

Broken Oath: A Raven Thriller

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Chapter One – Lost in Havana

Walking the Ground, Present Day

It was the details that got you, Raven thought. He'd been doing low profile surveillance of Havana for a week, learning the lay of the land, working up a mission feel, studying patterns, sensing the street, learning to blend in.

I had three of my team in-country. Me and the close-in half of my crew, Rudy and Terry. Both of them spoke Spanish.

Rudy was fluent. Six foot four, bald as a billiard ball, and jet black. He looked like a pro athlete or maybe some high-end muscle for one of the cartels. Terry Coston, a muscled up white guy, was just under six feet and scruffy. A big black guy and his seedy beach bum sidekick.

The Security Group (TSG) had gotten them bullet-proof legends as security for a well-known Mexican oil firm. If challenged, they would check out clean. Both had been Marine Force Recon. They were used to working undercover in Red Zones.

The original plan had been to develop a broad footprint, a reusable presence, including developing a base outside Havana in the country. It didn't work out.

Cuba is still in the 19th century. Many people walk, but in the country as many use horses, both to ride and pull carts. We saw wagons pulled by oxen on the highway. We traveled by open truck, stayed in crude motels, and ate in restaurants; all owned by the government. For the truck, hop on, 8 cents, and you stood.

Basic hygiene was an unexpected challenge. In the public restrooms, rare but there were a few, washing your hands was interesting. You need three things to wash your hands; water, soap, towel to dry. Well the towel was your shirt or pants, because there never were any towels. In a third of the toilets, there was no water, and in one case there was a lady standing beside the sink with a bottle of water to pour over your hands. In most places, there was no soap.

Toilet seats did not exist in Cuba. We never saw one. We toted our own water and did what needed doing in the fields.

There was one room we'd never forget. Rudy's dash for the shitter was followed shortly by a string of profanity. Terry bravely rushed in to defend his teammate from poison snakes, scorpions, or whatever.

It seems the "no toilet seat" theme was exacerbated by a "no toilet paper" crisis. In its place, somebody had carefully torn individual sheets of toilet paper from a roll and placed them on the back of the toilet.

Laughing, with tears running down his cheeks, Terry handed him a single square and beat a hasty retreat. *He claimed Rudy had just set a new standard for "dip shit."* Holding my nose, I passed Rudy in a small pack of Kleenex wipes. *The mission went on.*

So much for our rural base of OPs. It was ridiculous. Forget the "broad footprint." Well, maybe we could find some gaps to exploit in Havana.

Improvise.

I gave them the lecture and dispatched my team to what was once the finest hotel in town, the Riviera Classic. We met in a park a day later to debrief.

They were less than ecstatic: 20 stories with 3 elevators. Only one worked. That one had a government minder running it and a police station a block away.

The shower at the Riviera had hot water, the only one with hot water we found in Cuba. It was fondly remembered when we scratched it off the list, but scratch it we did. We never did find an acceptable safe house in Havana.

Terry, our beach bum, suggested basing at a marina. *Why not?*

I sent them off to find us a fast cabin cruiser with an acceptable registry and living quarters. Once they had it, they could scoot over to GITMO for a test run. They were to line up some kit, but to come back squeaky clean, running empty, and see if it triggered surveillance.

They might get to test their IDs. It was a dumb plan, but I didn't have a better one.

There wasn't a lot of downside, Terry said. The Cubans were tolerant of drug running into the U.S. so long as adequate bribes were paid to the right people.

We were learning that the best way to operate in Havana was on foot. Car rentals stood out. The ubiquitous tourist cars, mostly old American Chevys from about 1941 to 1957, plus an occasional Cadillac convertible, were driven by locals whose livelihoods depended on keeping their masters happy. A driver could make more in a day with tips than a government approved medical doctor did in a month.

All these vehicles had long since worn out their engines. They were mostly powered by puny 4-cylinder Russian-made diesels. We'd timed the traffic in the country as averaging about 5 MPH.

The rural roads were terrible. They looked like they'd been carpet bombed.

What with potholes, pedestrians, and traffic, the tourist cars did about the same in the city. We figured maybe 10 MPH at best, and 20-30 in spurts. *Forget a fast getaway. It would be like trying to outrun the cops on a lawnmower.*

My job was roaming Havana on foot while my team was off on their nautical adventure, checking possible target sites and running counter surveillance routes, CSRs. I'd been doing it for days.

I had never picked up ticks. Other than verifying security was lax, neither did I learn anything useful. It was boring work, hot and sweaty. My feet hurt, I was tired, and it was now full dark.

This time I approached my hotel from the back, the blind side, down an alley that split the block between Tulipan and Conill. It was a good CSR path. A good place to check for tails. There were no lights and no illumination from buildings. You could easily see if anyone entered from either end.

I looked back. It was clear there, and clear ahead. And then it wasn't. A large figure emerged from somewhere ahead of me just as the moon came out from behind a cloud.

