

PROLOGUE

Santa Maria Airport, Azores island chain, 1951

HUDSON WALLACE STOOD ON THE RAMP just outside the terminal building on a cold, wet night. His leather jacket did little to keep out the chill as a mix of drizzle and fog shrouded the airport and the whole island around it.

Across from him, blue taxi lights glowed in stoic silence, doing little to warm the scene, while above a beam of white light swung through the fog followed moments later by a flash of green as the airport's beacon spun slowly and repetitively.

Hudson doubted anyone was up there to see it, not with the clouds so thick and low, but God help him if he were. Mountains surrounded the airport on three sides, and the island itself was just a speck on the map in the middle of the dark Atlantic. Even in 1951 finding such a spot was no easy task. And if someone could find Santa Maria though this soup, Hudson guessed he'd hit the peaks long before he saw the runway lights through the rain.

So getting to the island was one thing. Leaving was something else. Weather notwithstanding, Hudson wanted to go, couldn't wait

to get moving, in fact. For reasons he knew too well it had become unsafe to stay. Despite that fact, and despite being the pilot and owner of the Lockheed Constellation parked on the ramp, he didn't have the final word.

With little to do but watch and wait, Hudson pulled a silver case from his coat pocket. He drew out a Dunhill cigarette and stuck it between his lips. Ignoring the "No Smoking" signs plastered every twenty feet, he cradled a Zippo lighter to his face and lit the Dunhill.

He was a hundred yards from the nearest plane or fuel line, and the whole airport was soaking wet. He figured the chances of causing a problem were just about nil. And the chances of anyone bothering to leave the warm, dry terminal building to come outside to complain? He figured they were even less than that.

After a deep, satisfying draw, Hudson exhaled.

The heather gray cloud of smoke faded as the door to the terminal opened behind him.

A man wearing ill-fitting clothing stepped out. His round face was partially hidden by a brown hat. His jacket and pants were made of coarse wool and looked like surplus leftovers from the Red Army winter catalog. Thin, fingerless gloves completed the appearance of a peasant traveler, but Hudson knew differently. This man, his passenger, would soon be wealthy. That is, if he could survive long enough to reach America.

"Is the weather going to clear?" the man said.

Another drag on the Dunhill. Another puff of smoke from Hudson before he answered.

"Nope," he said dejectedly. "Not today. Maybe not for a week."

Hudson's passenger was a Russian named Tarasov. He was a

refugee from the Soviet Union. His luggage consisted of two stainless steel trunks, heavy enough that they might have been filled with stones. Both of which sat locked and chained to the floor of Hudson's aircraft.

Hudson hadn't been told what was hidden in those trunks, but the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency was paying him a small fortune to get them and Tarasov into the U.S. He guessed they were paying the Russian a lot more than that to defect and bring the cases with him.

So far, so good. An American agent had managed to get Tarasov to Yugoslavia, another communist country, but under Tito there was no love of Stalin there. A hefty bribe had managed to get Hudson's plane into Sarajevo and out before anyone began asking questions.

Since then they'd traveled west, but word was out and one attempt on the man's life had left Tarasov limping with a bullet still in his leg.

Hudson's orders were to get him to the U.S. as quickly as possible, and keep it quiet on the way, but they never specified a route. A good thing too, because Hudson wouldn't have followed it.

So far, he'd avoided all European cities of note, traveling to the Azores instead, where he could refuel and then go nonstop to the States. It was a good plan, but he hadn't counted on the weather, or on Tarasov's fear of flying.

"They'll find us here sooner or later," Hudson said. He turned to his passenger. "They have agents everywhere, in every harbor and airport at least."

"But you said this was out of the way."

“Yeah,” Hudson said. “And when they don’t spot us at any place that’s ‘in the way,’ they’re gonna start looking elsewhere. Probably already have.”

Hudson took another drag on the cigarette. He wasn’t sure the Russians would check the Azores. But two Americans and a foreigner landing in what was essentially an international airliner—and then waiting around for three days without talking to anyone—was the kind of thing that might draw attention.

“At some point, you’re going to have to decide what you’re more afraid of,” he said, nodding toward the plane sitting alone in the drizzle. “A little turbulence or a knife in the gut.”

Tarasov looked up to the churning dark sky. He shrugged and held his hands out, palms up, like a man trying to show the world he had no money. “But we cannot fly like this,” he said.

“Land,” Hudson clarified. “We cannot *land* like this.” He made a motion with his hand like a plane descending and flaring for landing.

