

Clive Cussler Quantum Tempest

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HOWARD AIR FORCE BASE, PANAMA

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The UH-1 Huey's blades beat the heavy blanket of humid night air like an old conga drum, shaking the palm trees lining the grassy strip in the rotor wash as the chopper descended.

The lone passenger, Juan Cabrillo, stood braced in the open doorway, taking it all in. His tattered tropical shirt and shoulder-length hair danced in the swirling vortex of air racing through the cabin. His theatrical sense craved Wagner's "The Flight of the Valkyries" blasting over a pair of loudspeakers as the Vietnam-era helicopter swooped into a near-emergency landing. But he wasn't in charge of this rodeo.

As soon as the skids hit the wet tarmac, Cabrillo bolted out the door with a splash of his Birkenstock sandals and bent his tall frame over as the chopper roared away. He dashed toward the nearest Quonset hut, one of three occupied by the local CIA station. There was no time to lose.

Langston Overholt IV, his CIA handler, hovered over a table studying a military map and an open dossier folder. Cigarette smoke clouded the room. He glanced up as his best non-official cover (NOC) bolted into the room.

"Juan, my boy." He extended his hand. "Glad you made it."

Though forty years his senior, Overholt's long patrician fingers still gripped like a bench vise. The elder spook carried the air of a well-mannered English squire. Not a bead of sweat could be found on him despite the suffocating humidity. His moisture-wicking nylon shirt and slacks looked freshly pressed. A Colt .45 in a well-worn leather holster perched on his hip.

Few knew Overholt had been recruited by Allen Dulles personally. Fewer still knew of his wet-work exploits carried out behind the Iron Curtain.

"You said the clock's ticking." Cabrillo nodded at a pallet of tarped gear in the corner. "That my kit?"

"Everything you asked for." Overholt's eyes narrowed. He noticed Cabrillo's brow glistening with sweat. "You feeling okay?"

"Never better. It's a sauna out there." Juan wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. "Gimme one of those," he said, nodding at the pack of Camels on the table next to the open dossier.

In truth, a bad case of malaria was racking Juan's swimmer's physique. He'd been popping quinine pills like Pez candies for the last forty-eight hours. The worst of the symptoms had passed, but a raging migraine pounded inside his skull.

Overholt tossed him the pack and Juan fished one out as Overholt fired up his Zippo. Cabrillo took a long pull, filling his lungs with as much nicotine as he could—anything to help cut through the headache.

Overholt eyed him again.

"That him?" Juan said as he pushed past his mentor and over to the dossier. A dozen telephoto pictures and a half page of handwritten notes in English and Spanish were all that filled the file marked "Vladimir Suárez, aka Zhukov."

"What's with the Russian general's name?" Cabrillo asked.

"FARC guerrillas love their romantic noms de guerre."

"Must be a real sweetheart. I don't normally associate FARC killers with romance."

Cabrillo studied Suárez's photos. He noted the cunning eyes, haughty smile, and arrogant posture. It was almost as if he knew he was being photographed secretly and was posing for effect.

Cabrillo was all too familiar with FARC, the Spanish acronym for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. It was the largest and most violent rebel group in the world, spreading Marxist-Leninist ideology throughout Latin America and beyond. Colombia, a nominal American ally, was on the verge of collapse beneath the weight of FARC's ruthless leadership and unrestrained violence. The Colombian Army was mostly busy chasing its tail while taking big casualties trying to subdue a well-trained, highly disciplined, and deadly foe.

"Sweetheart, indeed," Overholt said. "He's FARC's number one assassin and his infamous claim is that he's never failed a mission. The man's more elusive than a jungle jaguar and more venomous than a poison dart frog. Thanks to an anonymous tip, we know where he's currently located—here." Overholt touched a point on the map with his index finger. "But only for the next six hours."

Juan studied the location, paying special attention to the topography.

"At which point he departs for his next mission, according to your message. Any idea what it is?"

"Nothing concrete. But it's somewhat disconcerting that the bigwigs of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission are meeting the day after tomorrow in Ecuador. That's a perfect target for FARC, since the vast majority of their revenue derives from the drug trade."

"He's smack-dab in the middle of the badlands, where the Colombians can't reach him."

