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JUNE 2016

The squat wooden fishing boat had been painted a dandy combination of periwinkle and lemon. When the colors were fresh, they had lent the vessel an air of happy tranquility. But that was almost two decades ago. The weathering of sun and sea had beaten out all semblance of vibrancy, leaving the boat looking pale and anemic against the rolling sea.

The two Jamaican fishermen working the *Javina* gave little thought to her dilapidated exterior. Their only concern was whether the smoky engine would propel them back to their island home before the leaks in the hull overran the bilge pump.

“Quick with the bait while the tuna are still biting.” The elder man stood at the stern while manually deploying a long

line over the side. Near his feet, a pair of large silver fish flopped angrily about the deck.

“Not you worry, Uncle Desmond.” The younger man picked up some small chunks of mackerel and slapped them onto a string of rusty hand-forged hooks. “The sun is low, so the fish still bite on the bank.”

“It ain’t the sun that’s waiting for the bait.” Desmond grabbed the remains of the baited line and dropped it over the side, tying off the end to a cleat on the gunwale. He stepped toward the wheelhouse to engage the throttle but stopped and cocked his ear. A deep rumble, like rolling thunder, sounded over the boat’s old diesel motor.

“What is it, Uncle?”

Desmond shook his head. He noticed a dark circle of water forming off the port beam.

The *Javina* creaked and groaned from the invisible hand of a submerged shock wave. A frothy ball of white water erupted a short distance away, spraying a dozen feet into the air. It was followed by a bubbling concentric wave that seemed to rise off the surface. The wave expanded, encompassing the fishing boat and lifting it into the sky. Desmond grabbed the wheel for balance.

His nephew staggered to his side, his eyes agape. “What is it?”

“Something underwater.” Desmond gripped the wheel with white knuckles as the boat heeled far to one side.

The vessel hung on the verge of flipping, then righted itself as the wave subsided. The *Javina* settled back to a calm surface as the wave dissipated in a circular path of boiling froth.

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“That was crazy,” his nephew said, scratching his head. “What’s happening way out here?” The small boat was more than twenty miles from Jamaica, the island’s coastline not quite visible on the horizon.

Desmond shrugged as he turned the boat away from the receding eruption’s epicenter. He motioned off the bow. “Those ships ahead. They must be searching for oil.”

A mile from the *Javina*, a large exploration ship tailed a high-riding ocean barge down current. A blue crew boat motored slightly ahead of the ship. All three were headed for the *Javina*—or, more precisely, the point of the underwater explosion.

“Uncle, who says they can come blasting through our waters?”

Desmond smiled. “They got a boat that big, they can go anywhere they want.”

As the small armada drew closer, the waters around the *Javina* became dotted with white bits of flotsam arising from the deep. They were bits of dead fish and sea creatures, mangled by the explosion.

“The tuna!” the nephew cried. “They kill our tuna.”

“We find more someplace else.” Desmond eyed the exploration ship bearing down on them. “I think it best we leave the bank now.”

“Not before I give them a piece of my mind.”

The nephew reached over and spun the wheel hard to port, driving the *Javina* toward the big ship. The blue crew boat noted the course change and sped over, pulling alongside a few minutes later. The two brown-skinned men in the crew boat

didn't appear Jamaican, which was confirmed when they spoke in oddly accented English.

"You must leave this area now," the boat's pilot ordered.

"This is our fishing grounds," the nephew said. "Look around. You kill all our fish. You owe us for the fish we lose."

The crew boat pilot stared at the Jamaicans with no hint of sympathy. Pulling a transmitter to his lips, he placed a brief call to the ship. Without another word to the fishermen, he gunned the motor and drove the crew boat away.

The massive black hulk of the exploration ship arrived a short time later, towering over the *Javina*. Undaunted, the fishermen yelled their complaints to the crewmen scurrying about the ship's decks.

None paid any attention to the dilapidated boat bobbing beneath them until two men stepped to the rail. Dressed in light khaki fatigues, they studied the *Javina* momentarily, then raised compact assault rifles to their shoulders.

