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JIM MULLANEY

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The Red Menace #1: Red and Buried

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Bold Venture Press

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The Red Menace #1: Red and Buried

Paperback edition

ISBN: 978-1-936814-43-5

The Red Menace #1: Red and Buried

eBook edition

ASIN: B005NFKVU6

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Moonstone Entertainment, Inc.
582 Torrence Ave.,
Calumet City, IL 60409
www.moonstonebooks.com

The
RED
SEWAGE
#1 RED AND BURIED

by
JAMES MULLANEY



Foreward

I've known Jim Mullaney for centuries now, and over the many years I've shamelessly gotten shamefully rich off his work on books in my *Destroyer* series. And now he's bailing out and going off to write his own books. So what am I going to do?

Arrrrgh ... Well, if he's going to do it anyway — (and he is 'cause he's a heartless thankless mug) — I'm glad he picked the Red Menace to start with because this first episode, *Red and Buried*, is funny, exciting and stylish ... all the things Mullaney's work generally is, and this book should go a long way to helping him build up the kind of far-and-wide audience someone with his talent deserves. Plus, this story of Podge Becket, his partner Dr. Thaddeus Wainwright and an enemy from their past, demented Russian Colonel Ivan Strankov who would destroy all life on earth, is as whip-cracking exciting as it gets.

Good luck, pardner.

Warren Murphy,
two-time Edgar Award winner

PROLOGUE

October 1958

Colonel Ivan Strankov peered suspiciously at the contents of the sealed glass container and frowned.

There were plants in the tank. Or, rather, there appeared to be the dead remnants of what had once been plants. The stems of the dead husks were curled and oozing white pus, the leaves were shriveled and brown.

The adjacent tank on the laboratory table seemed placed there purely for contrast. This second tank was crammed with plants in flourishing bloom; dark and healthy green. Both containers were labeled with Cyrillic letters and carefully numbered with some sort of diabolically convoluted code that even Colonel Strankov, with his cunning mind and top Soviet security clearance, could not crack.

“What is all this?” Strankov demanded.

Dr. Oleg Plassko was fussing around a table in the center of the room and had barely taken notice of Strankov’s presence.

“An experiment, comrade colonel,” Plassko said, a hint of distracted frustration in his voice. “A failure for now, I am afraid. But we persevere. We persevere.”

Plassko was an odd figure. Thick glasses like the bottoms of Coca-Cola bottles were jammed far back on an upturned,

pig-like nose, comically enlarging his already huge, unblinking green eyes and giving the scientist the appearance of a perpetually startled owl. He was barely north of five feet tall but his arms were long and his feet large, as if some malevolent god had pushed down and compressed his torso. Although only fifty-two, Plassko was nearly bald, and the wild fringe of remaining yellow hair brushed the collar of his white coat as he hustled around the lab.

Strankov gave a low growl and returned to his observations.

The colonel did not want to be there, but only those who knew him very well would have detected his annoyance. A grunt, a scowl, a growl. Small tics, barely noticeable. Strankov was used to hiding his displeasure. In the Soviet Union, one did not rise as quickly as had he, and at such a young age, by advertising one's thoughts and emotions. It was not for nothing that Ivan Strankov was a decorated Soviet Army colonel at the age of twenty-six, as well as the youngest recipient of the Order of Lenin and the powerful director of the secret espionage agency known as Motherland.

Where Colonel Ivan Strankov walked, KGB officers fell silent in fear.

There were more glass tanks piled in the corner of the room. These looked as if they had been hastily cleaned and discarded. Strankov wondered if they had contained more plants. He supposed he should read more of what Plassko was up to down here in the Motherland offices at Lubyanka Square. One member of the Politburo was briefly interested in the odd little man's work a few years back and even though that party official had since died Oleg Plassko still had no difficulty finding funding. The unwieldy beast of government could not be stopped once set in motion.

Unlike Plassko, Strankov considered himself a man of

action. He had not much interest in beakers and test tubes and glass tanks filled with rotting, pus-filled plants.

“Very good, very good,” Plassko muttered. An irritating habit; the scientist often repeated his own words.

There were three other scientists in the room. They had helped Plassko clear off a black-topped central table. Everything in the room had been shoved to one side. Plassko took out several jars of dark material from a refrigerator in the corner of the room and set them to one side. He clapped his hands and looked around, biting his lower lip in concentration. “I believe that we are ready. Yes, we are ready, comrade colonel.”

Wordlessly, Strankov marched to the door. He waved one gloved hand into the hallway and a moment later a half-dozen men were hustling into the room.

The first four young soldiers were carting a large wooden box like a funeral bier. The box was six feet long but narrow, and fit easily through the lab’s double doors.

“Very good, very good. Over here,” Plassko said, gesturing toward the table.

“Mind the gas line. Right there, son, by your foot. Fine, fine. Good. Excellent.”

With great reverence the large crate was set on the table in the middle of the room. At a nod from Strankov, the two soldiers who had trailed the others into the room hustled forward and, using crowbars, pried off the lid. The clean silver nails shrieked in pain and once the lid was clear it was leaned against a wall. The soldiers returned and made quick work of the wooden sides. When the box was stripped away, the young soldiers backed away from the object that had been contained within.

The corpse was lighter than the box in which it had been transported.

The body had been preserved for over thirty years. The

eyes were closed in permanent slumber. The thick mustache seemed thin close up and was painted black, as was the hair that rimmed the bald pate. A goatee clung to the chin, which was pressed against the starched white collar and necktie.

“Comrade Vladimir Ilich,” Plassko wheezed reverently.

If it were a church, the men around the room would have blessed themselves.

Lenin’s mouth was stitched tight, as if to stifle more bloody commands which in life had flowed so freely from between the lips of one of history’s great monsters.

Strankov’s spine was nearly always at a perfect rigid right angle from the floor. The colonel spent his life at attention. Even as he bent to look at the desiccated corpse, the creases in his Red Army uniform remained perfectly rigid lines.

“What is wrong with his skin?” Strankov asked.

