

**CURSE
THE
MOON**

Lee Jackson

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Many of the episodes described in this novel were based on actual events, particularly those in the story that take place in Cuba.

The views expressed in this novel are not necessarily those of the United States Military Academy, the US Army, or the United States Government.

This is a work of fiction. The main character, Atcho, and his daughter, Isabel, are based on the author's family members. All other characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*To my wife and best friend, Barbara:
"Ah Fifi!"*

*And, to my father-in-law, the real-life Atcho:
Your courage is inspiring.*

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Code Name: Atcho

Actual Name: Eduardo Xiquez

Alias 1: José – Poses as own messenger

Alias 2: Tomas – Identity to US Intelligence

Alias 3: Manuel Lezcano – Prison identity

Isabel

Atcho's daughter

Juan

Atcho's best friend and deputy

Govorov

KGB Intelligence officer

Paul Clary

US Air Force Intelligence officer

Burly

CIA officer

Rafael

Cuban invasion force officer

Jujo

Leader inside prison on Isle of Pines

Sofia Stahl

Secretary at U.S. Interests' Section in Swiss Embassy in Havana

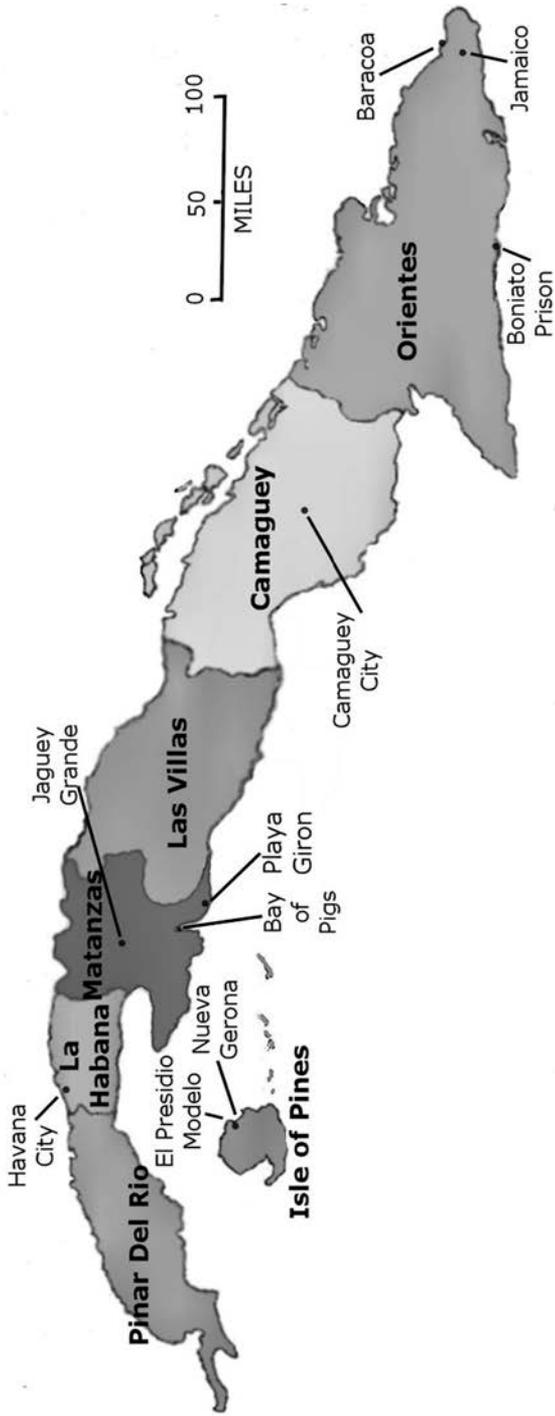
Mike Rogers

Senior Secret Service Agent

PROLOGUE

On New Year's Eve in 1959, Cuban President Fulgencio Batista fled the country in the face of an armed insurrection. Five days later, Fidel Castro entered Havana with Ché Guevara, and seized power. Initially greeted with an outpouring of popular support, Cubans soon learned that they had traded one dictator for another. Hailed as a liberator, Castro demonstrated cruelty and tyranny that eclipsed any known before on this island. Within a year, resistance groups sprang up around Cuba. They were led by patriots who were largely inexperienced but fearless in the cause of restoring freedom to Cuba.

One was a man of unusual qualifications. The few who knew him called him Atcho.



Cuba 1960

PART I

Cuba, December 1960

Atcho slouched against a wall, alone in a small plaza illuminated by the dim yellow light of a single streetlamp. His eyes probed the surrounding darkness. His fine, aristocratic features were hidden behind a week's growth of unkempt beard, while his normally well-groomed hair fell in shaggy brown locks below his ears.

