
PENTAGON

KENNEDY FROST HAD BEEN a hard man for nearly all of his short life. The young agent had only been stationed at his CIA post—serving intel briefings to the Moscow-based American Ambassador—for a scant few months when he'd gotten a call...*the* call...that would change him forever.

Everything in his life up until that point had ticked along like a well-hewn clock—each complication Kennedy had added to it was carefully chosen, one at a time, and always selected with such calculated precision that each new piece offered something unique, something of value to the mechanical face he had built for himself over many years.

He had grown up in extreme poverty—the verdant foothills of West Virginia that he had always called home had made him relentless. Ruthless, even. You see, Kennedy had always strived for structure in a life that, early on, contained very little of that very thing. The structure it *had* contained was that which he had facilitated through his hard work, sweat, and grit. And that determination had ultimately

served him well—catapulting him first to Westpoint and then, later, to the CIA as a field agent staffing the American Embassy in Moscow.

Of course, it hadn't hurt that he'd been tall, classically handsome, blonde, with eyes that seemed to reflect forever the greenish light of the misty hills he'd grown up exploring so fearlessly. As he'd grown into a man, he'd leveraged that advantage by developing a robust, athletic physique that had so far enabled him to excel at whatever he'd directed it toward. Except things hadn't worked out the way he'd planned. There had been a critical mistake in his elegant design—an error of judgment so profound it had almost unmade him.

When he'd gotten *that* call—the one that had changed everything—he'd crumpled instantly at the realization that he'd lost the mastery over life that he had so expertly honed and maintained with such brutal efficiency throughout his 24 years. Kennedy had gone berserk. Desks were flipped. There had been shouting. Punches were thrown. Mugs shattered.

And then, all at once, he'd been tossed bodily out of the consulate, his bruised and bloodied face a testament to the violence and helplessness that were roiling inside of him. He was sent home to the States the following morning—his otherwise flawless record now unforgivably tarnished.

When he arrived stateside, he'd drunk himself stupid on bourbon for a few weeks, unable to confront this new reality. His late bride's family was forced to deal with her final affairs—he, in many ways, was still a boy and unable to find the man he needed to be then to make the final, irrevocable choices that are demanded at the end of someone's life.

He had wallowed in shame for months after, the golden amber of the bourbon pouring over him alongside waves of grief he was desperately, futilely, hoping to drown. For the very first time, he felt he was being swept along by a current he wasn't strong enough to swim against. He had been broken.

From what Kennedy had come to understand later, the driver of the other car had been drinking. It had been late. Dark. It was raining hard, as it often did during West Virginia's humid, wet summers. Regan had been home visiting her family for the weekend—understandably lonely after having been left by herself in their little 1-bedroom in Washington D.C..

Kennedy had only just been deployed to his first assignment abroad the week prior, leaving her and the honeymoon glow that still illuminated them behind. A stop sign had been ignored or gone unseen...and then that had been that. In a mere instant, the entire potential of their future was upended. Obliterated.

Kennedy felt robbed. And that anger still burned in him—hotter and brighter when he allowed himself the bourbon to fuel it, which was still far too often even now as long days faded into longer weeks and, finally, months, life tugging him ever-forward—the growing distance between himself and that horrible day doing nothing to dull his anguish.

BUT RIGHT NOW WASN'T THE time for bourbon. Or self-pity. And Kennedy snapped himself back to forcibly—realizing that for the third time that particular day, he had

zoned out, staring off into the little silver framed wedding photo of himself and Regan that he hadn't been able to stop punishing himself with.

It haunted a corner of his drab desk in this depressingly gray cubicle. He fingered it absently, still hammering himself with all those runaway thoughts: If only he'd been there. If only he'd been the one driving. Maybe things would have been different. For her. For him. For them. He allowed himself those final doubts—the ones he knew he'd always be circling, while idly twirling a pencil, not able to bring himself to do any work.