Lenin’s pale skin was like wax that had dried in the desert sun. It seemed to pucker in places, pulling up from the bone. The dry flesh all around cheeks and broad forehead was crisscrossed with a fine lattice of cracks. Some of those cracks, especially over cheekbones and at the bridge of the nose, had widened into fissures.

“Our great friend and comrade has been dead for thirty-four years, Comrade Strankov,” Plassko replied, hustling over to grab one of the glass jars from the counter. “That would take a toll on even the best of us. Even Comrade Vladimir Ilich.”

Plassko unscrewed the lid on the jar. If he noticed the stench that immediately flooded the lab, the scientist did not react to it. Three of the soldiers who had been so fascinated by the body of the original Soviet leader retreated to a safe distance.

“Worse than women,” Strankov grunted at the trio. “Get out, ladies.” The three shamed men did as they were commanded, leaving the other three young soldiers in the room as they shut

the double doors behind them.

The other scientists knew what was coming and had braced themselves for the odor, yet one had to excuse himself, then the others until only Strankov, Plassko, and the trio of stronger-stomached soldiers remained.

Plassko remained oblivious to the odor. He stuck his hand in the jar and brought out a mittful of foul-smelling brown paste which he smeared on Lenin's bald head.

"Fool," Strankov hissed. "You should have tested it first on a leg or arm. This is not only your life you...are...dealing..."

But even as he spoke, his words slowed to a shocked whisper before finally dying in his throat.

As Strankov watched in awed silence, Lenin seemed to come back to life.

The gaps in the skin on the Soviet leader's scalp slowly sealed back into smooth flesh. The brown goo gleamed as it was absorbed before completely vanishing. The raised areas in the skin became flat once more and the single patch of forehead on which Plassko had smeared the strange substance quickly took on the healthy pink tone of living flesh. One of the three young soldiers gasped.

"Remarkable, is it not?" Plassko said. He tipped his head, clearly pleased with the result. "I discovered this on an expedition to Peru. Jungle natives use it to preserve their elders. I saw bodies hundreds of years old that looked freshly dead. Amazing." He dabbed some of the brown gunk to Lenin's cheek and the dead flesh soaked it up greedily, turning pink beneath the scientist's smearing fingers. "Of course, the decadent American cosmetics companies would give their eye teeth for its secret if they saw it in use, but that is not how it works, you see. Does nothing to living tissue. Only restores necrotic flesh. Mortuaries. The dead. Only use for this."

He had finished touching up most of Lenin's face. The

scalp beneath the hair would be trickier as would be the wrinkled neck. As for the rest of the treatment, they would have to strip the body, careful not to damage it in the process. But for the moment, the face of the late Soviet dictator was the evil mask he had worn in life.

The three remaining soldiers had crept forward in wonder, peering over Colonel Strankov's shoulders. Plassko smiled at his handiwork and sighed contentedly. He glanced at his Russian Army audience. To Strankov he said, "Go on. Feel."

Strankov was irritated that the scientist had read his expression so easily, especially in front of three subordinates. Still, curiosity got the better of him and he reached out and touched the tips of his fingers to Lenin's brow. He was surprised that the skin was cold. It looked so lifelike, yet there was not the warmth or softness of living tissue. The dead skin was hard to the touch. When he removed his hand, there were not the usual white imprints left from retreating fingers.

For a moment, the icy façade of the feared Colonel Ivan Strankov fell once more and he allowed a look of surprise to cross his face. "It feels like plastic."

"Yes, yes. True, true," Plassko said. "It does not revive the flesh, lamentably. It merely restores the *appearance* of living flesh. What a world this would be if we could actually return Comrade Vladimir Ilich to the living, eh?"

It was meant as a rhetorical question, so all were startled when a voice behind Strankov replied, "Well, I imagine he'd pick up right where he left off. You know, murder, savagery, filling the Kremlin swimming pool with blood and entrails. The usual commie summer vacation highlight reel."

The words were spoken in English. An American accent. And the voice. Strankov knew that voice. Unbridled rage instantly stampeded across his face as the colonel wheeled around.

A close-up flash of red; blinding. Strankov should have anticipated it. But here in Moscow, in a basement laboratory in one of the Soviet Union's most guarded buildings, the false illusion of safety had made him reckless.

The soldiers around him were startled as well, stepping back from the figure in red. One grabbed for his sidearm and another followed suit. Strankov opened his mouth to shout to the men waiting just outside the door in the corridor.

"Gua—"

The mass of shapeless red took the form of a man in a cloak, and from the rustling fabric shot a single hand, fingers extended. The sharp blow struck Strankov hard below the Adam's apple and the colonel fell back gasping against the table, grasping at his throat. His heel snagged the table's fat base and he tumbled hard on his backside to the concrete floor. On the table, the corpse of Lenin shuddered.

Strankov grabbed for his sidearm. At least he thought he did. He was certain his arm had moved — with all his will he had commanded his right hand to grab his gun — yet, like the phantom pain felt by an amputee, the movement was illusory. The gun remained buttoned tight in its holster and both of his hands remained locked around his own throat.

And he knew in that moment that there was a light scratch somewhere on his neck where the figure across the room had brushed a single finger of one red gauntlet.

It was a paralytic. Mild. Strankov had been dosed with it on two past occasions and both times he had shaken off the effects in about two hours. However, those other two times he had been abroad, once in New York and the other in London. Neither time had Strankov mentioned the paralyzing agent in his reports. What good would it do other than to damage Strankov's reputation in the eyes of his superiors? But here was his domain, which he was supposed to keep secure at all times. Here there

were witnesses. Here in Moscow Strankov knew he would not be able to use clever spin and blatant omissions to weasel his way out of terrible repercussions. This would be his doom.

Across the room, the figure in red was now a figure in black. Strankov knew it was only a trick of light. Up close, the cloak and mask were brilliant red, but at a distance of only a few feet the red faded to a deep midnight black. At night, the black material offered perfect concealment and made the man virtually undetectable.

