

## CHAPTER ONE

Vasquez Estate  
Isle de la Juventud, Cuba  
13:00 (18:00 GMT)  
April 9th, 2012

General Hector Vasquez sat in the comfort of his air conditioned Range Rover and stared out to his right-hand man, Luca Perez, as he prepared his latest acquisition for a test. His eyes narrowed behind his Maui Jim sunglasses and his teeth bit down on his unlit cigar as he fished in his pocket for a lighter.

It was an unusually hot day. The heat index typically didn't exceed one hundred degrees for another month or two. Normally, he would ride one of his prized stallions around his estate, but not today. He watched as Luca wiped the sweat off his brow for the third time in as many minutes. *Is that from the heat or is he nervous about getting this weapon to work? He'd better get it to work.*

Past Luca was a palm tree lined field. Luca stood adjacent to the canopy covered table, littered with computers and monitors, wiped his brow again then walked the short distance to the SUV. Vasquez lit his cigar and rolled down the window as Luca approached. Vasquez's daughter, Adriana, had been pestering him to quit smoking. *I wonder what she'd say to me now?*

"General, we have the weapon configured and ready to test."

*About fucking time.* The cigar was clinched between his teeth. He took a long draw, savored the tobacco's essence and blew it out. The smoke lingered above his olive green beret, like a cloud and swirled as he opened the door.

"Follow me, sir," Luca said.

At the table, Luca picked up a bottle of water and took a long drink.

The general sighed to show his impatience. "I've never seen a weapon like this. How does it work?"

Luca stepped to the side before he answered. The general now had a clear view of the screens.

"These weapons don't use a traditional firing pin with a magazine or belt to feed the ammunition into the chamber. Instead, the barrels *are* the magazine. That black box contains twenty-four barrels, stacked in four rows of six barrels each."

Luca handed the general one of the barrels. Vasquez took it and turned it end over end.

"It's heavy."

"Yes, sir. That one is loaded with seven grenades. If you'll hand it to me, I'll show you how it is applied to the weapon."

Vasquez handed Luca the barrel. He took another draw from his cigar and exhaled the smoke in a quick and forceful manner. Luca took the barrel and moved faster.

"Very quickly, sir, they're inserted from the back." Luca hurried into the roasting sun to one of the *Metal Storm* units a few meters from the table and opened a metal door in the back of the weapon.

"That thing just looks like a black metal box," Vasquez said as he removed his cigar and spat on the ground.

Luca's lips curled up.

"Something amuse you, Mr. Perez?"

"I thought the same thing, general." He bent down and slid the barrel into the back until it clicked into place. The metal door clanked as he snapped it back into place.

The general wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Get on with it. What's next?"

Luca cleared his throat and hurried back into the shade. "The munitions, whether they are bullets or grenades, are stacked in the barrels. The projectiles fire using electrical pulses sent down the barrel. It's flawless—with respect to firing. No jams. You can set it to fire at a rate of your choosing."

"What is the maximum firing rate?"

"If it could be sustained—up to one million rounds per minute for bullets and two-hundred and fifty-thousand rounds per minute for grenades. Of course, it would be impossible to fire one million rounds. The unit would be so large; it would no longer be mobile or easily hidden."

Vasquez rubbed his beard and stared out past Luca. *I might have to raise the price on this. Or better yet, put it out to the highest bidder.* "Tell me about the kill zones."

Luca pointed to the center monitor. "This area on the screen represents the area in the southwest part of the field, out there." He gestured to the field, about three hundred meters out.

The general stooped and read the monitor and then out to the field where Luca had pointed. "Continue."

"If I press this button..." The general's eyes motioned down to the keyboard. "...you will now see the kill zones that we've set up. If anybody or anything enters these zones without wearing one of these sensors..." Luca held up a small token, the size of a medium coin. The general reached out, took it and inspected it. "...the weapon is set to auto fire all the grenades at the rate that's been set. Nothing would survive."

*The Colombian's will definitely want these to protect their estates. I'll make millions.* "What about small animals? Wouldn't they set-off the weapon?"

"No, sir. It has to have a minimum body mass, which is adjustable in the system."

