

Morning in Havana

by

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CHAPTER 1

Africa, 1988
The People's Republic of Angola

The jet fighter screamed across the pre-dawn African sky at almost twice the speed of sound. Inside its cramped cockpit, Lieutenant Francisco Blanco gripped the throttle with his left hand, but knew he didn't dare push the MiG-29 any faster. Instead, he tried to slow his pounding heart and focus on the poor quality radio transmission being patched-in from the battlefield ahead.

The words were faint and scratchy, blanketed by static and hiss, blotted out by machine gun fire and explosions, but the desperation came through loud and clear, "...heav- fire... ne-... ...air strike... where's my god-... air strike!"

"ETA seven minutes," Blanco radioed, feeling alone and naked. He was flying solo, having left his wingman on the runway with a defective turbine. The Cubans getting chewed up on the ground could not wait for repairs.

"What's the first target?"

Blanco waited, oblivious to the loud roar of Mach 2 flight, the bumpy ride, the dozens of glowing gauges and dials crammed into every flat surface of the dark cockpit. After a long pause another feeble string of words fought their way to his ears, "...mortars... kicking our ass... five hun-... met-... ... repeat, five hund-... meters south..."

"Roger that. ETA three minutes."

As he approached the hot zone, Blanco craned his neck to get a view of the situation on the ground and could just make out the shadowy outlines of the open field, bordered by jungle, where his comrades had been inserted and were now trapped.

It looked like the rebels had been waiting for them; the southern tree line sparkled with the enemy's non-stop barrage. Return fire from his pinned countrymen flashed intermittently in the field, as did exploding mortar shells, obviously lobbed in from somewhere beyond the trees. The first inkling of sunlight threatened over the horizon and his comrades' crucial cover of darkness was fast disappearing. Their hopeless plight accentuated the jitters in his stomach.

Blanco rocketed past the battlefield and banked into a turn high over the jungle, looking for some sign of the enemy artillery while the battle below raged on and dawn broke in earnest. He scanned back and forth, cruising in a high circle, and at last he saw what he was looking for. A bright orange tongue of fire flashed beneath the treetops and he rolled left, slicing steeply down toward it, knowing that if he took his eye off the spot, even for an instant, he would lose it.

As he flicked the switch selecting his 37mm cannon, a Stinger missile billowing white smoke burst from the jungle. Blanco knew that the Stinger's guidance system was already locked onto the heat of his glowing engines. His fear turned to terror, but he had no way out. With sweat streaming past wide eyes, he split his focus between the spot he had marked and the fast closing, dead-on projectile.

The Stinger grew from a pencil point to a softball in the blink of an eye. The next instant it was a bowling ball about to crash through his canopy. Blanco jinked down and rolled, praying there was no proximity fuse, and the missile screamed past only meters away.

Terror giving over to fury, he jogged right to get clear of the smoke trail and squeezed the trigger. The rapid drumbeat of his gun sent a red stream of tracers rushing to the ground. Blanco nudged his stick, guiding his cannon fire into the spot he had marked. As he watched the deadly points of light race away, his mind raced even faster and the notion of a heat seeking missile airborne behind him gnawed at the knot in his gut. Why the hell had he left without his wingman?

The tracers found their mark and fiery geysers told him that he had hit their ammo stack, setting off a chain reaction of detonations. He broke off and hugged the treetops.

It would have been perfectly acceptable--standard procedure for many--to dump the rest of his ordinance on the mortar site and haul ass home. But his comrades were still pinned and vulnerable, and though he wanted to, he could not leave them as long as he had ammo and fuel. "Mortar is destroyed... Mortar is destroyed... Next target."

* * *

On the battlefield below, Sergeant Carlos Mendoza squirmed flatter against the ground. "Fire on the tree line," he yelled into his radio. "Repeat, fire on the tree line!"

The other sergeants, the lieutenants, and the captain were all dead, and Mendoza knew that his shattered company was ripe for the taking. But at least the shelling had stopped, and he still had enough men to put up a fight.

Without lifting his head, he shouted, “Hernandez, Silva, I want two machine guns on their left flank... Wait for the air strike.” A bullet thumped nearby throwing dirt in his face. He blinked it out of his eyes. “Gonzales! You take Moreno’s platoon. I’ll take the rest. Move up to the banana trees on their right. We’ll trap those bastards between us and the machine guns!”

