

One

At sunrise in November, Marion D. Ford, wearing shorts and jungle boots, jogged the tide line where Sanibel Island crescents north, and finally said, “*Screw it,*” tired of wind and pelting sand. To his right were colorful cottages—red, yellow, green—The Castaways, a popular resort during season, but this was Tuesday and a slow time of year. He went to the outdoor shower, thinking he’d hide his boots and swim through the breakers. He was ten pounds overweight and sick of his own excuses.

A porch door opened: a woman backlit by clouds of cinnamon, the sun up but not hot enough to burn through. “Want some coffee?” She cupped her hands to be heard. “Your dog’s welcome, if he’s sociable.”

No idea who the woman was. Wearing a sweatshirt, with an articulate, strong voice that suggested Midwestern genetics: a descendant of dairymaids good at sports and baking pies. Late thirties, a rental compact in the drive, only one pair of sandals outside the door: a woman on a budget vacationing alone.

Ford said, “Can’t. I’m punishing myself.”

The woman replied, “You, too?” and walked toward him, started to speak but stopped, got up on her toes, focusing on something out there in the waves. “What in the world . . . is that someone drowning?”

Beyond the sandbar, Ford saw what might have been a barrel but one thrashing appendage told him was not. He removed his glasses. “A loggerhead, I think. This isn’t mating season, so it must be hurt.”

“Logger-what?”

“A sea turtle.” Ford handed her his glasses, jogged to the breakers, and duck-dived, still wearing his

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damn boots. The dog, which was a retriever but not a Lab or golden, swam after him. That was a mistake, too.

The turtle, barnacles on its back, was tangled in fishing line, and, yes, drowning. Ford had to alternately battle his dog, then the turtle, which hissed and struck like a snake while he maneuvered the thing through waves into the shallows. The woman was impressed. “You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“On rare occasions. Do you have a knife?”

“You’re not going to . . . ?”

“Of course not.”

The woman galloped to the cottage, her sweatshirt bouncing in counter-synch, legs not long but solid. *Nice*. She watched Ford cut the turtle free, inspect it for cuts, then nurse the animal back through the surf, where he side-stroked alongside for a while.

The woman was waiting with a towel, coffee in a mug, and water for the dog.

“Why not come inside and dry off? Or a hot shower, if you like, but you’ll have to forgive the mess.” The look the woman gave him was unmistakable—not that Ford often got that look from women he didn’t know. “Three mornings straight I’ve watched you run past here,”—an awkward smile—“so I finally worked up the nerve. Is it always this windy in November?”

Ford cleaned his glasses with the towel. “Nerve?”

“Old-fashioned, I guess. You know, speaking to strange men and all that.” Another look, eyes aware, before she added, “I’m here all alone.”

Ford tested several excuses before he followed the woman inside. He was thinking, *Why do the lonely ones choose islands?*

That night in Fort Myers, off Daniels Road, he was at Hammond Stadium, where the Minnesota Twins train, one of the practice fields, listening to his friend Tomlinson ramble on about something, but not

really listening.

“Which is why,” his friend concluded, “I won’t even watch a game on TV without wearing the ol’ codpiece.”

Mentioning fish got Ford’s attention. “You caught a cod? They don’t migrate this far south.”

“No, man—*my cup*. Until a woman finds an expiration date on my dick, I simply will not risk the Hat Trick Twins.” Tomlinson rapped three bell tones from between his legs to illustrate, which proved nothing, because they were sitting in a dugout, under lights, wearing baseball uniforms, not in a bar watching TV. On the field was a Senior League team from Orlando, a left-hander warming up while the umpires kibitzed, game time stalled for no apparent reason

Tomlinson muttered, “Geezus, what’s the holdup?” He grabbed the fence, yelled, “Hey, blue—while we’re still young, okay?” before returning to Ford. “You seem distracted, ol’ buddy. Romantic problems or is it something unusual?”

Ford replied, “This morning I found a turtle tangled in fishing line—one of those crimped wire leaders tourists buy at Walgreens. I assumed it was a loggerhead because they’re so common. Now I don’t think so.”

“Was it dead? Goddamn pharmaceutical companies. They’d sell Pop-Tarts to diabetics if it bumped their numbers.”

“The turtle was only about fifty pounds but already had barnacles growing. See what I’m getting at? Even a young loggerhead or hawksbill would be closer to a hundred. Or maybe I’m wrong about that, too. I had him in my hands but didn’t bother to notice details. Embarrassing, how little I know about sea turtles. Wouldn’t you expect a biologist to notice what the hell species it was?”

Tomlinson knew the pitcher from Orlando or would not have yelled, “Joe . . . Hey, Joey—put some color in that rainbow. Slow-pitch is for commies, dude.” This ultra-left-wing Zen Buddhist priest (he’d been ordained in Japan) and dope-smoking boat bum was a different person when he exited reality and entered a baseball field.

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Joey flipped Tomlinson the bird.

Ford mused, “Now I’m thinking it might have been a Kemp’s Ridley turtle, or even a Pacific Ridley. Two of the rarest in the world—the thing snapped at me like a dog, which is typical according to the literature. And its shell was too round. Had it right there in my hands; swam with it and still didn’t dawn on me. If that’s not a metaphor for something, I don’t know what the hell is.”

Ford hunched forward and retied his spikes, Tomlinson saying, “I should’ve never gotten rid of my old Kangaroos. These new Mizunos pinch my toe rings. I hate that.” Then hollered through the screen, “Oh great, now I’ve got to piss *again*. Guys . . . I have a Masonic meeting tomorrow. Any chance we’ll be done?”

Ford sat up. “Know what’s odd? Two days ago, I was reading about sightings of Pacific Ridelys in the Cuba Straits. I just remembered. Olive Ridelys, actually, but they’re the same thing. A few nests documented along this coast, too. Even north of Sarasota.”

