

GUN RUNNERS



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AN OUTRUN BOOKS FREE PREVIEW

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by Jono Way

The Explosive Prequel to Gun Runners '84



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Agent Karl Indigo went undercover for the ATF. He never returned.

The sting was meant to shut down a powerful arms syndicate—instead, it vanished in silence and blood.

What follows is the Prologue that starts it all: free and unabridged, straight from the paperback.

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Prologue: Karl Indigo

The jungle didn't just surround you; it consumed you. It wormed its way into your skin, seeped into your bones, curled around your lungs like a slow suffocation.

The air was thick with humidity, choking, the kind of heat that made sweat bead on your forehead before you even moved. The mud was everywhere, in your boots, in your gear, in your teeth when you clenched your jaw too hard. The sounds never stopped, never let you breathe, the distant pop of gunfire, the whining buzz of mosquitoes, the low murmur of men too tired to talk but too afraid to sleep.

Karl Indigo had arrived in Vietnam barely nineteen years old, just another face in a sea of young men sent halfway across the world to fight a war they didn't understand. They were told it was about stopping communism, about holding the line, about duty and honor and sacrifice.

The first time Karl saw a man bleed out in the dirt, the first time he fired his M16 into the darkness at figures he couldn't even see, the first time he realized the enemy was just as scared, just as young, just as desperate to go home as the men around him, he knew the truth. This war wasn't about ideals. It wasn't about freedom. It was about survival.

The jungle was a living thing, a beast that swallowed men whole and left nothing but bones and rusting helmets. The trees were too thick, the canopy blocking out the sun, the shadows stretching long even in daylight. It was too easy to get lost, to step off a path and disappear forever. The Viet Cong knew that. They didn't fight in the open, they fought from the ground, from the trees, from the tunnels beneath their feet, waiting, watching, turning the land itself into a weapon.

Karl learned fast. You had to. He learned how to stay quiet, how to move without making a sound. He learned that gunfire wasn't just gunfire, you could tell by the crack if it was close, tell by the echo if it was aimed at you. He learned that orders from men in clean uniforms didn't mean a damn thing when you were knee-deep in the mud, when you were out of ammo, when the jungle itself was trying to kill you. He learned to trust the men beside him and no one else but even that wasn't enough.

He'd been part of a platoon in the valley, twenty-six men sent on a routine patrol, told they were moving into an area that had already been cleared. They were ambushed at dawn, the jungle exploding around them in a firestorm of bullets and screaming. The radio operator went down first, his throat opened before he could even call for backup. The medic never had a chance. Karl remembered the heat of his own rifle, the empty magazines piling at his feet, the iron tang of blood thick in the air. He remembered the sound of men crying out for their mothers, for their wives, for someone to pull them out of this nightmare. He remembered dragging a kid no older than seventeen behind a fallen tree, pressing his hands against the wound in his stomach, knowing damn well he wasn't going to make it. When it was over six men walked out. Six. Out of twenty-six. He was one of them and for what? Karl didn't know anymore.

The war dragged on, day after day, firefight after firefight. Every dawn felt like rolling the dice. Would today be the day the sniper in the trees picked him off? The day he stepped on a landmine? The day he didn't wake up at all? There were men who broke from the waiting. Some ate their own rifle barrels just to make the waiting stop. Some walked straight into the jungle and never came back. Others did worse, things they could never talk about, things they could never take back.

When it finally ended, there was no victory. Just silence. Karl boarded a military transport plane, packed shoulder-to-shoulder with other survivors, all of them sitting in stunned quiet as the engines roared. No one spoke. No one knew what to say. The war was over for them, but it wasn't really over, it never would be. It was in their heads now, in their bones, burned into the backs of their eyelids.

When he stepped off the plane onto American soil, there were no parades. No cheers, just stares, whispers, spit on the sidewalk. People looked at them like they were the villains. Like they had wanted to go over there. Like they hadn't lost everything already.

Karl tried to go home, to forget, to pretend he could be normal. It lasted three months before the walls of his apartment started closing in, before he realized he wasn't built for this world anymore. He tried to work, tried factory jobs, loading docks, construction. He couldn't stand the noise, couldn't stand the way people looked at him when they saw the scars, when they saw the thousand-yard stare. They didn't get it. They never would.

