

# FLIGHT TO NOWHERE

by  
*Blas E. Padrino*

## PROLOGUE

*Camagüey, Cuba – October 28, 1959*

The rain poured in rivers all afternoon but stopped shortly before the twin-engine Cessna lifted off the slick grass runway. The plane made two circles above endless sugarcane fields that glistened fresh, wet, green against the setting sun, then pointed its nose towards the vanishing daylight and climbed into darkening skies.

The passenger took one deep breath and shuffled the sheaf of papers in his hands. His report did not contain what he'd been ordered to write, but he couldn't bring himself to smear an innocent man. He'd told them as much over the phone already, and felt no apprehension about telling them again to their faces when he arrived. If it meant a revolution inside the revolution, so be it. The ball was in Fidel's court.

He stretched his legs and lit up a cigar, then leaned back and let his hat dip over his forehead, its wide brim just above the eyebrows. He took a puff and watched the reflection of the burning tip flicker on the plane's window.

*Fidel will curse and rail for who knows how long. Who cares? His tirades are starting to wear on everyone. He knows he can't touch me. The people adore me just as much as they fear him. Just the other day he said, 'If something happens to me, there's Raúl.' He's so full of shit. Nobody can stand his brother. Fidel thinks I'm going to do whatever Raúl wants, just because he made him my boss. He's got another thing coming. He can rant all he wants. I'm not going to stab Huber in the back. Either Fidel gets rid of the communists, or there's going to be another civil war.*

He took another puff of the cigar and watched the ring of ash around the tip glow red. He'd never been afraid of confrontations. Not in the least. Wasn't he the one who led the attack on Santa Clara that broke the back of Batista's army; the one who marched first – triumphant – into Havana? Where were Fidel and Raúl on January first? It was he and Che and Huber who took the fight to the enemy while Fidel and Raúl hid in the mountains. No. He wasn't afraid of confrontations. Especially those he knew he couldn't lose. Actually, he was looking forward to it. Half the Cabinet was ready to abandon Fidel over the communists. Even Urrutia, the President, had told him he'd had enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

The plane reached cruising altitude and streaked through an indigo blanket of sky. The evening floated beneath him in dark patches, broken by occasional points of light below, huddled like candles on a birthday cake – each cluster marking a small town nestled on the water's edge.

Suddenly, he heard a high-pitched whistle coming from above. Three bursts of light

flashed against the night. The plane shook and banked right. Hard. It no longer flew in a straight line, but swerved and shuddered in haphazard fashion like a kite snapped off from its string. One moment he was glued to the seat by the G-forces, the next he was being jostled like a pip inside a maraca. “*Que pasa, coño?*” he shouted. He got no answers from the pilot, whose body lay crumpled against the controls. The engine gasped like a dying man fighting for one last breath. The plane shook again. His head hit something. The hat went flying. The cigar slipped from his grasp. The plane went into a spinning dive. Darkness. Noise. Silence. Black sky became unfathomed water.

## CHAPTER 1

*Miami, Florida, August 2009.*

Felix Robles ignored the sweat trickling down his back. Never mind the ice-cold air blasting from the restaurant’s overhead air-conditioning vent – it was losing the battle against Miami’s summer heat. He focused on the gray cloud on the laptop’s screen and frowned as the mass staggered across the ocean with the broken steps of a Frankenstein monster – or so it seemed when tracked through time-lapse photography. Turning to his friend Mario Fernandez, he pointed to the black heart at the cloud’s center. “This is no chicken-shit hurricane. Could be another *Andrew*.”

“You sure?” Mario looked up from his espresso and slid his chair closer. He craned his neck and squinted at the slide show of satellite photos.

Felix pushed his coffee cup across the table to make room. “You can lay off your ‘Castro’s dying’ news stories and take the thermometer out of his ass for a week or so. When this storm hits, you’ll be busy covering it.”

Mario looked through the window at the Little Havana traffic, stroked his mustache, and cleared his throat. “So, who’s gonna get it?”

Felix laughed and poked his friend’s arm. “I’m a weatherman, not a *babalao*.” He reached for his *café con leche* and dipped a slice of Cuban bread in it. “Wherever it ends up, it won’t be pretty. Has the potential to become a cat-five.” He slurped down the bread.

Mario’s eyebrows bunched up at the bridge of his nose – his signature end-of-newscast look. “At least give me probabilities, a leg up. You must have some idea.”

