

The background of the cover is a photograph of a kayaker in white water rapids. The kayaker is wearing a blue helmet and a dark jacket, and is using a black paddle. The water is turbulent and white with foam. In the upper portion of the image, there is a white circular graphic with a vertical and horizontal line intersecting at the center, resembling a compass or a target. The title 'Dire STRAITS' is overlaid on this graphic.

Dire STRAITS

A Derek Stillwater Novella

MARK TERRY

DIRE STRAITS

A DEREK STILLWATER NOVELLA

Mark Terry

**OROX
Books**

Dire Straits

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“And if we are able thus to attack an inferior force with a superior one, our opponents will be in dire straits.”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The stolen kayak rode hard in the swells. Derek Stillwater slouched in the cockpit, gazing south toward Cuba only a few miles behind him. He was fairly certain he had avoided the Cuban Navy, but he couldn't count on it. There were boat lights out there and he could only hope that a kayak wouldn't show up on their radar before he made it to international waters.

It was almost midnight and dark roiling clouds blotted out the stars. The clouds didn't bode well. A storm was brewing. A big one.

It was approximately one hundred miles of open water, sharks, and bad weather to cross the Florida Straits back to the U.S. Not to mention that the Cuban government would like to catch him, arrest him for espionage, torture him, try him—probably in that order—and have him shot by firing squad, no last requests, no hand-rolled Cohiba cigar.

He dug in his paddle, keeping the dark smudge and dim lights of Havana to his back.

Five Days Earlier

The flight from Toronto, Canada landed at the José Martí International Airport southwest of Havana, clunking down heavily on the runway. In the airport, Derek Stillwater, wearing a summery weight tan suit, presented his passport.

The Cuban inspector studied it. “Señor Peter Hamill.”

Derek nodded.

“The purpose of your trip?”

“Business.”

“Your business?”

“I'm with a biotechnology company located in Toronto, Ontario.”

“Canada.”

“Yes.”

“Where will you be staying?”

“The Riviera Hotel.”

“Length of stay?”

“One week, two if necessary.”

After some suspicious mulling, the inspector stamped his passport and allowed him into the country. It was 1992. The Soviet Union was in financial disarray and their relationship and economic support to Cuba had become tenuous at best. Dr. Derek Stillwater, PhD, fresh out of the U.S. Army after Operation Desert Storm, was attached to the Central Intelligence Agency, an expert on biological and chemical warfare and terrorism.

The U.S. was concerned about Cuba's biotech industry. Derek and other analysts believed Cuba was developing biological weapons. Derek's job was to confirm it.

Outside the airport, Derek stopped to let the tropical breeze kiss his cheeks and ruffle his hair. The air was a little smoggy—there were surprisingly more cars than he had expected, although many of them seemed to be U.S. vintage 1950s and '60s—he saw a 1956 Chevy Bel Air, the only one he could recognize, but there were plenty of others.

A line of taxis waited. He strolled toward a white cab, a Volkswagen. His Spanish was slim and not part of his cover anyway. The cabbie quickly shifted over to English and they negotiated a price for the Riviera Hotel.

The Riviera Hotel was a high-rise in blue and white, vaguely reminiscent of 1950s architecture, what Derek thought might merely be Pre-Revolution Glitz. He checked in at the desk. Just as he was turning over his passport, someone behind him cleared his throat.

“Señor Hamill?”

Derek turned. The speaker was a short Cuban man wearing dark slacks, a white shirt, and what looked like a cashmere sport coat. “Sí? Who are you?”

The man held out his hand. “I am Juan Osorio. I will be your liaison with the Centro de Biotecnología Cuba.” The CBC, the company Derek was to inspect because the CIA believed it was in front for the development of offensive biological weapons. And what were the odds, he thought—was Señor Osorio actually with the CBC or somehow affiliated with the Dirección de Inteligencia, Cuba’s intelligence organization? The safe money bet on Juan Osorio being with the DI.

“Pleased to meet you,” Derek said, shaking his hand.

Sitting in the hotel bar, Derek took a sip of his Tinima Bay beer. Juan Osorio had ordered rum. Osorio was trying to be a friendly Cuban, all Caribbean charm and manners, but Derek thought the man's humor never made it to his eyes and his body language indicated more than a modest portion of unease.

The bar had a very Caribbean feel—padded chairs in orange and blue and peach, tropical plants, granite-topped tables, walls painted with murals of Cubo-African women carrying baskets on their heads in front of the beach.

“So, Señor Osorio,” Derek said. “Thanks for meeting me. I wasn’t aware that anyone from CBC was meeting me here. I have a meeting with Arlo Benita tomorrow morning, but I’m sure you know that.”

“Sí,” Osorio said with a broad smile. “We will send a driver to pick you up and deliver you to the facility. How does nine o’clock sound?”

It sounds, Derek thought, like the DI wanted to keep an eye on him. He decided to test that out. “Thank you for the courtesy,” he said. “But I’m sure I can make my way there on my own. I’ll have the concierge call me a cab.”

“But I insist,” Osorio said. “We take care of our business partners here in Cuba. You are our guest.”

“Well, if you put it that way. Of course. Your English is very good, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Osorio said with a nod. “Do you speak Spanish, Señor?”

“Not really, no.”

Something moved in Osorio’s expression, something rippling beneath the surface. “So you will be needing a translator tomorrow?”

“Perhaps. I was assured that there were several people on the CBC’s executive team that spoke excellent English and there would be no problem.”

“Of course, of course,” Osorio said. “But I believe this can be helped. We will provide a translator.” He pulled a notebook from his pocket and checked something, nodding. “Sí. She will do. Along with your driver, Coro Gomez will assist you with any translations and anything else you might need.”