Desmond rammed the throttle ahead and spun the wheel hard over as he heard two quick thumps. His nephew stared frozen as a pair of 40mm grenades, fired from launchers affixed to the assault rifles, slammed onto the open deck and bounced about his feet.

The wheelhouse vaporized into a bright red fireball. Smoke and flames climbed into the warm Caribbean sky as the *Javina* wallowed on her broken keel. The pale-blue-and-yellow fishing boat was charred black as she settled quickly by the bow.

For a moment, she seemed to hesitate, and then the old vessel rolled in a faint farewell and disappeared under the waves.

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JULY 2016

Mark Ramsey allowed himself a slight grin. He could hardly contain his sense of euphoria as he sped past the grandstand. The gritty smell of gasoline and burnt rubber tickled his nostrils, while the cheers of a trackside crowd were just audible over the roar of his motorcar. It wasn't just the sensation of racing on an open track that gave him joy. It was his leading position with two laps to go that thrilled the wealthy Canadian industrialist.

Driving a 1928 Bugatti Type 35 Grand Prix racer in a vintage-class oval race, he had been the odds-on favorite. The light and nimble French blue Bugatti, with its iconic horseshoe-shaped radiator, had been one of the most successful racing

marques of its day. Ramsey's supercharged straight-eight engine gave him a healthy boost against the competition.

He had quickly separated himself from the field of assorted old cars, save for a dark green Bentley that tailed several lengths behind. The heavy British car, carrying an open four-seat Le Mans body, was no match for the Bugatti through the Old Dominion Speedway's banked turns.

Ramsey knew he was home free. Easing out of the second turn, he floored the accelerator, roaring down the main straight-away and lapping a Stutz Bearcat. A white flag caught his eye, waved by the starter atop a flag stand, signaling the final lap. Ramsey allowed himself a sideways glance at the crowd, not noticing that the pursuing Bentley had crept closer.

Braking and downshifting with the racer's heel-and-toe foot maneuver, he guided the Bugatti in a low arc through the next turn. The heftier Bentley was forced to follow higher, losing precious distance. But coming out of the turn, the Bentley cut a sharp line onto the backstretch and let out a bellow. Equipped with a Roots supercharger, which protruded from the front crankcase like a silver battering ram, the Bentley howled as its driver mashed the accelerator before upshifting.

Ramsey glanced at a dash-mounted mirror. The more powerful Bentley had closed within two lengths, its imposing blunt radiator filling the image. He held the accelerator down through the backstretch as long as he could, braking late and hard, before throwing the Bugatti into the final turn.

Behind him, the Bentley fell back as its driver braked earlier and entered the turn wide. Its tires squealed as they fought for

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grip while chasing the Bugatti through the turn. The Bentley's driver was no slouch. He was driving the big demon at its limit.

Ramsey tightened his grip on the wheel and muscled the Bugatti through the curve. His own late braking had sent him on an awkward line through the turn. Trailing his own brakes to hold his turn, he was angered to hear the wail of the "Blower" Bentley accelerating from behind him.

The Bentley was high on the track, but its driver had aligned its wheels to exit the corner. Ramsey dug hard through the turn, then was flat on the gas the instant he could unwind his steering wheel. The shrieking Bentley had almost closed the gap and was on his rear fender as they hit the homestretch.

It was a classic fight to the finish, pitting lightweight finesse against brute power. The Bugatti's 140-horsepower motor was a hundred fewer than the Bentley, but the British car tipped the scales at a ton heavier.

Both cars surged toward the 100-mile-per-hour mark as they stretched for the finish line. Ramsey saw the flagman wildly waving the checkered flag and he felt his heart pounding. The Bugatti still held the lead, but the Bentley was inching alongside. Racing fender to fender, the two ancient vehicles roared down the track, mechanical dinosaurs from a more elegant age.

The finish line approached and brute power held sway. The Bentley lunged ahead at the last instant, nipping the Bugatti by inches. As the larger car edged by, Ramsey glanced at the Bentley's cockpit. The driver appeared totally relaxed at the moment of victory, his elbow casually cast over the door sill. Breaking

protocol, Ramsey charged ahead of the field as the entrants took a cooldown lap before heading to the pits.