Somehow, he'd convinced the higher-ups to allow him a second chance as an int-specialist. It wasn't anything like what he'd been hoping to be doing this early on in his career—he had wanted excitement, travel, adventure. Instead, he was now working a boring desk-level security briefing job tracking Cuban-Moscow communications back at the Pentagon. But at least it was something. Without it, the bottle would be far too tempting.

He found himself hating this desk job, though. It had mainly consisted of listening to fuzzy recordings of taped conversations or reading through intercepted briefings outlaying trade agreements between the two communist regimes. He'd seen enough price indexes for sugar quotas to last him many lifetimes in his few weeks on the job. They littered the surface of his desk and were piled up all along the floor underneath it, covered in his haphazard and half-hearted scrawl.

The pistachio-green phone on Kennedy's desk rang then, interrupting his sullen thoughts. It rarely rang, and so he answered hurriedly—happy for the break in his monotony—

shuffling some of those boring papers into a manila file folder as he did so.

“Kennedy.” He greeted. He’d done his best to bury his Virginia twang alongside the poverty of his past, but it still sometimes found its way around the edges of what he said, no matter how hard he tried to put it to rest. And when he drank, it was even worse.

“Lunch. 15 minutes. Stop by Martha’s desk and grab the folder she has waiting for you. I hope you’re ready for a travel assignment, Kennedy. No more of this mopey bullshit.” *Click.*

Kennedy held the phone’s cool receiver against his temple for a moment, curious but feeling some inertia. He’d hit the bourbon again last night, hard, and had been paying for it all morning. His third cup of coffee had almost brought him back around, but he found himself crashing now as its momentum abandoned him.

A travel assignment? That’s what Clarke had said. And he knew his division chief wasn’t someone to mince words, either— Kennedy found himself suddenly smiling wildly for the first time in weeks at the idea of getting out of here— of just leaving all of the hurt and sadness in D.C. and being literally anywhere else.

Running from problems wasn’t his preferred solution. But it was *a* solution. Kennedy kicked off from his desk, spinning around in his office chair and hopping up with a jaunt to grab the briefing before joining his boss outside at what he knew to be the chiefs’ daily lunch spot.

THE COURTYARD in the center of the Pentagon had always felt like the world's most private, peaceful place to Kennedy. The white marble of the grand buildings' facade gleamed brilliantly in the midday sunlight all around him, the cloudless sky above a pale pastel blue that hinted at the chill in the early October air. Kennedy drew his arms in as he crossed the courtyard, moving brusquely along one of the many pathways leading to the solitary white structure in the center of that tremendous interior parkland.

He grinned as he recalled a story about how the Soviets believed the tiny structure to be a secret elevator to some vast underground facility housing America's latest and greatest cold-war secrets. They'd allegedly even devoted time with their spy satellites to track the comings and goings of hundreds of Pentagon employees each day.

What they couldn't know was the most remarkable state secret of all: the building was merely a hot dog stand. Kennedy chuckled to himself as he approached, wondering if, even now, one of those satellites was cataloging his visit, tracking him from miles above as though the greatest minds of man had nothing more to do than develop overwrought ways to peer into and judge one another's humanity. Or maybe they were just curious about his choice of hot dog toppings. He supposed he'd never know.

Clarke was there, as expected, leaning against one of the stands' little metal counters, loading up one of two giant dogs with a pile of chopped onions and mustard—both completely antisocial workplace choices in Kennedy's mind—making a mess of the counter as he did so.

“Kennedy, I'm glad you could finally grace me with your presence.” Clarke chortled, struggling to get the amount of

ketchup he seemed to deem necessary on the dogs now—shaking the bottle violently up and down before repeated, splattered failures had left a veritable Rorschach of the stuff all across both his and Kennedy’s pants. The hot dogs seemed to have dodged most of it, miraculously. “You’ll want to get that wiped up before it sets.” Clarke said absently, gesturing a pudgy hand at the stains on Kennedy’s camel chinos.

Kennedy did his best to remain level, mentally inventorying how long it had taken him to earn those pants and how long it would take to now earn having them dry-cleaned. He felt the corner of his eye twitch. Never a good sign. He redirected himself: “You mentioned an away assignment, sir.”