Since state Security Police, commonly referred to as *milicianos*, or G-2, had never seen Atcho, at least not as himself, they knew him only by reputation. Tonight, they would be looking for his messenger. Atcho's ears strained for the sounds of approach. His powerful frame ached to be released from its tense stance.

"For Isabel," he muttered. In the light of the streetlamp, his silhouette stood out, an easy target. From behind a nearby wall, the first glimmer of the moon tinged the edge of the sky as it began its ascent. Soon, it would cast its ghostly glow about the square.

Screeching tires around a nearby corner broke the silence. Atcho shrank even further into his loose-fitting clothes. He checked the inside of his left calf once more for the razor-sharp hunting knife strapped there. His face melted into dull callowness and his eyes became vacuous. He looked like a crude country peasant, nothing more.

His mind raced as two Jeeps drove into view and stopped several yards away, spotting him in their headlights. Muscles tensed. *Control! I must maintain control!* His heart pounded and his temples pulsed. He felt adrenaline surge, but his face showed no expression.

The driver of the first Jeep opened his door and stepped out. "Are you José?" he asked roughly.

Atcho shuffled away from the wall, and moved forward, shoulders drooping. "Sí, Señor. I am José."

"Do you have something to tell me?"

"Sí, Señor. Do you have a package for me?" José smiled amiably.

"Just tell me!" the driver retorted.

"But my boss says I have to get a package first."

The driver delivered a brutal punch directly into Atcho's belly. Atcho rolled with the blow and sank to the ground in pain. "Why did you do that?" he gasped. "I will be happy tell you. But my boss will kill me if I don't get the package."

The driver's boot connected with Atcho's chin, sprawling him across the ground between the Jeeps. He squatted beside Atcho's head. "José, you are going to tell us ... " Leaving the threat unspoken, he grabbed Atcho by the hair and jerked his face close.

"I want to tell you. But my boss will kill me if I don't bring him what I came for!"

"What's in the package?"

"I don't know. My boss says I'll know it when I see it."

The driver studied him a moment then motioned with his hand. Two men immediately stepped from the first Jeep. The driver conferred with one, a lieutenant, while the other stood guard over Atcho. When they parted, the driver squatted next to Atcho's head while the lieutenant moved back toward the second Jeep. "Soften him up a bit," the lieutenant called, "while I speak to the captain."

Atcho's guards seemed to relish their task. They pistol-whipped him, then threw him to the ground, and pounded his head and body with kicks. Again, they stood him up, and while one held him in a bear hug from the rear, the other punched his face over and over into a bloody pulp. Pain seared through him, and still the blows fell. First to his face, then to his stomach. When he

dropped to the ground, they continued kicking. But, despite feeling life ebb from his body, Atcho offered only token resistance.

The passenger door opened. The man from the first Jeep leaned inside, talking to the captain. Through bruised and squinted eyes, Atcho saw the glow of a cigarette from deep within the dark interior. He was unable to make out anything else.

The driver and the other soldier finally stopped beating him. Atcho lay spread-eagle in the dust, eyes swollen and nearly shut, and lips split and bleeding. From beyond the square, dogs, hearing the sounds of violence, started barking madly. Atcho heard nearby apartment doors creaking on their hinges, and then soft thumps as they closed. *Nobody wants to be part of this.* His arms and legs felt limp, incapable of motion.

The moon had moved high into the night sky and bathed the area in cold, white light, sharply contrasting buildings against their own shadows. Atcho slowly maneuvered his pain-racked head to watch the second vehicle. The *milicianos* spoke quietly by the Jeep.

As he lay in the dust with warm drops of blood dripping out of multiple wounds from his head and arms, visions of previous tragedies floated before Atcho's eyes. Columns of cadets in gray uniforms marched by. His late wife appeared, arms outstretched, eyes longing for the child she would never see. Then, dancing flames in a cold circle of moonlight consumed the pale figures of his parents. He felt himself waning, and shook his head. *I've gotta be alert!*

Cruel visions continued, immersing him in waves of grief, but pain reminded him of his mission. He shook his head to clear it, and concentrated his attention on the second Jeep. The glow from inside was again visible. Occasionally, a ghost of a face peered through the windshield, then faded into the black interior.

The murmur of voices was low and undulating. The shorter, sharper responses of the man next to the Jeep indicated the authority of the man inside. Believing Atcho incapacitated, the guards ignored him. With utmost stealth, he reached down alongside his

leg. The knife was there, cold and hard, the leather sheath pressing against his leg. Atcho felt a surge of energy. He edged the knife from its sheath with his fingertips and inched it up under his body.

