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The *Cassiopeia* rolled heavily with twenty thousand pounds of contraband coffee beans tucked securely within her cargo hold. She traveled northeast at a relaxed six knots while carving a luminescent wake through the dark Caribbean. A hard March wind dragged the stack's syrupy diesel fumes out across the ninety foot refitted shrimp boat and blew them towards Nicaragua's Costa de Mosquitos.

Ethan McCray steadied himself against the stern's rail, pissed into the ocean, and peered up into the nighttime sky. His neck hurt from staring at the Milky Way, a vivid, breathtaking splash of light fanning across cold pinpricks of distant stars. This second trip to Kingston, he thought, would net him a little more respect from Nicolas and Rosa, the middle-aged, well-seasoned deckhands now sleeping soundly in one of the boat's cabins. More respect too, from the skipper, McCray thought, turning his attention to shaking himself and then zipping up against the chilly nighttime air.

"Brooklyn never smells so clean," Ethan said aloud. His voice seemed small against the vast night, and it quickly disappeared out over the ocean. His workplace, the Coffee Exchange Alliance, quickly flashed through his mind. The office stood tucked away in a rundown corner of Brooklyn, one of the last holdouts of cheap rents against the inevitable gentrification sweeping through the borough.

A loud, static crack interrupted his musings about home, "Ethan, check the back hatches and engine room before you come in."

Startled, Ethan looked toward the boat's house and the two battered, outdoor speakers fastened just beneath its steel roof.

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He nodded to the camera, just visible near the heavy door, and again thought how strange it was having the skipper know his location at all times. He didn't sign up for this back in August, he remembered with a slight smile. The project description said nothing about going to sea, nothing about avoiding Salavandra's Coastal Patrol, and certainly nothing about surreptitious meetings and clandestine coffee sales in Jamaica. Yet all this and more had happened in the seven months since he stepped off the plane in Saint Matthew, on the island of Salavandra, with a head full of organizational models and a heart full of enthusiasm. Now, with calloused hands and aching muscles, he knew better, and brokered little faith in the Coffee Exchange Alliance ideals of equalizing trade and improving producers' lives. He bent to the deck and grasped the handle of a nearby hatch.

The thick aluminum handle was pushed firmly into place and the hatch cover lay appropriately flush with the roughly hewn wooden deck boards. Ethan then gave its wide black gasket a quick look to make sure that it too was in place. "One leaky gasket can sink us," he remembered the skipper telling him as they replaced an old, cracked one the previous day. Ethan had peeled it away in pieces from the boat's steel frame, with fish scales and mysterious, decaying organic matter flaking away.

A swell unexpectedly shifted the *Cassiopeia* to port, and Ethan nearly lost his balance.

"Sea legs, sea legs," he muttered quietly, encouraging himself as he strained against the deck's shifting mass. At least there was no motion sickness. Many hours ago Rosa had quietly given him a little pill just before they left the secret dock on Encarnacion.

"So you don't look so pale, this time out," she said with a smile.

Ethan liked Rosa for her motherly fussing and thought the *Cassiopeia* was blessed with her presence. Somewhere, buried in his memory, he remembered hearing that women aboard fishing vessels were bad luck. That, along with a dozen other seafaring superstitions, seemed ridiculous now. Common

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sense showed that Rosa was as valuable a deckhand as anyone else aboard.

He stepped lightly toward the second hatch, this one securing the boat's main hold where all the coffee lay, and immediately noticed that the handle had shifted slightly since his last check. He knelt to secure it, but then on whim, opened the hatch to have a look inside.

The deck lamp barely illuminated the nearly two hundred tightly packed burlap sacks. Inside all those sacks nestled millions of pebble-like, green coffee beans, the hard-won labor of the covert coffee operation on Salavandra's Encarnacion Peninsula. Ethan remembered packing some of the burlap himself, but only after endless weeks of picking and processing. In his dreams he still picked the red coffee cherries, still shoveled mounds of rotting pulp, and still heard the gentle rattle of beans as he dried them in Salavandra's sunshine.

"Not upside-down, Ethan!" the speakers abruptly crackled. "Never upside-down."

Startled, Ethan banged his head on the edge of the hold as he quickly turned toward the speakers and the deck camera.

