

THE FIVE SEEKERS
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Chapter One

Baker and Schultz exchanged skeptical glances, their faces furrowing. John, observing their expressions, saw a mix of surprise and confusion mirrored in their eyes. It was evident that these two influential men found John's explanation concise yet loaded with passion and patriotism.

Inside Secretary Schultz's office, a sense stillness was detectable, so profound that even a whispered sound would have been heard amplified. The air was tense, and the room seemed to hold its breath as though awaiting a crucial revelation.

Baker, his voice measured, finally spoke, "John, would you mind stepping out of the office for a few minutes while we dig into these new developments? You can wait in the lobby."

John couldn't hide his discontent; his head hung low as he complied and exited the office. In the White House lobby, he sat in a plush chair, his emotions running wild. His heart raced, pounding in his chest like a drumbeat. His emotional speech had been entirely unprepared, born of the recognition that both men were inclined to postpone the plan. He silently thanked the Holy Spirit for the inspiration that had guided his words when they were needed. He offered up a prayer, hoping for a change of heart when they called him back.

To occupy his nervous mind, John turned his attention to the artwork adorning the walls, each piece full of patriotic symbolism. The waiting area had emptied, leaving only a couple of individuals, like John, absorbed in their thoughts. It felt like the intermission of a high-stakes trial, where the jury's decision could change everything. Gradually, his racing heart began to steady, and he found calm in his uncertainty.

He thought of the long and arduous journey that had led him to this moment.

The plane ride from Arlington, Virginia, near Washington. D.C., to Denver, Colorado, had been lengthy. John had been seated beside his wife, Marcia, with their two sons behind them. As the

cabin became silent, John took advantage of the stillness to think about the impending meeting. This year was crucial for the operation he and his four closest friends were about to undertake.

In his mid-thirties, John was renowned for his careful planning and deep scrutiny. He was also susceptible to stretches of anxiety.

He asked himself, “Have I overlooked anything?”

His thoughts raced, like Road Runner fleeing from Coyote, as he carefully reviewed every detail of their preparations. Each element needed to be perfect. John took a deep breath, attempting to repress the rising anxiety.

“I need to relax and delegate more to the others,” he told himself. “They are just as capable and motivated as I am. This task is a collective effort, and we must stay focused together.”

Taking a sip of the coffee brought by the attendant, John looked out of the small plane window, seeking support in the emptiness of the night outside. The roar of the jet engines echoed, and brought memories of a solitary plane ride he had taken in 1961 when he was just a boy. He considered himself fortunate, with good health, a loving family, a fulfilling job, and the unwavering support of lifelong friends.

The plane touched down at Denver International Airport early the next morning without a hitch. Marcia, John’s wife, broke the silence during their arrival.

“I’m absolutely starving! What about you?”

John, weary but determined, replied, “I’m not too hungry, but some extra energy and another cup of coffee sound perfect right now. How about you guys? Hungry, too?” He turned to his children.

“Yes, Dad. Where are we going?” inquired Siro.

“I’m with Siro,” said Marcia, patting her stomach. “My vote is we eat here at the airport. Waiting until after we get the rental car will take too long, and as I mentioned, I’m really hungry.”

Finding a typical airport eatery, the family sat down for a quick and satisfying breakfast. Afterward, John rented a car, and together they embarked on the journey to the reunion’s destination. The 1983 reunion had been scheduled for the second week of November, hosted at the familiar Broadmoor Resort in Colorado Springs. The weather was perfect, with not a single cloud in sight and the morning sun casting a brilliant glow upon the surrounding Rockies. It was the ideal setting for the ninety-mile road trip to the resort.

As Marcia scrutinized the brochure, she shared details about the resort’s history and amenities with the children. “It’s the longest-running consecutive winner of both the AAA Five-Diamond and Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star awards,” she explained. “Situated on 5,000 lush acres, plus an additional 2,000 acres at the Broadmoor Wilderness Experience, this place is nestled under the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. They offer an award-winning day spa, fitness center, mountain biking, mountain climbing, hiking, swimming pools, outdoor hot tubs, and championship golf—”

John interrupted with enthusiasm, “Golf! I like that.”

Siro chimed in, “Swimming! Mom, did we bring my swim stuff?”

“Of course,” Marcia reassured him. “You’re going to have a lot of fun! It also has six tennis courts, tennis camps, children’s programs, specialty retail shops, and dining options.”

“I want to try the Wilderness Experience. It sounds like fun!” declared Siro.