Felix shook his head and raised his eyes to the ceiling. “You haven’t changed since our football days at Miami High ... always looking for a gap to shoot through.” He looked around the room, made sure no one else could hear, leaned closer to Mario, and spoke in a whisper. “We haven’t put out a probability cone yet, so if you quote me on this I’ll yank your hair plugs.”

“What hair plugs?” Mario’s mustache drooped around his lips. He ran his fingers through his pompadour. “This is all natural!”

Felix chuckled. “Yeah, right. From your own armpits.”

Mario scowled. “You’re making fun of my livelihood, man. That’s cruel.” He gave Felix a little shove. “Just for that, you can get the check.”

Both of them laughed. Felix slid his finger over the mouse pad and double-clicked. A map of the Caribbean popped up on the screen. "It's barreling out of the Atlantic." He moved the cursor as he spoke. "There's a high-pressure system to the north. Stationary. Will keep the storm heading west, at least until it hits the Florida Straits. I'm guessing a path north of Puerto Rico, maybe slam the Dominican, maybe Grand Turk and the north coast of Cuba. The high's been wiggling at the edges. My gut says it'll slide north eventually."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"This storm has Key West written all over it. Maybe a direct hit, maybe just a swipe, but it'll make its presence known."

"Key West, huh? So much for my fishing plans. What then?"

"That's as far as I'll stick my neck out. Once it reaches the Gulf, all bets are off. If I were you, I'd sail that pretty boat of yours the hell out of Islamorada and haul ass for Boca Raton."

"How soon's it hitting the fan?"

"Another five days before it rears its ugly head. You can start preaching preparedness in your newscast."

Felix shut down the computer and put it in his briefcase. "I got to get to the office. In a few days we'll be flying over the storm, and there's a ton of things to do." He gave Mario a sidelong glance. "You want to come along? Do a report from the eye of the beast?"

"Thanks, but no thanks, buddy. That stuff's not for me. But I can ask Terry. She lives for that kind of drama."

"Your co-anchor?" Felix's pitch rose to a mocking falsetto. "Terr-ry Toe-lay-doe, the news tornado?"

"That's the one."

"She's smoking hot. I'll take her any day."

"Don't get your hopes up. She only swoons for millionaire athletes. And you're no Alex Rodriguez."

"Hey, I may not have a running back's build like you used to have, but I still got my Latin charm."

"What do you mean *used to have*? I'll have you know I can still bench-press two-fifty."

"Yeah, right, and I'm going to have lunch with the Pope this afternoon."

Mario shook his head and gave Felix a pat on the back. "You always were the class clown." He got up, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and dropped it on the table. "I'll give Terry your cell. Got to go huddle with the writers. Thanks for the heads-up." He touched two fingers to his forehead in salute and hurried off.

Felix gulped the rest of his coffee and whistled to the waitress. "Put it on my tab, Cristina," he shouted, tossed a few singles on the table, and walked out.

It was still early, but the Miami August sun was already roasting the pavement as Felix walked to his Ford Escape. He got in, started the engine, and hit the button that opened the sunroof just as the air conditioner fan blasted its initial shot of hot air at his face. He turned the AC control knob down to 'frozen tundra' and turned west onto the Tamiami Trail. When the traffic light on Douglas Road turned red, a street vendor ran between the cars, holding plastic bags full of *mamoncillos*, for a dollar a sack.

Felix had a weakness for the little green fruits with the brittle rind that split in half when he bit into them. Licking at the silky layer of meat around the seed was as satisfying as the tart taste of the juice. He waved a bill through the open sunroof. The man raced over, tossed him a bag, took the money, and weaved his way back to the sidewalk as the traffic light turned green. Felix closed the sunroof and sucked on *mamoncillos* while he drove to the campus of Florida International University. By the time he arrived, he'd gone through half the bag.

He parked on the lot across from the National Hurricane Center building and stood outside for a moment. He studied the bunker-like structure, windowless and austere, a concrete box topped by satellite dishes, radio antennas, and wind gauges. A storm-chaser's bat cave.

As he walked through the front door, his cell phone began playing *Stormy Weather*. He flipped the cover open. "Felix here."

"Mr. Robles? This is Terry Toledo, from WHOT News. Mario gave me your number."

