

CHAPTER 1

*Off the southernmost tip of Florida*

*Mid-June 1989*

Black water lapped at the sides of the dirty gray boat, creating a frightening, yet comforting sound as it mixed with the rhythmic swish-swish of oars being pulled through water. The absence of all other noise meant that, so far, the dark night was protecting them, and that the black stillness surrounding them was as void of life as the inside of a tomb, though the air was strung with anxiety.

The thirty-three refugees who were crowded together on the tiny vessel kept their lips sealed and their ears alert for any signs of danger. No one spoke. No one coughed. No one smacked at the pesky mosquitoes that had suddenly begun attacking them, and no one dared to ease over to the smelly waste buckets shielded from view behind a sheet of dirty canvas that were only used when absolutely necessary.

Though Niya Londres could not see the faces of the dark-skinned people who were huddled together in clumps down in the hull, she knew what they looked like: ragged with exhaustion, nearly broken with terror, yet riveted with an unwavering determination to survive.

A mixture of fear and hope filled Niya too, and she fought back the reservoir of unshed tears that had been building inside her for days. She missed her mother, longed for the feel of fresh sheets against her skin, and would kill for scrap of bread and a sip of water to ease the hunger that gripped her stomach. However, she could not have those things, and no matter what happened, she had to stay strong. She could not break down and lose control and let her brother, Lorenzo, see how frightened she was.

Reaching out in the darkness, Niya groped for Lorenzo's hand, expecting him to pull away; an eighteen year-old boy might be somewhat reluctant to admit that he needed his big sister's calming touch. However, as soon as Niya's fingers touched Lorenzo's, he grasped her hand tightly and held on without saying a word.

Three years younger than Niya, Lorenzo, who would turn twenty-one in just a few days, Lorenzo was a foot taller than his sister but just as fiercely independent, and much too handsome for his own good. He thought of himself as both a ladies man and a tough guy...a macho male with a devilish smile and little need of comfort from anyone. However, as the inky night wore on, he did not let go of Niya's hand and his faith in her helped Niya remain calm.

Who knew how close the Coast Guard patrol boats might be? She worried. At any moment, a cough, a child's cry, even a muted whisper might bring the authorities bearing down on them with search lights, orders shouted through loud bull horns, and gunfire to make them surrender. Back home in Cuba, it had been rumored around the

island that not only the United States Coast Guard was out on patrol, but renegade vigilante boats as well, scouting the Florida waters for illegal Haitian immigrants, eager to interrupt their approach. The officials' fast-moving boats were said to be able to glide over the choppy coastal waters as silently as raindrops slipping down a pane of glass, and within seconds, the journey could end in a hail of gunfire, an ordered evacuation that would result in deportation back to the island, detention in a refugee camp, or even death.

For Niya, the only bright spot in the miserable situation was that of the sixty-three passengers aboard the boat, only she and Lorenzo were from Cuba, not Haiti, a fact that she prayed would make it possible for her and her brother to stay in America, even if they were caught.

Their journey had started under the cover of darkness at the beach at Caibarien, on the eastern coast of Cuba, when Niya and Lorenzo had hugged their mother good-bye and stepped into the weather beaten boat that was already jam-packed with Haitians. After slipping out to sea and away from their homeland under the cover of a thunderous, moon-less sky, Niya and Lorenzo had managed to commandeer a corner in the stern of the boat where they stowed their plastic bags containing personal items and a change of clothing before hunkering down for the duration of the trip.

Now, as the boat rolled with the waves toward the Florida shoreline, dim lights suddenly appeared on the horizon. Lifting her chin, Niya peeked above the rail and focused on the twinkling lights that illuminated the ragged edges of a far off shoreline. The lights, like festive Christmas garlands, decorated the land that would soon become her new home. Finally, it lay within reach, and despite her trepidation about what would happen to her once she set foot on shore, Niya swallowed her fear and silently vowed to be courageous, no matter what.

As the eldest, Niya felt responsible for them both, and had promised her mother that she would be brave, careful, and wise, and not let anything happen to Lorenzo. It was a promise Niya meant to keep.

The sighting of coastal lights in the distance caused an unexpected stir among the passenger refugees, and very soon soft whispers of excitement rippled across the deck.