The plump, gray-haired man was halfway through his first hot dog now, leaning greedily over the red and white paper basket it had been served in and spilling onions and sloppy mustard ketchup mess all over everything. No attempt at wiping himself or the countertop had been made during this particular demonstration of shamelessness.

“Rrrmph rrrmph rrrmph...” Clarke said into the hot dog. Kennedy felt that twitch again but continued to stand with his hands behind his back, face as placid as he could manage, while he allowed the chief to slurp down the remainder of his first hot dog. Kennedy winced inwardly at the thought of sitting through a second iteration of the horror he had just witnessed.

“...So you can be ready this evening?” Clarke had finished the first, finally, wiping ineffectually at his grease-covered lips while he spoke with a bare hand, clearly not willing this conversation—or his appetite—anywhere but forward.

Kennedy wasn't sure what he was agreeing to be ready for—he imagined he'd have to ask that hot dog Clarke had just chewed those details into when it reemerged out his other end—but he was ready for anything that wasn't a desk job. A desk job had never been his desire. Not even close. He forced himself not to stare at the glob of mustard on Clark's wobbly chin.

“Sir.” And Kennedy confirmed, and he meant it.

Clarke was returning to reunite himself with his conquest of that second hot dog but then tapped impatiently at the file folder near him on that countertop with a wet, ketchup-covered finger. “Be at Hoover Field by 5 pm. We had to borrow a jet from some asshole senator to pull this off. I needed something off the books. Tell no one. And kid...seriously...don't fuck this up.”

“Yes, sir,” Kennedy said, giving the man a salute that went thankfully unseen. Try as he might to keep things buttoned up, there were moments when pressure and excitement still got the better of him. And in those moments, autonomic artifacts of his past tended to guide his awkwardness—like the affinity he'd learned for saluting during the strain of Westpoint. In times of stress, he found himself absently saluting everyone from the cashiers at grocery stores to the neighbor next door who had brought him a weekly tuna casserole for months now since losing Regan—the habit cropping up at times when his work stress was burbling to the surface. Times like now. It was a tick he needed to shake out. Kennedy attempted to coolly grab at the folder, disgusted to see a smear of ketchup along its cover, and tucked it under one of his muscular arms.

“5 pm,” Clarke mumbled into the remaining bite of the remaining dog, unable to defend itself against his ravenous onslaught, sending a final shower of chopped onion to the ground.

“*Sir.*” And then, just like that, Kennedy was off, dismayed to notice that flecks of ketchup extended down to his patent leather shoes as he re-emerged into the bright fall sun from under the roofline of the hot dog stand. He wondered if the Russian satellites could pick up the mess Clarke had made of his clothes from space. He imagined they likely could.

MARASCHINO

KENNEDY WHEELED into his driveway that evening with little time to spare. He still couldn't believe Clarke had handed this assignment off to him. This was big. Too big, maybe, for someone like him with so little real-world experience. When he'd returned to his desk at the Pentagon after lunch, he'd eagerly flipped through the folder.

What he'd seen in those pages had left him numb inside: the Soviets were moving warheads. Lots of warheads. And they intended to place them in Cuba—within striking distance of most of the United States' primary population centers.

The fear that the world had been living with these past few decades since the bomb had become a reality felt ready all of a sudden to detonate into all-out armageddon—the threat of those terrible weapons being used widely appeared nearer and more real to him now than most of the general public had any reason to suspect as of yet. He shivered.

It was a big and lonely secret to be forced to keep, and Kennedy fought the impulse to call his parents and tell

them he loved them, but they had both passed away by the time he'd reached the age of 20. He fought the urge to tell anyone, really.

But he couldn't. Wouldn't. He had very few people he could call, anyway. And that was maybe the worst part of all of this: the reminder that he had to compartmentalize his already lonely life—the isolation causing a redoubled wave of profound grief to settle across him.