"The hatch cover," the skipper's voice sputtered in explanation. Ethan could hear his underlying impatience and cringed. An unhappy skipper made everything less pleasant aboard the boat. He swung his head and saw with dismay that he had indeed placed the solid aluminum oval upside-down on the deck.

"Sorry, I forgot," he yelled, knowing the skipper could not hear him. "Boat follows the hatch cover, yeah, yeah," he continued, this time mumbling and turning away from the camera. He quickly flipped the cover over, perhaps a little too aggressively. It landed a few feet away with a loud rattle.

"How does it look? Any shifting?" asked the skipper.

Ethan shook his head and flashed an "ok" sign at the camera. He didn't see how the bags could shift, given their tight pack, but he supposed anything was possible given the power of the sea. Before leaving Encarnacion an argument had ensued about how many sacks the *Cassiopeia* could safely

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transport. Several farmers wanted to load up another two dozen and thereby maximize the boat's hold capacity. As more sacks were loaded, however, it became clear that any more weight would drop the *Cassiopeia* too deeply below her water line. The skipper had refused these last sacks, but only after inviting several men aboard to see the extent of the fill.

"You'll want me to get to Kingston, I assume, and be able to come back with your money?" the skipper asked the group of grumbling farmers. "It won't do you any good if I sink out there because you insisted on a few more sacks of beans."

"What's twenty-four more?" asked an exhausted farmer, his palpable weariness mirrored the drained faces of his companions. "It's a few more feet up to the hold's ceiling. Wasn't the boat designed to fill up?"

The skipper, anxious to be going during the early evening hours and thereby elude Salavandra's Coastal Patrol during their regular shift change, angrily shook his head. "I don't tell you how to grow coffee, mister. How is it that you tell me how to run my boat?"

That ended the argument. While the farmers shuffled ashore the skipper ordered the stern, spring and bow lines manned in preparation for casting off.

Now, as Ethan peered back down into the hold, he was grateful for the lighter load. Offloading in Kingston would be that much faster. Having never broken any law more significant than a parking statute, his stomach did flip-flops at the thought of the many vulnerable hours he'd soon spend deep within the *Cassiopeia* offloading all this illegally imported coffee. He wondered briefly at his ability to withstand a Jamaican jail, but then hastily put the notion aside as he secured the hatch.

The huge eight-stroke Cummins diesel knocked Ethan's teeth on edge as soon as he broke the seal on the engine room door. With no ear muffs, he simply gritted his teeth against the layered hammering of the engine, the generator and nearly a dozen pumps and valves as they banged, hummed and rattled

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in a fanatical unison that somehow kept the *Cassiopeia* moving. He glanced at the checklist the skipper scrawled on the bright, white wall with a black Sharpie, and made a mental note not to forget to check the bilge level this time. Oil pressure, oil level, filter flow, coolant flow, batteries (check all six for charges), gaskets (for leaks)...the list continued in the skipper's careful hand until, at the very bottom, almost near the grated steel floor, bilge was listed.

Ethan made his way around the room checking the various dials and dipsticks. Sweat beaded up all over him and in a few minutes his shirt was soaked through from the stifling heat trapped within the small steel room. He worked quickly, noting a regular drip from an oil gasket as well as the leaking hydraulic valve that spit out a dark-green solution in short, regular spurts. These were on the "to-do" list, Ethan recalled, just as soon as the trip was over and the boat garnered a little more cash. Until then, the leaking and spewing of these and several other valves and gaskets would simply be watched for further breakdown.

Nearly finished, and with everything operating within various states of repair, he groaned inaudibly over the racket when he saw the bilge level. The thick, oily muck collecting beneath the engine was at its full level and thus needed pumping, which meant another ten minutes below deck. Without hesitating, he flicked a large red switch labeled "Bilge Pump."

"And the environment be damned," yelled Ethan, his voice buried within the racket.

Beneath his feet, on the surface of the bilge's murky contents, a small vortex appeared in the viscous liquid. Submerged deep within the thick mess a valve opened, a pump kicked on, and gallon upon gallon of toxic petroleum byproducts spewed out into the ocean.

High in the wheelhouse the bilge's red indicator light flashed, and Christopher Knox took note.

"He'd make a good deckhand," he mumbled, shaking his head unhappily.