Then one day, the ATF came knocking—the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. They needed men who weren't afraid to fight. Men who could go places others couldn't, do things others wouldn't. They needed someone to infiltrate the arms trade, to track the flow of stolen U.S. weapons coming out of Vietnam, out of war zones, into the hands of criminals and terrorists. It wasn't home. It wasn't purpose but it was war and war was the only thing Karl knew.

The cold, lifeless corridors of the ATF's Miami division headquarters felt like another battlefield, a distant echo of the jungles he once knew. In 1976 Karl Indigo, former Vietnam vet, now a seasoned ATF operative stood before a board of faceless decision-makers. Men in suits, men with power, men who had never fired a round in anger. They told him he was chosen—not asked, not volunteered. Chosen.

His military background made him the perfect candidate for deep cover operations. He knew how to survive in hostile environments, how to slip through the cracks of organized chaos. More importantly, he knew how to adapt, how to become someone else entirely. That was the game now, not a uniformed war in the jungle, but a slow-burn deception in the neon-glow underworld of the Caribbean and Central America.

The assignment? Infiltrate the burgeoning arms trade, an illicit world growing fat on America's surplus of weapons left to rot after Vietnam. The government had turned a blind eye to where these weapons ended up, but now, with tensions rising and whispers of dangerous buyers stockpiling for unknown conflicts, the ATF had to act. Karl was to become the ghost within the gun running networks, his mission clear. Find the biggest buyer, work his way into the trade, and bring down whoever was fuelling the fire.

Deep cover meant severing ties. No support. No backup. If he was caught, the agency would deny him. Karl knew this wasn't about justice. It was about leverage. about playing one kingpin against another until the ATF could sweep in and claim victory. They didn't care what it did to him.

Karl wasn't sure if he cared either. With nothing to go back to, no home left stateside except faded memories of a country that forgot its returning soldiers, this wasn't just another assignment. It was an escape; a second war he could disappear into. This time, there would be no coming back.

Karl didn't drop into the underworld overnight. He sank into it, slow and deliberate, like a man wading deeper into the ocean, knowing the current was already pulling him away. The first months were about establishing credibility. The arms trade was a world built on trust and paranoia, and no one gave a damn about your name, only what you could bring to the table. You had to prove yourself before you were worth doing business with. That meant starting small, playing the game right, making sure the right people saw him at the right times.

He began in Miami, where the underbelly of the city was alive with cartel money, corrupt officials, and ex-military brokers looking to turn old stock into gold. He ran fake deals, working with ATF assets to bait small-time traffickers into selling stolen military-grade weapons. Some were straight from government armories. Pilfered crates of M16s and M60s that had never even seen combat. Others had been smuggled in from Vietnam, their history written in rust and dried blood.

Once Karl had a few minor deals under his belt, he let himself be noticed. A middleman here, an enforcer there. He wasn't playing a role; he was becoming it. He shaved down the cop instincts, let the soldier in him come back. Karl didn't just talk like a gun runner; he moved like one, dealt like one. He learned how to buy loyalty with silence, how to spot a tail in a crowded bar, how to walk away from a deal that smelled wrong.

Miami was just the beginning. Havana, Nicaragua, Panama, they were where the real business happened.

Havana (1978): The city ran on secrets and desperation. The Cuban military was sitting on stockpiles of Soviet arms, and underpaid soldiers weren't above moving inventory for the right price. Karl embedded himself in the bars and brothels where deals were whispered over glasses of rum, mapping out who supplied who, which shipments were meant for which clients.

Nicaragua (Late 1978): The country was on fire, caught in the rising conflict between the Sandinistas and the ruling Somoza government. Everyone wanted weapons. Karl used the chaos to track shipments moving through the jungles, following the paper trail of deals made by desperate men trying to buy another day of survival. He watched as U.S. weapons, meant for "government assistance," were quietly diverted into private hands.

Panama (1979): The canal zone was one of the biggest smuggling arteries in the world. Everything flowed through there. Cocaine, weapons, even people. Karl made his way into the circles of military officers who were selling off American stock to fund their own operations. He learned the routes, the distribution hubs, the way shipments disappeared into the jungle before reappearing in war zones miles away.