Ramsey parked the Bugatti next to his customized luxury bus and oversaw his crew of mechanics as they checked the car and placed it in a covered trailer. He watched curiously as the Bentley pulled to a stop nearby.

There were no trailers or team of mechanics tending to the British car. Just an attractive woman with cinnamon hair waiting for the victor, sitting in a folding chair with a toolbox and a cooler at her feet.

A tall, lean man climbed out of the Bentley and collected a passionate hug from the woman. Pulling off his racing helmet, he ran his fingers through a thick mat of black hair that framed a tan and rugged face. He looked up as Ramsey approached and extended a hand.

"Congratulations on the win," Ramsey said, muting his disappointment. "First time anybody's taken me in the Bugatti."

"This old warhorse found a burst of energy on the last lap." The driver patted the Bentley's fender. His sea-green eyes nearly matched the color of the car and burned with an intelligence Ramsey had rarely observed. The driver had the look of a man who lived and played hard.

Ramsey smiled, knowing full well it was the driver, not the car, that had beaten him.

"My name's Mark Ramsey."

"Dirk Pitt," the driver said. "This is my wife, Loren."

Ramsey shook hands with Loren, noting she was even more attractive up close.

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"I love your Bugatti," she said. "Such a sleek car for its day."

"Fun to drive, too," he said. "That particular car won the Targa Florio in 1928."

As he spoke, his team of mechanics pushed the French car into the back of a semitrailer truck. Loren recognized the logo, emblazoned on the side, of a red grizzly bear with a pickax in its teeth.

"Mark Ramsey . . . you're the head of Bruin Mining and Exploration."

Ramsey looked askance at Loren. "Not many people know me in the States."

"I was on a recent delegation that toured your gold mine on the Thompson River in British Columbia. We were impressed by the environmental consciousness that surrounds the entire operation."

"Mining has had a poor track record, but there's no reason that can't change. Are you a congresswoman?"

"I represent the Seventh District of Colorado."

"Of course, Representative Loren Smith. I'm afraid I was out of town when the U.S. congressional delegation toured. My misfortune, I should say. What was your interest in the operation, if I may ask?"

"I serve on the House Subcommittee on the Environment, and we are examining new ways of managing our natural resources."

"Please let me know if there is any way I can be of help. We're always looking at safe ways to mine the earth."

"That's very good of you."

Pitt picked up Loren's folding chair and placed it in the rear of the Bentley. "Mr. Ramsey, would you care to join us for dinner?"

"I'm afraid I have to catch a plane to Miami to meet with some clients. Perhaps next time I'm in Washington." He eyed Pitt with a dare. "I'd like another go at you and your Bentley."

Pitt smiled. "Nobody has to ask me twice to get behind the wheel."

Pitt climbed in and restarted the Bentley. Loren joined him a moment later.

Ramsey shook his head. "You don't have a trailer?"

"The Bentley's as good on the street as it is on the track," Pitt grinned, gunning the car forward. Both occupants waved as Ramsey stared back.

Loren turned to Pitt and smiled. "I don't think Mr. Ramsey was too impressed with your maintenance crew."

Pitt reached over and squeezed his wife's knee. "What are you talking about? I've got the sexiest crew chief on the planet."

He collected his winner's trophy at the gate, then rumbled out of the Manassas, Virginia, track grounds. Passing the nearby Civil War battlefield site, he turned onto Interstate 66 and made a beeline toward Washington, D.C. The Sunday afternoon traffic was light, and Pitt was able to cruise at the speed limit.

"I forgot to tell you," Loren shouted over the roar of the open car, "I got a call from Rudi Gunn while you were on the track. He needs to talk to you about a situation he's monitoring in the Caribbean."

"Can it wait until tomorrow?"

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“He called from the office, so I told him we’d stop by on the way home.” Loren smiled at her husband, knowing his disinterest was only a bluff.

“If you say so.”

