

Chapter One

NEAR THE PARAGUAY–ARGENTINE BORDER PRESENT DAY

Juan Cabrillo had never thought he would meet a challenge he would rather walk away from than face. He felt like running from this one.

Not that it showed.

He had an unreadable game face—his blue eyes remained calm and his expression neutral—but he was glad his best friend and second-in-command, Max Hanley, wasn't with him. Max would have picked up on Cabrillo's concern in a second.

Forty miles down the tea-black river from where he stood was one of the most tightly controlled borders in the world—second only to the DMZ separating the two Koreas. It was just rotten luck that the object that had brought him and his handpicked team to the remote jungle had landed on the other side. Had it come down in Paraguay, a phone call between diplomats and a little hush money in the form of economic aid would have ended the affair then and there.

But that was not the case. What they sought had landed in Argentina. And had the incident occurred eighteen months earlier it could have been handled effortlessly. Yet a year and a half ago, following the second collapse of the Argentine peso, a junta of Generals, led by Generalissimo Ernesto Corazón, had seized power in a violent coup that intelligence analysts believed had been in the works for some time. The monetary crisis was simply an excuse for them to wrest control from the legitimate government.

The heads of the civilian leadership were tried in kangaroo courts for crimes against the state involving economic mismanagement. The fortunate were executed; the rest, more than three thousand by some estimates, were sent to forced-labour camps in the Andes Mountains or deep into the Amazon. Any attempt to learn more of their fate was met with arrests. The press was nationalized, and journalists not toeing the party line were jailed. Unions were banned and street protests were met with gunfire.

Those who got out in the early chaotic days of the coup, mostly some wealthy families willing to leave everything behind, said what was happening in their country made the horrors of 1960s and '70s military dictatorships seem tame. Argentina had gone from a thriving democracy to a virtual police state inside of six weeks. The United Nations had rattled its vocal swords, threatening sanctions but ultimately sending out a watered-down resolution condemning human rights abuses that the ruling junta duly ignored.

Since then, the military government had tightened their control even further. Lately, they had started massing troops on the borders of Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil, as well as along the mountain passes near Chile. A draft had been implemented, giving them an army as large as the combined forces of all other South American countries. Brazil, a traditional rival for regional power, had likewise fortified their border, and it wasn't uncommon for the two sides to lob artillery shells at each other.

It was into this authoritarian nightmare that Cabrillo was to lead his people in order to recover what was essentially a NASA blunder.



The Corporation was in the area monitoring the situation when the call came through. They had actually been unloading a shipment of stolen cars from Europe in Santos, Brazil, South America's busiest seaport, as part of the

cover they maintained. Their ship, the *Oregon*, had a reputation as a tramp freighter with no set route and a crew that asked few questions. It would just be coincidental that over the next several months Brazil's police forces would receive tips concerning the cars' locations. During transit, Cabrillo had his technical team hide GPS trackers on the gray-market automobiles. It wasn't likely that the cars would be returned to their owners, but the smuggling ring would surely collapse.

Pretending to be larcenous was part of the Corporation's job, actually abetting in a criminal enterprise was not.

The centre fore derrick swung over the hold for the last time. In the glow of the few dock lights left working at the little-used section of the port, a string of exotic automobiles glimmered like rare jewels. Ferraris, Maseratis, and Audi R8s all waited to be loaded into the backs of three idling semitrailers. A customs foreman stood nearby, his coat pocket bulging slightly from the envelope of five-hundred-euro bills.

The crane's motor took up the strain at a signal from crewmen in the hold, and a bright orange Lamborghini Gallardo emerged, looking as though it were already travelling at autobahn speeds. Cabrillo knew from his contact in Rotterdam, where the cars had been loaded, that this particular vehicle had been stolen from an Italian Count near Turin and that the Count had gotten it from a crooked dealer who later claimed it had been stolen from his showroom.

Max Hanley grunted softly as the Lambo gleamed in the weak light. "Good-looking car, but what's with that god-awful colour?"