Severo joined in, saying, “Me, too!”

Marcia smiled and told them, “We’ll think about it, and if you behave well, maybe we’ll let you both give it a try. There are activities for everyone coming to the reunion. Remember, Pedro Pans were all once children, too.”

“Speaking of Pedro Pan,” Siro interjected, “Can you tell us more about it, Dad?”

“Yes, about 14,000. It was simply amazing. Many of the children were taken in by American families, and others stayed with relatives, while others were sent to institutions throughout the U.S. Monsignor Walsh made contact with a U.S. government official, Tracy Voorhees, who was U.S. President Eisenhower’s representative for Cuban refugees at the time to make him promise to finance the operation. They agreed to meet at Miami’s Bayfront Park to ensure privacy and security for each of them.

“Monsignor Walsh was part of the Diocese of Miami and assigned to work with the Cuban refugee influx. Bayfront Park is located near Downtown Miami near the mouth of the Miami River. Around 2,000 years before the Europeans reached it, this area was occupied by the Tequesta tribe. Indeed, the name Miami is derived from the name used by those Native Americans, ‘Mayaimi.’ This park was emblematic for the Cuban refugee group. They would congregate at the park, given that it was free, and entertain themselves with the many pigeons there, and enjoy the maritime activity of nearby Biscayne Bay. The Cubans used to call this park: ‘El Parque de las Palomas’ or Pigeons Park. There even was an unconfirmed rumor that some of the pigeons ended up as food for some of the Cubans.

“Interestingly, in 1566 the Spanish Admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Florida’s first governor, declared this area a Spanish possession. Thus, almost four hundred years later, the Cubans, in many ways, took possession of the park ‘again.’”

“A very interesting book I once read had a lot of details about Operation Pedro Pan. There was even some actual dialogue included between Monsignor Walsh and Mr. Tracy Voorhees. I don’t remember it all letter-perfect, but I will always remember the very exciting details,” said Marcia.

“Thank you for the opportunity to meet you,” Father Walsh said to Voorhees.

“I was intrigued by your brief explanation, so I flew down as soon as I could.” Both men sat on a park bench where their conversation wouldn’t be overheard.

“Castro has confiscated all the schools and will indoctrinate the Cuban children. He has threatened to take all parental rights away and assume the children under his government,” Father Walsh’s tone was both somber and urgent.

“Our government is amicable to a feasible alternative. What can we do?”

“We need the financing and the unofficial approval of our plan which we call. ‘Operación Pedro Pan.’ Father Walsh then explained the details in particular that Pedro is Peter in Spanish.

“Word of the program’s existence will spread by word-of-mouth by clergymen and educators in Cuba. Those interested will be directed to the Ruston Academy for processing. Lists of names will be sent to me so I can procure the visas and the plane tickets. Applications then will be made for an exit permit. The children will fly to Miami and be received by me and my staff, who will then arrange for transportation to their relatives in Miami or elsewhere or to foster homes and orphanages for those with no relatives.”

“Where will they be housed throughout this process?” asked Mr. Voorhees.

“We have secured temporary living areas in locations throughout South Florida,” replied Father Walsh.

“You can count on our support.”

“And that is all I remember,” said Marcia.

“That’s really impressive! I know you have a great memory, but remembering all that so well is way beyond my wildest expectations!” said John.

“It was a terribly important episode in my husband’s life, so I wanted to know every detail to remember as much about it as possible,” said Marcia.

“Thank you, Honey! Let me give you a hug. I love you very much, too.”

The Dalmaus arrived at the resort and checked in to their room, which had two bedrooms and a large living area. The children went to the balcony and were fascinated with the view.

“You have to see this, Dad! This place is awesome,” said Siro.

“I am glad you are beginning to appreciate it.”

As they stood alone on the balcony, Siro asked, “Can you tell me more about Pedro Pan?”

“Of course, Siro. I am glad you asked.”

“I love it when you tell us stories. Severo, come over here! Dad is going to tell us a story.”

“Some parents were unhappy with the situation in Cuba, so they wanted to keep their children safe. Operation Pedro Pan offered a way to send them to America. It was well-planned and well-executed. The headmaster of Ruston Academy, an American school in Havana founded in 1920, James Baker, oversaw the transportation arrangements in Cuba. The State Department issued visa waivers and supply funding for those who provided temporary custody for the children. Monsignor Walsh, who came up with the idea, arranged the children’s accommodations in Miami and elsewhere. Word of this secret program soon spread, and more than 14,000 children arrived in the U.S. from December 26, 1960, to October 23, 1962.”

