

1961

PROLOGUE

The sun stung like the lashing of a stingray as Tomás Marín waded neck deep through the mucky waters of the Zapata swamp. He could hear the Castro militia men nearby, shouting insults, calling him and the others to come out.

Tomás knew what would happen the moment he surrendered—mowed down in a hail of bullets, or captured and tortured and then killed, or transported to *La Habana*, then tortured and then killed. *El paredón*. No matter what, he knew, there was only death waiting for him, so he trudged on, choosing death his way--by thirst, by hunger, by drowning, if need be, but his way.

It was his 18th birthday.

Wasn't death what he had signed up for? Victory yes if lucky but death almost for certain. *Morir por la patria es vivir*, to die for the homeland is to live—*dulce et decorum est*, like the Marist priests used to say.

Suddenly Tomás found himself back in the classroom listening to Father José María discussing in his Galician accented Spanish the symbols of the Cuban national shield. The key in the middle is Cuba, he said, which is the key to North and South America, the stripes on the side are those of the national flag, the cap on top of the central bundle is the Phrygian symbol of

liberty, the palm tree is our national tree—and Tomás realized he was hallucinating, that the days evading the swarms of Castro's militia after the disaster at Playa Larga had finally gotten to him.

He ducked down behind the spiny mangroves, wading quietly through the rank water, careful not to drink it, even though thirst and hunger were cramping his guts, his bowels already emptied from the bacteria and protozoa of the swamp. *Protozoa are small harmful organisms, single cell parasitic animals found in much of Cuba's waters*, came the voice of Father José María again—but Tomás pushed it out of his consciousness, hearing the stomping of boots coming drawing ever nearer.

“¡Aquí va uno!” shouted someone a few feet away—and he heard the rat-tat-tat of the Cheka submachines spitting bullets overhead. He plunged into the water, the bullets piercing the water with a muffled bursting sound. He laid down flat at the bottom and saw, with odd piercing clarity, a crab about the size of his hand and thinking how he would be able to eat for the first time in three days he reached for it when a voice shouted,

“¡Aquí está!” and hands seized him and hauled him out of the water and he faced a troop of *milicianos* with their guns aiming at him and he struggled to set himself free. He was to wonder, during the ordeal ahead, whether he might better have drowned.