He sighed deeply, glancing down at the golden band of his wedding ring he still couldn't bring himself to take off—then regrouped and let himself out of the car, bounding up the few short steps to the door of his tiny ground-floor apartment. Regan's parents had purchased it for them shortly before the wedding last spring. He'd barely spent any time in the place, and they were selling it now, intending the proceeds to be used in founding a charity to promote awareness for drunk driving.

Inside, it was dark, and all the furniture was wrapped up in plastic for storage, their meager possessions tucked away in boxes, all waiting to be shipped back to their hometown in West Virginia. Whatever warmth this place had once known was gone now. He used to imagine himself coming to love the place. Now, he couldn't wait to be done with it.

Kennedy and Regan had met back in high school—and their entire relationship had played out like it had been on rails right from the start: homecoming king and queen and all of the other expected benchmarks Kennedy had pressured himself to achieve. To win, to succeed, had always been his primary drive, and he'd attempted perfection in everything he'd ever undertaken—whether playing competitive baseball at Westpoint or crafting an idyllic relationship that

from the outside had seemed perfect. He tried to take everything he did to an eleven. Even when he knew his heart wasn't really in it.

And mostly, it had worked out for him. Except this hadn't. He couldn't control fate. And that lesson was one he had apparently been doomed to learn and unlearn many times, the simple idea never seeming to foment into anything approximating proper understanding in his not fully matured mind.

He popped open his final bottle of West Virginian bourbon then, pouring himself a finger (or three) in self-congratulations at escaping from the boredom of a desk job so easily, hoping to numb the wound of saying goodbye to this place once and for all with its honey-amber contents. He took a sip, letting the familiar warmth flow through him, and rested the glass against his chin thoughtfully.

The sale would likely be finalized by the time he returned... if any of this even existed by the time he was done with this assignment. *If* he returned. And the existential weight of it all hit him then once more right as the alcohol began to filter through his thoughts. He downed the bourbon hurriedly, not wanting to slip into all of *that*, and placed the glass neatly onto the counter, heading back toward the home's single bedroom to pack his travel kit and do his best to forget about...well...all of it.

Kennedy had never been to Cuba before. He had never been anywhere tropical at all, really—save for South Carolina one summer with Regan's folks when they'd all rented a beachfront home and spent long days combing the sand for seashells or barbecuing hamburgers out under the starlit sky amongst the tall seagrass.

It was the closest to genuinely belonging anywhere he had ever felt. The closest to family he'd ever gotten. He fondly remembered how he hadn't worn shoes for a month straight on that trip, and that distant memory caused Kennedy to tear up before shuffling his thoughts to the mundane task of folding the clothes he thought might best suit him in a warmer climate. He had become quite skilled at distracting himself from his own despair. Masterful, in fact. And so he carried on with doing what must be done, as he always had.

He made a point to pack his sidearm, a black Smith & Wesson X series pistol—a gift from his father when he'd turned 18, alongside a few other small instruments and tools he'd squirreled away during his brief time in Moscow... his favorite of which were a trio of form-moldable explosive gel packs that he had no idea why he'd swiped from the embassy's tactical cupboard but found infinitely fascinating.

There was also a little black box—a radio device that could somehow intercept landline communication and record it onto little diskettes for later listening. It was probably expensive. And rare. He had used it to overhear he was being sent home, actually, shortly after he'd learned about Regan's accident and reacted so poorly. That wasn't his proudest moment, and he felt deep shame reflecting back on it. Kennedy stuffed the little box into his bag and zipped it up with finality, hoping to use it to do some good now.

There had always been a part of Kennedy—ever since boyhood—that had allowed itself to unzip from the rest of him: to separate the idealism and perfectionism from the *real* and to allow small indulgences that went otherwise denied.

And this small fragment, this tiny tattered piece, had a nasty habit of stealing. It had other secrets, too—but he had rarely allowed himself much more than the stealing bit. For many long years, that had been enough, and he'd more or less been successful at keeping his little compulsions to a minimum. Except when he was stressed. Except in moments like Moscow.

