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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Midnight in Havana**

Written by Peggy Blair

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## PROLOGUE

Ricky Ramirez's parents stood on the other side of the door, speaking in hushed tones with the doctors. His grandmother's hand felt like wishbones in his small one. Her eyes were still closed and she breathed shallowly. The hospital room smelled of tobacco and anise, mixed with sweat.

He was surprised more than frightened when she suddenly sat up and pulled his head towards her by the ears. She tugged so hard it brought fresh tears to his nine-year-old eyes. "The dead will come," she rasped. "My gift to you, as the eldest child." He barely recognized her voice. She hadn't spoken for days.

"What dead, Grandmother? Are you coming back?" Dead people *left*, and as far as he knew they never returned.

"No," she smiled weakly. She released her grip and patted his cheek with her soft brown hand. "As much as I would like to see you grow up, little man."

"Then who is coming, *mamita*?" He rubbed his sore ears.

Her body slowly deflated onto the metal bed. She reached for his hand again. "Messengers from the other side. Eshu, the *orisha*, will send them to help you so you can help them. You will be a policeman, Ricky. I see it in your future. Treat them with respect,

as they will you. But never forget this: Eshu is a trickster.” She whispered her last words so quietly that he had to strain to hear her. “This must be our secret; the gods are too easily angered. Promise me.” She squeezed his palm.

“I promise.”

She released his fingers one last time and her eyes closed again.

As her hand cooled in his, he knew she was gone, just not where, and he started to cry.

Once he overcame his sadness, the idea of ghosts excited young Ramirez. He wished, at the same time, that his *mamita* had left him something more practical, like a baseball bat.

But as weeks passed, then months, there were no dead, no messengers, and he still had no bat.

His parents explained that his grandmother was old and confused, that she died from a rare form of dementia that caused her to believe things that weren’t true. Her legacy, he eventually learned, was one of flawed genes, not sixth sight.

By the time he discovered he was dying, Ricardo Ramirez was the inspector in charge of the Havana Major Crimes Unit of the Cuban National Revolutionary Police.

# ONE

JANUARY 1, 2007

From Hector Apiro's thirteenth-floor office in the medical tower, Inspector Ramirez watched a young patrolman slouch against a lamppost on the sidewalk below.

A week earlier, on Christmas Eve, the same bored policeman had worked a corner on the Malecón. He no doubt wished, then as now, for a purse-snatching, a car accident, anything to break the monotony. Instead, according to his statement, he watched a foreign couple bicker as a street child hustled them for money. If he had intervened, would the boy still be alive?

For Apiro's sake, Ramirez almost hoped not.

"That policeman should be more careful where he stands," Ramirez said to the dead woman sitting at Apiro's desk. She had materialized in the parking lot that morning. She wore a frilly southern-belle dress and a wide white bandana bedecked with a giant fabric flower. The several strands of beads around her neck revealed she was—or rather had been—a follower of Santería.

Somehow, she had managed to squeeze her rather large rear end into Apiro's small chair. She sat there uncomfortably, fanning

herself in the heat, waiting patiently for Ramirez to finish his business with Apiro and get working on her murder.

“Earlier this month, a building collapsed nearby,” Ramirez explained, keeping his voice low, in case Apiro walked in without Ramirez hearing his distinctive hop. “I investigated the deaths; Dr. Apiro examined the bodies.”

She nodded politely but suspiciously. Unlike the others, she refused to engage in pantomime. She would be a tough bird to crack, thought Ramirez. Yet someone *had* cracked her, right through the sternum, from the looks of the large knife sticking out of her chest.

Ramirez was surprised cancer hadn't got her first. Even dead, she carried a well-chomped, seven-inch, hand-rolled Montecristo, although she'd never inhale again. Apiro planned to autopsy her remains that afternoon.

Ramirez had wrongly thought the dead would be more accepting of something as ephemeral as a body, but he watched the disappointment build on the woman's face as she scrutinized Apiro's photographs, all hung well below eye level. Perhaps she expected a doctor of Apiro's stature to have, well, more stature. Still, whatever Apiro's defects, they were nothing compared to hers. Apiro, at least, was alive.

Hector Apiro worked part-time as the pathologist on call to the Havana Major Crimes Unit. Ramirez was unsure why the formerly famous plastic surgeon had accepted the unpleasant job. All that Apiro would say was that cadavers never disappeared in the middle of the night. He expected nothing from them and so was never disappointed.

“Believe me,” Ramirez said reassuringly, “there is more to Apiro than meets the eye. Whatever genetic or biological defect caused his misshapeness, trust me, it doesn't affect his skill. Only his sensitivities.”

The old woman shrugged her shoulders unhappily. That a dwarf would cut her up, however talented, simply added insult to her already fatal injuries.

Despite Apiro's brilliance and kindness, his achondroplasia startled most people. Nature made Apiro's torso normal. His head and hands were unusually large, while his legs and arms were abnormally short. The rest of Apiro's body, so far as Ramirez knew, was unaffected.

Apiro was down the hall, getting a kettle of water to brew a pot of coffee.

Ramirez wanted to go over the events of the past week with his friend before he submitted his final report to the Attorney General. A police report as important as this one required careful reconstruction. With the lies demanded by the Minister of the Interior, it would be as tragic as a Russian novel, but without the humour.

Ramirez sighed. He would start his report with Christmas Eve, the day the past began to overtake the present. In one short week, two murders, a suicide, and an international scandal. Some said Fidel Castro might leave his hospital bed for the first time in months to attend the funerals. Who could possibly have known so many deaths would be triggered by something so commonplace, so ordinary, as a couple arguing on the seawall? Certainly not the patrolman below.