Brakes squealed and an engine stopped as a Jeep pulled up. The two men turned in its direction. In the passenger seat sat Julio Ramirez. The general put the cigar back in his mouth. A wry smile crossed his face and he walked out into the sun toward the Jeep.

"Mr. Ramirez."

The man sat in the Jeep with his hands clasped in his lap. His head hung low. The general enjoyed the look on the man's face. He'd been beaten, tortured, starved and locked up for the past two weeks. *Won't he be surprised when I tell him I'm letting him go?*

He answered in a quiet tone, with a distinct shake in his voice.

"Yes, sir?"

"How long have you worked for me?"

"Six months, sir."

"Have I been good to you—provided you with food, shelter, money to send back to your family?"

"Yes, sir."

Vasquez took another step closer to Julio. He reached out and grabbed him on the back of his neck and squeezed. Julio's shoulders drew tight and he closed his eyes. "Then why did you steal from me?"

Julio kept his silence and cowered more. Vasquez tightened his grip, jammed the cigar into his mouth and clamped down. He slapped Julio in the face. "Answer me!"

The general enjoyed it when Julio put his hands up as if to ward off another blow.

"I—I don't know. I mean—my family. We needed money. I'm so sorry."

"You're sorry? Is that all you have to say?" *You're a Goddamn traitor. You'll see how I deal with traitors.* Vasquez released his grip.

"I—"

"Shut-up!"

Julio inhaled a quick breath and held it. His eyes squinted. His body jerked and his hands went up again.

The general laughed. "Relax. I'm not going to hit you." *Yet.*

He took the cigar out of his mouth and spat on the ground. Sweat ran down the side of Julio's face as the general stared him down. *God, it's fucking hot. I need to get this over with.*

"I have been beside myself trying to think what I should do. I know that many men fear me for my sometimes brutal ways, but those ways are necessary to keep men in line. You understand that, do you not, Julio?"

"Yes, sir."

"Speak up!" The general slapped Julio once more.

"Yes, sir!" Julio rubbed his cheek. It was red and the general could almost make out the shape of his hand print on the condemned man's face.

"It has also been said that I am too cruel and maybe—maybe I should be a bit kinder and more lenient. What do you think?"

Julio raised his head and gave the general a half-toothed grin. The general saw the small gleam of hope in the man's eyes and smiled back.

"Very well then," he said. "That's just what I'll do. I am forgiving you for your crimes against me. I'm letting you go."

Julio's eyes widened. He raised his chin toward the general as he smiled wider. "You are?"

"Yes. If you drive this Jeep to the far side of the field and go through those trees," The general pointed to where he had mentioned. "I have someone waiting for you to take you home. But Julio, there is one thing I demand in return."

"Yes, general, whatever you want."

"Don't ever come back or ask me for anything. Understand?"

Julio nodded in excitement. "Yes, general, thank you."

Vasquez slapped the hood of the Jeep. "Go on!"

The driver of the Jeep stepped out and walked over to the canopy. Julio moved over to the driver's seat. The engine roared to life. Julio placed his hand on the gearshift and paused.

He raised his head and said, "General?"

Vasquez stared into man's eyes once more. "Yes?"

"Thank you."

Vasquez held up his hand and waved him forward.

Julio released the clutch. The tires stirred the dust as they began to turn. Vasquez walked over to the laptop and examined the screen. One of the kill zones detected a hostile entity within its defined parameters and sounded an alarm. A fraction of a second later, a single blast startled and made the general jerk. Two hundred and forty grenades darkened the sky, like a swarm of bats. Vasquez's eyes widened in anticipation.

A thirty foot fireball engulfed dirt, steel and body parts. Twisted metal, a blood drenched seat, glass and something that looked like half a leg came to rest in and around a forty foot crater in the field. Smoke emanated from the blackened pit and small parts of the Jeep and Julio burned.

The general's eyes squinted as a broad smile spread across his face. His weathered hand found the top of Luca's shoulder. "You were right. Nothing survived."

## CHAPTER TWO

CIA Headquarters  
Langley, VA  
08:00 (13:00 GMT)  
April 21st 2012

Thirty-two year old Blake MacKay strolled into the office of Mike Brennan, the Director of Clandestine Affairs and Blake's Handler. Mike was on the phone and paced around his office. Blake wasn't sure if he should sit down or wait outside.