“Was it stopped?” asked Severo.

“Yes,” John replied somberly. “It was halted due to the Cuban Missile Crisis.”

“When the U.S. detected ballistic missiles in Cuba, President John Kennedy demanded they be removed. Castro, in combination with the Russian Kremlin, secretly installed several ballistic missiles throughout Cuba. Members of the anti-Castro underground in Cuba had detected the

constructions of bunkers and missile sites and secretly reported these events to the CIA operatives who were on the ground in Cuba. These operatives reported the events to the Defense Department and the President. The sites were also confirmed by photographs taken by spy planes flying over Cuba.

“From the beginning of the crisis, Kennedy and the Executive Commission declared that the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba was unacceptable. The challenge facing Kennedy, however, was to orchestrate the removal of the missiles without making the threat worse and resulting in a nuclear war.

“The meetings lasted nearly a week. They discussed several options, including an all-out bombing of the missile sites and a full-scale invasion of Cuba. Kennedy ultimately decided on a less dangerous plan. First, he would order the U.S. Navy to establish a blockade or quarantine of Cuba to prevent the Soviets from delivering additional missiles and military equipment. Second, he would send an ultimatum to the Soviets that all existing missiles in Cuba must be removed.

“On October 22, 1962, the President, in a major television address, informed Americans and the world of the presence of the missiles, disclosed his decision to enact the blockade, and alerted everyone that the U.S. was prepared to exercise its military force, if necessary, to neutralize this dangerous threat to national security. This is basically what he said:

“It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.”

“The U.S. deployed Navy vessels to form a blockade not only to prevent more missiles from coming to Cuba, but also to verify that those already in Cuba were, in fact, removed.

“President Kennedy accepted the deal offered by the Soviets whereby the Soviets would remove all the missiles if Kennedy agreed not to invade Cuba again. This decision still weighs heavy, even today, on U.S. policy toward Cuba. Subsequent administrations have operated with this

“hands off Cuba” mentality. Since then, the efforts of Cuban exiles to execute military incursions in Cuba have been persecuted by the Coast Guard and other agencies.

“This showdown between President Kennedy and the Soviet Union’s Chairman Nikita Khrushchev not only stopped Operation Pedro Pan but many other activities between the U.S. and Cuba. Monsignor Walsh and his team were extremely upset. Monsignor Walsh declared,

“After all this work and preparations, we are left with an unfinished operation, which still has many children awaiting their trip to freedom.”

“Among the many activities stopped was the daily Pan American Airways flight from Havana to Miami. Many Cubans on the waiting list to migrate to the U.S. were stranded and in danger because the Cuban government knew they wanted to leave. Anyone wanting to leave was considered an enemy of the revolution.

“The Monsignor and his cohorts used many locations in the South Florida area to house these children, but many were still sent to other parts of the U.S. where the Catholic Church had found families and institutions to take care of them until their parents arrived. Some of these locations included camps near Homestead, Florida, and other areas south of Miami. My four friends and I had no family or close friends in the U.S., so we were sent to an orphanage in Denver Colorado, the Colorado Children’s Home, formerly known as Colorado Orphanage House. This is where the bonding began and lasted until this sixth reunion. The selection of the location for their reunion was not by chance but purposely done to be near Denver so we could visit the orphanage and help with both monetary and moral support,” related John to his children.

“Dad, that is an awesome story. Tell us more,” said Siro.

“What happened when you guys got to the orphanage?” asked Severo.

“We were used to the almost sea level elevation of Havana, so we had some adjusting to do, not only to our new life but also to the higher elevation where we have been sent to live.,” explained John.

“We need to get ready to get some dinner. You can continue later,” said Marcia.

“You guys go down. I’m going to stay here for a while. I feel like reminiscing some more about those days,” said John.

“This is a beautiful city,” said Felix Riera, one of the boys.

“I felt kind of dizzy when I stepped out of the plane,” said Yvette Chong, one of the girls.

“That’s because Denver sits on the South Platte River Valley, which is near the Western edge of the High Plains and just east of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. Its nickname is the Mile-High City because its official elevation is exactly one mile or 5,280 feet above sea level,” John Dalmau, the leader of the group, explained.

In John Dalmau’s mind, these children were rising out of the ashes the Castro regime had made of their beloved home. John’s ambitions rose further, along the 747 that carried them to the Mile-High City on that fateful day.