"No accounting for taste, my friend," Juan said, twirling a hand over his head to signal the crane operator to go ahead and lower the final car onto the dock. A harbour pilot was due to guide them out to sea shortly.

The sleek car was lowered to the crumbling concrete dock, and members of the smuggling gang unshackled the lifting sling, taking care that the steel cables didn't scratch what Juan had to agree was a damned ugly paint choice. The third man standing on the old freighter's wing bridge had given his name as Angel. He was in his mid-twenties, and wore slacks of some shiny material that looked like mercury and an untucked white dress shirt. He was so thin that the outline of an automatic pistol tucked into the small of his back was obvious.

But maybe that was the point.

Then again, Juan wasn't really concerned about a double cross. Smuggling was a business built on reputation, and one stupid move on Angel's part would just about guarantee he'd never do another deal again.

"Okay, then, *Capitão*, that is it," Angel said, and whistled down to his men.

One of them retrieved a bag from a tractor trailer's cab and approached the gangplank while the rest started loading the hot cars into the rigs. A crew member met the smuggler at the rail and escorted him up the two flights of rusted stairs to the bridge. Juan entered with the others from outside. The only illumination came from the antique radar repeater that gave them all a sickly green pallor.

Cabrillo dialled up a little more light as the Brazilian set the bag onto the chart table. Angel's hair cream shimmered as much as his slacks.

"The agreed-upon price was two hundred thousand dollars," Angel said as he opened the battered duffel. That amount would almost cover the cost to buy

one of the Ferraris new. "It would have been more if you had agreed to deliver three of them to Buenos Aires."

"Forget it," Juan said. "I'm not taking my ship anywhere near there. And good luck finding a captain who will. Hell, none would take a legit cargo into BA, let alone a bunch of stolen cars."

When Cabrillo moved, his shin hit the edge of the table. The resulting sound was an unnatural crack. Angel eyed him warily, his hand moving slightly closer to the pistol under his shirt.

Juan made a "relax" gesture, and stooped to roll up his pant leg.

About three inches below his knee, his leg had been replaced with a high-tech prosthetic that looked like something out of the *Terminator* movies.

"Occupational hazard."

The Brazilian shrugged.

The cash was in bundles of ten thousand. Juan divvied them up and handed half to Max, and for the next several minutes the only sound on the bridge was the soft whisper of bills being checked. They all appeared to be legitimate hundred-dollar bills.

Juan stuck out his hand, "Pleasure doing business with you, Angel."

"The pleasure is mine, *Capitão*. I wish you a safe—" A loud squawk from the overhead speaker cut off the rest of his sentence. A barely understandable voice called the captain down to the mess hall.

"Please excuse me," Cabrillo said, then turned to Max. "If I'm not back when the harbour pilot gets here, you have the conn."

He took a flight of internal stairs down to the mess deck. The interior spaces of the old tramp freighter were just as scabrous as her hull. The walls hadn't seen fresh paint in decades, and there were lines through the dust on the floor where a crewman had made a half-hearted attempt at sweeping sometime in the distant past. The mess hall was only moderately brighter than the dim companionway, with cheap travel posters taped haphazardly to the bulkheads. On one wall was a message board bearded with unread slips of paper offering everything from guitar lessons from an engineer who'd left the ship a decade ago to a reminder that Hong Kong would revert to Chinese control on July 1, 1997.

In the adjoining kitchen, stalactites of hardened grease as thick as fingers hung from the ventilation hood over the stove.

Cabrillo walked through the unoccupied room, and as he neared the far wall a perfectly concealed door snicked open. Linda Ross stood in the well-appointed hallway beyond. She was the Corporation's vice president of operations, essentially its number three after Juan and Max. She was pixie cute, with a small, upturned nose, and a panache for varying hair colours. It was jet-black now, and swept passed her shoulders in thick waves.

Linda was a Navy vet who had done a tour on a guided-missile cruiser as well as spent time as a Pentagon staffer, giving her a unique set of skills that made her perfect for her job.