“But we can sure as hell take off,” he continued, raising his hand again. “And then we can head due west. No mountains that way. Nothing but ocean . . . and freedom.”

Tarasov shook his head, but Hudson could see his resolve faltering.

“I checked the weather in New York,” he said, lying once again. He’d done no such thing, not wanting anyone to guess his destination. “It’s clear for the next forty-eight hours, but after that . . .”

Tarasov seemed to understand.

“We go now or we’re stuck here for a week.”

His passenger did not appear to like either choice. He looked at the ground and then out toward the big silver Constellation with its

four massive piston engines and sleek triple tails. He stared into the rain and the cloak of the night beyond.

“You can get us through?”

Hudson flicked the cigarette to the ground and crushed it out with his boot. He had him. “I can get us through,” he said.

Reluctantly, Tarasov nodded.

Hudson looked out toward the plane and made a winding motion with his hand. The sharp sound of the starter motor rang out and black smoke belched from the number 3 engine. The plugs fired and the big radial engine came to life. In moments, the huge propeller was spinning at fifteen hundred rpms, blasting rain and spray out behind the aircraft. Seconds later the number 1 engine sprang to life.

Hudson had hoped he would be able to convince their passenger to fly. He'd left Charlie Simpkins, his copilot, in the plane and told him to keep her primed to go.

“Come on,” Hudson said.

Tarasov took a deep breath and then stepped away from the door. He began walking toward the waiting plane. Halfway there, a shot rang out. It echoed across the wet tarmac, and Tarasov lurched forward, arching his back and twisting to the side.

“No!” Hudson yelled.

He sprang forward, grabbing Tarasov, keeping the man on his feet and hustling him toward the plane. Another shot rang out. This one missed, skipping off the concrete to the right.

Tarasov stumbled.

“Come on!” Hudson shouted, trying to get him up.

The next bullet hit Hudson, catching him in the shoulder, spinning him around. He fell to the ground and rolled. The shell had

knocked him downward like someone hitting him from above. He guessed the shot had come from the terminal's roof.

Wincing in pain, Hudson pulled a Colt .45 from his shoulder holster. He spun and aimed toward the roof of the building, firing blindly in what he guessed was the approximate direction of the sniper.

After blasting off four shots, Hudson thought he saw a shape duck behind the lip of the terminal's roof. He fired another shot in that direction and then grabbed Tarasov once again, pulling him backward toward the plane, dragging him across the ground like a sled, until they reached the stairs near the front of the aircraft.

"Get up," Hudson shouted, trying to haul him up.

"I . . . can't," Tarasov said.

"I'll help you," he said, lifting. "You just have to—"

As he pulled Tarasov to his feet another shot cracked, and the man sprawled to the ground face-first.

Hudson ducked behind the stairs and shouted toward the aircraft's open doors.

"Charlie!"

No response.

"Charlie! What's the word?"

"We're ready to go!" a voice yelled back.

Hudson heard the last of the engines winding up. He grabbed Tarasov and rolled him over. The man's body was limp like a rag doll's. The final shot had gone through his neck. His eyes stared lifelessly up and back.

"Damn," Hudson said.

Half the mission was blown, but they still had the steel trunks and whatever was in them. Even though the CIA was a secret or-

ganization, they had offices and an address. If he had to, Hudson would go find them and bang on the front door until someone took him in and paid him.

He turned and fired toward the terminal again. And in that moment he noticed the lights from a pair of cars racing toward him from the far end of the ramp. He didn't figure they were cavalry.

He dashed up the stairs and dove through the door as a bullet ricocheted off the Connie's smooth skin.

"Go!" he shouted.

"What about our passenger?"

"Too late for him."

As the copilot shoved the throttles forward Hudson slammed the door shut, wrenching the handle down just as the plane began to move. Over the droning sound of the engines he heard the crackle of glass breaking.

He turned to see Charlie Simpkins slumped over toward the center console, his seat belt holding him up.

"Charlie?"

The plane was on the move as Hudson ran forward. He dove into the cockpit as another shot hit and then another.

Staying on the floor, he reached up and slammed the throttles forward. As the engines roared he scrambled under the pilot's seat and pushed hard on the right rudder. The big plane began to pick up momentum, moving ponderously but gathering speed and turning.

Another rifle shot hit the sheet metal behind him and then two more. Hudson guessed he had turned far enough that the aircraft was pointing away from the terminal now. He climbed up into his seat and turned the plane out onto the runway.

At this point he had to go. There was nowhere safe back on that

ramp. The plane was pointed in the right direction, and Hudson wasn't waiting for any clearance. He pushed the throttles to the firewall, and the big plane began to accelerate.