Mendoza hunkered still lower and felt for his AK-47. Above the trees, the MiG appeared and banked hard right, releasing a pair of drums. They hit the ground in massive fireballs so intense that Mendoza felt the draft as the exploding napalm sucked in air to feed its raging combustion. He gathered his feet under him as the MiG came back down the enemy line strafing with machine guns.

“Go! Go!” yelled Mendoza, scrambling forward. He ran thirty meters and dove for cover as dirt kicked up around him. But the MiG was back again, right on the deck with its cannon blazing, throwing up sprays of earth and felling trees. Mendoza leapt to his feet and sprinted for the banana thicket, from which he and his six men fired furiously to cover the other platoon’s advance. Once again the MiG roared through, lower than ever, this time apparently out of ammo but still able to get everyone’s head down.

The machine guns Mendoza had sent to the opposite flank got into position and opened up a merciless barrage down the enemy line. Mendoza grabbed his radio. “We’re securing the ground. I need choppers to evacuate the wounded!”

The cross fire was murderous and the African rebels broke and ran. Mendoza’s men picked off one after another until the remnants disappeared deep into the jungle.

As the shooting subsided, Mendoza barked, “Gonzales, get ready for a counter attack.” He pointed at a shallow embankment. “Set another machine gun over there and post fire teams on either side.” With that he ran back to the earlier killing field.

“Where are my goddamn choppers!” he yelled into his radio, dropping to his knees next to a writhing body and fumbling open a first aid kit. Though not a medic, neither was he a stranger to emergency aid. “Easy, Rafael, we’re gonna get you fixed up.” He whipped gauze around a gushing thigh wound and stabbed morphine into the other leg before scampering to the next casualty.

“Medic, over here! Hang on a little longer, Pepe.” He tightened a tourniquet above the man’s missing boot, then picked up his radio. “*Where are my goddamn—*” The sound of helicopters in the distance cut him short, and he turned back to the bootless man.

The choppers came loudly blustering in with their doors open and everyone rushed to fill them. Inside of five minutes the birds revved their engines for takeoff. Clearing away, Mendoza noticed a bloody youth covered with mud that the medic had checked and left for dead. Maybe he was, but then again... even one in a million was more chance than the kid had lying there in the muck. As the last helicopter was lifting off Mendoza scooped the boy up and ran back toward it, kicking a limp left arm out of the way with each stride. The chopper settled back to earth and Mendoza handed over his package.

With the wounded on their way, Mendoza released his air support to fly cover for them. The MiG wagged its wings and departed. Mendoza gratefully watched the jet streak away. *One hell of a flyer, but if he keeps that up he’ll never go back to Cuba alive.*

* * *

“Malanje tower, Malanje tower, this is Malanje Six. Landing instructions.” With the choppers safely down, Blanco was ready to get another mission behind him.

“Malanje Six, runways are stacked up. Hold at eight thousand meters.”

Blanco checked his fuel, and easing into a sweeping turn, gazed down at the now familiar landmarks around Malanje. Was it only eight months since he had arrived in this bizarre hell hole, overflowing with oil, diamonds, and poverty?

Roughly square and a bit larger than Venezuela, Angola was a mile-high plateau covered with mountains, jungles, savannas, and rivers, except for a narrow strip along its Atlantic coast. Three-quarters of the way up this coastal strip, the Cuanza River Delta bulged out into the sea, and there sat Angola’s capital city, Luanda.

Just north of Luanda, in the extreme northwest of the country, were the provinces of Cabinda and Zaire where multinational petroleum companies worked vast oil fields around the clock. Diagonally across Angola, in the eastern and southern provinces, lay some of the world’s richest diamond deposits... and the enemy: UNITA rebels seeking to overthrow President Dos Santos. Malanje was partway between the oil reserves and the diamond fields, a secure outpost near the edge of Dos Santos-controlled territory.

“Malanje Six, you’re cleared to land. Runway nine zero.”

“Nine zero, roger.”

Minutes later Blanco landed, taxied off the tarmac, and brought his fighter to a stop between two large mounds of earth. Unlike the airports near Luanda where the threat was low and planes parked in plain view, out here in central Angola the aircraft were kept bunkered or in hangars.