A minder. “Gracias,” Derek said with a nod. Off to his left he saw the bartender, a tall, slender Cuban woman with dark hair streaked with blond highlights, catch his eye. The Company had indicated there would be a contact at the bar of the hotel who would help him with messaging. He showed no signs he had seen anything.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Señor Hamill?”

No, you’ve done plenty. “No, I think I’m good,” Derek said.

Osorio finished his rum and said, “Shall I accompany you to your room? Do you need anything?”

“I think I’ll finish my beer. And thank you. You’ve been more than generous.”

“I hope you enjoy your stay in Cuba. Will you be dining in the hotel this evening or going out to see the city’s sights? We have many wonderful nightclubs.”

Wouldn’t you like to know? “I haven’t decided yet. I have some business papers to go over, but it would be a shame to come to Cuba and not explore a little bit.”

“Very good. Your ride will be here at 8:30 in the morning. Have a good evening.”

~~Derek watched Osorio disappear. A few minutes later the bartender drifted his way and asked he needed anything. He said he was fine. She left a bill for him to sign and returned to her post at the bar.~~

Sipping the beer, which had a mild fruitiness to it, Derek idly glanced at the bill. He was picking up the tab for Osorio, he saw. In addition, the bartender, whose name was María, had underlined her name with two lines, apparently for emphasis. It was one of a series of codes he had memorized. The code indicated he was to pick up a message at a dead drop after 7:00 that evening in Old Havana.

And so it begins, he thought ...

In his suite on the twelfth floor, Derek first did a sweep for listening devices. Turning on the TV loudspeaker to a Spanish-language soap opera, he started with the telephone. In his suitcase he kept a small utility tool, a Swiss Army Knife with a compass, knife blade, screwdriver, corkscrew and other handy tools on it. First he dismantled the receiver.

Sure enough, there was a small listening device. He left it where it was and put the phone back together. He found three listening devices overall—one in the phone, one in a lamp in the sitting area and one beneath the desk.

He left them all where he had found them. He didn't intend to hold any conversations of any importance in the room. His biggest concern was that the listening devices were a way to keep track of his comings and goings. The second biggest concern was that his cover was already blown and the Cubans knew he was an American in the employ of the CIA. Hopefully the Cubans were just worried about any northerner paying a visit to one of their biotechnology firms and were displaying a fairly typical Communist level of paranoia about it.

It was also possible that there were other devices and pinhole cameras that he hadn't located, so it was best to be innocuous and boring.

Dropping his briefcase hard on the desk, he opened it and pulled out a sheaf of documents related to a possible research and development relationship between the Centro de Biotecnología Cuba and Ontario, Canada-based TLM Biotechnology, Inc. Fidel Castro and Cuba's economy might be a total wreck by many world standards, but the quality of the country's healthcare system, including pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, were some of the most robust in the world. Go figure.

TLM Biotechnology, Inc. was a legitimate biotechnology firm founded and operated by a pair of college friends, one American, one Canadian. They were on very good terms with the Central Intelligence Agency, providing a number of their non-official cover (NOC) agents with background to travel internationally under the guise of various business aspects of the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry. TLM Biotechnology had a very firm footing in Central and South America and parts of Asia, and was working on developing business relationships in the Middle East.

Humming to himself, hoping to annoy anybody listening, Derek spent some time going through the paperwork and making the occasional notes. It was busywork. Primarily he was refreshing his memory with his cover for TLM.

He took a shower, put on slacks and a light sport shirt and prepared for an evening exploring Old Havana and generally acting like a tourist. He also wanted to put real landmarks in his head about his various escape routes, should they become necessary.

Heading for the door, he was brought up short by a knock. Raising an eyebrow, he cautiously opened the door. An attractive young Cuban woman stood in the hallway. She had flowing curly black

hair, a heart-shaped face, and lush red lips. She wore a white blouse and dark short skirt, feet in heels and a leather purse over one shoulder.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello! I am Coro Gomez. I’m your guide and translator. I thought I would come by, introduce myself, and show you around the city.”

Derek blinked, reset his emotional flight plan and smiled. “What a coincidence! I was just going out. Nice to meet you. I’m Peter Hamill.”

The kayak bumped and wallowed. The swells and waves were growing larger, ten and twelve-foot waves that would cause problems in a small boat, let alone a ten-foot-long kayak. Derek struggled to keep the bow of the kayak facing the oncoming seas, squinting as waves splashed over the bow into the open cockpit, soaking him to the skin.

Something bumped the kayak from below. Looking into the darkness, he saw little excruciating fluorescent froth in the dark night.

Scanning the horizon, Derek felt his stomach clench. It was so dark he couldn’t see land. Fumbling in his pocket, he removed his Swiss Army Knife. Built into the handle was a small compass. From another pocket he withdrew a tiny flashlight, which could be a very dangerous thing to turn on with the Cuban Navy possibly on the lookout for him. Nonetheless, he needed to get his bearings.

Briefly turning on the light to check the compass, he saw that he was now facing east. If he kept going east he might hit the Bahamas or the Turks and Caicos Islands. Or he would miss them entirely and find himself in the North Atlantic with the next stop being Africa.

The wind, which was strengthening, seemed to be coming from the east. He hoped it was just a storm. Not a tropical storm or a hurricane. He also hoped it wasn’t bearing down on him.

As it was, if a storm surged out of the east, he might get blown deep into the Gulf of Mexico.

In the precious seconds he had taken to stop paddling and check the compass, the kayak had spun in the waves, turning broadside to the swells. The kayak tilted precariously. Derek gripped the paddles with white knuckles, urgently stroking to bring the kayak around into the wave.

He felt the world tip. He dug in hard. It felt like paddling cement. Then he was over the crest of the wave and crashing down into the trough on the other side. The kayak wallowed as water splashed into the cockpit.