Ultimately the cape and mask were irrelevant. A useful parlor trick to be sure, but the danger was not the cloak he wore but the man himself: The Red Menace.

Strankov knew that his men didn't have a chance. Paralyzed on the floor, the colonel could only watch helplessly as the drama played out before him.

His three men danced around the figure in black.

One soldier aimed a gun. The Red Menace snatched the soldier's wrist and yanked the Russian towards him. The soldier lurched, the gun discharged and the bullet sank into the chest of the second Red Army man.

Screaming in fear at the discharging weapon, Dr. Plassko dived for safety beneath a coat rack next to the remains of Lenin's packing crate.

A split-second after the gun fired, the Red Menace plucked it from the startled soldier's hand and with a smooth, vicious sideways motion brought the gun butt down on the temple of the third soldier. The soldier had not time to remove his own gun from his holster. The blow struck hard and the unconscious man fell nearly in unison with the dying man with the sucking chest wound.

It was over in seconds. The first soldier stood alone in the midst of his fallen comrades, a thunderstruck look on a face that had yet to shed the baby fat of his recent childhood. And then

the Red Menace was standing before him.

“Say goodnight, Gracie.”

Strankov did not see the blow that sent the final man into oblivion. There was a sudden horrid crack of bone and the soldier was falling.

When the Red Menace swept past the coat rack, from somewhere beneath came a gasp of fear from Dr. Plassko. Hidden hands reached out and Plassko grasped desperately at his own ankles, drawing his cheap shoes deeper beneath the pile of hanging greatcoats.

“What’s up, doc?” the Red Menace said, stomping his foot as he passed Plassko.

The coat rack squealed a tiny little squeal of fresh fear.

Shouts from the hallway. A surge of stampeding boots.

The black cape and mask turned red once more, that old trick of distorting light that Strankov knew only too well, and the Red Menace was looming over the Russian colonel. Then he was squatting; then nose to nose with the Russian.

The American wore the same infuriating, idiot smile on his face as always, and Strankov forced all his will into his fingers. If only he could reach his gun he would have blasted the smug smile off the American’s face. But though his molars squeaked and beads of sweat broke out across his forehead, his arms remained stuck fast, grasping tightly at his own injured throat.

“I guess you just don’t want it bad enough,” the Menace said, and the infuriating smile threatened to stretch from ear to ear.

A feral sound rose from Strankov’s constricted throat. When he spoke, he could only manage a hoarse whisper. “If you are going to kill me, do it. I do not fear to die.”

“Well, Sunshine, ain’t that just a stroke of luck on an otherwise gloomy day, because I do not fear to kill you,” the Menace said. “Unfortunately, I’ll have to take a rain check. This

trip's just to let your Politburo puppet masters know that I can reach anyone anywhere, even the director of Motherland. On a personal side note, I'm keeping fingers crossed that I'm ruining your career in the bargain, but you can leave that out of your official report. That's just between us old friends, Strankov."

Pounding at the heavy door. There was a chair propped up against the doorknob. How the American had managed to place it there in silence directly under Strankov's own nose, the colonel had no idea. The shouting on the other side of the door increased. There were many more there than just the three soldiers Strankov had banished from the laboratory. The pounding grew more focused. The walls shook and clouds of dust rose from the rattling frame.

The Red Menace stood. "This has been fun, but I think that's my cue."

"You might escape today, you may ruin me, but it does not matter. You will ultimately fail," Strankov rasped. "You cannot stop march of progress."

"Don't want to. Progress is going along just fine on the fun side of the Iron Curtain. I just want to stop you reds from undermining it." His voice steeled. "You were in Washington again last month, Strankov. I don't want you or any other Motherland goons anywhere near the U.S. again. This is your last warning. It gets bloody after this."

Vicious hammering at the door. The wood frame creaked and the chair legs slowly squeaked across the floor, a quarter inch, then an inch. The door opened a crack and the muffled Russian voices grew loud.

"Comrade colonel!" someone unseen shouted. The chair skipped a few more inches.

The Red Menace winked at Strankov. "See you in the funny papers, comrade cabbagehead." And he was across the room, red costume turning black as he ran.

A small desk was piled high with Plassko's paperwork. The Menace tipped the desk and the mountain of papers cascaded in an avalanche to the floor; documents dumped crazily from fat folders and pencils scattered and rolled in every direction. Beakers from a jostled nearby table wobbled then fell, shattering on the concrete.

A rifle barrel appeared through the crack in the door. It fired blindly, narrowly missing Strankov's head. Pulped wood exploded from the wall an inch away from the Soviet colonel's right ear. "Stop shooting, you fools," the colonel tried to shout, but the paralytic kept his voice a whisper. Another blind shot from a trigger-happy soldier, this one two feet above Strankov's head. Shards of wood fell in the colonel's hair.

The Red Menace swept to the center of the laboratory and lifted the small desk lightly in the air, swinging it high—

Strankov's eyes grew wide. "No," he wheezed.

—and brought the full force of the desk down on top of Nikolai Lenin's rejuvenated face.

The dead dictator's head collapsed with a hollow crunch. A cloud of dust shot out in every direction as if from a stomped-on clod of dry earth. With a bound, the figure in black was up on the lab table, black boots dancing on the bottom of the overturned desk. A hard twist of his heels and the sandwiched head of Lenin made a satisfying crunch.

Across the room, the chair at last wobbled, skidded and fell, sliding across the cement. The door sprang open and two armed soldiers stumbled into the room.

The Red Menace was ready. When the chair fell, his hand was already raised, the fat barrel of an odd-shaped gun pointed across the room. A soft pop and a small object zipped across the room.

The tiny bomb struck the floor before the soldiers and the ensuing explosion launched them back into the hallway like

scarecrows. Choking smoke flooded the area around the door and spilled into the hall.

With a nimble leap, the Red Menace was up in the rafters. He swung across the high ceiling from beam to beam and slipped like a wraith through the open transom to the adjoining room just as the entire Red Army piled into the Plassko's lab.