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It had been some time since finding a reliable third hand, Knox remembered, and thought how he would soon miss Ethan's enthusiastic willingness to learn. That was a problem for later, though. On the way back to Salavandra he would think about finding Ethan's replacement from amongst the coffee-growing families on Encarnacion. Now, more immediate tasks pressed upon him.

He shifted on his stool and peered down at a dimly illuminated nautical chart illustrating Jamaica's southwest coastline. His latest pencil scratch placed the *Cassiopeia* about six hours out of Kingston and right on schedule for an early morning tie-up. Knox traced his finger over the remaining bit of ocean, reading the fathoms off the chart and wondering how the ocean floor looked in that area.

"Probably fished out and raked dry," he mumbled under his breath, lamenting the disappearance of fishing grounds in the last decade. It was the growing difficulty of hauling adequate volumes of fish that drove him to smuggling coffee in the first place. His transformed life as a coffee smuggler was now beginning to feel a lot like his old life as an unemployed logger. At that time, he was looking for any means out of a desperate, outlawed existence. He flexed a strong hand, remembering how good the heavy fishing lines first felt when the previous skipper took him aboard as a greenhorn over fifteen years ago. Before that, life was about as unpleasant as it could get. His eyes drifted to the flashing bilge light as he recalled a hopeless and distant past.

"If you think that hurts, Knox, wait until you feel this." The heavily booted guard drew back his foot and smashed it into Knox's ribs for a second time. The sickening, sharp crack of breaking bones seemed to resonate through the jail cell as Knox's vision blurred and head swam. He gasped painfully, unable to draw in enough of the damp, urine-soaked air while fighting to stay conscious. He somehow managed to drag himself into a corner while two of Salavandra's Federal Police towered over him with their all-powerful, sadistic stares.

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“Fuck you both,” he managed to whisper, “and your mothers.”

The two guards looked at each other with genuine surprise. Of the dozens of prisoners now under their watch, this one was either tougher than all the rest, or simply did not care how much pain they inflicted.

“When is he moving on?” one soldier asked quietly.

“Don’t know,” said the other, shrugging heavily while staring at Knox’s crumpled form. “We’re supposed to keep him until further notice. No explanation, as usual.”

“Hear that, Knox?” asked the first Federal, smiling wickedly. “Until further notice. That means you can expect a lot more friendly visits from us. Maybe as many visits as there are bones in your body.” He chuckled briefly and motioned towards the door.

Only after the lock on the solid steel door slid home with a heavy click, and the footsteps and voices of the two Federals faded away into the dank hallway, did Knox let out a painful, rasping wheeze. “Shallow breaths,” he silently reminded himself, “at least until I get my strength back. Then...”

It had been a grueling few weeks since his capture on Salavandra’s coffee docks where, he learned through the guards’ hushed comments, the destructive arson of several coffee warehouses had been spectacularly successful. Of his fellow compatriots he had not heard, but he suspected, and in some cases even hoped, that they were dead. It’d be easier for them, Knox thought, especially for the older ones. Making it through this kind of pain took an almost unnatural, gritty determination. Even now, crouched in a corner of his stinking cell and barely able to breathe, Knox knew that he possessed the fortitude necessary to carry him through this misery.

His opportunity for escape came in stages of increasing boredom on the part of his rotating shift of regular guards. As the weeks passed, the beatings slowed. Knox did his part in lulling the Federals into unguarded complacency by keeping his mouth shut as his body healed and strength returned. While silently observing the working patterns of his jailers, Knox made secret plans to rejoin the United Front for the Liberation

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of Salavandra. In the unlikely event that the revolutionary UFLS was destroyed, Knox never once doubted his ability to carve out some new form of existence and thus keep on surviving.

On an otherwise nondescript day, after what Knox guessed must have been about six months of filthy incarceration, his unlikely yet opportune moment to slip the Federals' grasp finally arrived. He didn't plan the event. Instead, it simply fell into place in much the same nonchalant manner that his regular lunch guard placed the tray of food on the floor of Knox's cell. Guns were never carried into the cells, so right from the first day Knox realized that escape would mean gaining control of one of the heavy nightsticks the guards wore hanging from their waists. The lunch guard carried his high on his belt; it stuck out at an odd angle whenever he bent to place Knox's food on the floor. Without thinking, acting purely on instinct, Knox jumped at this advantage just as his metal platter of beans touched the floor with an innocent sounding clank.