Reaching the suburb of Rosslyn, Pitt turned onto the George Washington Parkway and followed it south along the Potomac. The white marble edifice of the Lincoln Memorial gleamed in the fading sunlight as he turned into the entrance of a towering green glass building. He drove the Bentley past a guard station and parked in an underground garage near a keyed elevator, which they rode to the tenth floor.

They had entered the headquarters of the National Underwater and Marine Agency, the federal department tasked with stewardship of the seas. As NUMA’s Director, Dirk Pitt oversaw a large staff of marine biologists, oceanographers, and geologists who monitored the oceans from a fleet of research ships across the globe. The agency also used ocean buoys, gliding submersibles, and even a small squadron of aircraft, all linked to a sophisticated satellite network, that allowed constant monitoring of weather, sea states, and even oil spills in nearly real-time fashion.

The elevator doors opened onto a high-tech bay that housed the agency’s powerful computer center. A quietly humming IBM Blue Gene supercomputer system was concealed behind a high curved wall that faced Loren and Pitt. Extending across the face of the wall was a massive video display, illuminating a dozen or more color graphics and images.

Two men were engaged at a central control table in front of

the video wall. The smaller of the two, a wiry man with horn-rimmed glasses, noticed Loren and Pitt enter and bounded over to greet them.

"Glad you could stop by," Rudi Gunn said with a smile. An ex-Navy commander who had graduated first in his class from the Naval Academy, he served as Pitt's Deputy Director. "Any luck at the track?"

"I think I would have made the late W. O. Bentley proud today." Pitt smiled. "What brings you boys into the office on a Sunday?"

"An environmental concern in the Caribbean. Hiram can tell you more, but there appears to be a pattern of unusual dead zones cropping up south of Cuba."

The trio stepped over to the control table, where Hiram Yaeger, NUMA's head of computer resources, sat pecking at a keyboard.

"Afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Pitt," he said without looking up. "Please grab a seat."

An ardent nonconformist, Yaeger wore his long hair wrapped in a ponytail and dressed like he had just staggered out of a biker bar. "Sorry to intrude on your weekend, but Rudi and I thought you might want to be aware of something we picked up on satellite imagery."

He pointed to the top corner of the video wall where a large satellite image of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea dominated the screen. "That's a standard photographic view. Now we'll go to a digitally enhanced image."

A second photo appeared, which overlapped the original

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with brilliant colors. A bright red band arced across the eastern Gulf Coast shoreline.

“What does the red enhancement indicate?” Loren asked.

“A dead zone, judging by its intensity, off the Mississippi River,” Pitt said.

“That’s right,” Gunn said. “Satellite imagery can detect changes in the light reflection off the ocean’s surface, which provides an indication of the water’s organic content. The seas off the Mississippi River Delta are a textbook dead zone. Rich nutrients in the river from fertilizers and other chemical runoffs create explosive growths of plankton—algae blooms. This in turn depletes the water’s oxygen content, leading to hypoxic conditions that kill all marine life. The area off the Mississippi Delta is a notorious dead zone that’s concerned scientists for many years.”

Loren noted the lingering bands of magenta that discolored the coastal waters from Texas to Alabama. “I had no idea it was so pervasive.”

“The intensity is fairly localized at the delta,” Gunn said, “but you can see the widespread effects.”

“That’s well and good,” Pitt said, “but we’ve known about the Mississippi dead zone for years.”

“Sorry, chief,” Yaeger said. “We’re actually focused a little farther south.”

He pointed to a trio of burgundy blotches that dotted the waters northwest of Jamaica. The patches were spread across an irregular line, extending past the Cayman Islands to near the western tip of Cuba.

Yaeger tapped at his keyboard, zooming in on the area. "What we have is an odd series of dead zones that have cropped up rather suddenly."

"What does the maroon color mean?" Loren asked. "And why do the spots get darker as they progress to the northwest?"

"It appears to be another burst of phytoplankton growth," Gunn said, "but much higher in intensity than we saw in the Mississippi Delta. They were fast-forming but may be somewhat temporary in nature." He nodded at Yaeger, who brought up a series of satellite images.

"This is something of a time-lapse view," he said, "starting about three months ago."