His eyes lit up. He cleared his throat. "Yes. He said you might call about doing a report on *Frodo*."

"Can you get me a seat on the hurricane hunter?"

"There's an open seat on the next flight. I'll talk to the mission coordinator." He paused. "I've got to warn you, it's a bumpy ride."

"I can handle it. Get me on the plane, and I'll give you your fifteen minutes of fame." Terry hesitated. "Well, not fifteen minutes, but you'll get thirty seconds in prime time, leading off the six o'clock news. What do you say?"

"I'll speak with the PR people this afternoon. They don't mind the press coverage. The P-3 Orion is scheduled to fly out of MacDill Air Force Base in a couple of days. You'll have to come for a pre-flight briefing; day after tomorrow at one."

"Can I bring a cameraman on the flight?"

"There's no room in the plane. You'll have to shoot your own video."

"I can live with that."

"Get here by noon, and I'll give you a quick tour of the Center."

"I'll be there, and I'll bring lunch. How's that?"

"Perfect. See you then."

Felix flipped the cell phone cover shut. *Yes!* He pumped his fist and mambo-stepped the rest of the way to his office, humming a riff from a Perez Prado classic while mimicking the band leader's trademark grunts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Felix ran up the wooden porch steps of his parents' Ocala ranch house and greeted his mother with a hug. She took his face in her hands, kissed him on both cheeks, and said, "I'm so glad to see you. You don't come up enough."

He smiled at the slender woman who stood in front of him. There was a hint of gray on her temples and a few wrinkles on her forehead, but her voice was young and tender, no different from when he was a boy and she read him corny poems in Spanish. "It's hurricane season, Mom. There's a storm brewing. You know how it is. I was lucky to get the day off."

“You should have been a doctor, like your dad. Even when he was an intern, his shifts were only three days. Yours last half a year. And that trip to the South Pole ... you were gone two years!” She shook her head slowly. “Two years.”

Felix patted her shoulder and smiled. “I didn’t go as far the Pole, only to McMurdo Station at the edge of Antarctica.”

“Same thing. All you got to see was ice, penguins, and polar bears. I saw all that at Sea World last Christmas when your father and I drove down to Orlando. Less than two hours away.”

“There are no polar bears in Antarctica, Mom.”

“There you go. I got to see more than you without leaving Florida and freezing to death. But you, a tropical boy, you had to go. I don’t know what for.”

Felix shook his head. He’d never won an argument with his mom. “You’re right. I don’t know what came over me. Youthful foolishness, I guess.”

“At least you’ll stay the night, right?”

He bit his lip. “Sorry, Mom, I can’t. Got to drive back to Miami tonight. We’re flying into *Frodo* in a couple of days. I still have lots of things to take care of.”

His mother’s eyes got round like Eisenhower dollars. “*Frodo*? The hurricane Marito was talking about in the news last night? *Ave María purísima!*” She made the sign of the cross. “One day you’re gonna give me a heart attack. Only crazy people take a plane into a hurricane. What are you gonna do next? Join the Flying Wallendas?”

“That’s an idea!” Felix walked the length of the porch, placing one foot in front of the other, arms spread to the sides as if walking a tightrope.

His mother followed him and shook him by the arm. “Quit making fun of what I say.” Felix turned and faced her. “Thirty-two years old,” she scolded, “and you still act like a kid. When your father was your age, we were already starting a family. But you, all you want to do is chase icebergs and hurricanes.” She wrinkled her forehead and pursed her lips. “Why don’t you find a nice girl and get married like Mario did? They already have two daughters. But I’m still waiting for grandchildren.”

Felix sighed. “Maybe I just haven’t found the right one, yet.”

“What about the lady lawyer you were dating? What was her name?” The tone in Felix’s mother’s voice suggested that the lady lawyer was not her ideal daughter-in-law candidate.

“That was nothing serious. It didn’t work out.”

“That’s the problem. With you, it’s never serious. You should start thinking about getting serious.”

Felix gave his mother a long look, then showed her a broad smile. “Maybe I’m waiting for someone who can cook as well as you.”

“Ha!” She laughed. “See? You’re asking for the impossible. But if you bring her over, I’ll teach her so she’ll be almost as good as me.”

Felix hugged his mother and gave her a peck on the cheek. “I miss you and Dad. You should’ve stayed in Miami.”