As the crew opened the canopy, Blanco disconnected his oxygen mask and pulled off his helmet. His short, black hair glistened with sweat as he climbed down from the cockpit, and his sense of relief intensified when he stepped off the last rung of the ladder and felt solid ground under his feet. He had done what he had to do and made it back once more.

A crewman handed him a clipboard and he held it tight against his stomach, pressing hard with his right hand, annoyed at the involuntary tremors, as he scribbled his name and the date, 14 March 1988--late summer below the equator, and trying times for the revolution.

Three years ago the Russians had started flirting with glasnost, an apparent sign of weakness. And only last year Reagan had had the gall to tell Gorbachev to take down the Berlin Wall. That’s what weakness gets you, Blanco thought with disgust.

Glasnost. Was it the beginning of the end for the revolution? Some whispered that it was. But Blanco, committed to the core, knew it was only a temporary setback; the revolution would prevail. Certainly he had his moments of misgiving; even priests doubted from time to time, and the road to utopia had been far longer than anyone expected. How could it be otherwise? The rich always used their money to keep the working class down.

Money, that root of evil, had to be eliminated. The desire for material goods would then give way to community service, and the virtuous new man would be born; born, unfortunately, of blood, disease, and destruction. Stalin said you had to break a few eggs to make an omelet.

But for now, a shower and a dry uniform would do.

* * *

“Why can’t we just meet at Gulf’s office?” McLarty asked his sales director in a low voice. The two of them, accompanied by a skinny Angolan, walked through a massive arched doorway and started down expansive marble steps leading to the gardens of the presidential palace, Funtungo de Belas. The palace was Luanda’s most ostentatious display of lopsided wealth, and an obligatory stop for all influential visitors to Angola’s capital city.

“The president has his fingers in every big oil contract,” the sales director, David Kenner, whispered behind his hand. “He doesn’t want us discussing anything behind his back.”

L.J. McLarty, a tall, gaunt, fifty-six-year-old with sandy hair, reddish skin and blue eyes, was the founder and CEO of LJM Machine Works. The past eight years had seen his company grow from a solid American player to an exploding international force in heavy tools—everything from tungsten-toothed drill bits to advanced micro lathes. After a three-week sales swing through the Far East, the two men were calling on their largest account in Africa: Gulf Oil’s Angolan subsidiary.

“Yeah, that’s why we’ve had this fellow glued to us since we got here,” McLarty said, motioning toward the Angolan as they reached the bottom of the stairs and began winding through the gardens. “I haven’t needed a babysitter since I was six.”

In response to McLarty’s gesture, the Angolan perked up and came closer, a suspicious look on his face. “No, it’s okay,” McLarty said, holding up a hand. “We’re just talking.”

The three of them strolled the palace gardens, the stocky but well-groomed Kenner at McLarty’s elbow and the minder five paces behind. McLarty mulled over the eight-million-dollar contract he had renewed with Gulf to supply a wide range of blowout preventers, gear boxes, drill bits, and miscellaneous precision parts. Birds chattered and called from all directions and vibrant tropical plants reached out to him from either side of the wide, brick-lined path, the deep green stems offering exotic flowers and fruits. A palm here or an orchid there, but for the most part the leafy, color-splashed plants were species he had never before encountered.

As they approached a series of ornate gates leading outside the palace walls, the Angolan rushed forward with a broad, nervous smile, gesturing for them to change course. “No sir, please, this way, please.” Armed guards at the outer gates looked back and stared as the two Westerners veered left and followed the inside perimeter of the high stone wall surrounding the grounds.

“He doesn’t want us to see what’s out there,” McLarty said. “All gaudy and ritzy inside and one step out the gates you find abject poverty. Reminds me of India. But India doesn’t have the oil and diamonds they have here.” He squinted up at the sky and said, “You know, I sure would like to try natural diamonds for drill bits instead of the artificial ones. In the States natural diamonds are too damn expensive, but here they’re just lying on the ground.”

“Yeah, but the ground they’re lying on is in the interior and controlled by the rebels,” Kenner said. “That’s how they finance their side of the war.”

McLarty sighed. “And we’re helping finance the other side—the Cuban side. Doesn’t that say that something’s wrong? The Cubans protect the capital and the oil fields, El Presidente gets fat leases from Gulf, and we sell Gulf the tools they need... So we help prop up these corrupt guys that half the country has taken up arms against. It makes me sick.”