Fishing around behind him, he prayed the owner of the kayak had kept some sort of kayak ski. He had been too busy trying to evade pursuit to worry too much about it. He gripped a piece of nylon and sent up a little prayer to the gods in thanks. Also in the cockpit of the kayak was a metal soup can. He contemplated that a moment, dropped it by his feet and went about squirming into the spray skirt and clamping it down around the cockpit of the kayak.

The kayak bumped again.

Glancing over to his left, he saw a dorsal fin, black upon black, knife through the water just feet away from his boat.

But before he could worry about the shark, another massive wave caught the kayak and sent it spinning.

Coro Gomez took Derek by the hand and headed toward the elevators. He stopped her just long enough to grab his camera off the desk. She was, he thought, way too good to be true. While training at the Farm, the CIA's training school near Williamsburg, Virginia, he had been coached on motives for spying—how to use them to recruit spies and to be wary of them. The acronym they taught was MIC, which stood for Money, Ideology, Compromise, Ego.

Sex as a way of recruitment typically fell in the Compromise bucket, because the recruitee was married or involved, or perhaps a closeted gay. Under certain circumstances, it fell under Ego—flattery and vanity, certainly.

Having sex with Coro Gomez, if the opportunity arose, wouldn't seem to compromise him because he wasn't married or involved with anyone. It was also something he was just plain planning on avoiding, no matter how attractive and sexy she seemed. His job was to get into the CBC, evaluate its manufacturing facilities, and fly home. If possible, he was to steal a sample or take a photograph or otherwise find proof that their vaccine and pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities were being used to develop and manufacture biological weapons. Bedding Coro Gomez wasn't in the plan.

But man, she came on strong.

She strode through the hotel lobby, short skirt flaring around long tanned legs, then out onto the street where a line of cabs waited. She said, "Oh, we have to take a Coco Taxi," and dragged him toward a bright yellow cab that seated two behind the driver in its round yellow open cockpit.

"Why do they call it a Coco Taxi?"

"It's shaped like a coconut, silly! How do you like Havana?"

"Very nice. I haven't seen much of it so far. And this cab doesn't look anything like a coconut. It looks like a big round lemon."

She laughed, girlish, cute, sexy. "Lemons aren't really round, though, and that doesn't sound as good as Coco. I will show you the city. Do you like to dance?"

"Sure. But it's early. Let's see the city a little bit. I like historic architecture."

She laughed at him, amused. "Everything in Havana is historic architecture. You want to go to Old Havana?"

"I do."

"There aren't many clubs there. But we can walk along the Malecón."

"Sounds great." He wanted to see the Plaza de Armas. There was a building there with rows of colonnades. In between several columns were wooden planters filled with flowers. In one of the planters was a small plastic box that would contain a message for him. "But let's hit Old Havana first."

Figuring out how to get her out of sight while he checked the dead-drop would be the trick.

They squeezed into the Coco Taxi, which forced them shoulder-to-shoulder and thigh-to-thigh. She leaned into him and rattled off a stream of incomprehensible Spanish to the driver. Derek had taken an intensive Spanish language course for this mission—his first for the CIA—but he was far from fluent. He caught very little of what she said. And he didn't want her to know he spoke Spanish at all. If they assumed he only spoke English, maybe they would say something useful that he could catch.

In what Derek was starting to realize was a constant and necessary state of paranoia for a ~~undercover CIA agent~~, he wondered if the driver was just a random taxi driver or someone working with the Cuban government. They drove from the hotel to the Malecón, a broad roadway and seawall that stretched along the coast for almost five miles from the mouth of Havana Harbor to Vedado. The car climbed out and Coro told the driver something Derek didn't catch. Derek had his wallet out, but she told him the driver was going to pick them up a mile or two down the esplanade.

Walking alongside her as she pointed out the sights, Derek had to admit that he liked the Malecón, a broad road and walkway. It was a sunny day, evening just coming out, the blue of the ocean dark beneath a denim-colored sky. The water was restless, the occasional high wave splashing over the seawall.

"So you are a scientist?" she asked.

He was gazing at the horizon. Derek loved the water, loved the ocean. He hoped one day to own a boat. He didn't know where that came from. His parents were missionary physicians. Home base was Florida, but he and his brother, David, just now finishing up his medical residency at Johns Hopkins, had grown up all over the world—Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and even in Cuba for six months when he was about ten. If he had to call any of them home, it would have been Sierra Leone, but in many ways he'd never really put down roots.

"Yes," he said. "Although a scientist with a business side. That's why I'm here. To evaluate CBC's facilities and try to outline a possible R&D agreement with my company and the CDC."

They walked, the ocean to their right, Old Havana to their left. They passed people every few feet—lovers out for a stroll, runners exercising, tourists taking in the view. Not as many people as Derek would have expected.

Coro chatted, asking him questions about himself. The CIA had developed a good cover for him, one similar enough to his own that it wasn't hard to stick with it. Peter Hamill had a doctorate in biochemistry; so did Derek, although his was also in microbiology. Hamill had an MBA as well. Derek did not. Derek had been a Special Forces soldier specializing in biological and chemical terrorism and warfare. He had served in active duty during Desert Storm, a frontline cowboy. His partner, a psy-ops guy named Richard Coffee, had died there.

Peter Hamill was single. So was Derek.

Peter Hamill lived in a condo in Toronto with a view of Lake Ontario. His parents were doctors working in the Canadian healthcare system.

Derek lived in an apartment in Virginia that he spent as little time in as he possibly could. His parents were doctors currently living and working in Sri Lanka.

He slowly shifted so he was asking Coro questions, although he had doubts about the truth of her answers. She was twenty-three, unmarried, living with her parents. She worked for a translation and tourism guide firm and was regularly hired by CBC to provide translation services to English, German, and Italian speaking business travelers visiting Cuba.

After walking for about a mile, she pointed to their yellow Coco Taxi. "Are you ready for food?"

"Not yet," he said. "I want to see more of Old Havana."