“Tell that to your father. All his medical education, and he’s still a country boy. Ocala suits him fine. And, while we’re on the subject, you better get over to the barn before he starts complaining that you don’t pay him any attention. He’s out there with the horses.” She paused and raised an eyebrow. “As usual.”

“You’re right.” He stepped off the porch. “I better go say hello.”

“Say something nice about Little Man, the chestnut stallion,” she called after him. “Your father’s been grooming him all morning. He hasn’t stopped talking about that horse since he got him last month. Horses and President Reagan, God rest his soul, is all he yaks about.”

Felix took the path that curled around the house and led to the barn. He walked under the shade of the pine trees that lined the edges of the path until he reached a pole barn with half a dozen stalls on each side. He stopped at the door. “Dr. Robles? Which patient are you examining?” he shouted.

“Felix?” his dad bellowed cheerfully from the last stall. “Over here, son. Come check out this beauty.”

Felix walked to the stall and found his father smiling, holding a dandy brush and a rope attached to the halter of a large reddish-brown thoroughbred. “This is Little Man.” He beamed. “What do you think?”

Felix took a step back and looked the horse up and down. “He’s a beast! Very impressive.” He nudged his father’s arm. “Mom lets you ride him? She doesn’t freak out?”

“Come on, son, this horse is a pussycat. No bad habits. Besides, I’m only sixty-four, you know. I’m not an invalid. Not yet, anyway, in spite of what your mother might think.” He ran his hand over the horse’s muzzle. “Look, Ronald Reagan was seventy-five, and he was still riding. A chestnut, just like Little Man. That’s what I say to her. You can’t argue with that, right?”

“You got a point, there, Dad.”

“Did I tell you the story about the time President Reagan was in England and went riding with the Queen?”

Felix rolled his eyes. “I don’t think so,” he lied.

“Well, see, he was on a state visit, and they went to Balmoral Castle. So the Queen has these beautiful horses brought out – one for Reagan, one for Prince Phillip, and one for her.” His dad chuckled under his breath. “So they’re riding up this hill, just at a canter – the Queen in the middle – when her horse lets out a big, loud fart you could hear a mile away. I mean, up goes the tail and *prrrrtttt*, like a trumpet. It stinks so bad, the air turns green.” He stopped a moment and held his ribs, as if trying to suppress a snigger. “Imagine that. The Queen’s face gets red as a beet, she’s so embarrassed. She turns to Reagan and says, ‘I’m so sorry, Mr. President.’” Again, he chuckled. The rest of his words sputtered out between spasms of laughter. “So, Reagan says, ‘It’s all right, Your Majesty.’” Solemn silence. “I thought it was the horse.”

Felix’s dad laughed until tears welled in his eyes. Little Man shook his head and snorted, lips quivering. He looked back at his horse. “See that? He liked the story.”

Felix smiled, placed a hand on his father’s shoulder, and leaned toward him. “You’re a funny man, Dad. Funniest man I’ve ever known.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Felix and his father sat at the dinner table, eyeing a steaming porcelain bowl filled with black bean soup and another dish brimming with fried pork chunks covered in lemon-garlic sauce. Felix’s mother came in from the kitchen and placed a bowl full of white rice next to the beans. She spooned a portion of rice onto everyone’s plate, then

poured black beans over the rice and dished out fried pork chunks. She sat down, and the three of them bowed their heads for a short prayer before they began to eat. Fifteen minutes later, they'd polished off second helpings.

When Felix's mom went into the kitchen to bring out the dessert, his dad looked up from his empty plate. "So, this storm they're talking about ... do you know where it's supposed to hit?"

"Looks like it'll skirt the north coast of Cuba, east to west. I'm mostly worried about the Keys."

"The planes that fly into the storm, do they get close to the island?"

"To Cuba? Now and then, if they have to."

"You don't worry about being shot down?"

"They clear the flight plans with the Havana tower to avoid incidents." Felix shrugged. "We've never had any problems."

His dad frowned. "I don't trust those bastards, and neither should you. Be very careful."

"I doubt they'd want to mess with us. They'd have the Air Force on their ass before they could cry Uncle Sam. Besides, they don't fly their planes into severe weather."

At that moment, his mom returned from the kitchen with a *flan* and set it on the table. "Who wants?" she asked.

Both Felix and his dad smiled and nodded.

"Then help yourselves," she said. "My soap's about to start."