Tomlinson reverted to his role as Zen master. “Nothing accidental about coincidence, Doc. Hey—just listen, for once. You’re being nudged toward something. Or away. Or into a new avenue of study. Karma seldom grabs a rational man by the balls.”

“I didn’t say it was a coincidence.”

“Oh?”

“Not the Cuba part.” Ford checked the bleachers—only a couple of wives in attendance—then found the main field, where stadium lights created a silver dome. Minnesota’s minor league team, the Miracle, was playing St. Pete, a few hundred fans in attendance. He said, “You’ll see when he gets here.”

“Who?”

“*If* he shows up,” Ford said, “you’ll understand. A friend from Central America. He was drunk when he called, which might explain why he’s late. Or might not.”

That made perfect sense to Tomlinson. He nodded, fingering a scar on his temple hidden by

scraggly hair—a figure eight which he insisted was an infinity symbol.

“Saving that Ridley is the coincidence. If it was a Ridley. The data goes back to 1953—one was caught in nets off Pinar del Río on Cuba’s western coast. A few years back, a Ridley was photographed laying eggs near Sarasota. They’re not supposed to be in the Gulf or Caribbean, but sea turtles are like underwater birds. They travel anywhere they want; flawless navigation systems, which suggests a magnetic sensitivity that’s still not understood. It crossed my mind I’ve never actually seen a Ridley. Not confirmed anyway, which is why I’m pissed at myself about this morning.”

Tomlinson’s attention focused. “*Really?* You sure that’s the only reason?” He said it as if envisioning a woman who was lonely and alone in her vacation cottage. Then added, “I hope you’re not thinking about going back to Cuba. That’s risking jail, man; a firing squad, from what I remember. Or has something changed?”

Ford shrugged, adjusted his protective gear, and buckled his pants. “I’ll ask Victor to catch the first few innings. He might have gone to the wrong field.”

“Vic? No . . . he went to his car to get eye black. What about Cuba? You know I’m right.”

“Not him. The guy I was talking about.”

Tomlinson said to Ford, whose spikes clicked as he walked away, “Not if I’m called in to pitch, you’re not leaving. Hey . . . *Whoa!* Do you have a death wish or get dumped again? Dude . . . I can talk you through this.”

There is a fine line between getting dumped and a relationship ended by the unanimous vote of one.

Ford thought about that as he walked past the spring training clubhouse, across the parking lot to the stadium, into a tunnel of noise and odors: popcorn, beer, and grilled brats. Cuba was also on his mind. What Tomlinson said would’ve been true a few years ago but might be okay now with the right cover story—or a companion with the right political ties.

The man he was searching for had those ties.

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Ford spotted him in the outfield cheap seats, alone above the bull pen. The nearest cluster of fans was three sections closer to third base. The man had been watching relief pitchers warm up, not the game, but was now arguing with two security cops.

No doubt who it was, even from a distance. The man's size and his choice of seats would have been enough.

Baseball spikes are tricky on aluminum. It took Ford awhile to get to left field and intervene on behalf of the man who was an old enemy and sometimes a friend—General Juan Simón Rivera, recently arrived from Central America via Havana.

“Tell them,” Rivera said in English when he spotted Ford. “Tell them who I am. Perhaps they will understand that diplomatic immunity includes baseball and cigars.”

He'd been smoking a Cohiba, that was the problem.

Ford replied in Spanish. “You want me to blow your cover, General?” This was safe to ask in front of two Anglo sheriffs deputies who resembled farmhands.

Rivera, the former dictator of Masagua, a tiny country that exported bananas and revolution, got control of himself. Decided, “Hmm. A man of my intellect is seldom a donkey's ass, but good point. Yes . . . better to indulge these fascists—for now.” Spoke loudly in slang Spanish, then waited with regal impatience while Ford pacified the cops.

When they were gone, Ford endured a bear hug; they exchanged pleasantries—who was married, how many wives, how many kids. Rivera, finally getting to it, said, “I'm surprised you recognized me. I've come incognito for a reason.”

Instead of signature khakis and boots, he wore a yellow Hawaiian shirt, a Disney visor, and flip-flops. Not enough to disguise a husky Latino with a gray-splotched beard and wild Russian hair, but Ford played along.

“A European tourist, General, that's what I thought at first. Very clever.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Oh, it took me awhile.”

Rivera expected that. It was a game they played, informal formality, but each man knew the truth about the other. He said, “Sometimes a wolf must blend with the sheep. Yet, not clever enough to fool you, my old catcher friend.” He noticed Ford’s uniform “Why are you not on the field? I might even agree to pitch a few innings . . . *if* you have a large uniform. It doesn’t have to be clean, but it cannot be an even number. I’m partial to the numbers three, nine, and thirty-seven.” With his hands, he gestured *I think you understand*.

Santería, a mix of Catholicism and voodoo, was big on numerology, especially when it came to baseball. Rivera was devoted to the game. In Central America, he had built his own field in the rainforest and drafted soldiers based on their batting averages. He fancied himself a great pitcher whose politics had ruined his shot at the major leagues.

Ford replied, “General, my teammates would be honored. But, first . . . why are you here?”

“Always the same with you, Marion. Rush, rush, rush. Only bachelorhood has spared you ulcers, I think.” Rivera nodded to the bull pen, where a pitcher who looked sixteen but was almost seven feet tall, sat with his hat askew. “That is Ruben. He’s one of my protégés. The Twins have offered him a tryout, but a mere formality. Ruben’s fastball rivals my own, yet he is a southpaw, as you can tell from his sombrero.”

A joke. *Gorro* was Spanish for “cap.” The general was in a pawky mood.

“He can’t be from Masagua. I never saw anyone from Masagua much over six feet—except for you. Are you his agent?”

Rivera touched an index finger to his lips. “Unfortunately, the situation requires that Ruben pretends he doesn’t know me. I can’t explain right now.”

Ford could guess where this was going but waited.

“I have an interesting proposition, Marion.”

Ford said, “In Cuba.”