Throughout it all, Karl kept feeding intel back to his handler at the ATF—Nick Strike. Tracking shipments, identifying key buyers, setting up small-scale busts that wouldn't blow his cover. He became a name in the trade, a broker who could be trusted, a man who knew how to get things done.

As the years went on, the lines blurred. There were nights when he looked at the men he drank with, the men he made deals with, and he couldn't tell if they were any worse than the ones giving him orders. That was the dangerous part. He was supposed to be playing a role but what if the role was playing him?

By the time Karl left Panama, he wasn't just infiltrating the arms trade, he was living it. The thin line between undercover work didn't feel like it existed any longer and he wasn't sure which side of it, if any, he was standing on anymore.

Karl had become a name in the business, a face people recognized, a man people trusted. That was the dangerous part.

In Miami, he had been a shadow lurking in backroom deals, listening, watching, but by the time he reached Panama, he was walking into deals like he belonged there. Because, in a way, he did. He knew the dealers. The real ones. The men whose names never made the papers, the ones who controlled who got what and when. They weren't street-level pushers or two-bit smugglers. They were businessmen. Some were Cuban exiles, others former military officers turned black-market brokers. A few had government ties, using backdoor channels to move weapons under the noses of the very people Karl was supposedly working for.

He knew the routes. He could map them in his head, where shipments moved from, how they crossed borders, which authorities looked the other way, and which ones had to be paid off. Some routes ran through the jungles of Central America, hidden among cartel cocaine shipments. Others traveled through old CIA airstrips, still operational, still moving American stockpile weapons to places that weren't supposed to have them. These were the guns he was supposed to stop but he didn't just stop them, he helped move them, if it meant keeping his cover. He knew the people at the top. He had sat at their tables, drank with them, laughed with them. Karl knew who was making money off war, who was funding revolutions, who was preparing for something bigger. Or at least he thought he did.

Vincent "Viper" Morelli had become a major player in the trade & Karl had got close enough to Morelli's network that he could see the outlines of it, even if he didn't yet know the full picture. At first, he had told himself it was all part of the job. Keep the act going. Get deeper. Get closer. But something had changed.

There were nights when he was drinking whiskey with men he was supposed to be bringing down, when he was laughing at their jokes, when he was shaking their hands and making deals and it didn't feel like an act anymore. Because these men weren't all that different from the ones Karl had fought beside in Vietnam.

Some of them were soldiers who had been left behind, just like he had been. Some were men who had lost faith in the governments that had abandoned them. Some were fighting wars that no one else cared about. Some were monsters and Karl had learned to drink with all of them.

He wasn't a cop anymore. Not really. He was something else now and he wasn't sure he could ever go back.

By 1980, Karl Indigo wasn't just an undercover agent anymore—he was part of the machine. Three years inside had hollowed him out, stripping away whatever was left of the man who once carried a badge. He had done his job too well; he had become the kind of man he was supposed to be hunting. Now he wasn't sure who the real criminals were.

The traffickers? He'd spent three years drinking with them, moving cargo, brokering deals, learning how they operated. They weren't all the monsters the government made them out to be. Sure, some were. Some were killers, some were slavers, some were psychopaths who moved guns because they liked the destruction they caused. But others?

Others were just men filling a void, playing their role in a system that had existed long before Karl got involved. Some men just did it so they could go home at the end of the day and feed their family.

Then there was the government, the people Karl was supposed to be working for. The ones who turned a blind eye when it suited them. Karl had seen too many American-made weapons smuggled into conflicts the U.S. Government claimed it wasn't involved in. He'd seen crates stamped with PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES being unloaded in war zones, handed off to the same people the ATF and the DEA were supposedly fighting. It didn't add up. It never did. Maybe it wasn't about stopping the flow of weapons. Maybe it was just about controlling it.

Then there were the feds pretending they were in control. Karl had been one of them. Sitting in air-conditioned offices, looking at maps, acting like they understood the game they were playing. The truth was nobody was in control.

Karl had spent three years risking his life for men in suits who had never stepped into the places they were ordering him to go. Three years selling the lie that they were winning.

Karl had seen the truth firsthand.