He zipped up the suitcase with finality before treating himself to a second and final bourbon in the space that he would never call home again. And then he was on his way.

THE EVENING SUN was low in the sky now, casting moody apricot-gold light to filter across the tarmac as Kennedy strode anxiously toward the huge aircraft hanger. He had his duffel in one hand and a navy blue sports coat draped over his shoulder, held in place by the other, trying to look the part he did not feel adequately prepared to play yet.

Uncertainty mixed with fear within him as he approached, causing a surge of adrenaline to course through his veins at the prospect of getting onboard that plane ahead and putting some miles between himself and the past few months. He kept himself moving anyway. *Breathe*, he coached himself. *Just breathe.*

But what a plane it was! His thoughts began to light up as he approached the sleek craft. Clarke had been right—this *was* some bigshots' private ride. Kennedy happened to be a bit of a plane fanatic, and he knew a Lockheed Jetstar when he saw

one, though he'd never been chanced with the opportunity to fly *in* one. He couldn't believe he was going to get to ride on the same plane that Elvis Presley himself used to tour!

Familiar pangs of selfish guilt erupted within him, forcing him to confront his shame at how petty and selfish he found himself for experiencing any excitement at all—finding himself tense up at the oscillation between experiencing a deep sadness about his recent past with his now-nascent attempts to look toward more than the twilight-lit clouds of loss that had for so long shadowed his horizon.

“Mr. Frost, welcome aboard!” A red-haired hostess in a skin-tight white pleather stewardess uniform had appeared from within the plane, greeting him in a buttery-smooth voice, a slight British accent delivering the words in a velvety purr. “I’m Cherry, and I’ll be seeing to all your needs on the flight.”

She was stunning and tall, and he stared, mesmerized by her bright red lipstick, before being drawn into her enormous blue-gray eyes. “We’ll be in the air in about 5 minutes. Please board and take your seat if you wouldn’t mind. Deadlines and all that.”

And then, just like that, she was elegantly taking his bag away from him, *click-clicking* up the short ladder to the plane’s cabin in her ridiculously high heels, butt wagging this way and that as she did so. He felt his eyebrow raise itself involuntarily at the sight of her backside, beginning to wonder just what he’d just be thrown into.

Kennedy straightened his tie uneasily, hoping this wouldn’t turn into anything weird, and followed the elegant, scarlet-

haired woman into the luxurious passenger compartment of the private jet.

He could see two military pilots seated up in the cockpit—replacing what he expected was the regular civilian crew for this particular flight. *Probably for the best...* he thought to himself as he sat down in a plush leather seat...*in case we got shot down.*

The thought sent a chill racing down his spine, reality challenging him to confront it, and he found himself reflexively hoping there was bourbon of some sort on this plane. The stewardess was now sealing the door before sashaying past him along the center aisle and taking her seat somewhere in the rear, the jet backing smoothly out of the hangar with VIP assuredness as they finally embarked on their journey to Havana.

As it turned out, they were in the air in *fewer* than 5 minutes, and Kennedy found himself awestruck that a junior agent would be treated to a perk like flying in a private jet, which was usually reserved for people more the rank of a Clarke. But then Kennedy had a flash of intrusive memory, unwantedly recalling the man sloppily eating those hot dogs and making such a cartoon out of all that ketchup. *Why had he needed so much?* Kennedy puzzled, smirking to himself. He looked down at the infolder he'd brought with him, a smear of red sauce across its front still visible, a painful reminder of his ruined pants.

Kennedy let out a begrudged sigh, finding himself oddly happy for the distraction of the stewardess as she leaned down beside him, her uniform revealing to him her ample cleavage in the process. She batted her big eyes at him ador-

ingly, her hand landing gracefully on his knee, gripping him slightly with bright blood-red nails.

“Thirsty?” She asked, her scarlet lips toying with the letter ‘s’ as she spoke.