The initial photo showed no anomalies. A brightly hued spot appeared in the next image, then two more burgundy patches in the following photos. As each new dead zone appeared, the earlier spots faded slightly.

"There's some sort of sharp impact that is gradually diluted but is soon followed by another outbreak at a different location. As you can see, there seems to be a pattern from southeast to northwest."

Pitt eyed the multiple dead zones as they progressed. "What's odd is that they are far from any landmass. They aren't the result of pollution from river runoffs."

"Precisely," Gunn said. "It doesn't make a lot of sense."

"Could someone be dumping pollutants at sea?" Loren asked.

"It's possible," Gunn said, "but why would someone go to all these locations? A criminal polluter would likely just dump in one spot."

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“What got our attention were the related fish kills and the apparent progression of the disturbances toward the Gulf of Mexico. We’ve found numerous media reports in Jamaica, the Caymans, and even Cuba, reporting large quantities of dead fish and marine mammals washing ashore miles away from the visible zones. We can’t say for sure there is a connection, but if so, the impact may be much more acute than appears on the images.”

Loren looked back at the view off Louisiana. “The Gulf Coast can hardly afford a new environmental catastrophe on the heels of the BP oil spill.”

“That’s precisely our concern,” Gunn said. “If these dead zones begin sprouting in the Gulf of Mexico at the intensity we’re witnessing here, the results could be devastating.”

Pitt nodded. “We need to find out what’s creating them. What do our hydrographic buoys have to say?”

Yaeger brought up a new screen, showing a global schematic. Hundreds of tiny flashing lights peppered the map, representing NUMA sea buoys deployed around the world. Linked to satellites, the buoys measured water temperature, salinity, and sea states, with the data constantly downloaded to Yaeger’s computer center. He zeroed in on the Caribbean, highlighting a few dozen buoys. None were located near the dead zones.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any markers in the wake of the dead zones,” Yaeger said. “I checked the status of those closest, but they didn’t reveal anything unusual.”

“We’ll need to get some resources on-site,” Pitt said. “How about our research vessels?”

"The closest vessel of size would be the *Sargasso Sea*." Yaeger converted the screen to show the fleet of NUMA-deployed research ships.

"She's in Key West, supporting an Underwater Technology project that Al Giordino is leading," Gunn said. "Do you want me to call him and reassign the ship to investigate?"

Yaeger rolled his eyes. "Al will love that."

Pitt stared at the map. "No, that won't be necessary."

Loren saw the look in her husband's eyes and knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Oh, no," she grimaced, while shaking her head. "Not the lure of the deep again."

Pitt could only gaze at his wife and smile.

3

The Revolution Day party wound down early. It had been sixty-three years since Fidel Castro and a band of rebels attacked an Army barracks in Santiago, setting off the eventual overthrow of Cuban leader Fulgencio Batista. These days, there seemed little worth celebrating. The economy was still in tatters, food was in short supply, and the technological leaps the rest of the world enjoyed seemed to be passing the country by. On top of that, rumors were rampant, yet again, that *El Comandante* was near his last breath.

Alphonse Ortiz drained the mojito, his sixth of the night, and weaved his way toward the door of the stylishly furnished apartment.

“Leaving so soon?” the party’s hostess asked, apprehending him at the door. The wife of the Agriculture Minister, she was a buxom woman buried under a mask of heavy makeup.

"I must be fresh for a speech tomorrow at Martí Airport, recognizing its recent expansion. Is Escobar about?"

"Over peddling influence with the Trade Minister." She nodded at her husband across the room.

"Please give him my regards. It was a splendid party."

The woman smiled at the false compliment. "We're happy you could join us. Good luck with your speech tomorrow."

Ortiz, a highly regarded Cuban vice president on the powerful Council of State, gave a wobbly bow and escaped out the door. Five hours trapped conversing with half the Cuban cabinet had left him hungering for fresh air. Easing himself down three flights of stairs, he crossed an austere lobby and stepped onto the street. A blast of warm air greeted him, with the sounds of revelers celebrating the national holiday.