For a second or two he heard bullets punching holes in the aircraft's skin, but he soon was out of range, roaring down the runway and closing in on rotational velocity.

With the visibility as bad as it was and the shattered window on the left side, Hudson strained to see the red lights at the far end of the runway. They were coming up fast.

He popped the flaps down five degrees and waited until he was a hundred yards from the end of the asphalt before pulling back on the yoke. The Connie tilted its nose up, hesitated for a long, sickening second, and then leapt off the end of the runway, wheels whipping through the tall grass beyond the tarmac.

Climbing and turning to a westbound heading, Hudson raised the landing gear and then reached over to his copilot.

"Charlie?" he said, shaking him. "Charlie!"

Simpkins gave no reaction. Hudson checked for a pulse but didn't find one.

"Damn it," Hudson said to himself.

Another casualty. During the war a half a decade back, Hudson had lost too many friends to count, but there was always a reason for it. Here, he wasn't sure. Whatever was in those cases had better be worth the lives of two men.

He pushed Simpkins back up into his seat and concentrated on flying. The crosswind was bad, the turbulence worse, and gazing into a wall of dark gray mist as he climbed through the clouds was disorienting and dangerous.

With no horizon or anything thing else to judge the plane's ori-

entation visually, the body's sensations could not be trusted. Many a pilot had flown his plane right into the ground in conditions like these. All the while thinking he was flying straight and level.

Many more had taken perfectly level planes and stalled and spun them because their bodies told them they were turning and falling. It was like being drunk and feeling the bed spin; you knew it wasn't happening, but you couldn't stop the sensation.

To avoid it, Hudson kept his eyes down, scanning the instruments and making sure the plane's wings stayed level. He kept the climb to a safe five-degree angle.

At two thousand feet and three miles out, the weather got worse. Turbulence shook the plane, violent up- and downdrafts threatening to rip it apart. Rain lashed the windshield and metal around him. The hundred-fifty-mile-an-hour slipstream kept most of it from pouring in through the shattered corner window, but some of the moisture sprayed around the cockpit, and the constant noise was like a freight train passing at full speed.

With the bullet holes and the broken window, Hudson couldn't pressurize the plane, but he could still climb to fourteen thousand feet or more without it becoming too cold to function. He reached behind his seat and touched a green bottle filled with pure oxygen; he would need that up higher.

Another wave of turbulence rocked the plane, but with the gear up and all four engines going Hudson figured he could power through the storm and out the other side.

The Constellation was one of the most advanced aircraft of the day. Designed by Lockheed with help from world-famous aviator Howard Hughes, it could cruise at 350 knots and travel three thou-

sand miles without refueling. Had they picked Tarasov up a little farther west, Hudson would have gone for Newfoundland or Boston without stopping.

He turned to check his heading. He was crabbing to the north more than he intended. He went to correct the turn and felt a spell of dizziness. He leveled off, just as a warning light came on.

The generator in the number 1 engine was going, and the engine was running extremely rough. A moment later the number 2 engine began to cut out, and the main electrical warning light came on.

Hudson tried to concentrate. He felt light-headed and groggy as if he'd been drugged. He grabbed his shoulder where the bullet had hit him. The wound was painful, but he couldn't tell how much blood he was losing.

On the instrument panel in front of him, the artificial horizon—an instrument pilots use to keep wings level when they can't see outside—was tumbling. Beside it the directional gyro was tumbling.

Somehow the aircraft was failing simultaneously with Hudson's own body.

Hudson looked up at the old compass, the ancient instrument that was the pilot's last resort should everything mechanical go wrong. It showed him in a hard left turn. He tried to level off, but he banked too far in the other direction. The stall horn sounded because his airspeed had dropped, and an instant later the warning lights lit up all over his instrument panel. Just about everything that could flash was flashing. The stall horn blared in his ear. The gear warning sounded.

Lightning flared close enough to blind him, and he wondered if it had hit the plane.

He grabbed the radio, switched to a shortwave band the CIA had given him, and began to broadcast.

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday,” he said. “This is—”

The plane jerked to the right and then the left. The lightning snapped again, a million-volt spark going off right in front of his eyes. He felt a shock through the radio and dropped the microphone like a hot potato. It swung beneath the panel on its cord.

Hudson reached for the microphone. He missed. He leaned farther forward and tried again, stretching, and then grasping it with his fingertips. He pulled it back ready to broadcast again.

And then he looked up just in time to see clouds vanish and the black waters of the Atlantic filling the horizon and rushing up toward him.