I saw a flash of white teeth. This one was huge. *Godzilla.*

Then I saw the knife. He held it low, blade up, at his right side. From there he could jab or slash. *Not good. This one is trained.*

Yeah, I'd had the training, but I hated knives.

Unarmed, the best bet is to run like hell, if you can. Next is to do something sudden that prevents the start of an attack. Third is to create distance and deploy a longer-range weapon. The last is to go berserk and hope not to get fatally cut going through and over your attacker.

I opted for number one, turning and fleeing. Two figures emerged in front of me, one from each side. The one on the left, smaller, was holding a pole or club.

I went for his buddy, target #1, brushed his defenses aside, and connected with a Muay Thai kick to his knee and a fist blow to the side of his head.

He sagged. I grabbed his arm and spun, just in time for his head to connect with #2's pole, now coming down in an overhead blow that shattered #1's skull in a dark spatter of brains and blood.

Messy. My mistake. It was a pipe, not a pole.

I stepped inside the arc of the pipe, gave him a Muay Thai fist to the throat, and another to the side of his head. He fell, limp. I'd not pulled my blows.

With my free hand I came up with the pipe before it hit the ground, highly motivated by the pounding of feet behind me. I whirled and saw Godzilla coming on like a charging buffalo, almost on me, knife extended, held low.

I needed to do something about that.

The words of a long-ago instructor came clear. *Jab at the soft, strike at the hard.*

Godzilla ran full-tilt into my pipe thrust at his stomach and doubled up. My strike, two-handed, and with everything I had behind it, shattered his right arm at the elbow. The knife dropped clear.

I could see terror in his eyes. In a moment he would scream. I raised the pipe, coming down hard from his right side, the side where he couldn't raise an arm to deflect.

Godzilla's skull shattered with a soft *thunk* and it was over. Silence. Three bodies on the ground in a spreading pool of blood.

I stood back, breathing deeply, looking around, thinking. Whatever this was, it hadn't been security. It was just some thugs seeking to rob a tourist.

I looked around, not seeing a soul, not hearing a thing.

Best to just leave them there. It would give the police something to do.

I wiped the pipe clean of prints, dumped it next to its owner, and started down the alley to my hotel. By the time I got there my breathing was back to normal. I was covered with sweat, but that was to be expected given the temperature and humidity.

I waved at the night manager, said nothing, and hopped on the elevator. I had a clean change of clothes for tomorrow. Tonight, even a cold shower would feel good.

Bella Habana-Aeropuerto, Havana, Cuba, Next Morning

I had gone out for a leisurely breakfast. Everything seemed normal. A new face at the desk, but no police presence. Apparently, thugs and thieves killing each other in the city wasn't enough to cause alarm.

I thought about last night. Cuba was turning out to be one of the most difficult targets I'd ever worked against. The Mideast was a mess, but Cuba was locked-down, hardcore, Soviet-Style Communist.

It was nothing like the halcyon paradise reported by the media. *Well, duh....*

Cuba was a surrealistic Twilight Zone, a cacophony of 1960s America, Stalin's USSR, and third-world squalor. What I saw was old American cars with tailfins and a subdued populace. The storied country of Hemingway had become a prison controlled by the gun-butts of political police.

No happy people cruising in their classic cars, dancing in the street to music of the Buena Vista Social Club, and thriving in an unadulterated simple life, with the benefits of free stuff and universal health care. That's what the nouveaux-tourists see and report.

Reality was dysphoria. Mexico's celebrated novelist Carlos Fuentes called it right, but no one believed him. "Perfect order is the forerunner of perfect horror."

Control was tight. People who put a foot wrong disappeared into prison or labor camps.

The hotel was my temporary safe house. The best of a list of crappy choices, it still sucked. The manager at the front desk could observe anyone entering. He wouldn't have that job unless he informed for, or worked for, the government. It would be the same, or worse, at any other hotel in the city.

In theory, the location was good. Ten miles from the airport, and the closest one to the Government buildings. It didn't help. There was no way to get close to The Palace of the Revolution, Cuba's Pentagon, with a kill team. A low chance of success, and a zero chance of egress.

A long gun wouldn't help. There was no high ground. Snipers were out, drones were out, and there would be no external support if it turned to shit. Using laser designators for smart bombs seemed was off the table. Without a major attack and a lot of suppression the cost would be too high.

Havana was a hard target.

The Cuban's had a few Su-35s, faster than our F-22s and arguably better in a close dogfight. They also had the Russian S-400 SAMs, only one system, but hypersonic with a 95% kill rate. It was the most capable and lethal long-range air defense missile system on the planet.

Effectively, my team was on its own. *Thank you, Bush, Obama, and Congress.*

Cuba was Plan B.

Plan A had been to target the new chessboard for an invasion, the new Syria, Venezuela. It was now a hard target, heavily defended.