There was much shouting. Men choked on the smoke as they stomped into the room, weapons at the ready. Soldiers rushed to Strankov's side.

"Put a bullet in his brain!" the colonel commanded. The men glanced at one another, unsure why the head of Motherland appeared to be strangling himself. "There!" Strankov growled. He motioned with his eyes to the adjacent laboratory's locked door. A few bullets around the lock and the men kicked the door open and raced into the next room. More gunshots and another broken door into a dusty, seldom-used corridor. Strankov heard their shouts fade and knew that they had gone up the hall, knew that the Red Menace had escaped, knew that his career was at an end.

At the start of the crisis, someone had roused a general from an office upstairs. The old man with the great, bushy mustache swept into the center of the maelstrom.

The general regarded Strankov with contempt as he soaked in the chaos with ancient, watery eyes. Bullet holes in the wall, the lab in shambles, Dr. Plassko being hauled, shaken and pale, from his ignominious hiding place, and the young wunderkind Colonel Ivan Strankov seated on his backside on the floor, refusing to stand for a superior officer. Soldiers pulled Strankov's hands from around the colonel's own throat.

"What is all this, Strankov?" the general demanded. "Get up, man."

"I believe, comrade general, the colonel has been paralyzed," one of the squatting Red Army soldiers offered.

“Ah, yes, yes! I have something for this!” Oleg Plassko announced.

The little scientist flounced to a row of cupboards behind the tank of rotted plants and pulled down a leather valise. He fumbled with the snaps and began pawing through tiny vials, some of which contained leaf samples, others different colored liquids. When he found the vial he was after, he drew some yellow liquid into a syringe and brought the needle to Strankov’s forearm. The colonel’s racing heart delivered the substance with a single beat and he began to feel a rejuvenating tingle in his fingertips.

And the last words of Colonel Ivan Strankov before he was hauled to his feet, before he was dragged off to a panel of superiors, before the public condemnation that would land him for years in an icy gulag, were a loud proclamation.

“I will kill him!”

CHAPTER 1

July 1972

The cliff was a hundred twenty-eight foot drop to jagged basalt rock and froth-churned ocean. A flock of gulls, mere white specks in the vast blue Caribbean sky, swooped and rose and swooped again on violently erratic pockets of salty air. Sharks had been spotted a mile offshore two days before. A fisherman had caught one in his net and nearly capsized his small boat before he could cut it loose. Jeb Wilson hoped that when they threw him off the cliff, the powerful Atlantic wind that kept the gulls aloft would be strong enough to fling him back against the rocks. He wanted to be dead before he hit the water. Jeb couldn't bear the thought of being a living feast for hungry sharks.

"Do you pray to God, gringo? Because now would be a good time to ask for wings," said the Cuban captain with the thin mustache and the aviator sunglasses. In Spanish, Captain Esteban Suarez repeated his joke to the men who held Jeb's arms, and the soldiers dutifully laughed.

"You're making a mistake," Wilson said. His face was bruised and swollen. It was difficult to form words with his split and bleeding lips. "I'm not who you think I am. I'm just a naval salvage hobbieist. I'm Canadian. From Winnipeg. I've only been to the States two times in my whole life."

“So you have said many times,” Captain Suarez said.

“Me?” The Cuban shrugged. “I do not care one way or the other. I just like to throw people off of cliffs.” He smiled, and the large silver filling in his front tooth glinted in the sunlight. “And it seems you have forgotten your confession already. What a shame. Betrayal of one’s country should matter more to men like us, eh?”

“Betrayal?” Wilson said. “I don’t know what...”

Memories swirled through his addled brain like the leaves of wind-whipped palms in the little grove where Suarez had stopped his jeep.

It was difficult to remember what he’d said during the hours of torture. There was the basement cell with the moldy walls and the rusty bars. One chair, crude leather straps for wrists and ankles. And Captain Suarez. The silver tooth glinting in the harsh hundred watt bulb that hung down from the middle of the ceiling. The electric shocks, the broken fingers and toes, the torn-out fingernails.

And a perfect white carnation.

Carnation?

And then Wilson remembered. It was only yesterday. Or was it a week ago? Jeb Wilson’s memory could not seem to sort time properly any longer. But he remembered the carnation and the impeccably tailored blue suit. He remembered the starched white shirt, open at the collar, and the sunburned face above it. And he remembered the voice of Nigel Sinclair, a friend from the old days.

“I can’t tell you what it is, Jeb,” Sinclair said. “I only know that they almost shot us down when my pilot accidentally strayed near the area. Bananas. That’s what I’m here for in my dotage, can you believe it? Retired from a life in the service, survive all manner of beastly...well, *you* know, Jeb...and I nearly get shot down over bananas.”

They were in a little hidden café in downtown Havana.

Although it was quiet down the side alley with its cobbled road lined with Spanish colonial buildings, Jeb could still glimpse the main drag where vintage 1950s Chryslers, Plymouths and Buicks prowled along as if the entire decade of the 1960s had been nothing more than a dream. A sleek powder blue Studebaker that looked as if it had just rolled off the assembly line roared by, flashing past a bright yellow taxi.

Sinclair took a pull on his rum and fanned his sweating face with a tattered menu.

“Lucky to be alive, that’s it. Only due to the fact that my pilot was quicker on the radio than those MiGs were with their rockets. Ghastly creatures, these Cubans. But what am I supposed to do? I won’t stare at the walls and wait for death or Her Majesty’s next government check, whichever comes first. I won’t do it, Jeb. Even if I have to accept the indignity of becoming a fruit peddler in my old age. Men like us do not take retirement well. Well, of course, I don’t have to tell *you* that.”

Jeb was only fifty-one yet he was self-aware enough that he did not take Sinclair’s observation as an insult. Jeb Wilson knew he looked old. He was reminded of that fact every time he looked in a mirror.