"Hold on a second, Julian." Mike cupped his hand over the phone. "Have a seat, Blake. I'll be with you in a second."

Blake plopped down into the overstuffed chair in front of Mike's desk. Behind the desk, several pictures chronicled his handler's career during the Cold War. Over the past few years, Blake had gotten to know Mike pretty well. Not only was Mike a great boss, he had become a trusted friend.

There was a photo of his handler accepting an award from Ronald Regan. At six foot one, Regan towered over Mike and his five feet, eight inch frame. *I remember when I used to wonder if anyone ever gave him shit for his height?*

Another picture showed Mike accepting his certification for his fifth degree black belt in Jujitsu. Mike still had the same physique as he did in the picture that was taken so many years ago. *Well, if they did, they'd definitely know they made a mistake.*

"Yes, sir. We will be discussing it. He just walked into my office. Thanks." Mike disconnected his call. He placed his phone on his desk and ran his hand through his salt and pepper grey flat-top. He sighed and dropped down into his chair.

"Okay. No beating around the bush."

Mike opened a folder and spun it around for Blake to see.

"Meet Mr. Prick, otherwise known as General Hector Vasquez. Formerly of the Cuban army."

Blake reached over and picked up the folder and started to read.

"Gun runner, huh?" Blake asked.

Mike scoffed. "To say the least. He used to be a minor nuisance on our radar; didn't really give a shit about him until recently."

"So, what changed?"

Mike leaned back in his chair and got comfortable. "Let me give you a little background on him first. As a general in the Cuban army, he's always had access to weapons. Unfortunately, it was his lack of conscience, overwhelming greed and appetite for the finer things in life that eventually got him to where he is now. He's set up quite the underground enterprise."

*So far he doesn't sound any different than most of the other assholes I've had to deal with.* Blake continued to thumb through the file and took out photos that intrigued him.

"Go on," Blake said.

“He started with smuggling weapons to the Colombian drug cartels, and the profits allowed him to buy protection from those higher up in the Cuban government who would turn a blind eye to his operation.”

Blake pulled out an overhead photo of a large house. “Is this his residence?”

“Yes. Gunrunning profits allowed Vasquez to purchase the land and build his estate on the south side of the *Isle de la Juventud*. It’s the biggest and the least populated of the three hundred and fifty islands that make up the whole fucking area.”

Blake opened his laptop and accessed the CIA’s internal satellite imaging system. He zoomed in on the island. “It looks like most of the inhabitants live on the north side of the island.”

“Right,” Mike said. “That makes it perfect for his operation. Ironically, that part of the island had been used by pirates and other lowlifes back in the day.”

“What are these fields?” Blake turned his laptop around.

Mike put on his glasses, edged forward and squinted. “Hmph.” He leaned back in his chair and tossed his glasses on the desk. “That’s the funny part. He has a cattle ranch and a pineapple farm and they’re actually pretty lucrative. You and I would be sitting pretty with the money that he makes each year off of those.”

“I’m guessing he uses those to launder the money he makes from selling weapons,” Blake said.

Mike made a gun with his thumb and index finger and pointed it at Blake. “Bingo.”

Blake glanced back down. “This file dates back several years. You still haven’t told me why there’s a sudden interest?”

“General Vasquez has quickly become the largest supplier of weapons to the Mexican drug gangs, and those weapons have been used to mount attacks on the U.S. border patrol. They have also been smuggled into the United States and made their way into the hands of the stateside gang members. Taking out Vasquez and his operation would significantly hurt the Mexican drug gang’s ability to fight each other and the police. It would also give the Mexican police a better chance of rounding up and arresting the gang members.”

Blake tossed the file folder on Mike’s desk and sighed. “Well, I can certainly see where that would make things easier for the border patrol and the Mexican police, but I don’t see why we need to get involved.”

“Blake, do you remember those two U.S. customs agents that were shot recently?”

Blake winced. Both agents had families with children. One of the agents had a wife that just gave birth to a baby girl a few weeks prior.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“The FBI traced those weapons back to Vasquez. The president wants this done correctly without any ties back to us. She insisted on our best man and requested you, personally. It’s time he takes a dirt nap.”