She gave a very pretty pout. "Old buildings. Don't you want to party?"

"With you? You bet. But first, show me around the city. I'm going to be stuck in a conference room for the rest of the week and I wouldn't be surprised if the meetings lasted into the evenings. So I want to see some of the city now before I get cooped up."

"Oh, okay."

She strode toward the taxi. Derek purposefully got a grip on her elbow and helped her in so far

could get a hand on her purse. Not surprisingly, the purse was unusually heavy.

Exactly as if it contained a small handgun.

She turned to him in surprise as the purse swung away from him. A complex of emotions ran across her face. He held up the camera and snapped a picture. "Hey, sorry, I got tangled up in your purse. Smile!"

Two hours later Derek had not gotten any closer to the site of his dead-drop at La Habana Vieja although Coro had been willing to show him Castillo del Morro and two other castles, half a dozen churches, and the National Capitol. She seemed to be intentionally avoiding Plaza de Armas.

"Now to the night clubs," she said. "I want to dance!"

"One more place. Plaza de Armas."

"That is, how do you say it ... a tourist trap. How about we go to El Floridita. It's on the same street. That was Hemingway's favorite bar. We can have a daiquiri."

He shrugged. "Maybe later. I'm a tourist. Last place. I promise."

Reluctantly she directed the driver to Plaza de Armas. And sure enough, it was crowded with tourists. They wandered the large plaza while Coro talked about the different buildings. Finally Derek pointed for her to stand by a statue of King Fernando VII. He backed up to the planter that would hold his message and held up the camera to take a picture, then shook his head. "Hang on! I've got to change film."

Coro looked disgusted. He wound up the film, popped out the cartridge, then fumbled around in his camera bag for extra film. And intentionally dropped it, so he had to bend over next to the flower box. He slid open the little box inside, withdrew a slip of paper, and stood up.

"Almost got it!" he called out, and loaded the film. Then he slammed off half a dozen shots. Mission accomplished. "Now, how about that daiquiri!"

El Floridita was, without a doubt, a tourist trap. Everyone there seemed to be Canadian, Venezuelan, European or, in a few cases, Russian. Derek caught an attractive woman with reddish hair studying him. He didn't know why, but he got a Russian vibe off her.

He and Coro pushed their way to the bar and, of course, ordered daiquiris. They were large enough, overpriced, and he liked it. The waiters in their white shirts and red aprons were pros. He relaxed a bit. Coro said, "So, what do you think of Havana?"

"Very nice. Like the weather. Much better than Toronto."

"I have never seen snow."

"You're not missing much."

He scanned the bar. He wasn't too wild about their location at the bar, back to the door, so he shifted on his stool so he could better scan the place.

"They say that Hemingway invented the daiquiri," she said. "I don't think so."

He shrugged. "I'm skeptical."

"Do you like Hemingway?"

"Sort of."

She studied him. "What don't you like about him?"

"Machismo for machismo's sake, I guess. It's all about war and hunting and fishing. There's more there, of course, but ..." He shrugged. "I liked 'The Old Man And The Sea.'"

"I like 'For Whom The Bell Tolls.'"

"The war story."

“And a love story.”

“I guess you’re right. Which part did you like best?”

“The love story, of course. The earth moves when they make love.”

He laughed. “Again, Papa Hemingway, excuse my skepticism.” He then excused himself and found the restroom. Taking out the slip of paper, he saw that it had a word—Corona—and a number—12. Both were code. The Corona was a simple code for a location from a list he had memorized. The one referred to the statue to José Martí in front of the Inglaterra Hotel in Central Park. The number 12, was actually a time, but not to be overly obvious, you always added 90 minutes to the time. He was supposed to meet someone at that location at 1:30 in the morning.

He flushed the paper, washed his hands and returned to Coro, who asked him if he wanted to eat there or find someplace else. Knocking off his daiquiri, he said, “Dinner and dancing, señorita!” and grinned.

“Now you’re talking!”

They ate dinner in an outdoor café that overlooked the harbor. For a moment Derek wished he wasn't working. There were far worse ways to spend an evening than with a beautiful woman in Cuba eating good food while a warm breeze kissed your cheeks and ruffled your hair. But he'd been raised by religious folks with a positively Puritan work ethic, although neither parent approved of him in the military. Neither of them knew he had joined the CIA.

It was hard to enjoy vacations when there was work to be done.

From dinner Coro led him to a series of nightclubs where they danced and drank. She encouraged him to drink and he pretended to comply, but most of his drinks were left untouched or unfinished. She was a sexy dancer, a toucher, a seducer. He wasn't oblivious to her charms.

Closing in on midnight, he said, “Sorry to be such a killjoy, but I want to get back to the hotel and get some sleep. I’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

She gave a sexy little pout, then pressed against him, flinging her arms around his neck. “Sound wonderful. Except the sleep part.”

Ah, temptation. He untangled her and led her toward a taxi, not a Coco Taxi this time, but a white Volkswagen. Untangling her wasn't easy. She was about as subtle as a ball-peen hammer to the forehead. To the driver he said, “Take her home, please.”

“I’m going with you.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.” He paid the cab driver and headed down the street, slipping into the next cab to appear before she could get out of the taxi.

He was back in his hotel room within twenty minutes. Studying the room, he nodded. It appeared to have been searched. The papers on the desk seemed to have been moved, his suitcase not in the exactly the same spot. Not a terrible surprise.

Making preparations for a light night mission, Derek put on black jeans and a dark shirt. The Company preached blending in and anonymity, which did not necessarily mean dark clothes at night. However, Derek was also Army Special Forces and he was all too aware that Cuba was enemy territory.

Once he was prepped, he turned the TV on low, hoping to give listeners the notion that he slept with the TV on. Derek made appropriate sounds and motions with the lights off to make it seem as if he had gone to bed, then slipped very carefully out the door.