It was not so long ago that he had been in solid shape. One had to be when the stakes were so high. But after his field days ended, muscle had slowly turned to fat until Jeb scarcely recognized the wreck he had become. His arms were weak, his stomach flabby and he had recently noticed that his double chin was spawning a third. Not that Jeb was obese. He got a little winded climbing stairs, yes, but he could still see the tips of his shoes, which was more than a lot of his contemporaries could boast. He had simply grown old before his time and once the deterioration had started it became difficult to stop until all vestiges of youth were gone and he now no longer cared.

“What do you want me to do with this, Nigel?” Jeb asked, shaking his head wearily. He had ordered a beer but had not

touched it. He tapped his finger on the table next to the glass and watched the foam bounce up and roll away from the center.

“Your backyard, not mine, Jeb,” Sinclair said. “You can do nothing, if that’s what you choose. But so you know, I already communicated all this to our man at the embassy. Insufferable little prig. Can’t stand Eton boys. He got the word back to sit tight. London’s burying it. Not worth investigating the ravings of a long-retired cold warrior like me. How many similar reports do they get every week from old soldiers all over the world? I’m sure they think I’ve gone potty from the heat or the boredom.”

“I don’t know, Nigel.” Jeb sighed and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. They came back dappled with sweat and he wiped his hand on his knee. “There’s no record of any base out there. What exactly do you think the reds are protecting?”

“Can’t say for sure, but there is definitely something there. The jungle is thick. Perfect for concealment. But I know there was at least one large building. I saw it from the side. Wouldn’t have seen it if we were directly above. Camouflage netting obscured it. Your spy planes would miss it, no doubt about that. After the MiGs broke off and we were allowed to turn back for Havana, I spotted Russian troops through a break in the trees. Aiming at us, the bastards. They quit as we turned and I lost them in the jungle. They couldn’t have mobilized that fast, they must have already been out there patrolling. Something is going on out there, Jeb. I’m not so decrepit that I’ve lost all my instincts for the game, no matter what Box 850 thinks. I thought America should know, and now it does through you and I am washing my hands of this whole messy business and going back to my blasted bananas.”

Sinclair polished off his rum, stood, fussed a moment at his white carnation, and offered his hand. Unlike Jeb’s sweating palms, Nigel Sinclair’s hand was dry and cool.

“Good luck, old sport. Be safe.”

Sinclair left the café and headed down the alley. A moment

later he had blended with foot traffic and disappeared around the corner.

Jeb sat alone at the table for another ten minutes before he finally got up and left.

For the next two hours he walked Havana's streets as he tried to figure out what to do with Sinclair's information.

Jeb was still an agent of the United States government, and was sworn to do all in his power to preserve the nation he loved. Although, granted, his was not exactly the most glamorous agency. No one wrote sexy spy novels about MIC, one of the worst kept secrets and most underfunded agencies in the spy game. Mention MIC at a D.C. cocktail party and the response was either jeers or surprise that the agency still existed.

MIC stood for Manpower and Intelligence Coordination. The agency had been set up in early 1950 in response to the first successful Russian nuclear test, First Lightning, in August of 1949. MIC was to be a cop directing traffic, facilitating the smooth flow of information as well as coordinating cooperation when necessary between the various domestic and international American espionage and police agencies. CIA, FBI, Army Intelligence and a dozen other agencies would supply the raw data and the boots on the ground and it was MIC's job to sift through that data. It worked well for the first decade or so. But over the tumultuous previous decade came a bureaucratic shift. America's other intelligence agencies seemed slowly to come to the conclusion that the greatest threat came not from America's enemies but from bean counters, budget cutters and rival agencies. Invisible walls were constructed around the bureaus which MIC theoretically supervised; their staffs became misers hoarding gold.

Nothing ever went away in government, and even as its own budget was slashed and its agents were sent out to pasture, MIC limped on into the 1970s. There were not many MIC operatives left in the field these days and most, like Jeb Wilson,

were holdovers from the old days.

Jeb came to Cuba through Canada for several weeks every few months, ostensibly as the owner of a small salvage business. He had made an arrangement with the Cuban government that allowed him to not only cover the costs of his various expeditions, but to turn a slight profit. In exchange, Jeb turned over a few salvaged baubles to the Cubans and greased the palms of a few Cuban officials. In the past six months his Cuban crew had found a pair of two hundred year old wrecks off the coast of the island nation while Jeb supervised the action from a safe distance. Mostly from his favorite hotel bar. Technically he was in Cuba on assignment, but he hardly ever heard from headquarters these days. His MIC job was to keep his eyes and ears open and report back to Washington anything that might pose a threat to the nation.

It was a cozy arrangement, and most days Jeb forgot that he was technically a spy. Now Nigel Sinclair had dumped this thing in his lap and just like that he was out of the salvage business and back in the game.

Jeb's wandering was not as aimless as it seemed. He eventually found himself near a dead end street a half-mile from Havana Harbor. The very top of the lighthouse at Morro Castle peeked over the rooftops. Five old houses, their exteriors all well maintained, sat practically out on the street, two on either side, one facing out from the dead end.

Since his meeting with Sinclair, Jeb had made certain he wasn't being followed. Once he had caught the eye of a curious constable, but Jeb had bought some fish at an open air market and a doll from a sidewalk vendor and the officer had lost interest. When the cop wandered off, Jeb gave the fish to a beggar and the doll to a child. He checked for tails again before turning up the dead end.

The house at the end of the street, like the rest, had no front yard to speak of. Just some tropical greenery, a few colorful

flowers and a low wrought iron fence. Jeb puffed as he climbed the three red-painted steps and knocked on the dark green door.

The man who answered was the same age as Jeb but in far better shape. Still, his hair was prematurely white, a stark contrast to his dark skin.

When he saw who was on his doorstep, the man did not smile or speak. He looked up and down his street and, seeing no one, grabbed Jeb's arm and dragged him inside, quickly shutting the door behind his guest.

The foyer was hot. The home was clean but the white paint was peeling. Jeb heard a radio playing Spanish music deep in the house.

"What are you doing here?" the Cuban demanded, his flawless English clipped.

"I need your help, Juan Carlos. Nothing big, I hope."