The guard let out a single, surprised yelp just before the nightstick crashed down on the left side of his skull. With his heart pounding furiously, Knox had dispatched his captor with one mighty, satisfying swing. The dead weight of the ruined guard fell heavily at his feet. A single, gentle breath escaped into the cell and seemed to echo in surreal waves against the damp concrete walls before dissipating. A tense, unnatural silence hung in the air now. Knox wondered if he had actually killed the man. It wouldn't be the first time—he'd done it before, but with a gun instead of a club. As he knelt on the floor in a growing puddle of blood, Knox thought that either weapon suited him fine. There was something more satisfying about the nightstick, however. Perhaps it was the physical effort and sudden release of such a vicious swing.

The distant squeak of a swinging door abruptly awoke Knox from this inopportune musing. Animal-like survival instincts erupted, and in near recklessness he launched himself over the guard's body and out into the hallway. With bloodied knees, a swinging nightstick and a near-demented expression,

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he flew into the hallway. It was empty save for the food cart off to his right, still holding three trays of beans for his unknown neighbors. Scales of black mold climbed the dark cinder-block wall behind the cart and wept slick, runny furrows. Knox sprinted away to his left.

Six great, leaping strides took him past several other cell doors and face to face with the surprised second guard just entering the hallway. The Federal's teeth crumbled under the jabbing end of the nightstick. The bloodied man stumbled backwards, heavily, out into an office area with two empty desks and a door propped open on a day weary with humidity. A rickety desk fan stirred the tropical air with heavy lethargy. Knox dashed by and burst into the light. In a minute he was several blocks away from St. Matthew's jail, walking with determined strides to the docks, where the *Cassiopeia* was tied-up and short one deckhand.

The flashing red bilge light flickered one last time and then went out. Knox blinked, cleared his head with a quick shake and then checked the radar and GPS stations to make sure the boat was still on course. Ethan would be in the wheelhouse soon, and this made Knox's heart jump despite his long-laid plans. Down below, the engine room door swung open, releasing a pounding racket. Knox envisioned Ethan stepping quickly over the steel threshold and then turning to heave the massive door back into place. When the racket suddenly died, Knox knew that Ethan had secured to the door's two large levers and thereby sealed the engine room. Footsteps followed, and Knox shifted in his seat to better see Ethan coming up the steps.

"Everything was fine except the bilge," Ethan said as his head popped up from the steep stairwell into the darkened wheelhouse. "It's pumped clean now, though."

"Good. Have a seat, Ethan," replied Knox, motioning to the second stool standing about six feet away. Ethan clambered up the rest of the steps and easily hopped up onto the tall stool. The pale vinyl let out a struggled wheeze as his light frame sank into the cushioned seat. He peered over the

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broad console, out over the bow and towards the distant horizon where the sea's black water swallowed the sky's brilliant stars. A cozy, muffled quiet followed, one that Ethan came to appreciate whenever he occupied the wheelhouse.

"We're about six hours out," Knox murmured after a few minutes, knowing Ethan would ask, as he always did.

Confident in the smooth rocking of the boat and the calm, assured air of the skipper, Ethan made a soft affirmative response. He liked being in the wheelhouse. Its lofty perch above the rocking bow gave him a delicate sense of partnership with the otherwise heartless, windswept ocean. Outside, the spray and constant pitching could easily toss even the most seasoned deckhand. Inside, however, in this sacrosanct space with its heavy steel doors, thick plastic windows and securely bolted stools, humanity firmly declared that it had a place on rolling ocean.

"I gotta admit," Knox said quietly, "I'm surprised you're on this second trip to Jamaica. I thought after the first go around that you'd try to rally the troops, so to speak. Get them to openly declare themselves and, well, go legal, I guess."

Ethan smiled at this remark. He thought the same thing on the return trip last time, and actually stepped ashore planning to organize a growers' meeting that very night. Then he saw all the proceeds from the first run, and how Knox and the coffee farmers gathered together to open the cash box that Nicolas had carried ashore. The careful, public manner in which the money was patiently divided amongst the farmers, the skipper and the deckhands, surprised Ethan. Each farmer walked away netting a tidy sum from the covert Jamaican coffee sale. The *Cassiopeia* crew got a cut, as well as the *Cassiopeia* herself, for fuel and upkeep. The cash-out was more efficient and transparent than the best-laid methods that the Coffee Exchange Alliance had ever helped establish. As Ethan stood watching the farmers walk away, each with a thick pad of bills tucked into a pocket, it seemed unlikely that his professional efforts could possibly improve the situation.