The war wasn't ending. It was just changing shape. The players shifted, the names on the shipments changed, but the game never stopped, and Karl was tired of pretending that it did.

By late September 1980, Karl Indigo didn't know whose side he was on anymore. It had been three years since he crossed the line between cop and criminal, three years since he started walking in the same circles as the men he was supposed to be bringing down.

He had spent so long playing the role—he wasn't sure it was an act anymore.

Speaking of men in suits pretending they were in control, here he was, sitting in a rickety safehouse, back in Havana, once again reporting to his handler, Nick Strike. Strike's career was a timeline of calculated, ruthless efficiency, shaping him into a man capable of controlling entire investigations, eliminating threats from a distance. There were similarities between the two of them.

Strike enlisted young, just out of high school, and was handpicked for sniper training after demonstrating unnatural precision in marksmanship drills. The war that made him was Korea back in 1950. Korea was a war of waiting, of cold patience. The mountains, the bitter wind, the endless white of the snow. Perfect conditions for a man who could kill without emotion.

Strike was sent behind enemy lines to eliminate high-value Communist officers, working as a lone asset or in two-man reconnaissance teams. He learned to survive without backup, to take a shot and disappear.

He had been Karl's mentor at the ATF so once again, when summoned, Karl had come running like a well-trained pet dog. At least Strike showed up, even if it was only once every few months. At least he was willing to get his hands dirty, unlike his superiors, who never stepped out of their air-conditioned offices, away from their spotless desks, their neatly typed reports, and their safe, theoretical version of danger.

They had never had blood under their nails, never had to talk their way out of a deal where one wrong word would get their throat slit.

At least Strike had the real-world experience of the good, the bad and the grotesque. Strike had been deployed in deep reconnaissance teams, eliminating high-value targets behind enemy lines.

Known for his patience and cold efficiency. Strike wasn't a wild, reckless shooter, he was a ghost, hitting targets no one else could. His longest confirmed kill was a staggering distance, adding to his legend.

By the late 60's the U.S. was dealing with a massive rise in arms smuggling, domestic terrorism, and cartel-related gun running. Strike was recruited into the ATF because they needed men who weren't afraid to operate in the shadows. He became the ATF's top marksman. By the mid-1970s, he was one of the most feared and respected tactical snipers in the entire federal system. Strike quickly rose in the ranks, not just as a field agent but as a master manipulator of operations.

His career changed when he was promoted into ATF intelligence operations, where he began manipulating undercover networks instead of pulling the trigger himself. He was no longer just a shooter. Nick Strike became a strategist, learning to control people the same way he once controlled the battlefield. His tactical mind allowed him to move agents like chess pieces, ensuring their targets never saw the takedown coming. Strike learned the structure of power. Who gave the orders, who took the fall, and how crime families ensured deniability, and he passed everything he learned onto Karl. Enabling him. Helping him to dig deeper.

The men in suits would send Strike down from the mountain to touch base with Karl, to handle their dirty work, listened to his reports, skimmed through Karl's updates, nodded like they understood, then disappeared back into their desk job bureaucracy. They didn't care. With Strike's position at the ATF, they left him to plan the operations and dump the execution onto Karl. Because, in the end, shit rolls downhill. And Karl was at the bottom of the hill.

Did Strike even care? Karl wasn't sure. Strike had been his only connection to home, the only familiar voice in a world where nothing else felt real. But looking at him now, standing there in his crisp suit, like this was just another business meeting, Karl realized something.

Home didn't exist anymore. Just Nick Strike and wherever the ATF sent him.

It always felt like Strike had his back, like Strike would pull him out if it went sideways, but Karl never tested that theory, preferring instead to bail himself out. Rule number one in this game: trust only the man in the mirror.

Across the room, Cole Ramirez was watching him. Special Agent Cole Ramirez was the kind of federal agent Karl used to be, by-the-book, clean-cut, and convinced that there was a right side and a wrong side. A product of the new ATF, men who hadn't been in the game long enough to understand that the world wasn't black and white, but a thousand shades of gray smeared in blood and gunpowder.

Karl could feel it. Judgment. Suspicion. Mistrust. Cole left it unsaid, but Karl didn't need him to. It was written all over his face.