"Do you have any idea—" Juan Carlos stopped, gathering his thoughts. "I have not seen any of you people in ten years. Ten years. Now you come knocking on my door? No. You have to leave here. Now." He pushed Jeb towards the door.

"You owe me, Juan Carlos. You owe MIC."

"Do not say that name here," Juan Carlos snapped.

Jeb took a deep breath. "Okay, you owe the Red Menace. You do remember him, right?"

It was playing dirty pool, Jeb knew, but it had the desired effect. Juan Carlos's eyes grew wide. "Is he here?"

"Not yet. We have to do some reconnaissance first."

The deception made Jeb feel dirty. Poor Juan Carlos had been out of the loop since Batista's fall. He could not know that the Red Menace hadn't been seen since 1960. Twelve long years. Yet not so long that the name did not inspire fierce loyalty from those who had known him. Within the hour, Jeb was stowed away in the trunk of an old 1950 Chevy Bel Air that belonged to Juan Carlos Pena's elderly uncle.

Jeb could hardly breathe as he bounced around his small

prison. When the car finally stopped and Juan Carlos lifted the trunk, Jeb gulped at the humid jungle air.

The car was hidden deep off the side of an abandoned footpath. Juan Carlos held a machete in one hand and he hauled Jeb out of the trunk with the other. Jeb's shirt was sopped with sweat and he felt a chill where the fabric was pasted to his lower back.

Juan Carlos closed the trunk with a careful click, held one finger to his lips and immediately began hacking his way through the overgrowth.

Jeb was grateful for the full moon or he would not have been able to see a thing. Moonlight glinted off the machete as Juan Carlos brought the sharp blade down on vine and frond. Very nearby, the soft footfalls of some unseen jungle animal stopped dead and then raced off through the thick brush.

Juan Carlos Pena's reputation as an anti-Castro jungle guide had not tarnished with age. The old animal paths were still there and, despite the deep shadows cast by the jungle canopy, the Cuban's feet instinctively located them. The two men followed the trails past waterfalls and up hills. Juan Carlos used the machete sparingly for fear the sound would draw attention. After two hours of trekking through the tropical forest, Jeb began to wonder if there was anyone out here whose attention they could attract.

"There's nothing here," Jeb said.

The machete flashed. For an instant Jeb thought that Juan Carlos had betrayed him. He expected to feel the blade strike the side of his head. Instead, a damp hand clamped firmly over his mouth and Juan Carlos dragged Jeb into some underbrush. He stuffed the machete near their feet and swept the rotting jungle floor over the metal.

Moments later, a foot patrol tromped past.

There were ten of them. Mostly Cubans, with a pair of Russians mixed in. One Russian was older, the other very

young. A Soviet advisor and his aide.

The group failed to spot Jeb and his guide. Once they were gone, Juan Carlos grabbed up his machete and the two men hustled after the group.

There were paths made by men now, and so the going became considerably easier. However, a clear path meant much human activity and Jeb knew that it would not be very long before another patrol swept through the area. But what exactly were they guarding?

Jeb and Juan Carlos lagged behind the patrol until the footsteps faded in the distance. Jeb had been puffing as if in the early stages of heart failure for the entire trip up from the hidden Chevy, but with the appearance of the patrol his old instincts had kicked in. His heart quickened, his breathing came under control. Even his own footfalls sounded quieter to his ears as they made their way up the perilous mountain path.

The first scent of salt air was tickling his nostrils and Jeb knew they must have rounded out to somewhere near the ocean when they finally found the spot about which Nigel Sinclair had spoken.

There were some lights on high poles, but black tarpaulins were spread out above them so that the light cast down was hidden from above. Camouflage netting was everywhere. Crude thatch made of palm leaves and light branches covered buildings and were strategically scattered over camo nets. And crawling like uniformed ants throughout the complex were dozens of Russian and Cuban soldiers.

With a nod and a dark expression, Juan Carlos melted back into the shadows. His guide had gotten Jeb to his destination and would go no further. The Cuban would hide here and await the American MIC agent's return. *If* he returned.

Jeb spent the next hour reconnoitering the complex as best he could. He was limited by geography and age, and guessed he'd only gotten a sixth of the periphery mapped out. He had

brought a camera with a good telephoto lens and spent much of his time snapping picture after picture. A major road to the south led down a mountain near the sea, but a cliff face on one side and jungle on the other obscured it from aircraft.

Around a central courtyard were barracks and a tin hanger, a few small buildings for medics and officers and something that looked like a bunker. This was the center of the hornet's nest. Men came out of buildings, saluted superiors, and ducked inside other buildings. Foot patrols returned while others marched off into the jungle. Beyond this section of the base, Jeb could see more lights and more activity. There was something else going on in the jungle, but to get there he would have to cross too close to the central hub and there was no way he could do so without being spotted.

It would be dawn soon. Jeb was about to start picking his careful way back to Juan Carlos's hiding place when he spotted two figures exiting one of the smaller buildings. Jeb had seen a man in a white coat enter the structure earlier and had guessed that it housed medical facilities. He directed his lens at the two men.

When he peered through the camera and got a clear, close-up image of the men, Jeb felt his heart clench.

A ghost. Impossible. Not here. It could not be. Jeb blinked, hoping that his eyes were playing tricks. When the image did not change, Jeb allowed a tiny slip of air to pass between his lips.

"Holy smoke," he hissed.

That he had first thought he was seeing a specter was understandable. Colonel Ivan Strankov appeared cadaverous. The Russian could not weigh much more than a hundred pounds. When he spoke, he bared his teeth like a snarling dog. Even his skin looked the wrong color. Jeb wanted to blame it on the weird base lighting, but the skin tone of the fat, pale little man with the thick glasses, bald head and yellow fringe of hair to whom Strankov spoke appeared normal in the light.

Jeb took two dozen pictures of Strankov. Strankov standing in front of the medical buildings, Strankov motioning toward the distant jungle and the unseen section of the hidden base, Strankov walking slowly but steadily, as if a breeze might blow him down, inside the low concrete bunker. The door shut behind the Russian colonel.