Kenner raised his eyebrows. “L.J., this civil war has been going on for fifteen years... ever since independence from Portugal. Gulf Oil has been here a lot longer than that, and way before the Cubans came. Should they just leave? As long as Gulf’s here, they need someone to supply them with machine tools. If it’s not us, it’ll be somebody else.”

“I hear you, but I don’t like it,” McLarty said, frowning at the wall. “Listen, my cows in Idaho live better than people here. Plenty to eat, nobody molesting them. These people endure hunger, violence; they have to sleep on the bare ground... It’s unconscionable.”

“But L.J., that’s not because of us,” Kenner protested.

“Do you remember two days ago when we were in Hong Kong?” asked McLarty. “It’s nothing but a rock sticking out of the sea. Forget about oil and diamonds, they don’t even have fresh water. But it’s rich, clean, and peaceful. What the hell is wrong with the world?”

Kenner put his hand on McLarty’s arm, briefly stopping him. “Would Angola be better off if we left and took away the few good jobs they have? The country would be even poorer and more brutal—if you can imagine that.”

“I *can’t* imagine it,” McLarty said, shaking his head. He squinted at Kenner out the corner of his eye. “Should we be doing business here?”

* * *

The Russian jeep made a grinding noise as Captain Victor Chavez shoved it into first gear. He resented chauffeur duty, but it would not do for a Ministry of Interior colleague to be met by a mere soldier. MININT officers stood apart from the rest of society. They were Fidel’s secret police: his eyes, ears, and when needed, teeth, responsible for ferreting out and crushing the enemy within.

Chavez had never met a man he didn’t begrudge, and he found serving in MININT much to his liking. True, it had been his poor luck to draw an assignment in a war zone, Malanje of all places, instead of the cushy domestic snooping he was accustomed to, but he was putting in his time and sooner or later would be transferred back to Havana.

He roared across the base and came to a jerky halt near an aircraft bunker. Presently an Antonov-26 cargo plane dove for the runway, rushing through that uncomfortable space of air in which it was vulnerable to ground fire. The Antonov landed safely, if somewhat erratically, and minutes later Major Louis Rivas bounded down its stairs and strutted over to the waiting jeep.

“Welcome to Malanje, sir,” Chavez said, saluting.

“Captain,” Rivas responded with a crisp salute. He shook Chavez’s hand and climbed into the passenger seat. Chavez ground the jeep into gear one more time and it lurched into motion.

“What brings you to Angola, Major Rivas?” asked Chavez as he sized up his visitor from Havana: heavily starched uniform; olive skin stretched over a gaunt face; pencil-thin mustache; small, penetrating eyes; haughty demeanor. Rivas’s meticulous grooming

and trim silhouette made Chavez self-conscious about the extra pounds he was carrying and his careless shave that morning.

"I need to see someone in the town," Rivas said. "I assume you can drive me? It's a matter that requires discretion." Rivas's eyes extracted a promise of secrecy from Chavez.

"Of course, whatever you need," he replied.

"Good. The address is Rua Do Lobito, 31."

Chavez swung the jeep onto a rutted path running alongside a rusty, three meter high wire fence. "This is the inner perimeter," he said. "About fifty meters out you see three rows of barbed wire. In between, the land is mined and there are guard towers every few hundred meters." He pointed to his right. "The town of Malanje is that way, about twenty minutes from here. And behind us, to the south, the valley continues down to the River Cuije."

"And these mountains further out in front of us?" asked Rivas, taking in the ascending terrain with tropical rainforest clinging to all but the highest peaks.

"The Mucari Range. It forms one side of the valley we're in."

"Looks like a good place to hide."

"Probably would be but the rebels can't come this close," Chavez stated. "Another hundred and fifty kilometers east, in the border provinces, it's a different story. But here we're in firm control,"

"Good. And how's the war going?"

"We win the battles, but winning the war is another matter. The enemy is scattered throughout the countryside. They collect for an attack, then melt back into the jungle." The jeep hit a pothole, jostling its occupants. "The Soviets still want to launch this crazy offensive against Mavinga near the southern border. The Cuban command says it won't work. Supply lines too long, too easy for the South Africans to intervene, but the Russians and Angolans are dead set on it."