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“I told you as much on the phone. A nice chunk of silver in U.S. dollars if you agree.”

Ford sensed trouble but also escape: turtles, isolated beaches, a land without cell phones—if he wasn’t arrested. “I’ll listen, but I don’t do that sort of work anymore. Not if it’s dangerous. Or political work—count me out if politics are involved.” He hadn’t ruled out human trafficking in deference to his own curiosity.

“Politics?” Rivera said. “I spit on the word. I piss on their speeches. To hell with their silly games. I am a freedom fighter—always—but have learned there are benefits to this free enterprise system of yours. A man is allowed to change, isn’t he?”

“Only the small-minded hate change, General.”

In clumsy English, Rivera replied, “You can say that twice. We will feast ourselves several days in Cuba. A week at most, every expenses paid. But, first”—he hesitated while shifting to Spanish—“I have a little problem here that must be dealt with.”

“In Florida?”

“Let us hope so.” Rivera leaned closer to speak over the noise of the PA system. “I have lost a baseball player. Temporarily, I’m sure, but it would be unwise to contact your police.”

“How long has he been missing?”

“Not ‘missing’; ‘wandered off.’ Since this morning, when I visited his motel—a place not far from here, with a large red sign. Without shoes or money, the lunatic could not have gone far.”

“He’s crazy?”

“Well . . . no more than most, but he’s not as smart as normal men. And honest, very honest, which makes him unpredictable.”

Ford had spent much of his life on the water and in baseball dugouts, which is why he asked, “Were his glove and bat missing? He could have worn spikes instead of shoes.”

“I didn’t think to check. I was too angry because a briefcase I entrusted to him was also gone. Nothing of value—some letters, a few photos. What I think is, the crazy fool took my orders to protect

the case too seriously and carried it with him when he wandered off.” Rivera demonstrated the size of the case by holding his hands apart. “An old leather briefcase. Not big, but well sewn.”

Ford wondered about that, looking down into the bull pen where the seven-foot-tall pitching prospect, sitting alone, was scrutinizing a Gatorade label. “Well . . . if the kid looks anything like Ruben, he shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“No, he is a shortstop, and not so young. There is no birth certificate to prove his age, but his brain has not matured. Figueroa Casanova is the name he uses—but we are wasting time. Tomorrow, we will find Figuerito. Tonight, we must discuss this trip I’ve proposed.”

Ford’s mind returned to Cuba. The government there respected Juan Rivera; with Rivera, he’d probably be safe. But there were other concerns. “Would we be traveling . . . together?”

Rivera misread Ford’s wariness and was insulted. “In my country, *generalísimos* do not travel like Yankee flamenco dancers or *maricóns*. Separately, of course, so bring a woman—two or three—all you want. I will provide you with a rental car and gas. Details can wait, but on a certain day we will rendezvous in the west of Cuba. A day or two there, shake a few hands, then back to Havana. Have you traveled the Pinar del Río region?”

Ford knew what “shaking hands” meant but pictured dirt roads and rainforest when he replied, “I’d have to think back.”

“Magnificent countryside, and vegetables from the garden. There, every village has its own baseball *campo*, so you will have many opportunities to swing the bat.” Rivera removed a cigar from his shirt, bit the tip off, chewed and swallowed. “Inferior pitching, of course, but on an island ruled by Fidel for fifty years, what do you expect?”

That was an odd thing for Rivera to say, and it was heresy in Cuba, but Ford was warming to the idea. He’d felt restless for weeks, but still had to say, “This can’t be legal.”

No, it wasn’t. He could tell by Rivera’s attempt to skirt the subject, which is when Ford decided, “Tell me anyway.”

Two

In his lab, Ford dropped three brine shrimp pellets into an aquarium while speaking to Tomlinson, who had an ice pack bag on his knee and a pitcher of beer on his lap. There had been a collision at home plate, but just bruises.

Ford said, “Rivera is smuggling Cuban baseball players into the U.S. He didn’t admit it, of course. He came up with another story—a bizarre one you’ll like—but I’m sure that’s what he’s doing. Now the heat’s on in Cuba and Rivera wants me to go along, probably as a beard. Or who knows, with him.”

“How bizarre?”

“The cover story? Just so-so, by your standards. He says in the late fifties, three American ballplayers buried their motorcycles and some guns the day Fidel Castro came to power. You know, rather than have their valuables confiscated. Thompson submachines, presentation grade. But let’s stick with the smuggling thread and I’ll fill you in later.”

Tomlinson moved the ice pack, fidgeting. “Were the bikes Harleys? If they were Harleys, the story is bullshit. No baseball jock would bury his Harley.”

Ford took a patient breath. “Anyway . . . the U.S. has loosened sanctions, but Cuban players still need legal asylum from a third country before Major League Baseball will sign a contract. Most escape through Mexico. The drug cartels handle everything—boats, papers, even sports agents. But now Rivera has set up his own cut-rate version through contacts in Masagua. Or—could be—Nicaragua. Pretty much the same political players both countries. Oh—get this—for start-up money, he’s been smuggling Cuban hard goods: cigars, paintings, historical items. Anything he can sell on the Internet while the

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Castro regime collapses.”

Wind slapped waves against the pilings, sifting odors of saltwater and iodine through the floor. Tomlinson was still wearing baseball pants but had traded his spikes for Birkenstocks. He adjusted the ice pack and wiggled his toes as if they were cold. “For a while,” he said, “I thought you were talking about the Juan Rivera I know—big guy from Masagua, a pitcher with a decent slider? The famous general. It’s such a common name.”

“That’s him. You were pissed because he wouldn’t give you a uniform when we were down there, then almost hit one out. That was more than, what, ten years ago? Now Rivera’s caught in a squeeze between the Cuban government for stealing players and the Mexican cartels for horning in on their business. That’s why he wants help, I think.”

Tomlinson smiled, gave a sideways look. “Naw, you’re messing with my head.”