"What's up?" Juan asked as she fell in beside with him. She had to take two steps for every one of his.

"Overholt's on the phone. Sounds urgent."

"Lang always sounds urgent," Juan said, removing a set of fake teeth and some wadded cotton from his mouth that were part of his disguise. He wore a

fat suit under his wrinkled uniform shirt and a wig of greying hair. "I think it's his prostate."

Langston Overholt IV was a veteran CIA man who'd been around long enough to know where all the skeletons, literal and figurative, were buried, which was why after years of trying to put him to pasture, a succession of politically appointed directors had let him stick around Langley in an advisory capacity. He had also been Cabrillo's boss when Juan was a field agent, and, when Juan left the Agency, Overholt had been instrumental in encouraging him to found the Corporation.

Many of the toughest assignments the Corporation had taken on had come from Overholt, and the substantial fees they had collected were paid through black budget appropriations so deeply buried that the auditors for them called themselves the 49ers, after the California gold rush miners.

They reached Cabrillo's cabin. He paused before opening the door. "Tell them to stand by in the op centre. The pilot should be here soon."

While the wheelhouse several decks above them looked functional, it was nothing more than window dressing for marine inspections and pilots. The wheel and throttle controls were computer linked to the high-tech operations centre that was the real brains of the ship. It was from there that all thrust and manoeuvring instructions were issued, and it was from there, too, that the array of deadly weapons secreted throughout the decrepit-looking scow was controlled.

The *Oregon* might have started out as a lumber carrier schlepping timber along America's West Coast and to Japan, but after Juan's team of naval architects and craftsmen were finished with her, she was one of the most sophisticated intelligence-gathering and covert-operations vessels ever conceived.

"Will do, Chairman." Linda said, and she headed down the passage.

Following a rather hairy duel with a Libyan warship several months earlier, they had found it necessary to dock the ship for extensive repairs. No fewer than thirty artillery shells had penetrated her armour. Juan couldn't fault his ship. Those shells had been fired at less than point-blank range. He'd used the opportunity to redo his cabin.

All the expensive woodwork had been stripped out, either by the Libyan guns or carpenters. The walls were now covered in something akin to stucco that wouldn't crack as the ship flexed. The doorways were modified so they were arched. Additional arched partitions were added, giving the seven-hundred-square-foot cabin a cosy feeling. With its decidedly Arabesque décor, the rooms looked like the set of Rick's Café Américain from *Casablanca*, Juan's favourite movie.

He tossed the wig onto his desk and snatched up the handset of a repro Bakelite phone.

"Lang, Juan here. How are you doing?"

"Apoplectic."

"Your normal frame of mind. What's up?"

"First of, tell me where you are."

"Santos, Brazil. That's São Paulo's port city, in case you didn't know."

"Thank God, you're close," Overholt said with a relieved sigh. "And just so you know, I helped the Israelis snatch a Nazi war criminal from Santos back in the sixties."

“Touché. Now, what’s going on?” By the tone of Overholt’s voice, Juan knew he had something big for them, and he could feel the first feathery traces of adrenaline in his veins.

“Six hours ago, a satellite was launched from Vandenberg atop a Delta III rocket for a low-earth polar orbit.”

That one sentence alone was enough for Cabrillo to deduce that the rocket had failed someplace over South America, since polar shots fly south from the California Air Force base, that it was carrying sensitive spy gear which might not have burned up, and that it most likely had crashed in Argentina since Lang was calling the best covert operatives he knew.

“The techs don’t know yet what went wrong,” Overholt continued. “And that really isn’t our problem anyway.”

“Our problem,” Juan said, “is that it crashed in Argentina.”

“You said it. About a hundred miles south of Paraguay in some of the thickest jungle of the Amazon basin. And there’s a good chance the Argentines know because we warned every country on the flight path that the rocket was overflying their territory.”

“I thought we no longer have diplomatic relations with them since the coup.”

“We still have ways of passing on something like this.”