He took the stairs and on the main floor, avoiding the lobby, he edged out a rear exit. Unlike

the U.S., there was no alarm on the door.

~~Out on the street, he walked until he was several blocks from the hotel before catching a cab. He had the driver drop him off about four blocks from the Inglaterra Hotel.~~

From there he walked, stair-stepping around Old Havana, slipping into the doorways of buildings, stopping at benches, leaning down occasionally to talk to a cab driver before moving on. He did not think he was being followed. Once he was confident of that, he circuitously worked his way back to Central Park and the Inglaterra Hotel. It was easy enough to stay in the shadows of one of the many buildings. It was almost one-thirty.

He became motionless.

It was quiet. The palm trees rustled in the breeze. Horns honked from further away. Occasionally a cab pulled up in front of the hotel and a guest entered the lobby.

He saw nothing.

No one.

1:35 AM.

Nobody had shown up. Perhaps they were waiting for him to make an appearance.

Perhaps his contact couldn't make it.

1:40 AM.

Derek didn't know what happened, but he wasn't going to wait much longer. Then he saw movement. Across the park, he saw a figure walk out of one of the buildings and cross to a car. Juan Osorio.

Osorio talked to someone in the car. Derek saw two figures in the car, a Russian-made Lada, but he couldn't make out any details. Then Osorio did him a favor and put a cigar in his mouth and used a match to light it. The flame of the match cast just a little bit of light on the passenger in the Lada. A woman with long auburn hair.

Derek recognized her. She had been in El Floridita. He might have seen her again in one of the nightclubs, although he hadn't been sure.

Now he was. He didn't know who the woman was—and again, maybe because of the Lada, he got a Russian vibe off her. There were plenty of Russian military and intelligence advisers still in Cuba despite the USSR having fallen apart last December.

And maybe she was Cuban.

It didn't matter. Something had gone seriously wrong with the dead-drop and the meeting here. He was being set up. But why? Did the Cubans know he was with the CIA? Was Derek's support network here compromised?

He melted back into the shadows and headed back to the hotel.

The rain began. Derek, in the kayak, hunched forward. Drops of rain like bullets hammered his head, his shoulders, his back. Reaching under the kayak skirt, he snagged the rusty soup can and held it so it wouldn't would fill with rainwater. The wind howled and waves swept over him, watery fingers trying to snatch the paddle and the can from his hands. He clung to both as if his life depended upon it. Because it did.

He no longer knew which direction he was heading. Hopefully not back to Cuba. Hopefully not too deep into the Gulf of Mexico. The wind had been coming from the east, so he was fairly confident he wasn't heading east.

When the soup can was half full, he drank the contents, grimacing. Rust. Some salt. But hopefully not much salt water. He needed the fresh water.

Tucking the can into a fold of the kayak skirt held in place with his knees, he struggled to keep the wind to his right—his starboard—side. At the very least he would try to keep the bow into the waves and try to keep from rolling.

But battling wind and waves like this in a kayak was a brutal, grueling business. The best he could do was try not to sink or flip.

And it rained ...

After a dubious night's sleep, Derek dressed in a suit, packed his briefcase, had coffee and a roll in the hotel restaurant and waited for Coro and his driver. When Coro arrived, it was very much as if a different person had appeared. She wore flats, dark slacks, a maroon blouse, and a dark jacket. Her curly hair was pulled back in a bushy ponytail, and her makeup was significantly more subdued than it had been the evening before.

"Are you ready?" she said curtly.

"Sí," he said, smiling at her. She didn't return the smile.

"It was not a nice thing you did last night."

"I was tired," he said.

"It was rude."

"I apologize."

She studied him. "Come, let's go. Señor Osorio is waiting for you."

Oh great. Derek followed without comment. And sure enough, waiting at the curb was a black Mercedes—a Cuban driver in dark slacks and white shirt at the wheel, and Señor Juan Osorio sitting in the back. Coro slid into the front passenger seat. Derek, not having any choice, climbed in next to Osorio, who greeted him cheerily enough.

"Did you sleep well, Señor Hamill?"

"Not bad. Yourself?"

"Like a baby."

"You must have a clear conscience."

Osorio seemed puzzled by this. "What does that mean?"

"It's an expression. It means you sleep well because you have nothing to feel guilty about. It's a joke."

Osorio seemed to consider him for a moment. “And yourself, Señor Hamill? Do you have a clear conscience?”

Derek smiled and spread his hands. “I am a businessman.”

Osorio laughed. Coro did not. The driver was listening, but not being involved. They drove through Havana, heading west of the city. The streets were clogged with cars, some new, many old. Derek wondered if the new cars were all rented by tourists and business people from outside Cuba and the U.S.

Soon they approached a complex of buildings, the Centro de Biotecnología Cuba, the CBC. It was sprawling, probably ten buildings made of concrete and glass. Several of the glass buildings appeared to be office buildings, the CBC’s headquarters. The more utilitarian buildings were manufacturing facilities. Derek had studied satellite photographs of the facility and compared them to maps. He and his handlers in Langley had come up with ten different ways for him to get into Building 5. But overall, he was expected to improvise. Get in. Find proof. Get out.

Far easier said than done.

Cuba had an extraordinary biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry. Fidel Castro had strange priorities in many ways, but he had shifted a great deal of Cuba’s economy to biomedical research and development. It was no secret.

The question was, had he shifted some of it to bioweapons?

The entire facility was surrounded by a tall chain-link fence with razor wire curling along the top. Not inviting, but perhaps the only difference between it and pharmaceutical and biotechnology manufacturing facilities around the rest of the world was that their headquarters weren’t situated in a glossy and manicured technology park. It did give the CBC the feel and appearance of an armed camp, though.