“Ask him tomorrow when he shows up. If he shows. We’re supposed to help him find a shortstop who wandered off this morning.”

“You’re serious.”

“After all your cracks about my lack of imagination, what do you think?”

That clinched it. Tomlinson placed the beer pitcher on the floor—a man trying to control his temper. “You’re telling me that Juan Simón Rivera, the Maximum Leader of the Masaguan Revolution . . . the *generalissimo* of the goddamn People’s Army . . . is smuggling ballplayers and selling shit on eBay—”

“On the Internet . . . Yeah, he admitted that much—”

“And profiting from the flesh trade? Gad, that’s freakin’ human trafficking, man.”

“Well, depends on the ballplayer, I suppose.” Ford thought that might get a smile. It didn’t. “I could be wrong. Like I said, he gave me that story about motorcycles and machine guns. I can tell you the rest now or wait until we drive in to look for his missing shortstop.”

Tomlinson didn’t hear the last part. He got to his feet, chewed at a string of hair while he paced,

limping a little. “That *bastard*. Is there not a shred of Euro socialist integrity left in our leaders? A feeding frenzy of mobster behavior—that’s what’s happening. Even to advance Utopian goals, it is totally bogus.” He cringed and sighed. “Thank god Fidel and François Mitterrand aren’t alive to see this day.”

Ford, attempting subtlety, replied, “A lot of people would agree.” He flicked on the aquarium’s lights and noted movement among clusters of oysters at the bottom of the tank that had appeared lifeless but was now coming alive. “Watch this. It took only two days to condition the stone crabs—see that big female creeping out? Lights mean it’s feeding time. At five days, even the barnacles started to respond.”

Among the oysters, a mini-forest of lace blooms were sprouting, robotic fans that sifted amid a sudden flurry of crabs—dozens of crabs—most of them tiny.

Tomlinson said, “There you go—a feeding frenzy. I rest my case. Living entities perverted by the system to hide from the light—at least until some poor, innocent shortstop walks into the money trap. Now I understand why Rivera didn’t have the balls to look me in the face tonight and say hello. Which is why I assumed it was a different guy.”

Instead of pitching for Ford’s team, the *generalissimo* had remained in the main stadium but was gone by the end of the game—a game they might have won if, in the ninth inning, down by two runs, Tomlinson hadn’t tried to steal home. By all standards, a truly boneheaded play.

Ford asked, “Are you mad at the general or still mad at yourself?”

“Sure, rub it in. I didn’t buy a plane ticket to fly back here and lose. Be aggressive—that’s just smart baseball.”

In October, Tomlinson had sailed his boat, *No Más*, to Key West for the Halloween freak show known as Fantasy Fest. That was three weeks ago, but he couldn’t resist returning for a tournament that attracted teams from around the country, games played day and night at the best fields in South Florida.

“Stealing home with two outs? Down two runs?” Ford tried to sound neutral.

“Surprised everyone but the damn umpires, didn’t I? Dude, spontaneity, that’s just who I am.”

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Tomlinson looked into the empty pitcher. “You’re out of beer, Doc. Hate to say it, but I warned you this morning. Me sleeping outside in a hammock takes at least a six-pack—and that’s before I knew we’d be searching for some poor dugout refugee from the slave trade. What’s the shortstop’s name? Just from how the name flows, I can tell you if he’s any good.”

Ford, walking toward the door, replied, “The 7-Eleven’s still open, if you’re desperate. I’ve got to find my dog.”

Ford’s lab was an old house on pilings in the shallows of Dinkin’s Bay, just down from the marina, where, on this Tuesday night, people who lived on boats were buttoned in tight but still awake, watching monitors that brightened the cabins along A dock.

The dog was there, curled up next to the bait tank, probably tired from swimming all day. A picnic table allowed a view of the bay. Ford sat, opened his laptop while explaining to the dog, “I didn’t renew my Internet service because it’s so damn intrusive. And I don’t want to be there when Tomlinson sneaks a joint. Or comes back with more beer.”

The dog’s eyes sagged open. His tail thumped once. He went back to sleep.

“People say you need Internet for research? What the hell’s wrong with going to the library? I like libraries—or used to.” Ford, using two fingers, banged at the keys. “Next time—I mean this, by god—Tomlinson is getting a hotel room and he can either ride his bike or call a cab. What kind of grown man asks to do a sleepover? His exact word: *sleepover*. Then bitches at me about not buying enough beer.”

More hammering on the keys before he scanned the boats, some held together by epoxy and tape, others expensive yachts. “Crappy reception out here. You’d think one of these people could afford a decent router. Hey”—he was speaking to the dog—“Hey, if I’ve got to sleep in the same house with him, you do, too. Your too-tired-to-walk crap isn’t going to fool me twice. The way he snores, I get it, but I’m the one who needs sleep.”

Ford zipped the laptop into its case, loaded the dog into his truck, and drove to Blind Pass, telling

himself he would cast for snook along the beach on this good outgoing tide despite a waxing moon.

From the parking lot of Santiva General Store he could look across the road to the beach and colorful cottages of The Castaways, red, green, and yellow, although they appeared gray at eleven p.m. on this breezy night.

From the back of the truck, Ford selected a spinning rod—an intentional deception. All the cottages were dark but for one where a woman, opening the screen door, said, “I was hoping you’d stop by.”

She had yet to request or offer an exchange of last names, or personal histories, which created a vacuum of protocol that, to Ford, felt like freedom.

He asked, “Need any help?” No lights on, the woman was in the bathroom, searching for something—a towel, it turned out.

“Not with you around. Wasn’t it obvious? That was a new one for me.”

“It seemed natural, just sort of happened.”

The woman, voice husky, said, “I wouldn’t mind if it happened again,” and came back into bed.

Maggie, that was her first name. Whether it was her real name or short for “Margret” or “Marjorie,” he hadn’t risked inquiring. Intimacy with a stranger was a cozy tunnel untethered to the past, open at both ends. Secrets, if shared, would necessarily vanish at first light.