Cole Ramirez looked like a cop. Not just any cop. A young, clean-cut, strait-laced federal agent who still believed in the badge, still believed that law and order meant something. He had the kind of face that belonged on a recruitment poster, the kind of look that made civilians feel safe and criminals take a second glance.

To Cole, Karl wasn't an undercover agent who had gone too deep. He was one of them. And maybe he was. The problem was the man in the mirror's reflection had changed.

The once-cropped, neat soldier's buzz cut was gone. That clean, regulation military look? A distant memory. Now? A thick red beard covered his jaw, rough and unkempt, the kind of thing only criminals and outlaws wore. His once-neat hair was shaggy, long, slicked back from too many nights spent in Havana bars, too many days where keeping up the act had become second nature.

He didn't seem like an agent anymore. He didn't even look like a man pretending to be an arms dealer. He was one. And the worst part? He wasn't sure he wanted to be anything else but here he was in the here and now.

Late Night. Havana, Cuba. The ceiling fan spun lazily overhead, its warped metal blades struggling against the thick, humid air, doing little more than stirring the heat around like a suffocating blanket.

The walls of the safehouse were cracked and faded, the once-white plaster now an uneven patchwork of grime and peeling paint, the kind of place that had seen too many late-night meetings, too many whispered deals that ended in blood.

The wooden shutters rattled against the breeze rolling in from the Havana streets outside, the glow of a nearby cantina bleeding through the gaps, flickering against the walls in pulses of red and blue.

The rhythm of the night city moved around them, but inside the safehouse, time felt slower, heavier, the kind of slow-burn tension that crawled under the skin.

The faint thump of Blondie's "Heart of Glass" carried in from the bars down the alley, the bassline pulsing like a heartbeat beneath the conversation, mixing with the distant roar of laughter, the occasional clatter of a bottle against pavement.

This was Havana at the edge of midnight, alive with vice and violence, where fortunes changed hands over drinks, where death came cheap, and where no one asked questions they didn't want the answers to.

The room itself was sparse. A single rickety wooden table, chairs that wobbled when you shifted too much weight, an ashtray overflowing with crushed-out cigarettes and cheap cigar butts. Strike had already made himself at home, ready to pull the strings on his latest puppet show. Karl sat opposite him, elbows on the table, his thick red beard damp with sweat, his long shaggy hair pushed back, revealing the sharp edge of suspicion in his eyes.

He had been in too many rooms like this, in too many places where the walls were thin, where the air carried the scent of old regret and lingering death.

He had been in this world too long to trust anything that seemed too easy, too clean. This should have been the moment he walked away but instead, he was here, watching the man across from him, trying to ignore the growing weight in his gut that said something about this

didn't sit right.

Cole stood near the door, arms crossed, jaw tight, the only one who still looked like a cop. He didn't lean against the wall, didn't relax into the chair. He stood, watching Karl. Not Strike. Not the map on the table. Karl. Like he expected something to go wrong, like he was waiting for Karl to make the wrong move. Maybe he didn't trust Strike either, but Karl could tell. To Cole, Karl was the one who didn't belong. Three years inside had done that. The red beard, the shaggy hair, the way Karl moved now, not like a cop playing a role, but like a man who had lived the life long enough for it to leave its mark on him.

The briefing hadn't even started yet, and Karl was already losing his grip on whose side he was supposed to be on. Karl's gaze drifted from the map on the table to the cracked wall behind Strike, but his mind was somewhere else entirely.

The room around him faded into the neon glow bleeding through the shutters, into the distant hum of Havana's streets, into the memory of nights spent at tables just like this, but with different men, people who didn't know who he really was. Men he had spent years drinking with, dealing with, laughing with.

Some of them were husbands, trying to keep their families above water in a world where honest work didn't pay. Some were brothers, bonded not by blood but by survival, watching each other's backs in a business that could get you killed over a bad shipment or a wrong word. Some were fathers, men who had made their peace with selling death so their kids wouldn't have to grow up starving.

He had seen them call home after a deal, seen them stumble into bars after a long night, faces worn, eyes heavy with exhaustion, joking about how much trouble they'd be in if their wives found out how late they were. They weren't saints, but they weren't devils either and here he was. About to take them all down. Some of them were going to prison, if they were lucky. Some of them wouldn't make it out of the night.