At the entrance, the two armed guards at the pillbox checkpoint asked all four of them to step out from the vehicle. One of the guards took Derek inside the trailer next to the pillbox, frisking him efficiently and demanding that he open his briefcase for inspection. Derek was fairly sure that Coro and Osorio were not being given the same treatment.

He returned to the car and the four of them drove to a sprawling green-and-blue glass building surrounded by palm trees and tropical shrubs.

Climbing out, Osorio said, “Welcome to Centro de Biotecnología Cuba, Señor Hamill. Shall we go in? I am afraid that very few of the executives you will meet speak English fluently. Discussion will be in Spanish. Señorita Gomez will translate. Are you ready?”

“Sure,” Derek said with a nod. Into the lion’s den.

Arlo Benita was the CEO of the CBC, but he showed an uneasy deference to Juan Osorio, particularly since Osorio was being presented to Derek as merely an escort. They sat in a large conference room with windows overlooking a courtyard, date palms waving in the breeze. Arlo Benita, Juan Osorio, Coro Gomez to translate, and three other executives from the CBC sat around the conference tables.

Benita was a fat man, probably 350 pounds, a smidge over six-feet tall. His thick graying hair was wet with sweat. Benita was a sweaty guy, his collar wet and wilting, armpit stains on his white shirt. Derek wondered if it was nerves, or if Benita just wasn’t very healthy. The building was air conditioned, but not terribly well.

The company’s Chief Operating Officer, Luis Manuel, was giving a presentation on products the CBC thought might be good for distribution in Canada. Derek had begun the meeting by talking about

TLM Biotechnology and the Canadian company's distribution relationships with various other countries. He topped it off with what TLM, he, and the CIA felt would be a major carrot for CBC—a potential distribution relationship with TLM into the U.S. market, a possible way of working around the U.S.-Cuba trade embargo.

It had definitely gotten their attention. He had been instantly peppered by questions, which Coro had struggled to translate. The CBC management team wanted to know how sure he was of the feasibility of the deal, would the U.S. government prevent it, could he present numbers. He'd been forced to finally raise his hands in protest. "Gentlemen, I assure you that TLM's lawyers have been working on this and it is entirely legal and possible. It's the sort of thing you will have to discuss with them in detail. As you know, although I'm presenting TLM to you, I am largely a technical-business guy, so one of the principle reasons I'm here is to evaluate your technical units to determine if there is a good technical match between our two companies. To that end, as we arranged before, I hope we can spend a significant period of time touring your facilities and meeting your technical personnel."

It was at this gambit that Benita, glancing nervously at Osorio, began to hedge. Coro translated. "I understand, Dr. Hamill, your interest in CBC's manufacturing facilities. You do, of course, understand that many of our technologies are ..." A nervous pause while Benita met Osorio's gaze who spoke up to say, "Proprietary."

"I understand," Derek said. "However, I don't see how we could continue much further without at least showing me some of your facilities and seeing your manufacturing processes. It's why TLM wants this relationship, after all."

"Of course," Osorio interjected. "After lunch I'm sure we can begin a tour. In the meantime, I believe Señor Manuel has a presentation."

Derek leaned forward and spoke directly to Arlo Benita. "I'm sorry. I thought Señor Osorio was my liaison."

Benita twitched. Osorio, his oily voice losing a bit of its smoothness, said, "I'm sorry I didn't make my role clear, Doctor Hamill. I am an advisor to the executives."

"Legal? Technical?"

Osorio smiled. "Legal and governmental."

"But you do appreciate that although I am interested in the business relationship with CBC, I'm here to perform technical due diligence, as well as to set things up for further discussions. Surely, your government would approve of a distribution deal of this potential magnitude with Canada and TLM and other partners worldwide."

"Of course, of course. But Señor Manuel will continue with his presentation."

And so it went. They ate a pleasant lunch where Derek primarily talked baseball, the Toronto Blue Jays, and boats—Benita owned a cabin cruiser he docked at the Marina Hemingway. Finally, Osorio, Coro, and Manuel led him on a tour, starting with the vaccine research laboratories in Building 1. Derek noted the building's security—a barcode reader that read the badge, a uniformed and security guard sitting behind a desk just inside the door. Both surmountable, if it should be necessary.

But he was most interested in a building deeper in the complex. Toward the end of the day, having only seen two buildings—but interviewed dozens of people—he had pointed to a more utilitarian building. Concrete, very few windows, a more complicated entrance that suggested high levels of security. "What's that building?"

Manuel, a short, thin man with receding black hair and thick glasses, a beak of a nose and a carefully groomed and greased mustache he seemed very proud of, hesitated before saying, "A vaccine"

manufacturing facility.”

“I’d like to see it.”

“Perhaps tomorrow,” Osorio said. “I believe it’s time to go.”

Derek shook hands and was escorted out of the complex. Coro was very quiet. Osorio, dropping him off at the hotel, said, “Tomorrow morning, Doctor Hamill. Have a good night.”

Coro looked up, as if remembering that she had a job to do. “Dinner?”

“I’m really tired tonight,” Derek said with a smile. “I think I’ll just have something light here at the hotel, write up a draft of my report, and get some sleep.”

She looked almost relieved. Osorio didn’t look pleased, however. They said their goodbyes and Derek went in, bypassing going up to his room and instead went to the hotel bar, set his briefcase down beside him and ordered a beer. The bartender was a blonde woman in her twenties.

He said, “There was a bartender here yesterday. I think her name was María. When does she come on duty?”

The young woman’s eyes grew round and she glanced nervously around. Shaking her head, she said, “She’s not here anymore.” And then, for the first time since being in Cuba, he saw someone make a gesture he had been warned about—she raised a hand to her chin and pulled the hand down, as if she was stroking a beard. In being briefed for this mission, he had been told that many everywhere in Cuba did not like to mention Fidel Castro’s name aloud, so they used the hand-to-beard gesture to signify his—or the government’s—presence. Usually in a Big Brother Is Watching kind of way.