Well, the dead man knew, thought Ramirez, recalling the ghost that preceded this one. But I didn't understand what he tried to tell me. And by the time I did, it was too late.

"I won't make that mistake again," he promised the cigar lady. "Trust me, I will find the person who did this to you. It's just a matter of having enough time before I'm gone."

She nodded slightly, and turned her eyes away.

## TWO

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2006

A half-dozen, dirt-streaked, half-naked boys ran behind Mike and Hillary Ellis as they wandered along Calle Obispo, past the art gallery shops where owners called out to *turistas* to buy their brightly coloured paintings.

The boys, small beggars, chased through the throngs of Canadians and Europeans who had come to Cuba in search of sun and a taste of Hemingway. This one stayed after the others scattered. He skipped beside the couple happily, oblivious to the lies their eyes and mouths exchanged.

The empty metal stands of the outdoor markets shone with the reflection of the setting sun. The small boy's ragged red-and-white shorts flapped in the light breeze as they crossed the Malecón together. They dodged cars and the ubiquitous taxis as they made their way to the seawall, where waves washed lazily along the rocks and young Cuban men flirted with passing women.

The boy pointed again and again to his own mouth, calling out repeatedly in Spanish: "Help me. I am hungry. My mother is a widow. My little sisters are starving."

The woman did her best to ignore him, but the man seemed open to persuasion, so the boy tagged along beside them, begging for money in a language they didn't understand.

"No," she repeated and shooed the small boy away with her hands. "Go away. Oh, for God's sake, Mike, I told you not to give him anything. He's never going to leave us alone now. I'm so tired of these people constantly after us."

Mike reached into his pocket for more coins. He still placed some faith in bribery.

"I don't think giving him a few pesos is going to kill anyone, Hillary," he said, although as it turned out, he was mistaken. "Lighten up. We're on holidays."

"Yeah? Some holiday. I hate this country," she snapped under her breath, even though it was obvious the boy spoke no English. "I can't stand it. All these buildings falling down everywhere. I feel like I'm in Beirut after it was bombed."

"You've never been to Beirut," Mike countered. His jaw was clenched tight as he put another two pesos into the boy's grubby hand. Five in total.

"Here, now that's enough. *No me moleste, por favor.*" Leave us alone, please. The only Spanish phrase he knew, courtesy of the hotel doorman.

The boy wrapped his fingers around the money and hugged Mike tightly for a moment. Mike tried to smile, but his mouth pulled in the opposite direction. The boy didn't seem to notice.

"Get along now," Mike said, and the boy nodded, grinning. The street child stopped for a moment, watching a group of older boys run along the sidewalk on the other side of the seaway. When they disappeared from sight, he finally ran off, clutching his pesos. He weaved between the honking cars like a brightly coloured fish until his yellow shirt disappeared into the deepening shade of a small, high-fenced park near the artists'

market. A Ferris wheel and garish carousels spun slowly behind a wall of palm trees.

"You know goddamn well what I meant," Hillary said, openly furious now the boy was gone. They were headed for another argument with all the momentum of a suicide jump. She turned away, rigid with anger. Mike leaned against the seawall, waiting uneasily for her next attack.

Mike was entitled to several weeks of holidays after his disability leave. Chief O'Malley had told him to take his time, have a good long mental-health break. Come back to work when he was well-rested. And make sure to bonk that nice-looking wife of his every day they were away. Mike chose Havana as their surprise destination. He no longer remembered why he thought Hillary would enjoy it, or, frankly, why he cared.

All *she* noticed was the poverty. Families piled into devastated apartments propped up with bits of purloined wood; shaking dogs driven crazy with mange. She started complaining the moment they got off the plane.

Seagulls circled above them, screeching. Others bobbed like small white buoys on the dark waves. She shook her head at him, disgusted. "I don't know why the hell you did that. Gave him more money, after I expressly told you not to."

Mike shrugged helplessly. "They have so little, Hillary. Why get so angry over a few dollars?" But he knew her anger wasn't about that, it was about them. More precisely, about him.

"That's exactly what's wrong with you," she said in a voice as brittle as twigs. "You said a few days in Havana and everything would be better. Well, nothing's going to change who we are, is it? A few more days here isn't going make a difference. I moved my flight forward. I'm going back to Ottawa tonight."

An old car backfired like a gunshot. Mike's heart tightened at the sound. He felt the hard punch of the muscle spasms he'd

suffered since Steve Sloan's death. Panic attacks, the departmental psychiatrist called them. Anxiety.

For a moment, he couldn't breathe. He leaned over the seawall and the sharp edges of the rocks pressed into his chest. The water below shone with rainbows of kerosene slick. He swallowed and took a deep breath. He managed to straighten up as the muscle above his heart slowly relaxed. "So you want a divorce? Is that it?"

She evaded his question. "I'm leaving on the nine o'clock flight. You like it here so much, *you* stay."

"And just when did you decide all this?" He grabbed her by the arm, tried to force her to look at him, but Hillary was stubborn. "When did you call the airline? When I was in the shower this morning, after we made love?"

"What difference does it make?" She yanked her arm away. "Either way, I'm leaving."

"Leaving me? Or leaving Cuba while you make up your mind?"

"Don't raise your voice at me, *mister*." She threw her hair back, indignant. He saw tears in her eyes but wasn't sure what they meant. "Coming here was a mistake. You know it, and I know it. I'm going back to the hotel now to pack. I'll call you from my parents' house once I decide what to do."

"You mean you'll have that sleazebag lawyer of yours call me."

"If that's how you want it."

She strode off briskly without a backwards glance. Her silver sandals clattered on the cracked stone. The Cuban men who lined the seawall hissed after her appreciatively.