*If only I could shout my happiness, Niya thought, near to bursting with joy. However, instead of screaming her relief to have made it to the coast of America, she gave Lorenzo's hand a hard squeeze and allowed the tension in her shoulders to ease a bit, in exhausted, blessed release. We'll be on land soon, she thought. And then everything will be fine. We'll go to New York, find Uncle Eric, and become American citizens like him.*

With a stab of regret, Niya thought of her mother, Olivia Londres, wishing she were with her now. The Haitian boat captain, who had agreed for Niya and Lorenzo to join his group, had made it clear to Niya's mother that he had room for two children only, and had been less than pleased to discover that the "two children" turned out to be

a twenty year-old girl and an eighteen year-old boy. Reluctantly, the captain had let them aboard.

Now, Niya concentrated on the lights in the distance, eager to shut out the misery of missing her mother. Rising on her knees, she pulled Lorenzo up beside her, and together they strained to make out the dark shapes along the coast as the boat began to pick up speed.

In their eagerness to reach shore, the oarsmen had begun pulling harder, propelling the boat forward at an increased pace. Even the wind picked up and pushed them faster toward America, a good omen, Niya thought.

Unable to resist a view of the approaching shoreline, many of the refugees crowded together at the front of the boat causing a sudden shift in the distribution of weight, tilting the boat precariously to one side.

"Sit down!" The captain hissed, loud enough to startle everyone. "Sit down or we will flounder."

Suddenly someone screamed; a loud cry of surprise, followed by a splash -- as if someone had fallen or jumped overboard. Soon everyone on board, it seemed, was shouting in alarm.

"He fell! Help him. He fell into the water!"

"No, no. I think he jumped!"

"Yes, you see? He's swimming to shore!"

"No! He fell. He did not jump!"

Eyes wide, Niya jerked her head around and followed the voices, but all she could make out in the darkness was a jumble of bodies pressed together at the side of the boat. Soon, others began wailing, some started cursing, and a woman began screaming for someone to save the man who had fallen into the water.

Into this mayhem, a new, loud voice shot out of the darkness and quickly silenced the panicky crowd. "Halt! Halt your vessel or you will be fired upon!" shouted a man, initiating further panic.

The shadowy tangle of people broke apart in an instant, and the splash of more bodies hitting water quickly drowned out the voice on the bullhorn. Niya screamed when groping hands and arms pushed her down onto the deck, but she managed to hold onto Lorenzo and pull him into a safe spot behind a wooden crate where they huddled in fear as the frightened refugees began jumping into the ocean.

Gunfire rang out.

The refugees roared with fright.

The throng trampled forward, pulling her and Lorenzo with them. More people

flung themselves overboard, taking loved ones along into the freezing water.

Now, pinned against the rail, Niya had no place to go except over the side of the boat, too, and still holding onto Lorenzo's hand she pulled him to his feet.

"Come on Lorenzo! We've got to jump. Swim for it. If we don't, we're finished."

She stood up, looked down into the black water and took a deep breath, poised to jump. But before she could fling herself over the rail, a bullet struck her in the shoulder, forcing her into the icy water headfirst.

"Lorenzo!" she screamed as his hand slipped out of hers. "Lorenzo!" she frantically, she groped for him. But she was alone, and he was gone.

Niya felt herself sinking deep beneath the water and her lungs instinctively tightened with lack of air. For several horrifying seconds she remained in a downward spiral, her head pounding, her limbs useless against the strong undertow. As she continued her descent, she wondered if she would live to see America, her brother, or daylight, again.

When she thought her lungs would certainly burst, she found the strength to fight her way to the surface, and with a push, erupted above the water, only to find that she was totally alone. Not even the boat remained within sight.

Gasping for breath, she dog paddled to stay afloat, and after forcing herself to calm down, flipped onto her back and floated, letting the waves nudge her body toward shore. Back home in Cuba, she and Lorenzo had often swum as far out as they could, only to float back to shore on the crests of tall, white-capped waves.

*Please let Lorenzo be alive. Let him remember how to do this, Niya silently prayed. Please let him think of the beaches where we played in Cuba. Make him remember not to fight the current but to allow it to carry him safely to shore.* She knew Lorenzo was an excellent swimmer, but would he be able to orient himself well enough to make it to land? Or would he mistakenly swim out to sea until he floundered, drowned, or got eaten by sharks? She could not think of such a horror. She had to concentrate on surviving.

After drifting a while, she calculated that her chances of swimming to land were pretty good, so she flipped over and struck out toward the shoreline, praying that Lorenzo was doing the same thing. With firm strokes, though her shoulder was aflame with pain, Niya continued swimming toward land.