Seldom had Ford felt so relaxed.

Later, they talked some more. Him saying, “I know the Cuba idea sounds far-fetched, but it’s an actual business proposition. Usually, I’d put it down on paper, a list of pros and cons, instead of bouncing it off you. You mind?”

Without using names, he had condensed Rivera’s unusual cover story.

Maggie started to ask “What kind of business are you . . .” but caught herself and opted for a safer option. “Machine guns and motorcycles, huh? I guess we’re all Huck Finn at heart. I’ve always wanted to go to Cuba—not that I’m fishing. I’ve got this place booked through Sunday.” She tested the silence

for awkwardness, then added, “Havana is beautiful, from the pictures. Have you been?”

He dodged that. “There are direct flights from Tampa now. That would make it easier.”

“But is it legal? And, once you get there, is it safe? I read an article about an antiques dealer—he’s from Miami, I think—that he’s in jail, accused of stealing documents from the Castro estate. Paintings and stuff, too. And this other man who tried to smuggle in electronic equipment. Almost four years he’s been in prison.”

Ford’s attention vectored. “Which Castro?”

“Well . . . I’m not sure, but they’ve both been sentenced to death by firing squad. Not the Castros, the men I’m telling you about. Or sentenced to life. Some terrible punishment. I’d have to find the article.”

Ford settled back. “It wouldn’t have made the news if it was true.”

“You mean it *would* have made the news.”

Too late to correct his slip. “Could be. You hear all kinds of rumors about that place.”

“What I’m saying is, you need to confirm with your friend that what you’re doing is legal. If he is a friend . . . or *she* is a friend. Either way.” Her hand found Ford’s thigh. “Sorry, none of my business. Tell me the rest.”

He did, paraphrased a summary he’d written on a legal pad earlier in the lab:

On December 31, 1958, three American pitchers playing for the Havana Sugar Kings were delayed by extra innings and accidentally trapped when Castro’s army came to power. The players—two from the Midwest, one from the Bronx—weren’t politically savvy but knew it was dangerous to return to Havana until things cooled down.

They were cautious for good reason: Cuba’s recent dictator, flaunting Caribbean League rules, had personally signed their contracts after bribing them with cash and presents. Bribes included new Harley-Davidson motorcycles and three gold-plated Thompson submachine guns, each personalized and engraved LOYAL BEYOND DEATH—FULGENCIO BATISTA.

At the end of seventeen innings, when news about the coup circulated into their dugout, that inscription took on a darker meaning. Fulgencio Batista was the recently deposed dictator.

Everyone in Havana had seen their hot rod Harleys and gaudy rifle scabbards. No denying that. So the three Americans waved good-bye to the team bus, mounted their bikes, and laid low in western Cuba for a week. Ultimately, they swore a blood oath and either hid or buried their valuables before returning to the United States. Because of the embargo, they never went back.

Ford ended the story, adding, “My friend has a contact who claims to know where the stuff is. It would be fun, I think. Not for the money—if we recover anything, it should go to the players’ families. That part we haven’t discussed. Problem is, my friend might have invented the whole business just to lure me down there so I can help with something else.”

Maggie, rather than ask the obvious, decided to have fun with it. “They buried their motorcycles . . . my god. That sounds unlikely. Probably hid them, don’t you think? Even if they didn’t, you should go. Adventure for its own sake. We get trapped in ruts, doing what’s expected instead of what we really want.” She squeezed his hand. “I don’t mean to sound maudlin, but I’ve wasted too many years afraid to step off the high board.”

Ford, loosening up, said, “Might be fun. There’s a species of turtle down there I’ve never seen. Occasionally found in Cuba anyway. A Pacific Ridley. Not that I’m an expert—you were wrong this morning. So yeah, why not? As long as I don’t have to spend too much time with this guy. He can be a lot of work.”

“Then your friend is a man.”

“Times two. I thought I made that clear.”

Maggie—if that was her name—lifted the covers and sprawled atop him, her breath warm. “Good. I don’t care what happens tomorrow, but tonight—I’ll admit it—I’m glad you’re not going with some ballsy woman.”

“Jealous?”

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“*Envious,*” Maggie replied, “of any woman with that much nerve. This is my first vacation without training wheels”—she was repositioning her hands—“and, so far, I like the taste of freedom.”

Three

In the morning, the retriever followed Ford past the marina office, where Mack, behind the counter, read the sports section as fishing guides fueled and iced their boats. No rush. Fog had displaced the wind with a stillness that dripped from the trees. Poor visibility required a late start.

Mack called out the window, “Were you there when police showed up at the stadium?”

Ford was on his way to the beach. “What do you mean?”

“That Senior League tournament. You had a game last night, didn’t you?”

“Yeah . . . ?”

“Says here there were gunshots, but it could have been a car backfiring. That a locker room was robbed and a couple of cars. Must have been quite a game.”

“You’re kidding. Cars were stolen or just broken into?”

“During a brawl,” Mack replied, and resumed reading until Ford was inside. “Says here it started because a batsman scored four home runs in two games, which somehow caused a fight.” He peered up through his bifocals. “Is a four-over considered a century? Or is it called a round-tripper?”

Twenty years since Mack had immigrated from New Zealand, but he still confused baseball with cricket. Ford approached the counter. “Mind if I see that?”

There were two stories about a game and resulting incident at an old Grapefruit League complex, Terry Park in east Fort Myers, miles from the Twins stadium, which Ford explained.

Mack, although disappointed, looked on the bright side. “I suppose there are enough ugly rumors about this marina, so I’m glad you weren’t involved. Particularly”—he motioned in the direction of

Tomlinson's mooring buoy—"you-know-who."

Ford scanned the newspaper for familiar names and zeroed in on yesterday's box scores. In the afternoon, a shortstop named F. Casanova had hit three home runs playing for the Dallas BMW Bandits. Last night, pinch-hitter F. Casanova, playing for Tallahassee Orthopedics, had *beaten* the Dallas team with a solo shot in extra innings.