A noise halted his movement. The Jeep door swung open and the dark figure of the captain emerged. He was tall, and wore a dark civilian overcoat and slouch hat. He strode toward Atcho. With a single motion, he grabbed a lock of hair and yanked Atcho's head into the light. He stared into Atcho's blurred eyes. Then, as if discarding a head of lettuce, he dropped Atcho's face into the dirt.

Hovering on the edge of consciousness, Atcho could not discern the captain's features. He saw the officer stride back to the vehicle and swing into the passenger's seat. The captain spoke a few words to the lieutenant, but hissed them too softly to make out. Then the Jeep door closed and the engine cranked to life.

Atcho's heart stopped. Still hiding the knife, he fought desperately to sit up.

The lieutenant moved towards him. "You are fortunate tonight, José." He spoke in menacing, mocking tones. "The Russian, Captain Govorov, has let you live for a while. We'll take you to a nice hotel to rest and enjoy our company – until you tell us what we want to know."

"I will tell you!" Atcho yelled. "Right now, I will tell you! Please don't hurt me again," he sobbed into the ground. He turned his head to watch the lieutenant, who waved his hand. The Jeep's engine cut off. Relief spread through his pain-wracked body. Silence settled heavily over the night. The moon looked down, uncaring.

"All right, coward," the lieutenant said. "Tell us."

"OK, I will tell you. But, can't I at least see the package? Atcho will think I lied to him if I don't bring it back with me. Then he will kill me, move his headquarters, and you will have nothing."

At mention of the name *Atcho*, the lieutenant's face became grave and hard. His mocking tone ebbed. "How will you know if it's the right package?"

“Atcho said I would know it when I saw it. Please, can’t I see it? Or he’ll know that I talked to you to keep you from killing me.”

The lieutenant looked thoughtful, then walked over to the captain’s Jeep. More conversation took place. Then Captain Govorov’s tall, lean figure stepped out again with an indistinguishable bundle. Keeping his face in shadows, he strode closer to Atcho, and leaned over. When he straightened, a much smaller figure stood beside him – the shape of a 4-year-old girl.

“Is this it?” the lieutenant demanded.

Eyes shielded from the light by one hand, his voice raspy, Atcho gasped, “I can’t see her face!”

Roughly, Captain Govorov shoved the little girl forward. The lieutenant shone a flashlight in her face. “Is this the right package, José?” he demanded again.

Atcho nodded weakly. The child began to cry. “*Yo quiero a mi Papá!*”

With one arm, the captain swept her over his shoulder and started back toward the Jeep. The lieutenant leaned toward Atcho. “Now tell us what you know,” he commanded. “Where is Atcho?”

Atcho made no move. The lieutenant prodded him. Atcho still made no reply. The lieutenant kicked him.

Atcho responded. With all his remaining strength, he let loose a furious cry that burned through the passionless, moonlit night. In that instant, he lunged and buried his knife deep in the lieutenant’s chest.

As if on signal, the night exploded with gunfire. Beside the first vehicle, the driver and guard dropped to the pavement, lifeless. The driver of the second Jeep cranked the engine, then slumped as the windshield shattered in his face.

Captain Govorov held the little girl closely. Turning, he walked deliberately back toward Atcho and stared at the lieutenant’s corpse. It lay in a heap in a pool of blood spreading into the dust.

Knife ready to attack again, Atcho crouched next to the dead officer. From the folds of his coat, the captain produced a small pistol and held it next to Isabel's temple. The firing stopped.

Captain Govorov regarded the ring of men forming around him. With a slight gesture, he indicated the pistol at Isabel's head. "Atcho," he called softly, his voice mocking.

Panting heavily, sweat and blood streaming from his tattered clothing, Atcho waited. Hatred burned in his eyes, muscles tensed for the slightest chance to pounce.

"Atcho. It is you, isn't it?" Govorov's Spanish was very good. Atcho made no reply. The captain laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, it is you. It occurs to me that I still don't know what you look like." He sighed. "The irony is that confirming your looks and the whereabouts of your headquarters was our mission. But tonight, we were too ambitious in modifying your face. I should have given the lieutenant better instructions."

In a half-crouch, circling slowly, Atcho looked for an opening. Weakness dizzied him and his legs wobbled. Desperately, he shook his head to clear it, and planted his feet more firmly. Through squinting eyes he appraised his position. If he attacked, Isabel would surely die. If he did not, he might never see her again. Almost imperceptibly, he loosened the grip on his knife.