“Bourbon,” Kennedy said in a clipped tone, not knowing why but hating every minute of speaking to her suddenly, more so as her nails clawed into him further in reply. He felt himself growing hot and flustered under the pressure of performing this entire charade the way he thought he was supposed to: smooth CIA agent swoons sexy flight attendant.

But it didn’t feel right. It felt pressured. Forced. And he felt his big heart begin thudding harder in his muscular chest even as she gave him a dismissive wink, heading gracefully to the rear of the plane and returning swiftly with his bourbon—a double—before returning to her seat somewhere out of sight humming some poppy tune to herself while she did so.

Kennedy took a grateful sip of the bourbon, watching the maraschino cherry he hadn’t wanted or asked for float around in the glass—it was red, profane, and reminded him of the flight attendants’ lipstick. He ate the damned thing, disgusted by its sour-sweet tang but happy enough to have it out of sight. He then washed it down with another *glug* and was able to finally appraise the golden imbibe, swirling what was left of it around in the glass. *Not bad*, he allowed, *Not bad at all*.

He could see from the plane’s generous window that they had only just crossed the threshold from transiting land to ocean—the blanket of night falling gently across the

Atlantic as though tucking it in for the evening. The white caps of the waves slivered up at him in the October moonlight: silver threads streaking and whirling across the emerald-sapphire surface like phantoms blurring in and out of reality itself—ever-doomed to flicker and shimmer forever and ever across those ice-cold waters.

Kennedy pressed his forehead against the cool window and watched the waves race beneath him, far below, for a long while, sipping at that pretty-okay bourbon as he lost himself in thoughts and memories.

RANCHO BOYEROS

THE DESCENT into Rancho Boyeros International Airport was turbulent. The flight had only taken a few hours, but in that time, the sun had set—causing the cooling waters to throw up roiling waves of air at the plane as the sky settled itself out for the night, bucking them this way and that as their plane tried desperately to reconnect itself with the surety of the ground.

Kennedy had only flown twice in his life before this and found himself wishing that he'd asked for a second drink as he slammed up and down in his seat, feeling queasy all the while. He couldn't decide if it was better or worse to look out the window and watch as the plane's stubby wing flopped up and down with him.

The ground was rapidly approaching now—illuminated only by a series of blinking runway lights that grew nearer and nearer at a rate he found increasingly alarming. He clutched his armrest, attempting to control his fear, unable to resist looking out that little window as they plunged downward...

All at once, they were grounded... safe but rattling along what felt like the roughest tarmac in the world to Kennedy. A particularly intense bump caused him to land in his seat so hard he thought he'd bruised his tailbone—involuntarily letting out a little *oomph* of air as he slammed into the leather surface he was buckled into.

Eventually, they rolled to a stop, and Cherry was right on him again—his bag outstretched in front of her, clutched tightly by a single hand, nails sparkling out at him. “Your bag, Mr. Frost,” she said curtly, still managing to toy with that “s” in a way he found very distracting.

“Your driver should be waiting outside. I’ll see you at the embassy,” she finished, unlatching the plane’s door ladder and expertly unfurling it to the ground.

“You’ll do what now?” Kennedy was saying, having imagined this would be the last he’d see of the woman.

“They didn’t tell you? I’ll be your attaché during your assignment. The embassy has been closed for three years. There’s no staff. No support. It will just be me, you, and the driver—a local, Javier Diaz. See you at the embassy. I have a date tonight.” She flashed him a smile and gave a regal little wave, then deboarded, tossing her hair over her shoulder as she did so like she’d just arrived home after far too long away, making her way to one of two waiting vehicles, one a red Mercedes convertible and the other a large black Cadillac coupe. He didn’t need to be a spy to know which car was hers.

Kennedy blinked, not enjoying this updated itinerary as much as his previously imagined one. At least she was professional. Mostly. *And maybe her date would keep her*

distracted, he thought idly, hoping he'd still be able to take the time for himself here that he'd secretly been hoping for. He needed a distraction, and if this wasn't that, he didn't know what was. He was confident that he would pick a missile crisis over sugar manifests any day—excepting that the price of failure had compounded gravely in this newer task.

