what you think. Roberto didn’t run away to avoid marrying me.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” he said and that brought her chin up again. “Roberto who?”

“Roberto Player.”

She opened the small purse, removed a color snapshot and handed it to him. It showed her and a man about forty, standing on a beach in bathing suits, their backs turned to aquamarine waves, a palm tree nearby.

Even at first glance they appeared oddly mismatched. The man was much bigger than she was, maybe six three, dark, hairy chested and husky. The expressions they wore were totally different as well. She was smiling eagerly, while he was solemn, his eyes full of wariness, vulnerability. It was a look you might expect to find in a troubled teenager, not a grown man. Willie didn’t say that.

“He looks like a serious fellow.”

“He is and he’s a good fellow too.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Ten days ago. We spent the night at his condo in Coral Gables . . . and we had a fight.”

“Over what or . . . ?”

He let the question trail off, but again she was ahead of him.

She shook her head. “It wasn’t a who. It was a what. We were both born in Cuba and he had decided to go back there.”

“To stay?”

“No, only for a few days.”

Willie shrugged. "Lots of people go back these days to visit family. They have to sneak over through Mexico or the Bahamas, but they come back alive. It's not anything to worry about."

"That's just it," Ellie Hernandez went on. "He has no family there. He's an only child and his parents were killed in Cuba more than thirty-five years ago. They smuggled him here just months before they died. He was one of the children they called the Peter Pan kids."

Willie's eyebrows went up. "Really?"

"Yes."

It had been years since Willie had heard mention of the Peter Pan kids. In the early sixties, when it was almost impossible to get out of Cuba, some citizens who opposed the government there had managed to smuggle out their kids through a secret pipeline. With the help of foreign diplomats and forged documents, they put them on planes to the United States where the kids lived in orphanages and foster homes for years until their parents were finally allowed to leave Cuba. They were called that because they had taken to the air without adults. The story was one of the legends of the Cuban exile.

"But you say Roberto's parents didn't follow him to the US, that they died before they could."

"They didn't just die. They were found murdered in their home."

"Murdered by who?"

She shook her head. "We don't know that for sure and that's what this is all about. His parents were in the hotel and entertainment business in Havana. They controlled one of its most successful casinos. They were well known. But six months after he came here, he suddenly stopped hearing from them. He was six years old, and he lived in an orphanage up in Michigan with a bunch of other Cuban boys who were constantly communicating with their folks. The nuns who ran the orphanage wrote to his old house but got no answer. Someone got in touch with the Cuban government and they were told that Roberto's mother and father had been killed by thieves. Their friends here didn't believe that. They said Bobby's parents had been murdered by the government because they were part of the anti-Castro underground."

Willie's eyebrows danced again. The underground was another legend beloved in Cuban Miami. It had been almost entirely wiped

out back in the sixties; some members killed, others imprisoned and a few eventually able to escape. In his teens Willie had played pool at a local billiard hall with a dark, rail-thin man named Marcos who told tales of midnight sabotage missions and escape through Havana roof to roof.

“So, they were in the underground.”

“That’s right. Although it isn’t clear what they did or exactly how they died. Anyway, after the orphanage, Bobby was moved into foster homes. Other Peter Pan kids went through the same thing, but eventually their parents were allowed to come from Cuba and reclaim them. He had no one left to be reunited with. I don’t know if you can imagine how hard that was on him.”

Willie nodded in commiseration. “Very hard, I would think. Who raised him eventually?”

“Some old friends of his parents took him in for a while and then he was adopted by the family of another Peter Pan boy who had lived at the orphanage with him. The head of that family is Sam Suárez, a banker here in Miami. Maybe you’ve heard of him.”

Willie nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard the name. South Florida Federal Bank. A big wheel.”

“That’s right. Bobby’s smart, and did well at school. He won scholarships, went to law school and works as counsel for Sam’s bank now. But he never stopped wondering about his parents. What had happened to them? How had they died? It has haunted him for years.”

Willie glanced back at the photo. That was the look in the eyes all right. Someone haunted.

“So that’s why he went to Cuba?”

“Yes. We planned to get married this year. But he said he couldn’t do that until he resolved all those questions. He couldn’t settle down and start his own family until he found out what had happened to his parents. Where they were buried and how they had died. Of course, he didn’t tell the Cuban government that. He said he was a Cuban who simply wanted to see where he was born and he was allowed in. He didn’t tell anyone here besides me where he was going.”

That didn’t surprise Willie. Trips to Cuba weren’t talked about much in some sectors of Miami exile society. On the one hand, peo-

ple said it was treason to go to the island and deposit even one dollar in Castro's economy. On the other, these very same people went on the sly to visit relatives they loved and couldn't see any other way. The Cuban government was aware of the weakness exiled Cubans had for their families. It didn't stamp American passports, so nobody would ever know who went. Willie's old history teachers had once taught him about what was called the "open-door policy" of American immigration. In Miami they had what was called the "backdoor policy." Don't ask, don't tell. Bring back cigars. Not too many, but a few.

