



BOOMERANG

A Spy Thriller

“In one of these plans, you propose to have a female cosmonaut burning up on reentry.” Ted’s cheeks puffed out and his voice became nasal. “If anyone ever found out we were responsible, the press will go absolutely nuts, you know that don’t you?”

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Oberon Phillips has killed seven cosmonauts. If he'd been flying, that would have made him an ace with two to spare. But in Oberon's line of work, the phrase "unsung hero" was a mantra rather than just a saying. It had all started in his office in the early portion of the year 1957. It would be hard to imagine a colder office than the one inhabited by Oberon Phillips. It wasn't the temperature of the room, you understand, but the appearance which gave it the icy feeling it would become so known for. Four blank walls painted institutional white. No framed diplomas, none of the inspirational posters you see in today's offices. Its decor was late filing cabinet, its ornamentation reams of paper. The air inside was stale, smelling slight from dry-cleaning fluid from fastidiously cleaned suits. Even the desk was bare. It consisted of one in/outbox, one telephone, a blotter, and a single picture. It was a family alright, but if there is any model for a fake, staged picture, this was it. It was the apex of insincere photography.

The office occupant himself was a nondescript middle American with pre-maturely white hair and a pinstriped suit. Tall and imposing, he none the less seemed to blend in with the office. His starched white shirt a match for the walls harsh paint job. He neither seemed at home in his wooden office chair nor out of place. If anything, he gave the impression he'd been grown in the room. Only his first name gave any indication of his unique talents. A man out of the ordinary.

Ted Nichols opened the door without bothering to knock. In his hand, he held a crumbled document which appeared to be a memo. His face seemed as crumpled as the document. "What's this?" he demanded.

Oberon looked up slowly from a stack of papers he was busy absorbing for intelligence details. "It's a proposal."

Ted fumed. "It'll never work."

"Of course it will."

"In one of these plans, you propose to have a female cosmonaut burning up on reentry." Ted's cheeks puffed out and his voice became nasal. "If anyone ever found out we were responsible, the press will go absolutely nuts, you know that don't you?"

"The press will never find out."

Ted's agitation only increased with Oberon's self-assured tone. "How can you be so sure?"

"Do you know where the Soviet rocket launch site is?"

With a face approaching double annoyance, Ted responded. "Of course not. You know I don't. Its exact location is a closely guarded secret. The best we can do is place it somewhere in Soviet Central Asia."

"Exactly my point. Even the Soviets are guarding this like a nuclear weapon."

"I'm not following."

"If their atomic bomb test hadn't worked, do you think anyone would have heard about it? For all we know, the first four tests we're complete failures."

"What's that got to do with the press."

Oberon looked bemused. “In any case, they are going to be failures. Do you think they are going to tell anyone about their failures?”

Ted hit the desk with the rolled-up memo like he was killing an unseen fly. “They’ll deny the whole damn thing ever happened.”

“Of course they will. That’s the beauty of the whole thing.” Oberon gave him a wry smile. “That’s what everyone will expect them to do. If the events happen, they’ll insist it never happened. Their normal behavior will play right into our hands.”

Undeterred, Ted continued his tirade, but at a lesser volume. “But you’re killing women. What’s next? Small children and dogs?”

It’s important to remember that this was back in the 50s. In those days, there were still some lines intelligence services were not willing to cross. As we all know now, they got over such distinctions as time marched on. But, in those days, it wasn’t an accepted idea. Public opinion still hadn’t gotten over Ethel Rosenberg being executed in the electric chair in Ossining, New York. And everyone agreed she’d betrayed her country.

Oberon raised one eyebrow. “I didn’t put women in the Soviet space program, Moscow did. The whole thing doesn’t work if I don’t kill them.”

Ted sputtered and stuttered, but nothing coherent was coming out. He didn’t like the whole idea, but he couldn’t fault his subordinate’s relentless and unfeeling logic. Finally, he composed himself and took a deep breath. “Who are you going to use?”

“The Italians.”

Nichols snorted. “Now you’ve really gone over the deep end. They’re complete amateurs. Those guys are sure to foul things up royally.”

“We need them. That way, the affair can’t be traced back to us.”

“What makes you think they’ll do it?”

“If they want money for their crazy UFO search, they’ll do it.”

Ted’s frown deepened. “UFO believers. Now I know they’ll screw up.”

“And if they do,” Oberon grinned shyly, “No one will seriously believe it was staged by a pair of UFO cranks. It’s perfect.”

“It’ll never work.”

“That’s what they said about Operation Ajax.” Phillips slyly referred to the US organized coup d’état overthrowing the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in favor of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in August 1953.

“Someday, that’s going to come back to bite us in the ass,” Ted remarked.

“It was four years ago and still nobody knows. In four years, we’ll have a man in space and that’ll be the end of it.”

“You’re treading on thin ice.”

“With the Soviet penchant for secrecy, it more like a glacier at the North Pole.” Oberon joked.

