**EXCERPT 1**

*[Setting note for narrator: Cuban police station. Tension level: Medium but building. Pepper is maintaining composure while navigating a potentially hostile situation in a foreign country.]*

The officer opened a metal door and led Pepper Ryan through a maze of gray-painted hallways. At the end, he ushered Pepper into a bullpen of scratched metal tables, metal chairs, and stone walls.

A variety of uniformed and plainclothes men and women came and went. Working, sipping coffee, and joking with each other.  This was an environment that Pepper knew.

The officer gestured to a single chair across from a cluttered desk. It held several precariously stacked piles of old-fashioned manila case files.

A man strolled over and sat down hard at the desk across from Pepper. Unlike the previous officers, he wore brown dress pants and a white *guayabera* shirt. And a scowl.

The officer rattled off a quick stream of Spanish.

"*Hablo muy poco Español*," said Pepper. "*Habla Inglés*?" *[American accent attempting Spanish - not perfect but competent]*

The officer smiled, a thin crack. "I am Detective Juan Guiteras of the *Policía Nacional de la Revolución*. I speak enough English.  The officer said you are looking for a missing friend? Or two missing friends?" *[Cuban accent, authoritative tone, precise pronunciation of Spanish terms]*

The detective dug a notebook from a drawer and looked expectantly at Pepper.

"My friend Angel Cavada came here this morning to report that his girlfriend was missing. And no one has seen him since."

"Yes, your friend spoke to me," Guiteras said. "And I'm still trying to understand." He studied Pepper. "If you tell me what you know, I will help you and your friend if I can. Is that fair?"

"Great," said Pepper.

Pepper told the detective that Marisol had gone missing on Monday afternoon, soon after arriving in Havana, when buying flowers. Angel had asked Pepper to come to Cuba, then had disappeared himself.

"And when did you arrive in Cuba?" asked the detective.

"Two hours ago," said Pepper.

The detective scratched a note in his book. "And back in America, what would the police do when someone cannot find his friend for two hours?"

The sneaky belligerence of the question jarred Pepper, but he tried to stay cool.

**EXCERPT 2**

*[Setting note for narrator: Outside Pepper's lodging in Havana. Tone shifts from investigative to interpersonal with romantic/sexual tension and light humor.]*

When they pulled up to *Casa de Vides*, they saw Dayana de Melina sitting on the doorstep in yoga pants, a T-shirt, and a Los Angeles Dodgers baseball cap, looking casually gorgeous. She glanced pointedly at her watch.

"*¡Una mango!*" muttered Hector. *[Cuban male voice, authentic Cuban pronunciation]*

"Classic Pepper," Angel laughed. "He attracts them like flies. And he hasn't even sung for her yet." *[American male voice, teasing tone, friendly]*

"I couldn't sleep last night, I was so worried about Mari," Dayana said when they joined her at the doorstep. *[Cuban female voice, attractive, confident but showing concern]* "So I got your address from Ozzie." She held up a bag. "Chicken, rice and beans—good fuel for your work."

"You're a lifesaver," said Pepper, his stomach rumbling at the smell.

She flashed a big smile. "Was Ozzie's father helpful?"

"A little," said Pepper.

Dayana frowned. "Did *Señor* Rappeneau think *el Segador* took Mari?"

Pepper shook his head. "He didn't speculate much. He handed us off to someone else. So you came here to check on our progress?"

She laughed. "You think I have another agenda? Maybe to seduce a *yuma*?"  She reached over and squeezed his biceps. "If I had a peso for every man who tried to seduce me, I could fly off to Hollywood."

"She's stunning," said Angel upstairs in the *casa*'s living room when Dayana ducked into the bathroom.

"So was her slap," said Pepper.  "I haven't stopped thinking about her since last night."