Jeb was still trying to wrap his brain around the enormity of this discovery as he made his way back through the jungle to Juan Carlos. The first gray streaks of dawn were lightening the sky when his guide appeared from the thicket. The two men made their way back down the hill, avoiding three foot patrols on their way to the hidden Bel Air.

Jeb did not even notice the bumpy ride back to Havana. In the dark, fiercely humid trunk he thought only of Strankov.

The Russian was dead, or as good as. According to smuggled reports out of Moscow, it had taken the Soviets nearly a year to find a look-alike to generously, if involuntarily, donate his head to replace the flattened mess the Red Menace had made of Lenin's. The Russkies surely would have used that of Ivan Strankov himself if the bone structure hadn't been so wrong. The last Jeb heard, Strankov was locked away in a gulag for life. Yet here was the leader of Motherland, fourteen years after his disgrace and imprisonment, back in uniform and on the wrong side of the Atlantic.

MIC in Washington would need to know.

The sun was hot by the time they reached the capital. Juan Carlos popped the trunk behind an auto body shop, warning Jeb as he climbed back behind the wheel of his uncle's car, "Never contact me again."

Jeb wasn't even listening. As the Bel Air roared off down the road, Jeb hustled in the opposite direction.

In a tiny cottage near the shore he found a friend from the old days. The old man promised to smuggle the undeveloped film to the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

The next two days were sheer agony as Jeb could only sit in his hotel room and wait for a reply. It came after midnight on the third day, delivered by a kid of about twelve whom Jeb had never seen before.

“Interesting pictures of old friend, but vacation photos lack detail. Next time, highlight background landscape.”

Jeb shook his head, shocked. “The bastards can’t be serious.”

MIC had recognized Strankov, but they wanted pictures of the one area of the Russian base Jeb had been unable to reach.

For a few minutes he considered ignoring the order. At his age and in his shape it was suicide to traipse back up through the jungle and straight into the lion’s den. Not to mention the fact that he was lucky the Cubans hadn’t picked up on his absence the first time around. Castro’s thugs had a habit of unlocking hotel doors when one least expected it, even those of supposed Canadian citizens who had bribed all the right people.

Jeb burned the note in an ashtray as he weighed his options. In the end, loyalty to country got the best of him.

The next morning he took a bus out to his salvage operation, which was stationed in a bay a few miles down the shore from the jungle base. His crew had just returned from a fruitless week at sea and he spent the afternoon commiserating with them, heading back for the bus stop as the sun was setting. But when the rattling old bus arrived, Jeb was not standing around with the locals. He had slipped back in the jungle and had begun the arduous, miles-long journey back to the Russian base.

He knew where it was now and so did not need Juan Carlos to guide him. In three hours he was back in the same spot where he’d snapped the photos of Ivan Strankov.

Strankov was not in the main compound this time. Jeb crouched in the forest and puzzled over how he could reach the far side of the base without detection.

It did not take long for him to find the blind spot in their

security.

A fresh Russian-led Cuban patrol departed every ten minutes, just as the first patrol in the hour-long cycle was returning. Jeb hoped that gap of ten minute intervals between patrols would be enough for him to sneak through to the other side of the base.

He waited for his chance and when a new patrol had departed and a returning patrol had disappeared inside the main barracks, Jeb slipped from his hiding spot and ran headlong across the main road and through the courtyard.

It was bright beneath the waning Caribbean moon. Nearly everyone was asleep and all the windows in the buildings were dark. Only a handful of the exterior lights remained on, all shrouded from above so as to be invisible to reconnaissance flights. The low light cast the compound in spectral shadows.

As he ran, Jeb imagined Strankov sleeping somewhere in one of the little tin buildings, probably the one with the chugging air conditioning unit. Briefly he wished he had told Juan Carlos the truth, wished that the Red Menace hadn't disappeared over a decade ago. Jeb would have welcomed the return of his mysterious cloaked friend this night. But Jeb Wilson was alone, huffing through the humid Cuban night.

Jungle closed in once more on the far side of the main compound, and Jeb raced into it, grateful for the slap and scratch of branches against his sweating face.

The forest followed an arc around the concrete bunker Jeb had spotted the first time around. Beyond that, on the ocean side, was the closed-off section of the base.

Jeb had crept only a few yards when the alarm sounded.

Shocked, Jeb stopped dead, as if stillness might stop the awful, piercing noise.

The entire base seemed to rouse from slumber, a furious giant suddenly aware of the flea on its back. The staccato shriek blared from loudspeakers on buildings and poles.

Ahn-ahn! Ahn-ahn!

The noise screamed over and over in Jeb's ears, piercing his skull and numbing his brain. It was all he could do to arrest the instinct to flee, to race straight back in the direction from which he'd come. But the compound was alive now. Floodlights flashed on all around, slicing into darkness. Conscripted men in hastily donned uniforms were swarming from every building; officers sprinted amongst them shouting orders and questions in Spanish and Russian.

A running foot patrol suddenly appeared out of nowhere and Jeb fell instinctively to his belly as boots stomped past mere feet from his hiding spot.

A few shouted words were just barely discernable from out the frenzy.

“Loose.”

“How?”

“A vent.”

Jeb understood Spanish and only a little Russian, but he knew enough to realize that the chaos had nothing to do with him. He stayed put as the drama played out.

Strankov appeared, looking like a corpse that had been roused from its crypt. He waved furious arms and a soldier ran off. A moment later the klaxon stopped blaring. The fat little man with the bald head and fringe of yellow hair waddled desperately out of the bunker. He was dressed and wore a white lab coat, as if he had been working at this late hour. He joined a conference between Colonel Strankov and some Cuban officers.

Strankov's raised voice cut through the renewed silence, and although Jeb could hear the Russian's angry drone he could not catch the words.

Soon people were fleeing back into buildings. Strankov and the little scientist remained outside for several long minutes until a growing whine rose from the southwest jungle. The first aircraft appeared from Havana and Strankov strode into the bunker, forcefully gesturing the chastened little fat man to get

in ahead of him.

