

Chapter Two – Welcome to Miami

Nineteen seventy-one had been a good year for South Florida residents. The Miami Dolphins had won the AFC Championship and the following year they even made it to the Super Bowl. However, at this particular moment, neither item was of any concern to either Victoria or Maria Vargas. After spending the previous twelve hours aboard a 747 traveling from Santiago, Chile to Miami, the only thing their hearts desired was to set their tired feet on some solid ground – or at least a nice patch of warm, sandy soil.

“Thank you for flying Delta. I hope you enjoyed your trip. Please fly with us again,” a tall, dark haired Captain wearing a navy blue suit mechanically repeated as each set of passengers trudged past the cockpit, onto the narrow aerobridge that led into the terminal.

Victoria politely nodded in reply. However, after spending that much time in flight, and a partly turbulent one at that, she really wouldn't have cared if he would have said, “Thanks for giving us your dough. ... Now get your fat ass off the plane.” She just wanted to get outside so she could bathe in the warm sunshine and inhale the salt tainted sea breeze.

“Ah-h-h,” she unconsciously verbalized after the two of them exited the cramped passageway.

Maria gazed at her mother and smiled. She could always tell when Victoria was daydreaming. “So how do we get to Customs from here?”

“I'm not really sure,” Victoria replied, taking a couple of steps toward the center aisle before starting to look around. On her right, the concourse was lined with numerous dark gray, plastic seats and an untold number of boarding gates – each symmetrically arranged on either side of the terminal. And to her left, a mirror image existed, with the exception of one item – a large LED sign about 50 feet away that displayed an ever-changing list of the day's departures and arrivals. “This airport is quite a bit larger than I expected.”

Maria frowned. “Are we lost?”

Victoria looked at her and was about to answer, yes, when a curly-haired, young female Delta airline attendant flashing a toothy smile unexpectedly interrupted. “Excuse me. You appear to be in need of assistance. Could I help?”

“Sí. I mean, yes,” Victoria said, turning to face her. “My daughter and I have just arrived from Santiago and we’re not really sure how to get to Customs?”

“No problem, Señora,” the attendant replied, displaying another oversized grin, before pointing toward the Arrival/Departure sign. “This terminal is for international flights only. Just follow the walkway about 200 feet past this sign and you’ll see the line for Customs.”

“Gracias.”

Minutes later, “Oh look, mother,” Maria excitedly stated, upon reaching a roped entranceway and seeing only a half dozen people in front of them. “We’re not going to have a long wait.”

That’s a shame, Victoria thought, before answering. That also means the officers will be able to do a much closer inspection.

“Do you have anything you would like to declare,” a thirty-something, uniformed Customs agent asked in a very business-like manner, after examining their passports and handing them a translated handout that contained a lengthy list of U.S. rules and regulations.

“No. I don’t think so,” Victoria replied, placing her handbag in front of him for inspection. “The only thing I brought is my makeup and jewelry.”

“Jewelry?” the officer repeated, taking hold of the bag. “What type of jewelry?”

“Just a few gold rings, and some necklaces and bracelets.”

“My parents own a chain of jewelry stores in Arica,” Maria interjected.

“You do?” the officer automatically gave Victoria a suspicious look. “You wouldn’t be trying to smuggle a few items ... would you?”

Victoria let out a false laugh. “Why, of course not,” she replied, while discreetly pulling her jacket sleeve over the small collection of bracelets she had placed on both arms before they left Arica. “Just look inside my purse. There’s only a couple of items in there.”

“Just a couple,” the officer repeated, noticing the way Maria had gazed at her mother. “And you’re not wearing anything you would like to declare. ... Are you?”

“No,” Victoria said. “Unless I need to declare the necklace my husband bought me for our anniversary.” She then reached inside the neck of her blouse and pulled out a fourteen carat gold herringbone.

The officer stared at her in reply, and then glanced at Maria. “No. That won’t be necessary. We just want to make sure that the total value of everything you’re bringing in doesn’t go over a thousand dollars. If it did ... you’d be required to pay an import tax.”

“I know,” Victoria said, stuffing her necklace back inside her blouse. “And I can assure you that I’m not bringing in enough to have to make a declaration. ... I’m very careful about things like that.”

“I see,” the officer replied, handing back their passports. “You should be ready to go then. ... I hope you ladies have a nice visit.”

Victoria smiled and took Maria’s hand. They then proceeded toward the main concourse.

“You really need to watch what you say, little one. You almost got us into some major trouble.”

“In trouble? ... For what?”

Victoria quietly replied, in Spanish, in hopes that no one but her daughter would understand.

“Do you have the two ladies in sight yet?” a husky male voice asked over the in-house security phone, a few moments later. “We’re looking for two South American females. Both with dark hair. One looks to be in her mid to late 40’s. The other is around 18.”

“Yes. I see them, Captain. They’re about fifteen feet away and heading in my direction,” Joe whispered into a rectangle-shaped, push button phone that hung on the wall next to his station at the front of the airport. “They should be reaching the main concourse any minute now.”

“10-4.”

“Do you want me to approach them?”