Seeming not to notice, the captain shrugged. "You're brave," he said. "For now, you live." He chuckled. "Anyway, if I were to shoot you, one of your men might put a bullet in my head – your little girl be damned. Besides, you're far too valuable to discard carelessly." He sighed. "So you live, Atcho. But we will meet again – I have your daughter!"

With cold laughter, he moved swiftly to his Jeep and yanked aside the dead driver. Pulling Isabel onto his lap, he sat behind the wheel, started the ignition, and with a grind of gears, drove into the night.

With his last vestige of consciousness, Atcho watched the Jeep disappear. Hate welled within him. He slumped to the ground.

Four days earlier

Atcho could still scarcely believe that he was cutting sugarcane by hand with a machete. He had been in the fields many times here at the family plantation in Camaguey, on horseback, racing with his father through the rows of cane, even while field laborers swung their sharp, steel tools during the harvest. Fidel Castro, worried about losing the crop while the country was still in chaos since his coup, had issued an edict that all citizens would go into the fields to help harvest.

Sweat streamed from Atcho's brow and down his neck and back, and blisters swelled his hands. He looked down the row of laborers to his right. He knew none of them, and hoped none recognized him. A laborer was heading Atcho's way. He was tall and lean, and he too, carried a machete. Atcho recognized the familiar figure. It was one of his men in the resistance, and he would take his time making his way down the row.

Atcho returned to cutting, and minutes passed. Then the man was next to him, also cutting sugarcane. They did not talk, but when they were close enough, the man handed him an envelope, and then moved on, continuing to harvest as he made his way down the line.

Without drawing attention, Atcho went to an area in the scrub brush that laborers used as a latrine. The pungent air was stifling, but here at least, he had a little privacy.

The envelope contained two sheets of paper. One was a letter from his sister Raissa, who had been caring for Isabel. Atcho read it, and froze.

Dear Eduardo, Isabel has been taken! Officers from G-2 came to the house. They know you are alive! And, they know your code name. They said that if you want to see Isabel alive again, you must turn yourself in! I didn't tell them anything.

In a daze, Atcho reread the letter, noting smudge marks where Raissa's tears had landed. Then he read the second note. The first line was particularly startling.

Eduardo Xiquez (alias Atcho)

It instructed him to surrender to G-2 (*milicianos*) headquarters in Havana within a week or risk never seeing his daughter again. Approaching footsteps warned Atcho that someone else intended to use the area. Thrusting the papers into his pocket, he assumed the attitude of a good comrade and went back to his position in the field. As soon as he could, he left the field.

His gut wrenched with fear for his daughter – he had seen little boys led away to face firing squads. *How can they know that I am alive?* Turning himself in was not an option – that placed his comrades' lives in danger. After some furious thought, he decided to attempt a rescue.

That evening, Atcho showed the letters to Juan Ortiz, his best friend and deputy in their resistance organization. "I don't know how they found out, Atcho," Juan said. "But you can't be impulsive."

Atcho whirled on him. "We have to get my daughter back!"

Realizing Atcho's state of mind, Juan had quietly helped devise the plan that had brought them and four of their best fighters to this empty plaza four nights later. The cold face of the moon continued its impassive observation. The young guerrilla leader lay motionless in the dust.

2

For two weeks, Atcho lay in bed, inhabiting a mental space between coma and consciousness. In his clouded mind, he cried out for his daughter. She reached for him in his dreams, whimpering softly in a toddler's voice, "*Yo quiero a mi Papá!*" Her matted locks of long dark hair framed a small oval face filled with fear and fatigue.

Still dreaming, Atcho reached back, only to see a sinister hand snatch Isabel away while he agonized over the flaws in his failed plan. He had endangered her life by exposing her to gunfire. Maybe he should have turned himself in. Those who stood to suffer if information was forced from him could fend for themselves. Isabel could not. He saw himself being interrogated under bright lights, refusing, then answering when his tiny daughter was threatened. Faces of people he could betray marched before him, some accusing, and some understanding. The ghostly image of his father in U.S. Army combat gear drifted in and out.

As Atcho's body healed, his mind reached toward consciousness and new questions. How did G-2 connect Atcho to Eduardo? Besides Juan, Atcho's sister, and her husband, who else knew he had survived the fire that destroyed his family mansion? And where did the Russian captain fit in? He had never considered that Soviets might be involved.

He felt sweat, suffocation, oppression. Pain. Pain in his left hand. He looked at it: blurry, lumpy, and wrapped in bandages. He brought it closer to his face, realizing dimly now that he was awake.