Ortiz stepped across the crumbling sidewalk and waved at a parked black sedan. Its headlights popped on and the Chinese-made Geely zipped up to the curb. Ortiz opened the rear door and collapsed into the backseat.

"Take me home, Roberto," he said to the wrinkled man at the wheel.

"Did you enjoy the party?"

"About as much as I savor a migraine. Stupid fools just want to relive the past. Nobody in our government bothers thinking about tomorrow."

"I think the president does. He likes your thinking. One day, he puts you in charge."

It was a possibility, Ortiz knew. There was a short list of

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possible successors waiting for Raúl Castro to retire in 2018, and he knew his name was on it. That was the only reason he had attended the Revolution Day party and made nice with the other cabinet ministers. When it came to politics, you could never have too many allies.

“One day, I’ll be in charge of a rocking chair,” he mused to his driver. He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Roberto grinned as he pulled into traffic and threaded his way out of downtown Havana. A moment later, a rugged six-ton Kamaz military truck stopped near the front of the apartment building. A soldier in olive drab fatigues emerged from the shadows of an adjacent doorway and climbed into the truck.

He nodded toward the departing black sedan. “The target is live.”

The driver stepped on the gas, cutting off a motorcyclist as he veered down the street. A block ahead, the Geely skirted past the Museo Napoleónico before turning onto Avenue La Rampa and driving across the western suburbs. While many high-ranking government officials lived in luxury city apartments, Ortiz maintained his residence in a modest hilltop home outside Havana that overlooked the sea.

The traffic and city lights gradually fell away as the Geely motored through an agricultural area of cooperative tobacco and cassava farms. The military truck, having trailed through the city at a discreet distance, closed the gap and rode up tight on the sedan’s bumper.

Roberto, who had worked as a chauffeur for sixty of his

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seventy-five years, didn't flinch. The unlit road was a haven for stray dogs and goats, and he wasn't going to risk a collision on account of an anxious tailgater.

The truck hung tight for a mile until the road curved up a sweeping hillside. With a noisy downshift, the truck drifted into the opposing lane and charged alongside the Geely.

Roberto glanced out his window and noted a star-shaped emblem on the door. A Revolutionary Army vehicle.

The truck surged slightly ahead, then veered sharply into the Geely's lane, smacking into the sedan's front fender.

Had Roberto possessed the reflexes of a younger man, he might have braked hard and quick enough to slip back with minimal damage. But he was a touch too late, allowing the heavy truck to shove the car across the road.

The sedan slammed into a rusty side rail, producing a trail of sparks.

The truck showed no mercy, pinning the Geely against the steel barrier in hope of propelling it over or through the rail, then down the hillside. But as the vehicles exited the curve, the side rail came to an end, replaced by a series of squat concrete pillars. The sedan slid past the side rail and smashed head-on into the first concrete post.

The car struck with a loud clap that echoed across the landscape. On the opposite hill, a young ranch hand was startled awake by the crash. Sitting upright in an open lean-to he shared with a dozen goats, he peered toward the road beyond. An Army truck was skidding to a halt just past a mangled car. One of the car's headlights still shone, illuminating the truck a few

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yards ahead. The boy grabbed his sandals to go lend help, then stopped and watched.

A man in fatigues emerged from the truck. The soldier glanced around as if ensuring no one was watching, then strode toward the car, a flashlight in one hand and a dark object in the other.

Inside the car, Ortiz groaned from the pain of a separated shoulder and a broken nose, having been flung into the dashboard. He gathered his senses as warm blood flowed down his chin. "Roberto?"

The driver sat motionless, slumped over the wheel. Roberto's neck had snapped, killing him instantly, after he had rocketed into the windshield. The Chinese export car had no air bags.

As reality sank in, Ortiz sat up and saw the Army truck through the shattered windshield. He wiped his bloodied face and watched as the soldier approached, carrying a dark object.

"Help me. I think my arm is broken," he said as the soldier pried open the passenger door.

The soldier gave him a cold gaze and Ortiz realized he was not there to offer aid. Sitting helpless, he watched as the soldier raised his arm and swung at him with the object. An instant before it crushed his skull, the minister recognized it as an ordinary tire iron.