But Kennedy knew that he had rarely failed at anything remotely within his control to succeed at—and here he hoped to put that record to the ultimate test. What choice did he have? Kennedy wiped an errant bead of sweat that had just formed off of his forehead before waving thanks to the pilots, who ignored him, and stepping out into the near-black and pouring rain of his first night here on the island of Cuba.

The night air was dazzling, and he felt a haze of heat and humidity strike out at him darkly from every direction. It would have been unpleasant, too, had the air not been intermittently cooled by a breeze that patted him with light, icy raindrops. The contrast and foreignness of the sensation caused him to giggle involuntarily despite himself, looking up into the blackened sky and letting the tiny cold droplets splatter across his face.

“You’ll catch sick if you keep doing that, señor,” a deep voice, a slight Cuban accent, called out from nearby—forcing Kennedy to peel himself away from that brief glimmer of happiness he’d just been allowed.

Parked near the plane, the black 1950s Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz sat idling smoothly, a dark-haired man that towered over Kennedy’s 6’1” frame now resting against it. He was handsome, wiry, and tall but possessed a natural athleticism

and musculature that bore the hallmarks of a life of hard labor and long hours spent in the outdoors. He had a chiseled, masculine face and eyes that beamed a bit of sureness and a bit of humor in equal doses, hair dark and close-cropped.

The man reached out a thick, veiny hand to Kennedy and grasped the blonde's pale hand with his well-bronzed one. The padding on his palms felt thick, meaty, and warm to the agent—who, for some reason, found himself holding onto it longer than he probably should have, feeling a strange heat rise in his face as he did so.

“Javier Diaz. The pleasure, of course, is mine,” the Cuban bowed slightly, the gesture a bit goofy given his tall stature, before letting go of Kennedy's hand and grabbing his bag—placing it neatly in the car's enormous trunk. And then he was circling around to open the passenger door of the coupe for him, performing it all in one graceful, smooth circuit. He moved with effortless grace, not the calculated type that Kennedy tried to emulate but natural grace, the kind that some people are born with.

Kennedy had never had a car door opened for him before—never been driven anywhere at all, really—and the whole thing felt a little fussy and over the top. Still, he allowed himself to pretend he'd done this all a thousand times, battling away at his imposter syndrome and forcing himself into the headspace of Kennedy Frost: CIA Russian Language Specialist, Junior Intelligence Officer—and now field agent.

“Straight to the embassy?” Javier was asking, sitting heavily beside Kennedy in the elaborate car's driver's seat, the smell of vanilla and cedar wafting off the impossibly large driver

and forcing itself into Kennedy's nostrils. He felt his heart skip a beat for some reason, and then that heat in his face began to threaten him with its presence. He noted that the car's interior was elegant, the machined metal alloy of the dashboard impeccable. It all glittered at Kennedy like it was straight off the showroom floor. Even the leather smelled not a day old.

"Uh yeah. Straight to the embassy, thanks," Kennedy muttered, winding the window up and down and marveling at how smoothly the crank mechanism operated, enjoying the air from outside as it cooled his face. *Cadillac did know what they were doing*, he mused, fingering at the car's intricate metal lock, happy for the distraction.

"It's a pretty nice car, right? Can you believe they just left it parked in the garage at the embassy when they closed it down in '59? The keys were just lying there on the dashboard all those years until I wheeled her out just last week to get her fixed up. She's basically brand new. Can you believe that?" Javier patted the black dashboard affectionately, and Kennedy couldn't help but notice how heavily his giant palm thudded against it. That had to be the most enormous hand Kennedy had ever seen—the long, thick fingers extended out from the meaty pads, veins bulging across the top of it in a maze that wound its way mesmerizingly up the man's heavily corded forearms, the widest of those veins snaking their way up into the sleeves of a shirt that struggled to contain him.

Kennedy suddenly felt a bit of fear, then, when he realized it was just him and this heavily muscled stranger alone in a car in this foreign land. Would he be able to take him if it came to blows?