"And? Did Roberto make it back?"

She nodded, irritated now. "Oh, yes. He came back three days ago. He didn't even bother to come to visit me. Instead, he phoned and said he wouldn't be able to see me for awhile. Just like that, out of nowhere."

"Why?"

"Because he had something much more important to do. In Cuba he had uncovered something, or at least he said he had."

"And what was that?"

"That his parents were definitely dead, but the people who had killed them are not in Cuba. They are right here, in Miami, and he's going to find them and make them pay."

Willie frowned. "Why did he think that? Who are these people?"

"I don't know for sure. But like I said, his father ran one of the biggest gambling houses in Havana, Casino Cuba. Roberto said his father was an honest businessman himself, but he had American business associates who weren't."

"The American Mafia," Willie said. "They ran that industry in Cuba back then."

Willie had seen the old films and his father had told him about the high life in Havana in the days of the casinos. It had been a kind of Caribbean Monte Carlo, crowded with men in white linen suits and beautiful women in daring evening gowns amid the royal palms. All of it designed by members of America's own Cosa Nostra and their Cuban partners.

"So, he's looking for certain *mafiosos* who he thinks killed his parents. Is that it?"

"That's the only thing I can think of."

“He’s going to go after Mafia guys. And he’s a bank attorney?”

“Yes.”

Willie winced. “Does he own a gun?”

She nodded. “But I’ve never seen him hold it and I’m sure he doesn’t know how to use it. Now you understand why I’m so worried.”

There was pain in her face, as if she were watching her guy being gunned down right in front of her.

“Did he tell you anything about where he was going to find these people?”

She shook her head. “Oh, no. He wouldn’t tell me anything. Not who he spoke to or where he went in Cuba. Nothing. He said he didn’t want me involved because he didn’t want me to get hurt. Of course, as soon as he tells me that, I start worrying myself to death. But that doesn’t seem to bother him. Me, the person who loves him more than anyone, who has been trying to give him the family he never had.”

Her voice started to crack then. She didn’t cry, but she stopped talking and looked off into the areca palms as she composed herself.

Willie watched her. Ellie Hernandez said she wanted to give Roberto Player the family he’d never had. But she was near forty, and if she didn’t have kids already, her time was almost up. Her chance was slipping away, although she didn’t seem the sort who would come out and say so. She was a tough, smart little woman and Willie liked her.

He touched her hands, which were still clutching the small purse. “Don’t worry. I’ll try to help you find him. What did he do once he got back to Miami? Where might he be?”

Her head gave that hummingbird shake again. “I don’t know. He stopped going to work, which is another problem. Sam Suárez is very angry about it. Bobby’s going to lose his job. Mike Suárez—that’s Sam’s son and Bobby’s best friend since the days at the orphanage—is trying to calm his father down. But it isn’t doing any good.”

“And I take it Bobby isn’t showing up at home, at this condo in Coral Gables.”

“No. He went there the first night he was back from Cuba. He left the suitcase and some clothes. I have a key and I let myself in.

He hasn't come home or called. He has never done this before, hiding from me."

Willie squeezed her hand. Even if Roberto Player's story was true, it seemed likely that the people responsible for his parents' deaths might be dead now too, or at least very old. The whole thing certainly sounded a bit crazy, but then Cubans tended to be crazy about family and old scores.

Willie got phone numbers for Player's old pal, Mike Suárez, and his boss, Sam Suárez. He got the address of Player's condo in Coral Gables and Ellie also gave him the key so he could go have a look around.

Finally, she reached into her small black purse, withdrew her small fist and opened it. In her palm lay an old red poker chip, which had been cut in half with either scissors or a knife, so that its edge was irregular. It had originally been stamped with the words "Casino Cuba," Willie figured. Now it said "Cas Cu." It looked like a jagged, red half-moon.

"What's that?"

"Carlos, Roberto's father, gave it to him when he put him on the plane to Miami all those years ago. Carlos kept the other half. He said when they saw each other again the chip would be whole and the family would be whole too. Roberto showed it to me a long time ago and I found it on his dresser when I went to his condo two nights ago. I don't know why he had it out."

Willie took it from her, studied it and asked her if he could hold on to it. She said he could.

They discussed his fee, came to terms and she wrote him a check that amounted to a one-day advance. Then he showed her out and said he would be in touch. He watched her get into her car and drive away.

Willie returned to the backyard rubbing the chip between his fingers, the way you might rub something for good luck. The CD had come around again and the crooner apparently had found luck.

No, querida, don't leave me now

This love fever won't break till morning

Willie was still standing under the mango tree when he heard a rustling above him. He looked up, stuck out his hand and caught the fat one just before it hit the ground.