When these five children, three boys, thirteen, thirteen, and eight years old and two girls eleven and eight years old, arrived at the orphanage, they were very frightened, not only because they had been sent to the U.S. without their parents but also because they were now in a place where they really did not belong. John was the only English speaker then.

He helped the rest and tried to comfort them, especially the younger children.

“Don’t be afraid. I will help you with the language, and soon you will be more comfortable. You know that our parents will be united with us soon. We need to stick together and help one another, not only for us but for our parents. We need to maintain our love for our parents, for God, and for Cuba,” said John.

After a few days, the official from the orphanage took these five newly acquired children to their respective public schools to be registered. Juliana and Julio went to the elementary school, and John, Felix, and Yvette went to the middle school. All of them, except John, had a very difficult time in the first weeks because they did not speak or understand much English. Colorado did not have any special programs in place then for refugees with little or no English knowledge. These programs were primarily in South Florida, where the influx of Cuban refugee children was sizable.

Many of their classmates were helpful and tried to assist them, but there were a few bullies, too. Julio and Juliana, both eight years old, were in the same classroom and sat next to each other. Julio, not only helped Juliana a lot but also acted as her protector from those who were not as nice. Juliana was black which tended to aggravate the circumstances. The Denver schools were not integrated then, but because Juliana was considered Cuban, she was admitted.

One time, when both were walking to the lunch-room, a blonde boy approached Juliana and said,

“Maybe in Cuba they like black people, but here, we don’t.”

Juliana did not understand what the boy had said, but Julio picked up on the word ‘black’ and right away turned to the boy and said one of the few English phrases John had taught them:

“You, go away!”

The boy laughed and challenged Julio. Julio stood his ground and screamed, “You, go away.” The boy turned around and left.

“Julio, thanks for helping me out,” said Juliana.

“You are welcome, Julie. Don’t pay attention to this guy. Soon, we both will be able to handle the language better and with the help from the classes John is giving us after school and what we learn here, we will soon be able to communicate and feel better.”

John and Felix, both thirteen years old were also in the same classroom, but Yvette, who was eleven years old, was by herself in another class. Some of the children in Yvette's class made fun of her Cuban accent.

"A Chinese chick with a Mexican accent. Who ever heard of that?"

Yvette knew this boy's name was Maurice, but everybody called him "Bones." She had never spoken to him, so she didn't know why she was getting his attention now.

Whatever "Bones" said, Yvette did not understand. However, one of her classmates, a girl of Mexican descent named Carolina, came to her rescue.

"¿Cuántos idiomas tú hablas?" Yvette asked the boy in Spanish.

Carolina interpreted for her. "How many languages do you speak?"

"I only speak English, and that is all you need in this country," Bones-Maurice declared.

Again, Yvette did not understand what he was saying and could not respond. Carolina translated, and Yvette responded in Spanish. Then Carolina translated again.

"Well, let me tell you something. I speak Spanish and Mandarin Chinese, and soon I will learn English. I suggest you learn another language, too, if you want to have success in your life," said Carolina.

During recess, it became clear that Maurice didn't like losing the class's loyalty, which was evident when the whole class laughed when Yvette and Carolina put him in his place.

"Listen," Maurice 'Bones' Smith said as he grabbed Yvette's arm. "Your kind is like rats. You don't belong here."

Yvette had been trained in martial arts by her mom, so she stood her ground. When the boy raised his hand to hit her, then she grabbed him and sent him to the ground.

Mr. Bianculli, a teacher, who was observing them, took them both to the principal's office as per proper protocol. John was also summoned to serve as a translator.

"Ms. Chong, why did you push your classmate to the ground?" the principal demanded. John translated this question for Yvette. Then Yvette told John in Spanish, and John translated her reply:

"He was going to hit me, so I defended myself,"

"And you, young man, what do you have to say about this incident?" The principal demanded Maurice 'Bones' Smith.

The boy was silent and tears started to fall from his eyes. Mr. Bianculli spoke up now.

"I saw when he raised his arm and was ready to hit Yvette."

The boy was placed in detention for one month, and his parents were notified. Yvette was sent back to her classroom. When she entered the classroom, the rest of the class applauded her. They were pleased that this little Chinese girl who did not speak English had stood up against the class bully.

"It was good to remember all that! During those first few months, life at the orphanage was really difficult, but with my help, those four very bright young kids learned enough English to understand others and converse with them. Life became easier after that." John said to himself. He went down and got some supper.