Running weapons from Benghazi into Syria had spawned massive forced migration, which overwhelmed the nations of Western Europe. That was successful. The world had been “fundamentally transformed.” Socialism, Communism, and Global Governance by unaccountable bureaucrats was ascendant. Nation States were in decline. Once proud Western Cities were starting to resemble third-world shitholes.

The new plan was for a repeat in the Western hemisphere, with the U.S. as the main target. Control of Venezuela was the key to success.

Hitting Venezuela had been my Plan A, but Goldfarb gave it a “Hell no.” Venezuela was off limits. It was too lethal. There was too much downside. The Russians and Chinese were there as a tripwire.

Cuba’s best forces were in Venezuela running armed *Colectivos*, 100,000 strong, crushing resistance, killing and torturing civilians. It was good training and sent a signal: *Cuba held the keys to Venezuela*.

That operational focus was a possible weakness. Cuba was subdued. Resistance was crushed, freedom was lost, and the population was docile.

Cuba had been under harsh Communist rule since 1959 and only a minimal force was on alert in Havana. No one expected America would dare try anything, not after Kennedy’s legendary Bay of Pigs fiasco. Leftists in Congress would leak any inkling of such a plan and the media would rage.

Thus, the forces in Cuba slumbered, just as ours did at Pearl Harbor. CIA’s contingency plan for Cuba said that covert teams might be able to operate there. They saw it as the soft underbelly.

The brief we’d gotten from Goldfarb was a rerun of Syria, where Hillary had tried to topple Assad using weapons from Benghazi, ISIS, and the Arab Spring. That plan failed when Russia stepped in to protect its own interests: Warm water ports and a presence in the Mideast. It did succeed at creating the most massive forced migration in the history of the world. Too bad for Western Europe.

Venezuela was the new Syria. All eyes were there, and on the invasion route on up to the U.S. border. In theory a small America force could prevail against a country in chaos. Just as the Russians had in Syria, we could protect our strategic interests without a major conflict and loss of American lives.

It was hopeful theory from analysts sitting behind desks at Langley, checking boxes. CIA and NSA were slimmed down and focused on the major threats like Russia and China. *CIA’s plan was worthless*.

Sure, as long as my team stayed passive, didn’t linger, didn’t communicate, and followed Moscow Rules, it could avoid counter-surveillance. Security was sloppy. My hotel had no Internet or cell service. It checked clean for bugs and cameras. The phone on the front desk was rotary dial.

There was no hot water, but the refrigerator in my room worked, the toilet had a seat, and there was a hot plate to make coffee. The window air conditioner was rusted and probably hadn’t worked for years. It seemed to be a home for some kind of small lizards that preferred to range outside.

There were no geckos in the room - perhaps a consequence of the liberal use of insecticides. I heaved a deep sigh, noting the cracks in the ceiling and the mold around the small window, mopping my face with a towel, and remembering GITMO. *It had been a steam bath*.

Havana was yet another testimonial that Cuba didn't have a climate. Through the summer, humidity ran 90% to 97%. Even the winters had over 60%. Over the course of the year, the temperature varied from 69°F to 92°F and was rarely below 65°F or above 94°F. It pushed the limits of "muggy."

My room would be a Hell hole in Summer, which was coming. *The joys of socialism.*

Cuba was becoming a backwater, fading in importance. Its socialist system could not provide even a minimal standard of living for its people. It needed subsidies to survive, but, after decades, Russia tired of that, and then-wealthy Venezuela took its place. Now the focus was elsewhere.

Despite Obama, Cuban communists saw the U.S. as a danger, not an opportunity. Which was why I was there as a Canadian socialist using my Digger Simpson identity, the one accepted by the Russians.

With Venezuela the focus, Russia fed up, Obama gone, and Hillary a bad joke, Cuba was facing disaster. The big dogs, Russia and China, had first dibs on plunder. The cartels were next. Cuba was left with table scraps, stuck being the hated enforcers, and sliding towards becoming a failed state.

That part made the CIA happy.

It did not help me a bit. My problem was targeting, access, and egress. In or near Havana, there were two airborne brigades, an artillery division, three infantry divisions, an armored division, a mechanized division, and more. Plus, of course, police and personal security details for officials.

No, they weren't on alert, but there were a lot of them. It was a police state with eyes everywhere. One with 19th century infrastructure, one where rapid movement was all but impossible.

A small team, once noticed, would be quickly overwhelmed.

We had been in-country for three weeks. I was still working on what to do, lingering in a Red Zone with limited options. Plan C was an abort. I was getting close to calling it.

I was packed, ready to check out, but we could reuse this hotel. It wasn't blown. It was the best local base we were likely to get.

We're still alive. Why not get out of here, get our act together, and come back to fight another day? The allies had several failed attempts before D-Day.

That could be Plan D. I just needed to give a plausible excuse for leaving early, easily done, and to tip well. It might be best to linger another day or two, to take some tourist tours, to do some tourist things, to look normal so we would fit in when we returned. *If we returned.*

Mostly, I needed to go somewhere that had secure COM. We needed better options.