“Negative, Joe,” Captain Richardson replied. “According to our security cameras, I suspect we got a party of three – two adults and one child – that will soon be joining them.”

“Wholesalers or customers?”

“I doubt if they’re either, Joe. ... Going by the woman’s facial appearance, I highly suspect – it’s family.”

“Hmm. ... That’s interesting. ... Do you think they’re also involved in this smuggling scheme?”

“I’m not sure yet, Joe,” the security captain replied. “Just keep a close eye on them, but do not approach. We’re going to have some Customs personnel intercept them before they leave Baggage

Pickup.”

“10-4.”

“So do you really think that Jos• will still be waiting for me when we get back?” Maria asked her mother as they approached the main concourse. “A full year is a long time. Especially for people our age.”

“If he really loves you, he will,” Victoria cheerfully replied. “And if he doesn’t”

“Grandma!” a four year old child suddenly screamed at the top her lungs before wrapping her arms around both of the older lady’s legs. “You made it!”

“Of course I did, little one,” Victoria replied, admiring her granddaughter’s beaming smile.

“So how was the trip, Victoria?” Gaines asked, giving his mother-in-law a hug. “Not too turbulent, I hope.”

“No. It wasn’t too bad,” Maria replied. “There was only a couple of times Mom and I thought we had boarded a trampoline.”

“Oh. You were lucky, then,” Lisa, her older sister interjected. “During one trip Gaines and I had on our way back from Arica, the plane continually bounced for a solid two hours.”

“Really?” Victoria exclaimed.

Both Gaines and Lisa nodded yes, in reply.

“So where’s Baggage Pickup?” Maria asked, taking a quick scan around the concourse. “Mom said we were going to have to go there to pick up our luggage.”

“It’s just a little ways from here – on the ground floor,” Gaines replied, taking hold of his daughter’s hand. “I can’t wait to show you the huge conveyor the airport now uses.”

“The airport uses a conveyor for baggage pickup?” Maria asked, raising an eyebrow.

Both Gaines and Lisa smiled. “Of course, Sis. They have to in order to handle the volume,” Lisa replied. “You’re in Miami now. And it’s a lot bigger than Arica.”

“Station 15 to Captain Richardson. Station 15 to Captain Richardson. Do you read me? Over.”

“We got you, Joe. ... What up?”, the captain replied over his two-way.

“The suspects are starting to proceed down the stairwell.”

“10-4, Joe. We’ll notify Alan in Baggage Pickup to keep an eye out for them. Richardson out.”

“So what do think of our little airport, mother?” Gaines asked, shortly after retrieving both Victoria’s and Maria’s medium-gray, Samsonite suitcases from the airport’s eighth of a mile long conveyor and sitting them at her feet.

“It’s grandioso,” she replied, while subtly sliding a couple of fingers under her sleeve as if she had acquired an itch.

“Did you bring me a present from Chile, Abuelita?” Donna asked, displaying a childish grin after eyeing her grandmother’s luggage.

“Of course I did, little one,” Victoria replied. She then bent down to open her case. “Don’t I always?”

“Yes, ma’am. And I hope you brought me a Baleros Cup. I’ve recently been wanting one.”

“Well, let me see.”

Reaching deep into the bottom of her suitcase with both hands, Victoria grabbed a brown paper bag that contained a wooden object inside. However, instead of quickly removing it, she made a show like she was having trouble trying to find the gift – while opening a hidden compartment and depositing a small assortment of gold necklaces and bracelets inside.

“Would this do?” Victoria asked, pulling out what appeared to be a brightly decorated wooden cup attached to a stick – with a small, bright-colored ball attached.

“Yes,” Donna cried in delight, before giving her grandmother a large hug. “Thank you so much, Abuelita. That’s exactly what I wanted.”

“You just made her day, Victoria,” Gaines said with a smile, as he watched his mother-in-law close her suitcase, then lift his daughter to her waist. “She’s been bugging us about getting one ever since one of her playmates at nursery school brought one for Show-and-Tell.”

“Really? Then I guess it’s a good thing I bought it for her,” Victoria replied as they started to head toward the exit. “I also have something I’d like to give you and Lisa as soon as we get home.”

“Why, thank you, Mom,” Lisa said. “But you really didn’t have to.”

“Oh, yes I did,” Victoria replied, waving her off. “I wouldn’t want to ...”

“Excuse me. Aren’t you Victoria Vargas?” a tall, slender man wearing a dark, military-style uniform asked, abruptly interrupting her.

Victoria immediately stepped back, and a concerned expression flashed across her face.

“Yes I am, officer. ... Why?”

“Ma’am,” the officer began as two other officers walked up from behind. “We’re with the U.S. Customs Department and we’re going to need both you and your daughter to follow us to Captain Richardson’s office.”

“What is this all about?” Gaines asked, displaying an extremely shocked expression. “Have they done anything wrong? They just got here.”

“I know,” the officer replied with a serious intonation. “But they may not be staying long. ... Smuggling undeclared goods is considered a serious crime.”

“Undeclared goods?” Lisa repeated, in disbelief.