"You all do a better job than I thought possible," he said to Knox while lightly shaking his head. "No models, no

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organizational flow charts, no bureaucracy, no administrative fees, no governance rules. The efficiency of the whole thing is really impressive.”

Knox smiled and nodded. He too was impressed, and, upon considering his many years as skipper, satisfied that he had finally found a way of life that felt right.

“It wasn’t always so smooth,” he replied, looking out over the bow as it dipped into a rolling trough. “When we first started, there were some trust issues to work out.” He trailed off, remembering some of the early interactions with the coffee farmers.

“Nicolas and Rosa used to work their own coffee on the peninsula,” Knox continued. “The deal that we all struck one day was that they’d be my deckhands, and also make sure that the full amount of the Jamaican sale arrived back on Encarnacion.”

Ethan processed this quickly. “To make sure you didn’t skim any of the profits on your way home, you mean.”

“A blunt way to put it, but yes. It was strange at first, and frustrating as hell teaching them how to work the boat, but we settled into a routine pretty quickly.”

“And then I arrive,” said Ethan after a moment’s pause. “And...”

“And assume you can fix what’s not broken,” Knox interrupted. “I guess things look different when you’re on the inside, actually working.” Knox paused, considering. “Where did you say you came from?”

“Brooklyn.”

“Right. Brooklyn. What do they know about coffee production in Brooklyn, anyway?”

Ethan laughed lightly. “You’re making me a cynic, Knox. Lots of good ideas come out of the CEA. We’ve helped coffee producers all over the world improve their take and better their lives. Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, Nicaragua, Kenya, Yemen; you name the coffee country, and we’ve probably been there helping people.”

“Always the poor. Always in far away places,” mumbled Knox, while checking the radar.

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“That’s the whole point,” replied Ethan. “More money and better living conditions, all stemming from stuff that we want up north.”

Knox mumbled something inaudible over the nautical chart and shook his head. When he suddenly looked up, his flat facial expression startled Ethan.

“And here you are now, poking into Salavandra’s coffee. Nothing needs fixing, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Not out on the peninsula, I agree,” replied Ethan, unconsciously leaning forward on his stool to emphasize his point. “But the rest of the island? Where the growers toil away for those ridiculous exchange certificates? It’s criminal.”

“Yes, criminal,” Knox agreed quickly. “Unfair, unjust, all of that. It is also life’s reality, and not just on Salavandra. Some escape. Some do not.” He shifted and placed his feet up onto the expansive counter running the length of the wheelhouse. “Myself? I got out, deliberately. Forcefully, even.” Knox’s eyes briefly glazed as he looked out over the sea, remembering days long ago when he worked as a logger on the forested slopes of Salavandra. He never missed those days.

The *Cassiopeia* lurched briefly as an errant wave crested unexpectedly over the starboard bow. Heavy sea spray splashed across the wheelhouse windows, each drop sounding like a hard pebble hitting the boat. Both men braced themselves within their seats as the sea tossed the boat off course for a moment. Ethan listened as the autopilot clicked on. It whirred mechanically for a moment and then adjusted the boat’s rudder a few degrees. In a moment, they were back on course, plowing through the sea’s rolling black surface.

“And for those unable to get out?” Ethan finally asked. “At least the CEA improves their situation. Especially when *Coffee Watch* reports their bleak working conditions.”

Knox grunted, and Ethan sensed a hint of annoyance in this noncommittal sound. The two of them had been down this road before on the previous trip. After a minute of silence in which Knox seemed deep in thought, he looked over in a firm, direct way. His face, partially obscured in the wheelhouse’s

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low light, radiated hints of green from the radar screen. The weak light shone dully off his stubble-covered chin and flat, dead eyes.

“I hope the operation out on Encarnacion isn’t in that publication.”