CHAPTER 2

It was a little after dark when Willie strolled out his front door and headed for Roberto Player's place. He reached the parking lot around the corner and climbed into his car—an old red LeBaron convertible with a black top and white pinstriping, received as payment for his handling of a Nicaraguan divorce case. He started the car, flipped on the radio, tuned into a brassy Willie Colon medley and breezed west through Little Havana.

Willie had grown up in this neighborhood. His family had immigrated before the revolution and he later looked on as it grew crowded with tens of thousands of his Cuban compatriots escaping the island. Those Cubans arrived with not a stick of furniture and only a few threads of clothing, but they imported their island way of life. They had wrapped it in an obsessive nostalgia and preserved it in Little Havana. Roberto Player was certainly not the only Cuban hung up on his past.

More than thirty years later, Little Havana still looked nothing like its namesake. Where the old capital was famous for its baroque Spanish colonial architecture, Calle Ocho was a long commercial strip marked by mini malls, with the occasional palm tree and tin tables where dominos were played. That strip was heavy on health clinics for its aging population, but still featured the tryst motels where younger Cubans and other lovers met to carry on their *amores*. Many Central American refugees had moved in over the years, but the streets were still saturated with what they called *cubanía*—Cubanness. Corners of it smelled of Cuban coffee and sounded of mile-a-minute guttural Spanish and conga rim shots. For a man like Willie, who had come of age there, the whole neighborhood was charged by the looks in the eyes of Cuban women, some-

times amused, other times haughty and still other times nakedly interested.

Now it was eight o'clock and the streets were bustling. People were still out foraging for food in the brightly lighted supermarkets and the cluttered bodegas. Or they were heading for the old, familiar restaurants, some of them resettled from Havana decades before. Willie cruised past a music store with speakers out front and heard a chorus of trumpets and the rattle of a tymbal and he danced a little salsa in his seat. He eyed a woman in a red dress that was tight around the hips and he couldn't help but notice the lovely rocking of her walk, in rhythm with the music.

A few blocks east, Willie's mother owned a small botanica where she sold a combination of herbs, potions and religious imagery. Just blocks south, Willie's brother, Tommy, ran a nightclub called Caliente—Hot—and it was the hottest club in the city. Willie helped his brother by overseeing security there and he was planning to go to the club later in the evening.

But now he left behind the conga music and the beckoning rhythm of hips and turned south into Coral Gables. As time passed, the Cubans who had done well had moved on to tonier neighborhoods, especially the Gables. Within a block after you crossed the line you knew you were out of Little Havana. You began to pass the tall, tinted-glass office buildings, the art galleries and then the homes with manicured grounds that were each worth almost as much as a whole block in the barrio.

Three months before, Willie had handled a case for a man who ran a fancy restaurant in the Gables. A customer had welched on a very large tab for a private party. The story on the street was he had taken off for Bali. Willie had found him closer to home, hiding out on a houseboat up in Lauderdale, and he had impounded the guy's car as payment.

Now Willie turned where Ellie had told him to and pulled up to the condominium complex where Roberto Player lived. It was a Spanish colonial place called the Monastery, three stories high, with white stucco walls, barrel tile roof, graceful, black wrought-iron balconies and an old *campanario*—a bell tower. Royal palms rose majestically all around it and the rest of the grounds were beautifully landscaped in tropical greenery. If this had ever really been a

monastery, Willie thought, then the monks had lived very well indeed.

Willie passed it, parked down the street and then walked back. At the base of the bell tower a glass lobby had been constructed and Willie could see a uniformed guard seated at a desk. He didn't want to speak with him right then, so he walked around the block to a wrought iron gate at the rear.

The ring Ellie had handed him held only one key, and it didn't fit. So, he looked around, took from his wallet a small thin strip of metal he had peeled off a vacuum-packed can of Cafe Bustelo and easily jimmed the gate. He closed it silently and then headed upstairs lined with blue-and-white Spanish tile in a clover pattern.

On the second floor he found the thick wooden door, affixed with black metal studs, of apartment 2G. The lights were off behind the window, but he tried the wrought-iron knocker just in case. He waited, got no answer. He let himself in with the key and flipped the wall switch.

Roberto Player wasn't there. Willie could tell that right away. What *was* there made Willie stop and stare. Player might have waited a long time to actually travel to Cuba, but he had apparently spent years and years bringing Cuba to him, piece by piece. The old Cuba of his parents' day, that is. He had created in his apartment what appeared to be a small, crowded, private museum or shrine to that era.