She gave him his beer and hurried away, as if just asking about María had been in some way contaminating or dangerous.

The kayak slipped and slithered in and around huge waves, Derek struggling to keep the small craft from rolling. He was beyond worrying about the direction, of whether he was being blown into gulf even back to Cuba. This was about survival, a deeply primitive instinct. Beneath all his military training and preparedness crouched the Neanderthal in the storm hoping not to die.

Rain spiked down from the heavens, so thick and hard he could barely see, not that there was much to see. Blackness lit up by the occasional flash of lightning showing a roiling mass of waves.

Derek was not much of a religious man, despite having been raised by missionary physicians. He believed in some sort of God and in some kind of afterlife, but studying disease and being a soldier and being in battle had not convinced him that God was actively involved in the world. A disease like malaria or Yellow fever or African trypanosomiasis was not evil. It just was, and he was not inclined to think that a human-loving God intended for some innocent child to die from Lassa fever or schistosomiasis.

And from what he had seen of war and terrorism, there were plenty of evil people in the world. You could blame their behavior on the devil or on environment, but mostly he thought they made choices and those choices had evil outcomes. If there was a God, he sometimes thought he or she placed humans on the same value level as black-eyed Susans, Labrador retrievers, and cockroaches.

And thinking of what he had seen in Iraq recently, he wasn't so sure God would value human beings higher than cockroaches. Sometimes they were indistinguishable.

So it was with some self-awareness that Derek cast a prayer to the heavens to whoever might be listening to save his ass.

A lightning bolt stabbed across the sky, followed almost immediately by a monstrous roll of thunder. In the brief illumination Derek saw a huge wave, thirty or forty feet tall, looming above him.

He had just a second to try and turn the kayak's bow into the wave.

And the universe exploded in a wet fury around him. The kayak rolled. The paddle was ripped from his fingers.

Derek was torn from the kayak and crushed under a ton of raging water.

Finishing his drink, Derek returned to his room. He had a decision to make. Whether Fidel's people had arrested his hotel contact or not—and it seemed likely—it was now completely clear that his network was blown. The Cubans suspected he was an agent for someone and were delicately trying to prove it—hence last night's surveillance at the dead drop.

The only reason he could come up with for why they hadn't arrested him, thrown him into an underground cell and attached a car battery to his testicles was the possibility that he *wasn't* an agent and he actually could bring an international distribution deal to the CDC. But it meant they were really keeping an eye on him, which made his job that much more difficult.

Changing out of his suit, he sat down at the desk to write up a report. He spent several hours doing that, taking a break to eat a room service meal, then finishing up his report. He imagined that the Cubans would try to get a copy of it, and he hoped it was a very boring read. He also hoped that they did read it and paid any attention to it, they would loosen their grip on him a bit, because one

his points in the report was his concern that the CDC executives weren't being transparent about the technical manufacturing capabilities.

Maybe it would be a goad.

Finally, around eleven o'clock, he turned the TV on and changed into dark clothes. Once again he snuck out of the hotel. Then he began a series of short cab drives around Havana, finally getting dropped off about eight blocks from the ocean northwest of Havana.

He walked toward the beach, keeping to the shadows. Eventually he came across a series of beach houses. Many of them were rental homes, although some were owned by the elites of Cuban business and government.

Derek watched one of the houses for a very long time. It appeared abandoned. That gave him hope that the Agency's backup plans hadn't been blown like his initial network had been.

Moving out of the shadows, he approached the garage of the house and punched in a security code. A green light came on and the garage door rolled open. He slid under and got the garage door back down.

He flicked on a light.

Inside was a motorcycle, a Volkswagen, and several cases of equipment. He took a moment to do a quick search of the house to make sure no one was there. It was empty. Looking out a wall of windows, standing in the dark, he saw that the neighbors probably weren't home either. It was a nice beach, though. White sand. A beach cabana. Propped on the neighbor's dock were two kayaks.

Back in the garage, he opened up the containers. One of them held climbing gear and burglary tools. Another held recon gear—a night vision monocular, infrared camera, a small parabolic microphone, bugs.

A third contained weapons. He selected a Beretta 9mm, slammed in a magazine, and pocketed a spare extra.

Tonight was just recon. He took the night vision gear and the camera, fired up the motorcycle, and headed toward the CBC.

Derek struggled upward, spinning wildly in the crashing waves. His lungs burned, adrenaline coursing through him, burning like acid in his veins. Another wave spun him in circles. Then he was free. He sucked in air just before another wave crashed over him.

He struggled up again and was struck on the shoulder by something. Flailing out, he grabbed it.

It was his paddle. Thank God!

Clinging to it, he stared around in the inky black. Another wave crashed over him. Coughing and sputtering, he struggled to pull out his tiny flashlight. Raising it above his head as best he could, he flashed it around.

Way off in the distance he thought he saw the kayak. Clinging to the paddle, he started to swim in that direction. Derek was a strong swimmer. Only recently discharged from the U.S. Army with the brand new rank of Colonel, he was U.S. Special Forces. He was in peak condition. But swimming in a storm like this wasn't about swimming. It was madness. It was about survival.

There was no straight line.

He caught a wave and surfed atop it, crashing deep, almost losing his grip on the paddle, which made swimming almost impossible.

And then he saw it. The kayak.

For certain. A good fifty feet away.

He thrashed toward it, the strength in his arms seeping away. It seemed the harder he swam the further away it grew.

Derek caught another wave, rose high, then found himself somersaulting through the air, crashing into a trough. He clung to the paddle. It was his lifeline. His only hope.

And the kayak smashed into him. The bow slammed into his head. Pain exploded and he felt his consciousness start to slip away. With strength born of desperation he jammed the paddle into the cockpit and snagged one hand in the carry-rope on the bow.