"Too bad," said Rivas. The jeep turned onto a poorly paved road and picked up speed. "And what about morale?"

"Well, we do have a few problems in that area—a certain amount of drug use and some pockets of dissatisfaction. Some weeks ago, for instance, a soldier made a lot of noise about fighting for diamonds and oil—not socialism. But some problems are to be expected. Your work and mine is never done, no?"

"Protecting the people's resources is part of protecting socialism," said Rivas. "I assume you are improving attitudes?"

"Of course. We shot the bigmouth. That helped considerably."

"Good. You have to nip those things in the bud. *Socialismo o muerte, no?* But, couldn't you have detected the problem sooner?"

Chavez downshifted and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Perhaps, but this isn't Cuba. Back home we have good control; in addition to our own agents we have party members, union officers, police, teachers—not to mention school kids who tell us what their parents are up to. No one changes his socks without us knowing about it."

Rivas nodded. "It's a good system."

"A good system indeed, but here I don't have all those resources. It's a war. People transfer in and out, get killed, go missing, get captured—it's not a stable population. And under enemy fire the troops grow loyal to each other. It's harder to recruit informers."

As they neared Malanje both sides of the road were littered with shanties, lean-tos, mud huts with thatched roofs, and refuse of every description. There was a powerful stench and nothing green in sight; every plant, every blade of grass had been trampled into the mucky goop that people, chickens, and dogs alike stood in, walked through, and slept on.

"I understand," Rivas said, turning toward Chavez as if to get his nose as far from the road as possible, "that there are additional complications. But you can't let that deter you. You have to safeguard the revolution."

"Of course," agreed Chavez, downshifting again. He pointed to a street ahead. "This is *Rua Do Lobito*. I believe the place you're looking for is down on the left."

The jeep stopped in front of a rundown store with several wiry Angolan teenagers loitering in the doorway. They parted to let Rivas enter, taking note of his creased trousers and shiny shoes.

Inside, he found a basset hound fast asleep on the floor beside a wooden counter on which a bell sat. When Rivas rang the bell, the dog lazily opened its eyes and gazed up without lifting its head. It thumped its tail lightly as Rivas leaned down and scratched behind a floppy ear.

Elias Haddad, a graying, gritty Lebanese man appeared and welcomed Rivas like an old friend. "At last we meet, sir! How was your trip?" He led Rivas behind the counter and into a small room in the back. The room was empty save two chairs on either side of a table laid with a square of black velvet. A light hung from the ceiling just two feet above the table. "Sit! Sit! Can I get you something to drink?" Rivas held up his hand, declining. Haddad produced a pack of cigarettes, taking one for himself and thrusting the pack toward his guest.

"So, to what do I owe this honor?" he asked in a raspy, ebullient voice.

"You're slowing down," Rivas replied curtly. "What's the problem?"

Haddad's face clouded over. "My sources are drying up while you keep wanting more. That's the problem." He flicked ashes off his cigarette.

"We have a deal," said Rivas.

"Yes, we have a deal. Your soldiers protect my business and I sell through you. But I have to *get* the diamonds from somewhere. And where do I get them? From miners who scratch in river banks and mud pits in the jungle. Do your soldiers protect them? No. The rebels keep taking more land. I haven't seen a diamond from the eastern provinces for as long as I can remember, and now diamonds from Cuije and Lombe are becoming rare. I can tell how the war is going just from the way the diamonds flow, and I say the rebels are winning."

"That's not my problem," said Rivas. "My client wants to keep his money moving. It can't sit for weeks waiting for diamonds to buy. Today you're behind by almost twelve million dollars. That's too much. It's upsetting things. You have to do something."

"What can I do? Rub my hands together and make diamonds?" He opened his palms toward the ceiling. "I'm an honest businessman; my family has traded diamonds here for three generations. I've stuck to our agreement, but it's not working any more." Haddad leaned forward and lowered his voice. "If you want more diamonds I have to buy them from, well... *other* people... expand my supplier base... Understand?"

Rivas sat back, stroked his mustache, and took a long drag on his cigarette as he glanced around the room. Exhaling smoke, he gave his host a hint of a nod which the diamond merchant duly registered.