“I know what you’re about to ask, but be reasonable. The debris is going to be spread over a couple thousand square miles in bush that our spy satellites can’t penetrate. Do you honestly expect us to find your needle in that haystack?”

“I do, because here’s the kicker. The particular part of the needle we’re looking for is a mild gamma ray emitter.”

Juan let that sink in for a second, and finally said, “Plutonium.”

“Only reliable power source we had for this particular bird. The NASA eggheads tried every conceivable alternative, but it came back to using a tiny amount of plutonium and using the heat off its decay to run the satellite’s systems. On the bright side, they so over-engineered the containment vessel that it is virtually indestructible. It wouldn’t even notice a rocket blowing up around it.

“As you can well imagine, the administration doesn’t want it known that we sent aloft a satellite that could have potentially spread radiation across a good-sized swath of the most pristine environment on the planet. The other concern is that the plutonium not fall into the Argentines’ hands. We suspect they have restarted their nuclear weapons program. The satellite didn’t carry much of the stuff—a few grams worth, or so I’m told— but there’s no sense in giving them a head start on their march for the Bomb.”

“So the Argies don’t know about the plutonium?” Juan asked, using the colloquialism for Argentines he’d picked up from a Falklands War vet.

“Thank goodness, no. But anyone with the right equipment will pick up trace radioactivity. And before you ask,” he said, anticipating the next question, “levels aren’t dangerous provided you follow some simple safety protocols.” That wasn’t going to be Cabrillo’s next question. He knew plutonium wasn’t dangerous unless ingested or inhaled. Then it became one of the deadliest toxins known to man.

“I was going to ask if we have any kind of backup.”

“Nada. There’s a team on its way to Paraguay with the latest generation of gamma ray detectors, but that’s about all you can count on. It took the DCI

and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs to convince the President to let us help you that much. I'm sure you realize he has a certain, ah, reluctance, when it comes to dealing with sensitive international situations. He still hasn't come to grips with the whole debacle in Libya a few months back."

"Debacle?" Juan said, sounding hurt. "We saved the Secretary of State's life and salvaged the peace accords."

"And damned near started a war when you went toe-to-toe with one of their guided-missile frigates. This has to go ultra-quiet. Sneak in, find the plutonium, and sneak right back out again. No fireworks."

Cabrillo and Overholt knew that was a promise Juan couldn't make, so instead Juan asked for details about the exact location at which the missile exploded and the trajectory of its fall back to earth. He pulled a cordless keyboard and mouse from a tray under his desk, which sent a signal for a flat-screen monitor to slowly rise from the desk's surface. Overholt e-mailed pictures and target projections. The pictures were worthless, showing nothing but dense cloud cover, but NASA had given them just a five-square-mile search area, which made the grid manageable, provided the terrain didn't go to hell on them. Overholt asked if Cabrillo had any idea how they were going to get into Argentina undetected.

"I want to see some topographical maps before I can answer that. My first instinct is a chopper, of course, but with the Argies ramping up activity along their northern borders that might not be possible. I should have something figured out in a day or two and be ready to execute by week's end."

"Ah, here's the other thing," Overholt said so mildly that Cabrillo tensed up.

"You have seventy-two hours to recover the power pack."

Juan was incredulous. "Three days? That's impossible."

"After seventy-two hours, the President wants to come clean. Well, cleaner. He won't mention the plutonium, but he's willing to ask the Argentines for their help recovering, quote, sensitive scientific equipment."

"And if they say no and search for it themselves?"

"At best we end up looking foolish, and, at worst, criminally negligent in the eyes of the world. Plus we give Generalissimo Corazón a tidy bundle of weapons-grade plutonium to play with."

"Lang, give me six hours. I'll get back to you on whether we're willing—hell—able to back your play."

"Thanks, Juan."

Cabrillo called Overholt after a three-hour strategy meeting with his department heads, and, twelve hours later, found himself and his team standing on the banks of a Paraguayan river, about to cross into God alone knew what.