Thus the brawl.

Was F. Casanova "Figueroa," the general's missing shortstop? More likely it was "Frank" or "Felipe," some baseball stud who sold his services to the highest bidder. It happened. Interesting, though, because the locker room and two vehicles had been damaged by forcible entry during the game. It brought to mind Rivera's missing briefcase.

There was something else: F. Casanova had vanished by the time police and the news reporter arrived.

Ford, after asking Mack's permission, tore out the page. "Tomlinson will want to see this. Is he around?"

"I sure as hell heard him when I got up to check for water in the rentals. Snoring. Before sunrise, even with this fog, I knew it was him from a hundred yards away. If sleep apnea didn't kill His Holy Weirdness, I suppose he went to breakfast. Did you check the rack for his bike?"

Ford went out the door, the dog at heel but jittery when a gaggle of pelicans parted to clear a path.

Tomlinson's beach cruiser, with fat tires, AC/DC stickers, and a basket stolen from Fausto's in Key West, was outside Bailey's General Store, intersection of Periwinkle and Tarpon Bay, a quarter mile from the marina. Only a few vans and lawn service trucks in the lot. Ford sat on a bench near a bulletin board, watching men exit with coffee and breakfast in Styrofoam containers.

Not Tomlinson. Two bananas, a bag of scones, and a six-pack of Corona for him.

"Damn it," he said, "forgot the limes." Then looked up from the bag in his hand. "What happened

to you last night? I got up to piss around four, you weren't back. But I smelled coffee before sunrise."

Ford replied, "I actually got some sleep," and handed him the newspaper. "Keep an eye on the dog while you read. I'll grab limes while I get breakfast."

"You're welcome to a mango scone."

"Bottom of the page about a brawl," Ford said, "the teams from Dallas and Tallahassee. Oh"—he waited until Tomlinson had found the article—"the name of Rivera's missing shortstop is Figueroa Casanova. Take a look at the box scores."

"Is it 'Figueroa' or 'Figgy'? That makes a difference." Tomlinson stroked his beard while he read. "Geezus, the dude hit four dingers?"

"Could be a different Casanova."

"Not if his name's 'Figgy,' it couldn't. That's what I meant, just by the rhythm. A 'Fran' or 'Floyd' or 'Fredrico' couldn't hit his weight, not playing shortstop. And sure as hell wouldn't be my choice to pinch-hit with the game on the line. Yeah, gotta be 'Figgy' . . . 'Figgy Casanova.' What do you want to bet?"

Ford had refused a scone but decided to try one. "What I'm curious about is, the locker room was broken into. Did you get to that part?"

"Don't pressure me, Doc. It's too early for speed-reading. Besides, not all illegal immigrant shortstops are thieves. That is semi-racist."

"Spare me your guilt-ridden lectures," Ford replied, then explained about the missing briefcase. "Rivera said Casanova isn't smart, but he's loyal. When he wandered off, he left his street shoes and other stuff but took Rivera's briefcase. I'm projecting, probably no connection whatsoever, but see what I mean? Because that's what he'd been told to do: watch the thing."

Tomlinson liked that. "A position player you can trust, plus he hits for power. What do you think he'd charge to play for us?"

Ford, walking toward the electronic doors, didn't remind him their team had been eliminated after a

misguided attempt to steal home. When he returned with a salt bagel and coffee, Tomlinson was still reading, but less enamored with the missing shortstop. “The dude went and double-crossed Dallas. He’s nuts. You don’t screw a team from a state that fries killers before the judge’s truck is out of the parking lot. Why would the *generalissimo* trust Casanova with anything valuable?”

“Rivera said the briefcase contains some letters, personal stuff, nothing worth much. But it wouldn’t be the first time he’s lied to me. The man’s tricky. He’s got a very nasty edge—don’t let the charm fool you.” No reason to add that, during Masagua’s first revolution, Rivera had put a bounty on Ford’s head—ten thousand córdoba, dead or alive. But then, a few years later, at a baseball tournament in Cartagena, he had greeted him like a long-lost friend.

The *generalissimo*’s team needed a bull pen catcher, turned out.

“He claims he doesn’t have a cell phone and wouldn’t say where he’s staying. So we’ll have to wait until this afternoon—if he shows. I’ve got work to do in the lab anyway.”

Something else Ford intended to do was check for articles about items stolen from the Castro estate.

Tomlinson had folded the page to “Senior League Tournament,” “Today’s Games.” “Dallas is playing the Long Island Starbucks at ten a.m., Terry Park. A clash of cultures, man, in the loser’s bracket. You know how grueling that shit is. Two or three games in one day and both teams desperate for players who can still walk. I think we’ve got a shot at starting.”

Ford, fussing with the dog’s collar, shook his head.

“Your call, man. You going for a run?”

“To the Island Inn and back, hopefully eight-minute miles or better. Then pull-ups. I need to start pushing myself.”

“Sure. Pain is a lot more fun than baseball,” Tomlinson replied. “If can get my van started, I’ll let you know how things shake out.”

In 1921, a baseball-loving farmer donated cattle pasture east of Fort Myers in the hope of attracting a major league team to spring training. Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics obliged. Although teams changed through the decades—Pittsburgh, then the K.C. Royals—the baselines of the main diamond had not moved an inch since 1925.

Tomlinson loved that about Terry Park. He sat in his van, windows open, soaking up history while the morning sun baked the fog away. Senior League games didn't attract fans, so players' cars were clustered behind the stadium but not on the grass near the gate. That's why Tomlinson had chosen this spot, out here in the Bermuda flats, close to the old clubhouse, but not because the locker room had been robbed. He was a man who valued solitude for practical reasons—such as lighting a joint after amping up Springsteen's "Glory Days" until the bass vibrated in his heart. Then held his breath so long he had to relight the joint, which was okay, because he also valued ceremony.