Karl had been in too many busts that turned into shootouts. Too many men dead on the pavement, staring at the sky like they were trying to figure out where it all went wrong. He knew exactly how this was going to play out. Some of the men he had shaken hands with, the people who had trusted him, called him a friend, were going to take a bullet in the next few hours, and the ones that didn't? They'd spend the rest of their lives behind bars, wondering who set them up. Wondering if it was him.

Karl felt his jaw clench, the weight of it pressing against his chest. This was the job. This was what he had signed up for, but if that was true, then why the hell did it feel like he was betraying the only people who had ever treated him like he belonged?

He was the rabid dog that was about to bite. Double-cross them.

"Karl?"

"Karl?"

"INDIGO!!" Bellowed Strike. Karl's focus shifted back to the room, looking Strike in the eye.

"You back in the room now?" asked Strike, maintaining eye contact. Karl nodded.

Nick Strike moved through the room like a man who already knew the ending to the story. He was too smooth, too at ease, like Havana's heat didn't touch him, like the grime of the safehouse couldn't stick to his tailored navy-blue jacket. He didn't sit down right away. He

strolled instead, his pace slow, deliberate, like a man who enjoyed being watched.

Strike had a way of making himself the center of a room without forcing it, without needing to raise his voice or throw his weight around but when he didn't feel like he was the focal point, he sure as hell ensured he was.

Karl had seen a hundred men like him in this business, men who never had to do the dirty work themselves because they were smart enough to let others bleed for them. But Strike was different, wasn't he? They had history. Or at least, Karl had thought they did.

"Christ, partner. You look like you've been living in a war zone."

Karl blew out a breath through his nose, watching as Strike leant down palms flat on the table, that smirk still carved into his face. It was a game to him.

Karl's voice was low, flat. "That's because I have."

Strike flashed a grin. "And you're still alive and kicking."

Karl shrugged, watching Strike, wondering why his gut was telling him something wasn't right. The last time he'd seen him had been, what? Three months ago? Maybe longer? Strike showed up when it suited him, when the agency needed to check in, when they wanted to remind Karl that they still existed. When they wanted to remind him who he worked for. Did Strike actually give a shit about him? Karl wasn't sure anymore. Maybe he had, once. Back when Karl was still just a soldier-turned-fed, still naive enough to believe that what they were doing mattered.

But after three years in the muck, after watching men with government pay checks move weapons just as easily as the traffickers did, after seeing ATF ops get shut down not because they failed but because the wrong people were making too much money off them, Karl didn't believe in much anymore and looking at Strike now? He wasn't sure he believed in him either. But this was his last job. This was his way out—one last job.

The sharp crack of Strike's palm against the table cut through the room like a gunshot, rattling the half-empty ashtray and sending loose dust drifting from the warped wooden surface. The impact wasn't just for effect. It was a signal, a marker in time, the moment things shifted.

"This is it." Strike's voice was flat, unwavering, the voice of a man who was already picturing the job as done. "The big one. The deal we've been waiting for."

Three years undercover had taught Karl to remain still, to absorb, to listen. Across the room, Cole Ramirez's posture stiffened, his folded arms pressing tighter against his chest. Karl didn't need to look at him to know the expression on his face. Doubt, distrust, that same barely restrained frustration he always had when Strike walked into a room.

Karl got it. Strike had a way of making everything feel like a done deal, like they weren't walking into a storm but stepping onto a perfectly paved road. It was his style. Sharp suits, quick words, confidence that didn't ask for permission. The man was the ATF's very own stamp of authority.

Supervisory Special Agent Strike, overseeing arms trafficking operations in the Miami field office. He didn't need a gun in his hands to sell authority anymore. He carried it in his voice, in the way he stood, in the way he never let a room dictate its tone. Strike dictated the room.

Karl glanced down at the map now spread across the table, creases worn deep into the paper, inked markings indicating positions, exits, pressure points. He could see it playing out already, could trace the movements in his head, the way a deal like this would flow.

Strike tapped a spot near the edge of the docks. "This is where it goes down. The Cuban government has been trying to crack down on illegal arms smuggling through its ports, worried that weapons are slipping through Havana into rebel forces in Latin America. With relations between the U.S. and Cuba still frozen, there's no formal cooperation between Cuban authorities and U.S. law enforcement..."