Ethan felt a small jolt of anxiety as he gazed back at Knox’s face. How well did he know Knox, anyway? Or Nicolas and Rosa, for that matter. Miles of open sea surrounded him and nobody back in New York had the slightest idea of his location or of the covert coffee production on the peninsula. It had been over six weeks since contacting the office, and even then, Ethan only told his boss that he was working on “something big.”

“Like you said, Knox,” said Ethan carefully, “nothing needs fixing out on Encarnacion. Besides, Bridget would never jeopardize this operation. It’s working so well. And,” he continued after a moment’s consideration, “the story wouldn’t fall in-line with the newsletter’s mission.”

Knox watched him with a disconcerting, level look that set Ethan on edge.

“Bridget?” he asked.

“Oh, sorry. Bridget Hall. She’s the editor of *Coffee Watch*.”

Bridget was a lot more than editor. She actually founded the Coffee Exchange Alliance. *Coffee Watch*, also her brainchild, was the Alliance’s regular publication, with ten thousand copies circulating every month. Subscribers ranged from partner non-governmental organizations to bulk coffee buyers on the New York Board of Trade. Every month, Bridget reported on the Alliance’s investigations into producers’ working conditions, as well as on any emerging coffee quality issues. The dual focus of *Coffee Watch* gave insiders a unique and valuable picture of the industry.

After a moment of silence Knox slid from his stool with a small grunt and stretched.

“I’ll make my rounds and turn in. Wake me when you see the lights of Kingston.”

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Ethan nodded and sat up straight. Keeping watch and driving the *Cassiopeia* was not exactly thrilling, but the experience was still new enough that he tackled this particular duty with more enthusiasm than either Nicolas or Rosa. He made a mental note of the wheelhouse instruments and listened as Knox made his way down a narrow set of steps. One of the silent video monitors showed Knox making a quick survey of the galley, checking locks on cupboards and making sure the counters were clear. The skipper ran a tight ship and constantly checked and re-checked everything.

Seeing the galley in good shape, Knox made his way to his stateroom with sweating palms and a pounding heart. He was thankful that Ethan did not sense his nervousness. Best to keep the kid preoccupied for as long as possible, Knox thought.

The stateroom door clicked behind him and Knox immediately made his way to a small bureau tucked perfectly into the space between his narrow bed and the paneled wall. A delicate, wooden cigar box lay inside the third drawer down, between fresh socks and beneath clean but well-worn underwear. Knox pulled this out and flipped back the small, golden clasp securing the lid. With a calloused thumb he gently opened the box.

Two distinct and comforting odors immediately filled the stateroom. The strongest came from the box itself, having absorbed the many complex and gratifying scents of freshly rolled tobacco from the fat, black cigars that once nestled within the confines of the porous wood. The second smell, more bitter, less interesting, smelling faintly of manufacturing processes and chemicals, came from the box's contents; stack upon stack of neatly wrapped one-hundred dollar bills. Knox breathed deeply, relishing the less-pleasant scent of money as he ran an index finger over the crisp paper. He remembered receiving the box just a few weeks ago.

“Half now, half later, after you've taken care of him.”

Knox carefully grunted an affirmative while holding the cigar box tightly. It felt heavier than he anticipated, and he imaged the delicious heaviness of twice the amount of bills.

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“And no mistakes, Knox. I want the kid gone, disappeared, vanished. I don’t care how, and I can’t have any questions.”

“I got it. I’ll figure out a quiet way. It’ll be discrete.” Knox felt his voice betraying him, weakening under the magnitude of the agreement. His hands trembled slightly, and deep within a consciousness nearly deadened by decades of hard living, a small voice protested.

“I can get someone else if you’re not up to it.”

“No, no,” Knox replied quickly, wetting his lips. He shook his head and held the cigar box closer. Half now, half later, then I’m at last finished, he thought. But the voice wouldn’t quit. Too brutal, it disparaged. Even you are above this, it cried. But I’m old, Knox thought, and I’m tired. I’m so tired. Imagine the sleep I could get. And no worries about the boat, about coffee, about the Federals. No worries at all. I’ll go to Cuba and get a nice, quiet place to retire.

“I’m your man,” Knox whispered. He tucked the box under his arm and quickly made his way back to the docks where the *Cassiopeia* waited.

The poor, dumb kid made it easier than Knox anticipated. Ethan enthusiastically insisted on accompanying the *Cassiopeia* on its second run to Jamaica. Knox agreed, feigning disinterest, and then set about constructing a plan to minimize McCray’s suffering.