Next up, Tomlinson decided, he'd play Warren Zevon, with the Stones on deck and Jimi Hendrix in the hole. No . . . Buffett was a better choice to hit cleanup. Captain Jimmy prolonged the amperage of a buzz; he sort of took the tiller until mist cleared unto another fine day.

This was a bold move that required a lineup change. Which is why Tomlinson was pawing through a box of CDs when a man, his face obscured by a towel, appeared in the van's mirrors. The man was barefoot and shirtless, all skin and muscle, built low to the ground, maybe five-five on a tall day, with baseball spikes slung over his shoulder and wearing a towel like a hoodie.

Tomlinson sat up straight, cupped the joint, and let his paranormal powers assist his eyes.

Hmm . . . were those Santería beads hanging from the guy's equipment bag? Yep. Beads of red-and-black. They hinted at the man's identity despite the towel over his head. If true, this was one ballsy finesse, attempting to sneak onto the field this morning after causing so much trouble last night.

Tomlinson made a clucking sound of approval and used a boney hand to motion the stranger closer. "*Oírme, amigo,*" he called. "Over here."

The little man tilted his head to sniff the air, sniffed again and appeared interested. Then started

toward the van—which is when two sheriff’s deputies exited the locker room and scanned the parking lot. An instant later, an equipment bag banged through the van’s window. The little man followed, small and agile enough to land curled up on the floor like a cat. With his hands, he urged *Get moving*.

Tomlinson smiled down from the steering wheel. “Dude . . . I like your act already.”

“My brother,” the man replied, “that *pitillo*, it smells fine, but not so fine in jail, huh? Let me hold that thing while you drive.”

“You’re from Cuba, aren’t you? A shortstop, I’d wager.”

Figueroa Casanova formed a V with his fingers and accepted the joint with a smile.

What Figueroa couldn’t understand is why, after only five days in America, so many angry men had chased him, some with bats, but one with a *pistola*, and now police were after him, too.

“I come here, all I want to do is play baseball. In Cuba, we play all day, all night if there’s no cane to cut or I’m not in jail. Why is such a simple matter so crazy? Amigo, my ears hurt, those men yell at me so loud.”

Tomlinson pulled into the old armory, no cars around, just seagulls sunning themselves and shitting on haggard Humvees beyond the wire. The symbolism won him over, so he put the van in park. “Wait until your first iPhone, pal. Hell, or even a laptop if your ears are ringing now. The social media thing, Twitter and Facebook, they jackhammer into your skull. They’ll infest your privates and suck your soul dry. In terms of decibels? S and M—social media, I’m saying—the shit’s a relentless banshee scream that no silver bullet can silence.”

Casanova had no idea what Tomlinson was talking about, so continued with his story. “General Rivera, he says to me, ‘Figuerito, I promise all the baseball you want,’ but then leaves me—although in a fine hotel, it is true. Two days, do I play baseball? Three days, same shit. I bounce the ball in the parking lot. I sit on my ass in that room with cold air. Then *bang-bang-bang* at the door—it’s a *bandito* with this thing over his head—like a sweater with eyes, you know? A damn pistol pointed, so I grabbed

my shit and ran. Brother, I have been running ever since. Well”—Figueroa paused to except a freshly rolled joint—“not yesterday, when I hit three home runs. I trotted the bases out of, you know, respect for the pitcher. But those big gringos last night, when I hit a fourth, they chased me anyway.” He reached for the lighter. “What’s the name of that town where their team lives?”

Tomlinson was opening his cell. “Dallas, Texas,” he replied, then left another message on the phone in Ford’s lab. For half an hour and one fat joint they’d been talking, just driving and taking it slow to see what they had in common. There was Juan Rivera and baseball, now they were getting down to the nitty-gritty. This was the first Tomlinson had heard of an armed man breaking into Casanova’s motel. It sobered him. “Any idea who it was? From his voice, or maybe you saw his car.”

The shortstop was admiring the van’s spaciousness. He shook his head. “A man sticks a *pistola* in my face, all I think about is, run. He wanted something, kept yelling at me, but how the hell do I know?” His eyes did another scan. “This thing’s roomy, man. Last night, I slept on a bench outside ’cause of what happened. A golf course, I think. It was a field with flags.”

“What do you think the guy wanted?”

“The *bandito*? Whatever he could get. That’s why I left my money and shoes in the room. Nice shoes, and almost twenty dollars American. But guess what? Didn’t matter. That man chased me, too.” He went into detail, saying he didn’t know where Rivera was staying, and that he was afraid to return to his fine hotel, the Motel 6 on Cleveland Avenue, so he had nowhere to stay. Then, peering through the windshield, asked, “Which way is Texas?”

Tomlinson pointed west.

“Let’s don’t take that road,” Figueroa said, frowning.

“No way in hell, so don’t worry. But help me make sense of what’s going on here. The friend I told you about, Doc—his name’s really Marion Ford—he knows Rivera a lot better than me. He thinks Rivera’s tricky. And, from personal experience, I know he’s dangerous.”

“Who?”

“The general.”

“No, the other one. His name is Doc?”

“Marion Ford, he’s my neighbor on Sanibel.”

“Oh. Of course. All generals are dangerous. Why you think I ride a boat to Florida from Cuba?”

Figuroa let that sink in for a moment. “Yes . . . what you say is interesting. The general has a bad temper, this is true. And always on the phone whispering. Secretive, you know? I think he is running from something, or afraid.”

“Rivera gave you a briefcase to hang on to, according to Doc. Is that true?”

The shortstop patted the equipment bag at his feet, an oversized model carried by catchers, to indicate the briefcase was inside. “The general, he trusts me.”

“Maybe that’s what the robber was after.”

“The case? Could be, yeah. I don’t know ’cause I couldn’t understand what he was saying.”

“That’s the confusing part. Your English is excellent—thank god or we’d need sign language. Or was it because you were so scared?”