"And the nearest SEAL snatch team is eighteen hours away on another deployment."

"That's why you called me."

"If he gets away, it could prove disastrous. We only have that narrow six-hour window to capture him."

Juan mopped more fevered sweat off his face with his hand. "Why not take him out?"

"His capture would prove superlatively useful in dismantling FARC networks around the region. His corpse wouldn't be nearly as informative."

Juan tossed the cigarette to the ground and crushed it beneath his sandal. “So let’s go get him.”

Overholt fought back a grin. He’d first met young Juan as a brush-cut, bleached-blond, blue-eyed surfer boy in a polyester ROTC uniform at Caltech just a few years back.

Now look at him. Eager for the hunt.

Born and bred on the beaches of Southern California, Cabrillo had the powerful, broad-shouldered, wide-chested build of an Olympic swimmer and a dancer’s natural grace. But it was his artistry on the shortboard and high waves that held everyone in awe. To the casual observer, the young man could’ve been written off as just another rock-jawed, carefree surf rat with sand between his toes.

Overholt instantly detected a first-rate intellect behind the mischievous smile and recruited him.

Cabrillo eagerly embraced CIA service as the top-tier opportunity to serve his country and deploy his considerable talents. His linguistic skills were off the charts, and his brief flirtation with dramatic theater all proved invaluable as an undercover field agent. His sangfroid courage was second to none, and he handled small weapons as if they were mere extensions of his preternaturally powerful hands.

But it was Cabrillo’s innate ability to improvise—what Overholt called his “superpower”—that made the much younger man a prodigy in spycraft. He had proven his gift yet again when he proposed a solution for tonight’s mission. It was daring, unconventional, and risky beyond measure.

And the only shot they had.

Cabrillo currently posed as a surf bum and petty drug dealer on the beaches of Tola, Nicaragua—one of the hottest new spots on the world surfing circuit. The Sandinistas found renting longboards to rich German tourists far more profitable than socialism and quite a bit more fun.

Cabrillo’s CIA-fake fiancée, Gretchen, taught him how to hand-paint his long golden hair in the balayage technique with dark brown dye in order to camouflage it. It gave the effect of the blond hair mim-

icking sun-lightened streaks in naturally dark hair and required little maintenance.

Cabrillo was fully Hispanic on his father's side, but inherited his mother's Nordic features. Blond hair and blue eyes were not uncommon in Latin America owing to the extensive European migration of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But blond hair still attracted too much attention in this part of the world, a potential buzzkill for an undercover agent seeking anonymity in order to survive.

Cabrillo hated wearing contacts, so he didn't. Besides, his blue eyes were lady-killers and proved useful in that regard on more than one occasion. His physical appearance perfectly fit his cover story, and his faultless *acento mexicano* passed every sniff test by the local criminals and foreign elements he mixed with as he hoovered up intel on international terrorists and gangs.

"Weather?"

"Latest meteorological reports show favorable conditions, including wind speed. Rain moved out an hour ago."

"Check. Do we have eyes on him now?"

"Negative."

"Why not?" Juan glanced at the map one more time.

"Too dangerous. Any other questions?"

"When do we blow this popsicle stand?"

"The C-130 Hercules you requested is fueled and ready to go on the far side of the base."

Overholt checked his watch. "A Jeep will be here momentarily."

Just then, brakes squealed outside and a horn tapped twice.

Juan grinned, unsurprised by Overholt's precision.

"Grab your gear," Overholt said. "I'll be riding shotgun."

"Still don't trust me?"

"Just watching your six, boyo."

"Perfect." Juan crossed over to the pallet and snatched up his gear, including an oil-slicked Uzi submachine gun he slung around his neck and a pair of oversize packs. He slipped the heaviest one over his shoulders.

“If a FARC rebel doesn’t shoot you, or an Indigenous warrior doesn’t spear you, a jittery Colombian Army patrol may well take aim. And that’s assuming Suárez doesn’t put a round through your skull at a thousand yards. So keep your head on a swivel down there.”

“Just the way you trained me.”

A bead of sweat formed on the end of Cabrillo’s nose. He wiped it away with a pinch, trying not to think of the migraine crushing his skull.

“Let’s roll.”