Through a narrow window, he saw a night sky where the moon, now only a sliver, continued its cold, impassive observation. He tried to turn to one side, but sharp pain surged through his neck

and spine. An anesthetic odor met his nostrils, and nausea welled in his throat.

At the other end of the room, a chair scraped the floor. A man scurried to the door and disappeared into a hall. Moments later, Atcho heard faint whispering, and the door swung open. Another man walked into the room and looked at him worriedly. Atcho closed his eyes.

“Atcho, are you awake?” The voice was soft, familiar. Atcho forced his eyes open. “Atcho, it’s me, Juan. Do you understand me?”

Atcho’s lips were cracked, and his cheeks double their normal size. A question formed, a pressing, burning question. “Isabel?” he asked, his voice scratchy, whispery. Juan looked grave.

He struggled to ask again, “Isabel?” Juan continued looking grave, but did not speak. Atcho lay motionless, then moved his lips once more. “Water.”

Juan reached for a pitcher on a nearby table, poured water into a glass, and pressed it gently to Atcho’s mouth. The cool liquid brought refreshing life and provided small respite from his agony. He closed his eyes again.

When Atcho regained consciousness, the room was brighter. He raised his head. The pounding had subsided. Movement was now tolerable. Through swollen eyelids, he saw misty sunlight streaming through the window. A slowly rotating ceiling fan cast its shadow across dingy white walls.

Juan stood at the end of the bed. “You’re looking better, my friend. You’ve slept another full day.”

“Where am I?” His raspy voice was barely audible.

“On the outskirts of Havana. We’re safe.”

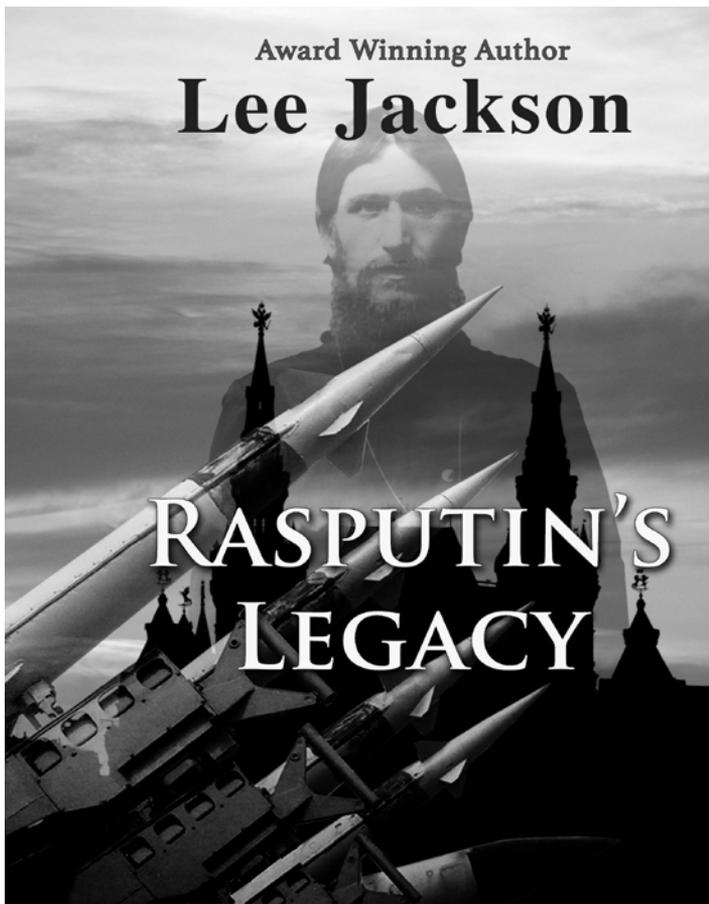
“How long have I been here?”

“Two weeks. We’ve been worried about you.”

Fear wrapped icy fingers around Atcho’s stomach. “Where is Isabel?”

Award Winning Author

Lee Jackson



Atcho is the only covert operative on earth to be trusted by both the president of the United States and the premier of the Soviet Union. A chance meeting of Rasputin, a mysterious monk with the daughters of the last Czar deep in the forests of Russia sets in motion cataclysmic events that surface 70 years later. Atcho finds himself battling a mysterious religious sect, the KGB, the Soviet military, and the Communist Party to save the National Power that had kept him imprisoned for more than 19 years – and he must do it without help or assistance from US intelligence resources. Failure would result in placing the full nuclear capabilities and military might of the Soviet Union into the hands of a madman bent on world domination.

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