He eyed those large hands uneasily now, recalling how effortlessly they'd eclipsed his own back at the tarmac and shuddered. He found himself stealing sideways glances at the man as they drove on, analyzing him, catching glimpses of his visage as they passed by streetlights—the sulfur glow occasioning him a clear view of the Cuban's strong profile every so often.

Kennedy found he couldn't help himself, either. Something in him seemed to derive satisfaction from directing his eyes to graze over the soft, pillowy curve of Javier's lips, the way his high cheekbones framed his handsome nose, and the way his shaved head reminded Kennedy of his days back at Westpoint. There had been a guy like Javier then, too...and Kennedy realized he was doing it again. And he stopped himself. As he had always managed to do. He stared ahead out the windshield determinedly in a hollow vacuum of self-awareness.

"*Right?*" A too-big hand waved in front of his face. "You ok, señor? Didn't lose too much oxygen up there in the sky?" Javier was laughing at his own banter as Kennedy refocused back on their conversation.

"Yeah...yeah, it's a nice car. Very nice," Kennedy struggled to say, not enjoying either the feelings he had been having previously or those he was burdened with now—but not sure which set had been worse. He had never felt so tongue-tied and tried his best not to steal another glance at the Cuban's powerful arm.

"So you're some kinda hotshot? Here to fix our little sugar crisis or something for some greedy American company? You seem a little young for that. No offense," Javier said, the older man adjusting the rearview mirror as he spoke, his

voice cheerfully companionable even if his subject matter had a revolutionary tinge.

“Not... exactly,” Kennedy said, allowing himself another sideways look at Javier before returning his eyes to the roadway. The city was dark, the buildings predominantly white stucco. The car’s headlights lit them up as they drove by—and Kennedy appreciated that the streets here were paved with ornate red tiles and lined by tall arcing palm trees, flower beds overflowing with tropical colors adorning either side of the roadway. He let his eyes float along the headlights’ horizon as they made their way through the labyrinth of narrow streets, bumping this way and that on the Cadillac’s floaty suspension—the engine a dull purr that Kennedy found rather soothing.

“Not a talker, I guess?” Javier had just pulled onto a central avenue—traffic somewhat picking up both on the sidewalks where club-goers were smoking cigarettes or idling with cans or glasses of alcohol and out along the streets where taxis and food stall vendors vied for limited real estate. Javier wove through it all expertly, a single hand on the wheel all the while.

“Not really,” Kennedy admitted readily, and it was true. He had never been able to do much with words. “Sorry. Long day,” he followed, not concerned about coming across as reserved but not wanting to be rude to the man, either.

“I understand. I’ve never flown, but I can imagine it’s very stressful. I guess I prefer to drive.” Javier shrugged cheerily, tapping the wheel with a single, monstrous finger to some internal rhythm as they pulled up to a colossal brutalist building made out of sandstone—long rectangular windows gridded across the surface of it, the sole ornamentation save

an enormous lettered sign: Embassy of the United States of America.

A wrought iron fence some dozen feet tall ringed the entire complex. Nearby, a single armed guard stood sentry in a post near the complex's entrance. "Home sweet home," Javier exclaimed, exiting the car and performing a reverse of his previous circuit—appearing at Kennedy's door and opening it, presenting him his bag.

In the better lighting, Kennedy noted how the man's shirt strained across his chest, how the buttons seemed ready to burst with the heft of apparently titanic pectorals, the outline of nipples pressing out from either side...He felt the heat rising again in earnest and forced himself to look away, grab his bag, and play his role once more.

"Jose, the guard, will let you in. I've been parking the car in the lot around back. Help yourself to anything you find to eat in there. The living accommodations are on the upper two levels—I believe they put you up in the ambassador's quarters, so you'll be set there and have one of the best views in Havana. Let me know if you need anything else; I'm usually around here somewhere."

Then, just like that, Javier was hopping back into the Caddy, the huge beast roaring to life with a kick and crunching out along the roadway and around the corner to the embassy's carpark.