Karl shook his head, another ghost op. Nothing new.

Strike continued, "However the Cuban government has been losing control over smuggling routes through its ports, where U.S. military-grade weapons have been slipping into the hands of local criminals and foreign rebel groups. Some of these groups threaten Cuban interests, especially paramilitary factions in Latin America that oppose Cuban-backed regimes."

Strike laid down a batch of photos depicting the weapons, their destinations & the people intending on using them, as if dealing a winning hand of cards.

"Morelli's network is one of the biggest players moving guns through Havana. By helping the U.S. take Morelli out, Cuba eliminates a major smuggling route and strengthens its grip on weapons trade within its borders. We stop these shipments falling into the wrong hands at home. It's a win-win."

Karl shrugged—nobody ever wins.

Strike kept running his mouth, "The ATF has been tracking stolen U.S. military weapons from Vietnam and beyond moving through Morelli's operation. The U.S. government can't legally operate in Cuba, but if Cuban authorities cooperate, the ATF can justify a quiet joint operation without violating political boundaries."

Politics. Karl couldn't give a shit about politics. He just wanted Strike to stop flapping his gums and get to the point.

"This is a covert, unofficial agreement between certain Cuban military officials and ATF top-brass, part of a larger, classified intelligence-sharing effort to keep U.S. weapons out of communist hands."

Ramirez gave Karl another stone-cold stare. This guy didn't trust him one iota & Karl knew it in abundance, but this guy, like everyone else, didn't matter anymore. Just get this done and it's over. Three years down, deep down and Karl was finally moving on.

Strike was still talking, "Cuba doesn't publicly admit to working with the U.S., and the U.S. doesn't have to explain why its agents were involved in a sting on foreign soil. If things go south, neither country is officially responsible."

Karl chuckled.

"Something funny Agent Indigo?" snapped Strike, staring Karl down.

Karl shook his head, "Blameless as always."

"You know the game better than most Agent! Are you done?" Strike stared Karl down again.

If only he was done. Karl just shrugged and waved the issue away through the muggy heat.

“This is it. This is the one. Morelli’s stepping out of the shadows, and he’s doing it for you, Karl. You played the long game, and it’s paying off. Morelli trusts you. He trusts you enough to show up in person. That doesn’t happen. Ever.”

Karl gave a slow nod. He knew that already. Morelli never left the safety of his network, never exposed himself to risk. If he was coming, it meant this deal was big enough to pull him out into the open.

Strike tapped the marked point on the map. The Havana docks. “We’ve got everything in place. Cole, you’re the supplier. Morelli believes you’re moving a shipment of U.S. military surplus. Clean, untraceable. Karl, you’re Morelli’s point man. You’re carrying the money. That’s why this works. That’s why this is happening.”

There was no part of this plan Karl didn’t already know. He had lived and breathed it for the past three years, a sting constructed and nurtured over three years of careful deception, deep cover operations, and a level of patience most agents didn’t have the stomach for.

This wasn’t just a bust. It was a masterpiece. Morelli was walking into a perfect trap.

Karl could recite every detail of this plan in his sleep. Every piece had been meticulously placed, each move choreographed, the final play designed to look as real as possible to everyone involved. Because it had to be real. The deal had to look perfect. Flawless.

Morelli had to believe it. This deal had to look legit.

Everything had to be in place. If Morelli sensed even the smallest flaw, he’d walk. So, the deal had to be authentic down to the last detail.

The weapons were real. Ramirez had personally acquired them, securing the inventory from a seized ATF stockpile. Strike had the paperwork signed off. The diversion of the weapons had been fully approved through ATF channels, justified as part of an “ongoing intelligence operation.”

The logistics had been set up to mirror a genuine black-market arms transfer. The weapons had been stored inland in Cuba, waiting to be moved.

Strike had arranged transport to the docks, where they would be loaded onto a freighter, the ship was already waiting, a legitimate vessel with a forged manifest, just like any other smuggling run.

Karl was carrying the money. Morelli had trusted him enough to make him his point man for the exchange. \$2.5 million in neatly stacked \$100 bills.