A wave caught the kayak and sent it spinning again. Pain shuddered through his wrist and shoulder as the kayak hit him again. He gripped the rope with both hands and held on.

Derek parked the motorcycle in the shadows four blocks from CBC and headed toward the compound. It was essentially an industrial area and was primarily empty in the middle of the night. He stayed in the shadows and saw very few vehicles.

Across the street from the CBC facility, he crouched in the dark, settling in to wait. This was something he was very good at. Special Forces soldiers might be action guys, but they knew all about waiting and surveillance. He melted into the shadows and remained motionless. There was no need for night vision goggles—halogen lights created a no-man’s land in and outside the fence line.

At first he saw nothing. Then armed guard walked along the fence with a German shepherd. The guard wore a military uniform, which merely confirmed something that Derek already knew—the CBC had a significant military component. Besides, the military controlled about sixty percent of the Cuban economy. Their tentacles were everywhere.

Twenty minutes later another uniformed guard and dog passed in the other direction.

And five minutes after that a peculiar pickup-like truck painted military green drove by the perimeter road. Derek recognized it as a GAZ-66, a sort of all-purpose military truck manufactured by the Russians.

He didn’t know if that was a coincidence or not.

An hour later he had determined that it wasn’t. There were two separate GAZ-66s that were driving around the perimeter on a semi-regular basis.

Each of the guards did a fairly regular circuit with their dogs, approximately every thirty minutes. He estimated each circuit took fifteen minutes. In between their circuits he didn’t know what they did or where. Maybe they sat in a room and watched TV. Maybe they played cards. Maybe they took naps. Maybe they patrolled individual buildings.

The trucks had two men, a driver and somebody in the passenger seat.

It wasn’t the tightest security in the world, but it presented a problem. There were at least six guards on the perimeter of the compound with two dogs.

By four in the morning he had determined that the guards were consistent in their schedule. He wanted to stick around and see when the shift ended, but the sun would rise soon and he needed to get a few hours sleep before enduring another set of conferences and further facilities tours. Derek had spent part of the time using the night vision goggles and a small but powerful pair of binoculars to study the fence line for motion sensors and alarms.

As far as he could tell it was a just a fence—no motion sensors or alarms. There was a coil of razor wire along the top, more of a threat than a real hindrance.

That didn’t mean the grounds wouldn’t have motion sensors, although the dogs suggested there weren’t any. And he had already determined during his limited tour that the buildings did have alarm systems and closed circuit TV monitors.

This was going to be harder than he’d hoped, but not impossible.

He put away his gear and headed back to his hidden motorcycle. Two blocks away, he dodged into an alleyway as two old men smoking pipes sauntered down the street toward him. They were murmuring to each other in Spanish, two old men on the way to work, perhaps.

They walked past the mouth of the alley without even peering in, the scent of Cuban tobacco

wafting toward where Derek hid. When they were gone, he slipped out, encountering no one else.

~~Firing up the bike, he returned to the safe house, stowed the gear, then snuck out and found a taxi that took him within a few blocks of his hotel. The city was starting to awaken. The sun was rising. It was going to be another beautiful day in the tropics. He used a rear entrance, avoiding people, and took the stairs up to his room on the twelfth floor, sincerely wishing he was on a lower floor.~~

He peered out of the stairwell door into the hallway, saw nothing, and stepped into the hallway. Turning the corner, he came to a halt and quickly backpedaled.

Juan Osorio was standing outside his hotel room door.

Too late. Osorio saw him. The Cuban shouted, "He's at the stairwell!"

Two armed soldiers appeared around the corner, running for Derek. He had about two seconds to make a decision: fake it out, fight it out, or run like hell.

He chose: run like hell.

Spinning on his heel, Derek exploded through the door to the stairwell and raced down the steps two, three and four at a time, using the railing for leverage, praying he didn't twist an ankle or slip and sprawl down a dozen flights of steps.

The soldiers pounded after him, shouting in Spanish. He had approximately a single flight lead.

He skidded around a corner, slammed into the wall, and tumbled a few steps before catching himself and continuing down. He lost half a flight's lead.

As he rounded another corner, one of the soldiers went all super-hero on him, leveraging himself over the rail and dropping ten feet to the steps to land in front of him. The soldier landed badly, quite possibly busting a leg in the process. Derek found himself between two soldiers, both armed with AK47s.

He took a giant step and powered his leg like an NFL kicker right into the soldier's face with a spray of blood and crunch of bone. Leaning down, Derek snagged the soldier's handgun, a Russian-made Makarov.

Spinning, he knocked off a round at the second soldier. The bullet caught the Cuban in the shoulder, spinning him backwards and knocking him off his feet.

Derek took the opportunity to leap down the stairs. Within seconds he exited the hotel. The street was filling with cars. He rushed across the Malecón, waving his hands wildly at a bright yellow Coco Taxi. The driver skidded to a stop, shouting at him in Spanish. The only words Derek recognized were "loco" and "pinga." The driver called him a "crazy dick."

Derek grabbed the man by the collar and tossed him out onto the roadway, jumped behind the wheel and raced off. He didn't go far. He could hear sirens.

He got off the Malecón as soon as he could, blending into heavy traffic, just another bright yellow Coco Taxi among hundreds. He ditched the taxi as soon as he could, sprinting into a crowd of Cubanos heading to work. He walked along with them for a block, then spotted a 1950s Chevy convertible parked by the side of the road.

It was aqua and in mint condition. He jumped behind the wheel, leaned down and peeled back the casing around the steering wheel. In seconds he'd hot-wired the car and was roaring toward the American Embassy Office—the U.S. didn't have a full embassy in Cuba—or the Canadian Embassy on Calle 30 in Miramar. If that didn't work, he could try the Swiss Embassy, or the British Embassy.

He had memorized the Havana map and considered a variety of escape routes in case hell broke loose.

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