Understanding the need for this guy to go away, Blake reached for the file again and opened it to read more about his target. He sorted through more photographs when he came to a picture he hadn’t seen. It was a picture of a woman with olive skin and green eyes. She had long flowing brown hair with stop and stare curves.

*Holy crap!* “Who—is this?” Blake asked, as he spun the photograph around in Mike’s direction.

Mike chuckled. "I was wondering when you'd get to that. That's his daughter, Adriana Vasquez. As far as we know, she's not involved in anything to do with her father's operation. She either ignores it out of choice, or out of fear from what happened to her mother."

Blake took another look at the photograph before putting it down. His eyes narrowed as he searched through more photographs trying find one of Mrs. Vasquez. "Are there any photos of her?"

"His wife? No."

"What happened to her?"

"Well, details are sketchy at best, but from what we've gathered, she apparently protested when he started to get involved with the cartels. She wanted him to stop and actually went to Cuban intelligence. Unfortunately for her, the person she talked to was on the general's bankroll. She disappeared shortly after that."

*I might actually enjoy sending this guy to hell. I hope I can do it so he sees it coming.*

"What does his daughter do?"

A couple of years ago, she set up an organization called Los Niños Primero. It means—"

"Children First," Blake said. *A woman that does this wouldn't be involved in her father's operation. She's probably scared to death of him.*

"Yeah, some shit like that. She provides food, schooling and medical supplies to the poor villages all over Cuba. A real puller of the heart strings, if you know what I mean. It's actually quite brilliant."

Blake cocked his head to the right. "How so?"

"Well, this prick gives his money to his daughter to do this. He knows the villagers need his charity to survive. He also knows he needs their silence so he can continue his operation. It's a classic symbiotic relationship. They talk, they lose the aide. Also, he promotes what she does, so how do you think he looks to outsiders?"

Blake leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. "Like a wonderful philanthropist, I'd imagine."

"You got it," Mike said.

"Okay, so what's my cover? The usual?"

"How could it not be? It's perfect. I mean, it's like we set this up specifically for this job."

"What's my timetable?"

"You leave this afternoon."

*Shit. So much for finishing my deck. Well, at least I'll be able to pick up some good cigars for gifts.*

"It's not going to be easy to get close to him. He's well-guarded. Add to it his paranoia and—this mission may take you quite some time. If it takes you three months, then so-be-it. Just get the job done. We figured your cover of being in charge of an organization that helps the world's children would be perfect to get in with the daughter. Get in with her and she can get you close to him."

*Oh, I will most definitely get close to her.* "Does she have a boyfriend?"

Mike laughed. "Hell no! Vasquez has probably threatened any man that gets near her with a slow and painful death—and they know he'll follow through."

Blake smirked. "Good. No competition."

Mike pointed a finger at Blake and grinned while suppressing a laugh. "You're an asshole, you know that? You get hooked up with all the hot chicks."

"I do not." *Yeah, I do.* Blake chuckled.

“The hell you don’t. I’ve seen some of the women you’ve hooked up with. The only women I dealt with were Russian. And they weren’t like the kind you’ve been with, either. These were the big, burly” Mike puffed out his chest and raised his shoulders, “Russian shot-putter kind of women. And to top it off, they were trying to kill me!”

They both laughed.

“Okay, okay,” Blake said as he waved his hand for Mike to calm down. “First off, I don’t *hook up*, Blake made air quotes in the air, with them. I try to stay professional, but, I’ll give you details if that’ll make you feel any better.”

“Actually, it won’t. But I want them anyway—dick.”

Blake shook his head and smiled. “All right.” He cleared his throat and changed to a serious tone. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, there is.” Mike scooted his chair closer to the desk and leaned forward. “This guy is pretty connected and there’s been some chatter that he’s been working with an unidentified weapons dealer from al Qaeda. We need you to dig around and gather as much intel as you can while you’re there. We need to find out where—and to whom he has his tentacles stretched.”

Blake picked up the folder and said, “as long as I can get into that estate, I should be able to get any intel he has.”

They both stood and Mike extended his hand. “Good luck. You still living on that big ass farm?”

Their hands locked and shook while a smirk drew across Blake’s face. “Of course. Why would I move from there?”

“More land than I’d know what to do with,” Mike said. “Anyway, go home, get your things ready. I’ll have a chopper pick you up at thirteen hundred.”