Ramirez was playing his part, the supplier.

It had to feel real. Because if Morelli even suspected this was a setup, everything would fall apart and so far, he suspected nothing.

This wasn’t a typical ATF sting. Normally, an operation like this would have dozens of agents in position, ready to move in at a moment’s notice. But not this time. Because this was officially a Cuban-led operation. ATF had limited presence, “waiting offshore” to support Cuban forces.

Strike had sold it that way to the higher-ups. The ATF wasn’t supposed to be seen moving openly in Cuba. Instead, ATF was staged at sea, parked outside Havana waters, waiting for the go signal.

The raid itself would be executed by General Ortega’s men. Cuban intelligence officers storming in from the streets.

Karl had questioned this part of the plan. Why keep the ATF at a distance?

Strike had been very clear. "This has to be a Cuban win, Karl. We don't get to be the heroes on this one. Ortega is running the ground team. We're just here to make sure it goes right."

Karl had bought that explanation. It made sense—diplomacy, secrecy, limited U.S. involvement to avoid a political mess. It all checked out.

General Emilio Ortega was the reason this operation had even been approved.

He was a high-ranking intelligence officer in Cuba, a man who had survived political shifts by being ruthless, efficient, and useful.

Ortega wanted Morelli gone. That's what Karl had been told. He was moving too many weapons through Cuba's ports, threatening the government's control over black-market trades. The U.S. wanted Morelli gone. Large volumes of arms were reaching the black-market in the United States too.

Ortega had personally signed off on the sting. He would ensure his forces locked down the streets once the exchange was made. He would guarantee no one left that dock alive unless they were in handcuffs. Karl had never worked with Ortega directly, but Strike had reassured him. "Ortega's a professional. He doesn't screw around. He wants Morelli taken down as much as we do."

Karl believed him. Because why wouldn't he?

Karl glanced at Cole, but the younger agent's face gave nothing away. He didn't like playing supplier. Too exposed. Too many ways for this to go wrong.

"Morelli thinks he's getting these weapons clean, no heat, no strings. The shipment is already in Cuba. ATF disguised as locals are bringing it to the docks in a transport truck, scheduled for offshore transfer. The ship is already waiting."

Strike moved his finger to another mark on the map. "ATF is staged offshore. They're waiting for the signal. We have snipers on-site. The moment the money leaves Karl's hands, our sniper calls it. We move."

Karl nodded. That tracked. A sniper confirming the exchange before calling in the raid meant no early exposure.

"Cuban intelligence is handling the ground team. Ortega's men will seal off the perimeter, blocking all exit routes. Morelli's people won't have anywhere to go. They'll be trapped, caught with the weapons and the money in their hands."

Strike rolled up the map, tapping it against the table like the conversation was over. No room for debate, no second-guessing. Just cold efficiency. "That's it, boys. That's the plan." His voice was steady, unshaken. Like he was laying out just another job.

Karl let out a slow breath, rubbing his fingers over his beard. It was a solid plan. Every piece had been thought through, every risk accounted for.

Ortega's men. The ATF positioned offshore. The sniper watching from above. It was locked in.

Still, Cole wasn't convinced. He stood near the door, arms crossed, jaw set. His silence said everything. Strike noticed. He always noticed.

He leaned back; his expression inquisitive. "You don't like it?"

Cole hesitated before answering. Finally, he shook his head. "Something feels off."

Strike didn't blink. Didn't react. Just let the words settle in the humid air before pushing his chair back. "That's just nerves. The big ones always feel that way." He let the words sit a second, then shrugged. "Doesn't change anything. We move at dusk."

Karl gave a short nod. It made sense. This deal had to happen under cover of night. Morelli wouldn't risk exposing himself in broad daylight.

Strike grabbed his jacket and stood, checking his watch. "Get some sleep."

He gave them both a look, one that told them everything was already decided. "We hit the docks at sundown."

Then he was gone, stepping out into the glow of Havana's streets, leaving Karl and Cole alone with the weight of what was coming. Karl watched him go before turning to Cole, who still looked uneasy. Karl wasn't worried. It was just pre-mission nerves. They'd done the hard part. Tomorrow, Morelli would fall. He was sure of it.

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