But the guilt-riddled little voice kept bothering Knox, even now in this eleventh hour, as he held open the cigar box one last time. He again wondered if he was up to the task. If Ethan wasn’t so damn eager to please, he thought, it’d be a lot simpler, easy even. Ethan shoveled an almost fawning attention towards the boat, to the crew, to the very idea of working at sea. If only he didn’t romanticize the whole thing, Knox grumbled, snapping down the lid with a note of disgust and jamming the box back into the drawer. The idiot thinks he’s on some grand adventure, Knox thought, while we’re stuck here day after day, grinding away.

That Ethan undoubtedly pictured himself back in New York, expounding upon his clandestine, high-seas adventures

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like some gloating, swashbuckling braggart, raised Knox's blood. He gripped the stateroom's doorknob and yanked open the door, letting his disgust at Ethan's unbridled eagerness wash over him. In the next minute he was on the deck with the boat's steel house to his back, contemplating the quickest way to finish the filthy task.

In the quiet wheelhouse, Ethan saw Knox leave his stateroom and make his way to the deck. The closed-circuit monitors viewing the deck were undisturbed, however, and Ethan correctly concluded that Knox must be just beneath the deck camera, and thus out of view.

"Smoking..." he thought, and turned his attention to the chart.

At six feet per fathom, the ocean's floor was a yawning one thousand feet down. Deeper areas appeared as crowded, narrow contour lines in the many crevasses outlining the sea's bottom. Dark and cold, Ethan thought, and imagined seeing the *Cassiopeia's* hull from the ocean depths, looking small and insignificant, like a forsaken chunk of humanity heedlessly pushing across the forbidden extremes of nature.

"Ethan, come out to the deck when you get a chance," Knox's voice crackled over a small speaker. Ethan pictured Knox standing next to the house and pressing a worn orange button on the battered white intercom. Nearly every room on the boat had this intercom link, allowing the crew a fast way to stay in touch while working. Ethan hopped off his stool after giving the instruments a quick once-over, and exited the wheelhouse through the heavy steel door on the starboard side. The portside door was painted over and forever stuck.

Outside, just as Knox had taught him, he tightly cranked the door's two handles and thereby sealed the wheelhouse against the ocean's waves and winds. Green seawater pushed through the scuppers and ran the length of the narrow deck between the house and bulwark. As he carefully walked the thirty feet towards the stern, he braced himself against the boat's fat blue rail and leaned against the *Cassiopeia* as she rolled lazily to port, then to starboard and back again. His feet got soaked. He never did get the right deck boots and still

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wore his tattered sneakers, now cold and wet with salt water. Ahead, a weak sodium lamp illuminated the wooden planks with a sickly yellow light.

Ethan rounded the corner of the house.

In a sudden leap, Knox fell upon him and thrust a six-inch blade deep into the young man's neck. The *Cassiopeia* rolled starboard. Knox pressed into Ethan, keeping the now crumpling figure erect by jamming him against the bulwark. A soft, almost whining gurgle escaped Ethan's lips and he tried to look up. The *Cassiopeia* kept rolling to starboard.

"It's not personal, my boy," Knox whispered into Ethan's ear. He smelled Ethan's sweat, felt the shocked and trembling body beneath his hands, and suddenly wanted to take it all back. The familiar cigar box, stuffed full of cash and the catalyst for this evil, seemed located not a few steps away tucked into his stateroom bureau, but rather a distant, malevolent and foreign thing in another time and place that now mocked Knox from afar.

"Paper and wood, nothing more," Knox bizarrely found himself whispering into Ethan's ear. "Half now, half later. That's what he said. I'm sorry Ethan."

Ethan looked into Knox's eyes, just inches from his own. Knox read fear, confusion, a strange and wounded gaze that he knew would haunt him from that moment forward.

Helped by the rolling boat now reaching its maximum incline, Knox tipped Ethan over the rail and into the sea. He pulled his knife free as the body dropped into a passing swell that came within a foot of the rail. The yellow lamp light, innocently observing these few wicked moments, briefly illuminated a dark red stain flowing atop the emerald water. The scuppers once again filled with seawater. Ethan's head knocked against the *Cassiopeia* with a soft bump before it disappeared beneath the waves. The boat pushed heedlessly forward.