Willie began to walk around and touch the furniture. Beautiful old mahogany rockers with woven cane backs, like those he had seen in photos of his grandparents' house in Havana. He examined other finely carved pieces from the Spanish colonial era, including a couch in one corner and a love seat near the balcony, both covered in colorful fabric imprinted with a pattern of banana leaves. A China closet was filled with platters, all hand-painted with scenes of sugarcane being harvested by men with machetes. Overhead hung a vintage, wooden-slatted ceiling fan that had to be sixty years old.

Cigar boxes and humidors sat on surfaces all around the room. Whether they were filled with genuine Havanas Willie didn't know, but the apartment was infused with the sweet, pungent aroma of tobacco. Where there weren't humidors, he saw tasteful old vases

full of birds of paradise and other tropical flowers. Potted palms stood in large, glazed pots.

The walls were covered with framed landscapes of Cuba, all lushly green. Mountainsides, rivers, tropical valleys. A corner was decorated with old black-and-white photographs of the streets and buildings of Havana. One photograph caught Willie's eye. It depicted the inside of a casino, its gambling floor crowded with people and a bandstand in the background where black jazz musicians in white jackets played. Some couples danced. Everybody was having a good time, not yet worrying about what was to come.

Everywhere Willie looked in that room he saw a relic of a Cuba forty years removed; vintage rum bottles, drink coasters from the nightclubs of legend—the Tropicana, the Caribe, the Sans-souci—an old record player with a stack of 78 rpm records by world-class Cuban singers and cabaret stars—Beny More, Rita Montaner and others. Willie could almost hear the music, and because the place had been closed up for days, he could feel the Havana humidity and heat.

He drifted around inspecting it all. What Ellie had said about Roberto Player, growing up without his parents to guide him, had echoed in Willie. His own parents had come ashore in the United States without speaking the language or knowing the turf. Willie and his brother, Tommy, had been left largely on their own to learn the ropes. A lot of the time they might well have been orphans on the loose in the city. They had stumbled into dangerous areas. Their innocence had probably saved them. Back then being a wide-eyed, stupid kid who spoke broken English could get you walloped but not killed. There had been scrapes, but no serious injuries or serious arrests.

And they had learned the city and learned to be Americans. In the end, they were hybrids, both Cuban and American. Many of the older generation never wanted to be anything but Cuban and never gave up hopes of someday going back. To them, the Cuba of old was like Atlantis. A place full of magic that had sunk but might still resurface. If you belonged to the younger generation, you had to establish how much of each world you belonged to, Atlantis and Miami. Your tastes, your lifestyle, how you loved, your soul. If you were smart you found yourself with the best of each. Roberto Player had

taken a route that seemed extreme—an attorney for an American bank at work and a radically nostalgic Cuban at home. It was as if he led a double life.

Willie went into the bedroom and found more of the same. In particular, on the night table next to the bed was propped a photo, an old black-and-white, five-by-seven. It pictured a well-dressed couple, in their early thirties it appeared, and a boy about five. They posed in front of a two-story house with a balcony and sun shutters. A palm tree stood next to them and you just knew this was Havana.

It wasn't easy to see the older, brooding Roberto Player in that boy. The kid was smiling, his eyes shining, not like the solemn man of forty Willie had seen in Ellie's beach photo. But Willie knew it was Roberto and his parents.

The Players were an extremely handsome, elegant couple, with a romantic air about them. Roberto's mother, wearing a dark dress with white rose print and a white rose in her hair, had been a very attractive woman; small, slim and fine featured—a lot like Ellie Hernandez. Roberto resembled her very little. Where Willie did see a ringing resemblance was in Roberto's father, a tall, robust man with a pencil-thin moustache, decked out in a gleaming white suit. He carried the same wary look in his eyes that Roberto had now. The couple had not been killed for some time after the photo had been taken, but Mr. Player, unlike the people in the photo of the casino, had already been worried.

Willie put the photo down and began to look in and under things. He opened drawers and searched beneath cushions. In a shirt pocket in a laundry basket, he found a slip of paper with writing on it. It said "Aurora—305-555-2117." Aurora might be the name of a shop, but it was more likely that of a woman. Willie tucked the paper away in his shirt pocket.

He kept searching. On the top shelf of the bedroom closet he found what appeared to be an old diary and next to it a folder for legal briefs. Some very old letters, written on onionskin paper, were tucked into aged airmail envelopes. They were addressed to "Master Roberto Player," the St. Joseph's Orphanage in Michigan, and post-marked Havana 1960 and 1961. The letters were written in a feminine hand, almost certainly by his mother in the months before she died.

Willie suddenly caught a whiff of perfume. It was strong, and for a moment he thought it came from the letters, even after thirty-five years. Then he sensed someone behind him. He whirled and found a lady, a very provocative Latin lady, standing in the doorway of the bedroom. Willie froze and she did the same. Willie's eyes dropped to the chrome-plated gun in her hand and then went back to her face. He raised his hands and gave her his biggest, sunniest Miami smile.

"Buenas noches," he said.