This modest meeting was how it all started. One unassuming discussion in a bleak office in the middle of the Cold War. It almost ended up one of those events relegated to the dust bin of conspiracy theories and alien abduction tales.

It would only be a few months before the memo’s plan would be put into operation. The room Mr. Phillip’s found himself in was a junk dealer’s impression of scavenged and improvised equipment radio equipment. There was already a chill in the late October breeze. The air was ionized as well as being moldy. The location was Torre Bert, just outside Turin. The Germans had once used it as a communications bunker, complete with a large radio antenna rising above the surface. Since the place was a leftover from World War II, Achille Judica-Cordiglia had gotten it for a song. He and his brother Giovanni Battista Judica-Cordiglia had turned the place into their headquarters in the Earth’s first attempt to contact alien civilizations.

Oberon noted a risqué pinup calendar for the year 1960 adorning one of the walls. “I thought this was a scientific establishment, not a bordello.”

“You Americans,” Achille snorted in derision, “no sense of art.”

“Accept for their Mr. Hefner,” Giovanni interrupted.

“Agreed.” Achille looked Oberon in the eye. His face looked like a schoolboy who was turning in an assignment he was sure would net him high marks. “We’re bouncing the signal off the Soviet satellite Luna 1. This way anyone picking up the signal will assume the Korolev’s people are bouncing a signal from a troubled capsule off the structure.”

Oberon wasn’t sold. “Who’s going to pick up such a signal?”

“The Swiss monitor all the signals from Luna 1. They can’t miss it.” Giovanni replied. “We set up a test program this past May. They reported the signals we relayed about a Vostok spacecraft going off course to British intelligence.”

The American seemed dissatisfied. “Why didn’t the press pick it up?”

“Who can tell with the Swiss?” Giovanni remarked.

“The Soviet embassy probably convinced them to keep quiet,” Achille added. “They exert some influence over the Swiss.”

“Do you have a recording?”

“Yes, but...”

“Make sure it gets leaked to the press.”

“What will we tell them?”

“Tell them you overheard the transmission.”

Giovanni looked puzzled. “Why is it so important the press gets wind of this?”

Oberon crossed his arms. “It’s the whole point. We won’t be able to launch our own man into space for another year. Our rocket technology is too far behind. It’ll be years before we can get a man to the moon. We need to make it seem like the Soviet space program is failing. Otherwise, the nations of the world will flock to the communist banner. Is that what you want? The red banner of the communist party flying over both Italy and the Vatican?”

“No, no,” the two brothers responded in unison. Both knew, as distant relations to the last king of Italy Umberto II, the communist party would have them up against a wall as soon as the revolution was over.

“Then leak the recording.”

“If you insist.”

Oberon handed Giovanni a reel-to-reel magnetic tape. “Here, use this for the next transmission.”

Giovanni took the tape but held it at arm’s length. “What is it?”

“It’s the tape the Germans made of an experiment at Buchenwald. It’s the sounds of an inmate suffocating. It’ll convince anyone listening it’s a Soviet cosmonaut dying in a failed mission.”

“Because it really is a man suffocating?”

“Exactly.”

Giovanni put the tape gingerly down on a table. “You’d have made a good German, Mr. Phillips.”

Achille appeared withdrawn. “You have the same callousness the man who recorded this tape had,” he announced.

Oberon’s expression remained unchanged, impassive. “I get the job done. Just keep in mind that we’re not killing anyone here... we’re just making it seem that way.”

“When do you want to set up the big release? The one where we fake a failed mission?”

“Early April,” Oberon announced fiddling with some of the amplitude control dials. “That’s when we think they’ll try to send up the first manned space mission.”

“What if their real mission fails?” Giovanni inquired.

“We can only hope.”

Giovanni reset the dials the American had changed. “And the female cosmonaut story?”

“We’ll save that one for later.” Oberon gave them a sly grin. “Don’t mention it to anyone, but it’s my favorite of all our deceptions.”

“Would you like us to kill one of the dogs too?”

“Let’s not go overboard, shall we? The female cosmonaut will be fine.”

Giovanni returned the American’s raw grin. “We’ll make it memorable. They’ll be talking about this for years.”

In May 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American to reach space, officially closing Project Boomerang. Oberon burned the files personally. But Achille and Giovanni kept the thing going for another two years. The notoriety gave them some unexpected attention they couldn’t resist. They never did find their aliens. Achille became a cardiologist while Giovanni worked for the Italian police providing phone-taps.

In 2008, Oberon Phillips sat in his living room and watched the rebroadcast of a documentary called *Space Hackers*. He suspected that Ted Nichols was the one who sent an article to the Fortean Times, a science-skeptical magazine, talking about the Judica-Cordiglia brothers and their recordings of a lost cosmonaut a month later. But that wasn’t the end of it. *Listen Up* told the story of failed Soviet space missions on BBC Radio 4 in May 2009. That was followed by a Science Channel TV show and a *Dark Matters* Episode, which also presented the same stories.

“You got to hand it to the boys,” Oberon mused to an empty room, “when they said they’d make it memorable, they weren’t kidding.”