Disgust enveloped Knox as he let himself fall weakly against the boat's house. He never envisioned this sickening feeling when planning tonight's killing. Why then, he wondered, did he suddenly want to vomit, to cut himself, to

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cast himself into the Caribbean and follow McCray? How could a fawning kid from Brooklyn wipe away the hard, uncaring armor that Knox had dearly earned through decades of hard living?

He lifted his right hand and looked closely at the blade. No blood tarnished the shining steel as it softly reflected the yellow light.

“Did this even just happen?” Knox wondered aloud.

Perhaps Ethan still sat attentively in the wheelhouse, diligently tracking the boat’s progress, making sure the radar was clear and the instruments were operating within their specified ranges. Why then did Knox feel so sick?

“Seawater. Washed it off,” he said aloud. He dimly realized how peculiar he must appear. Nicolas and Rosa might wake up. He wasn’t safe yet.

Shaking himself, cursing his weakness, Knox tossed the knife into the sea and bounded up the narrow deck towards the wheelhouse. With a grunt, he unlatched the massive door and stepped inside. An eerie, quiet security welcomed him. He wondered for a moment if Nicolas and Rosa were awake, had watched him kill Ethan and were now locked in their stateroom, cowering in terror.

“Ridiculous,” Knox mumbled aloud. He dropped a hand to the red throttle and gave the lever a gentle push. Deep beneath his feet, the Cummins rumbled to a high pitch and the speedometer needle climbed. Kingston’s lights would appear that much faster.

Knox remained standing until a feeble spot of illumination pushed through the black, northeastern horizon, thereby announcing Jamaica’s southern coastline. He gunned the throttle a bit more, running the *Cassiopeia* almost to her limit and burning through vast amounts of fuel.

“No matter,” muttered Knox quietly, considering the fuel gauge’s vibrating needle. “I’ll have money enough to buy plenty more.” Indeed, Knox considered, money enough not to ever worry about fueling any boat ever again.

## Chapter One

The dim glow upon the horizon soon broke into the many lights of Kingston, Port Royal and, more distantly, Spanish Town. Knox now recognized the familiar shoreline and navigated by sight, picking out recognizable patterns of lights as various landmarks and buildings gradually came into view. Other boats passed, coming into and out of the harbor throughout the night; the same ceaseless traffic of most seaports around the world. Checking his watch, Knox expected Nicolas and Rosa to remain innocently bunked at least for another hour. Passing a breakwater off the starboard bow, he turned sharply north-northeast and headed for a decaying warehouse at the water's edge in Kingston's extreme southeastern section.

A single, blue light hanging over the water from a battered lamp marked the end of the voyage. Mollusk covered piles ran up to the worn planks of the isolated dock as Knox expertly slowed the *Cassiopeia* and gently brought her alongside. Cutting the throttle, he dashed from the wheelhouse and quickly tied off the bow and stern. In a second, he clambered up the dockside ladder and made straight for a rusting steel door leading into the warehouse. Nicolas and Rosa still slept peacefully in their stateroom.

“You're a bit early, Knox. My other boats left only minutes ago.”

Thousands of stuffed burlap sacks, nearly all hidden in a well of darkness marking the warehouse's interior, muffled an otherwise rich and confident voice. Knox turned towards a dimly lit desk off to his right. A florescent lamp feebly pushed back the darkness. What little the light did illuminate showed a dusty, forlorn and ill-kept workspace—a stark contrast to the tidy, well organized and comparatively fresh-looking sacks of coffee stacked in neat rows throughout the building.

“I had to get here quick,” Knox stammered, unable to locate his unseen collaborator within the dark columns of coffee.

“Is it done?”

## A Coffee Crusade

“It’s done. McCray’s shark food by now. When my other deckhands wake up, I’ll tell them that he went into town right after we tied up.”

“Good. My boys will begin offloading you now. In the meantime, what you’re looking for is in the top, left-side drawer of that desk. Goodbye.”

Muted footsteps clicked away into the darkness. In a distant part of the building Knox heard an indistinct voice bark out an order and several heavy voices respond in kind. Just like always, he thought quickly, beginning to breathe easier for the first time in hours. He stepped over to the desk and pulled open the drawer. As promised, another cigar box lay inside.