Jeb saw from the silhouettes against the moon and stars that the two planes were Russian Tupolev Tu-4s. Once they were above the base there came a sudden loud hiss and a moment later Jeb felt his skin grow damp from something more than sweat.

The planes had been adapted as some kind of crop dusters. They methodically circled the area, releasing clouds of vapor from wing-mounted nozzles.

“Great. Poison,” Jeb muttered. But the smell that came to his nostrils was not harsh. In fact, the scent reminded him vaguely of...chocolate?

Just what the hell were the Russians up to here?

And suddenly — just like that — Jeb did not care.

This was it. Jeb Wilson had officially had enough. Twenty-seven years in the spy game and he was finished. If MIC wanted to investigate this further, that was fine with him. MIC, CIA, whoever. He didn't care. He was out of it. Fifty-two years old was too old for the game. A real retirement. Maybe make a real go of his phony salvage business cover. Maybe collect seashells in Florida and sell them to tourists. Something else. *Anything* else. Far away from this godforsaken sweaty island jungle.

The Tupolevs were circling in the distance for another run. The main square in front of the buildings was empty. Jeb broke cover and ran for all he was worth back across the road. He thought he heard a voice shout behind him but he did not stop to see.

Back into the jungle and down the hill. Foot patrols pounded the overgrowth, radios squawking. At one point the planes roared above, heading back to Havana.

Still, Jeb ran. In the sultry predawn he avoided Cuban street patrols. From alleys to backyards to courtyards, all the way back to his hotel. The wee hours skeleton staff was easily avoided and Jeb made it up the stairs and back to his room without being seen.

He turned the key in the lock, grabbed the knob, heaved a sigh of relief...

...and tripped and fell flat on his face on the threadbare carpet when the door was wrenched open from the inside.

Jeb rolled onto his back and found himself staring at the unblinking black eyes of six Russian Kalashnikov rifles.

“There was a time when the Americans would send more than an out of shape relic to spy on me.”

The accent was Russian, the voice was one Jeb had heard only on surveillance tapes, and then more than a decade ago. He had heard the same voice at the jungle compound that night.

Colonel Ivan Strankov was sitting on the edge of Jeb’s bed, legs crossed crisply and a cigarette smoldering between long fingers. A Cuban captain wearing a broad grin and sporting a silver filling in his front tooth stood at his side.

Jeb knew that Strankov couldn’t be more than forty. Yet up close the Russian looked eighty. His face was drawn, his skin leathery. And the pigmentation was off — horribly so — like the ugly mess a child achieves from mixing all the watercolors together.

“I’m not—” Jeb began.

“No,” Strankov snapped. “I have limited time and patience.” To the Cuban captain he said, “Take him, Suarez, and break him.”

Jeb was dragged from his hotel room and dumped in the back of a truck. In twenty minutes he was strapped to a chair in a basement room in the capitol building while the Cuban, Suarez, gleefully beat, burned and bled him.

For hours he kept his cover. “I’m a naval salvage hobbieist. Check with your own government. Minister Perez, Foreign Relations Minister. State Committee President Yedra, National Bank of Cuba. Canadian. I’m Canadian. From Winnipeg.”

How many times he told the story he did not know.

“Ontario?” Suarez said at one point late at night.

“What?”

“You just said you were from Winnipeg, Ontario.”

“Yes....no. Winnipeg, Manitoba.”

The first crack in the dam. It was not long after that he broke; shattered completely. Much sooner than his younger self would have thought. He told them everything. His two trips to the secret base, Juan Carlos, the pictures back to MIC. When the soldiers dumped Juan Carlos Pena’s mutilated body at his feet, Jeb scarcely noticed.

He was a mass of bruises when Strankov pulled him back by the hair and blew a puff of cigarette smoke in his face. The Russian was so discolored he was nearly purple. In a moment of lucidity that shocked him from his delirium, Jeb knew that he was not the only one in that cell who was near death.

“You think you know something? What is happening here?” Strankov shook his head and smiled a mouthful of long, yellow teeth, like the teeth of a very old wolf. “Pitiful.”

And then he was gone. Out of the cell — a gaunt shadow of his former self, but spine still rigid — without a backwards glance at his prisoner.

Jeb remembered the hot sunlight and a courtyard. Voices in Spanish, a language he knew as well as English, yet for some reason his brain could not process the words any longer. Hands grabbed him, lifting, dumping him in the back of a jeep. A drive that could have been minutes or hours. Hard kicks to the belly and he was rolled out of the jeep, dropping like a fat sack onto the ground. The ocean air tousled his hair, the salt mist stung the fresh wounds on his pale skin.

A fresh, horrid pain in his chest. He saw a short knife blade and a close hand carving something into his flesh.

Captain Esteban Suarez was standing before him once more, slipping a knife back into a sheath on his hip. The unforgiving Cuban sun beat harshly on Jeb’s pale skin, the endless ocean stretching out to the far horizon, gulls swooping, and a lethal

hundred and twenty-eight foot drop to violently churning sea.

“You know, Mr. Manitoba or Mr. Ontario, whichever senor prefers—” Suarez flashed his silver filling. “—for the right amount of money, I could be persuaded to let you go. You say you know the President of the National Bank?”

“What?” Jeb said, hope flickering in his heart. “Yes. Yes, I know him.”

“Oh.” Suarez snapped his fingers. “But we are not allowed to take the bribes. I’m so sorry, this had slipped my mind.” The flash of silver and Captain Suarez lunged forward, shoving both hands hard in the center of Jeb’s chest.

Solid ground became empty air. Jeb fell.

Gravity drew him straight down into the sloping rock face. He struck, bounced, struck the side of the cliff once more and was a limp bag of broken bones by the time he slammed the basalt rocks that lined the bay.

Suarez was back in his jeep and driving away from the seashore as Jeb Wilson’s lifeless corpse slipped slowly from the moss-and-blood slick rocks and vanished beneath the churning water. And for just a moment the white caps were stained red.