Figuroa gave him an odd look. “Man, I don’t speak English. What makes you say this crazy thing?”

Tomlinson tugged at a strand of hair and reconsidered the joint he had rolled. “You’re shittin’ me.”

“Just Spanish. What you think we’ve be talking this whole time?”

“I’ll be damned. You actually understand me?”

“Except for all the crazy shit you say. Smoke some nice *pitillo* before a game, yeah, I need it to slow me down. But too much”—he shrugged—“guess we all different. You a pitcher, huh? Left-handed, I bet.” Talking, he reached, unzipped the equipment bag, and removed a briefcase.

“This is so freaking cool,” Tomlinson murmured. He located his own eyes in the mirror, decided there were untapped worlds behind those two blue orbs. Among them, a cogent intelligence that might decipher why his new best amigo had been assaulted by a bandit.

The briefcase drew his attention. It rested in Casanova's lap: antique brass buckles, and leather of waxy brown, all handsomely sewn. "Hey . . . *that's* what that bastard *bandito* was after. What Rivera told my friend was a bald-faced lie, I think."

"Yeah?"

"Rivera claimed there's nothing valuable in there, but my cognitive senses reply, 'Bullshit.' Yes, a lie . . . a blanket deception designed to cover his ass—and all the more plausible because Rivera gave the briefcase to you. Why didn't the general hide the thing in his own room? *That's* the question. Dude . . . I can only think of one reason."

"'Cause the general knows I'm honest."

"That, too—or because *it's dangerous*." Tomlinson looked from Figueroa to briefcase.

The shortstop didn't want to believe him. "This?"

"Damn right, Figgy. Dangerous, sure, to have in your possession." Tomlinson bent to see a logo branded into the leather flap . . . no, three letters, one bigger than the others, but all too small to read until his nose had damn-near skewered the brass lock.

Figueroa was getting nervous. "I didn't ask what's inside. The general tells me to watch something, I watch it. He tells me not to look inside a briefcase, I don't look inside. As a child, I made a vow to a certain deity that I will not lie unless—"

Tomlinson, after inspecting the flap, sat up fast, saying, "Son of a bitch—I was right," but gathered himself when he saw the shortstop's face. The poor guy was ready to run barefoot through the streets again. So he took a breath—like, *No big deal*—and added, "On the other hand, Figgy, I'm seriously blazed. For instance, I didn't realize I spoke fluent Spanish until now."

This was true, although the initials on the briefcase suggested it was a big deal.

"God damn, brother, you scared me, actin' like you found something bad."

"Dude, look for yourself. We've got ourselves a situation here. Do the initials *F.A.C.* mean anything to you?"

“Nope. You want to open this case, you welcome, but it’s up to you.” The shortstop pushed the thing toward him and reached for the lighter. “All I promised to do is watch.”

F.A.C. Tomlinson, after reconfirming those initials, decided, *It’s got to be his*. Damn few people, even Cubans, knew that Fidel Castro’s middle name was Alejandro. But that wasn’t proof enough. He fiddled with the lock, part of him hoping it wouldn’t open.

Cripes. Like magic, the flap peeled back to reveal what was inside. There were well-sewn pockets. They holstered reading glasses with wire cables and several antique pens. At the bottom was a stationery box adorned with a ribbon in the shape of a heart. The box smelled of lavender perfume, and had some weight when he placed it on his lap. This offered hope. A man, especially the leader of a revolution, wouldn’t keep something so blatantly feminine in his briefcase.

Figgy, gazing out the passenger window, said, “Hurry up. I’m tired of pretending not to see.”

Inside the box were letters. Several dozen . . . no, at least a hundred, written on paper that ranged from fine onionskin to postcards to cheap legal-sized. Even a couple of telegrams, all in Spanish.

Tomlinson said, “Dude, I’m going to need some help here.”

The shortstop refused to turn his head. “If you can speak it, you can read. But, brother, don’t read out loud ’cause I don’t want to hear this bad thing you’re doing.”

Tomlinson let his mind go loose and picked out a letter at random. It had been typed; others were in cursive ink, written with a flourish that suggested a Jesuit education:

17 March '53

My Adored Gaitica . . . I saw Mirta yesterday, she said that she had spoken with Mongo by phone. I haven’t been to the University since the softball game three days ago . . .

“Softball,” the English spelling.

“Figgy, how do you say ‘softball’ in Spanish?”

“‘Pig shit,’” he responded but didn’t turn.

“Float on, *hermano*,” Tomlinson replied, and skipped over several lines to

There has been no blood shed until now. Havana is still in a sleepy state and nobody speaks on the buses. Last night they detained Dr. Agramonte and other Party leaders again. Fidel and I remain in hiding, although discreetly moving around a lot . . .

Huh?

He flipped the page over.

My regards to all and to you all the affection of your unforgettable love.

It was signed “Raúl.”

What the hell was a letter written by Raúl Castro doing in a briefcase with his older brother’s initials?

Tomlinson plucked out another letter, this one handwritten, three pages, dated April 1954 . . . and, my god, it was postmarked from prison on Cuba’s Isle of Pines. There was a censor’s stamp and red initials.

My Dear Little Doll . . . In the night I imagined you taking a bath in the washbasin and you were telling me in the mirror that you are too young to be so daring . . . I laid in bed rather absentmindedly and was soon in a state of ecstasy with thoughts of my sweet little girl . . .

Tomlinson spoke to Figueroa. “This one’s hot. I think the guy’s whacking off, which I don’t blame him because he’s in the slammer. You know? Locked up. But wait, let’s see how it’s signed . . .”

The shortstop covered his ears.

At the bottom of the third page:

You are always in my thoughts. Fidelito

Whoa! Jackpot.

30 Cuba Straits

Check the mirrors, lock the doors, check mirrors again. Tomlinson started the van.

They were on I75, south of the Twins stadium, before he finally said to Figgy, who was calmer, “I’ll tell you a great place to play baseball—you ever been to Key West?”