

Ch.7

Smoke on the water

The girl was snoring softly before they even reached the now-darkening boardwalk common. As they passed through the first arch, lights winked on as if to greet them, but it was just utility lighting, not any of the signage. Light poles along the circumference of the common, and individual doorway security lighting cast the central area in an unflattering gray glow. The open shop-front door amid all its closed brethren stood out, and the horses on the carousel looked sinister amid all of the conflicting shadows. They didn't slow, however, crossing the timbers of the common to the arch on the opposing side, where more utility poles lit the walkway beyond at regular intervals, continuing on towards the amusement park rides and ultimately the marina.

Jeff saw that it was lit in the same way as the rest, and it was a near-exact replica of his twilight return to that other one.

Her marina.

He jerked involuntarily as the thought hit him from out of nowhere. There was more light in the sky this time around, but not enough for him to shake the similarity. He steeled himself. He knew how this place worked, but time had put a lot of padding

on their last experience here, and to have bits of it resurrected so clearly was like a body blow.

From beside him, Sophia spoke quietly to him.

"I felt that. You ok?"

Priest walked ahead of them, the set of his shoulders ambiguous and hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans. He gave no indication of interest in her question, or of hearing her at all for that matter, in the same way he'd done since leaving the train platform. He hadn't spoken, and was nothing but a question mark now.

"Yes, I think so. It's throwing the past at us pretty hard though, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do. Had my first black flower moment a few minutes ago."

His head jerked around to regard her, eyes widening.

"Seriously?"

She just nodded, and reached out over to pat his chest without looking at him.

"Easy. Don't wake her up. It's ok."

"How is that ok? There's no way that can be ok!"

Her voice hardened.

"If I say it's ok, it's ok. You savvy, Captain Morgan? We tell the truth, and the truth will set us free, right? We've been over this too many times. Keep up, love."

He felt the panic run out of him like water. This was early days together 101.

"I savvy."

"I'll give you a treat later."

Only moments passed before he felt her stiffen beside him, and then she whipped the automatic out of her waistband, leveling it at the back of Priest's head. She thumbed back the hammer with practiced ease.

"Don't even think about it, Padre."

Priest stopped, and slowly put up his hands, still facing away from them. His question was short, but Jeff could hear the disbelief, as well as the guilt and the disingenuousness of his response.

"What?"

Jeff was alarmed, because Sophia's gun hand trembled then, and he could feel the rage broadcast outward from her in dark waves. He had no clue what she'd seen, but he didn't like this asshole's chances right now. She didn't address the question. She went straight to result.

"If you choose to go there again, I will relieve you of what little gray matter there is inside your skull. And, it will happen faster than any plan you can devise."

Priest began to shake.

"What the hell? How..."

Sophia strode forward before he could finish, planting the barrel of the gun against the back of his head, uttering three discrete words that silenced him.

"Am. I. Clear."

His shaking worsened, and he went down on his knees, helpless against it. Sophia followed the movement, and the gun never left the back of his head.

"Yes. I, yes. I understand."

Jeff's concern deepened as the moment spun out, and Sophia didn't de-escalate. She pushed the pistol forward, her jaw clenched, forcing Priest's head forward. He contemplated saying something, but held his tongue and waited. There was venom in her voice.

"Pitch it. Now."

Priest slid something out of his waistband, and then flipped it aside, over the railing. Jeff could see the flash of a wicked looking blade as it arced outward, landing on the beach a few moments later in a puff of sand. Finally, Sophia withdrew, easing the hammer back down.

"On your feet."

Priest complied, pushing upward with a slight wobble.

"Get moving."

They went on in silence for a while, passing a wide promenade entrance that led toward the amusement park rides on

the left, a shuttered ticket booth at its terminus. There were only about a dozen individual rides, their bright paint schemes muted in the twilight.

Up ahead, the walkway ended, a stair case descending to the floating access ramp leading down to the docks. Not far from the base of the ramp was a small building that was presumably the harbormaster's office. Light shone from the windows, so somebody was probably inside.

Before they reached the top of the stairs, Priest spoke up, voice still rough with fear, but it would appear his curiosity was the stronger emotion. He voiced a more specific version of an earlier query.

"Who the hell are you, lady?"

Sophia didn't ponder the question. There was still anger in her voice.

"To you? The hand of God, and he is not amused. Which boat?"

Priest pointed as he started to descend the stairway, indicating somewhere in the middle of the marina to the right of the central leg. He seemed earnest enough, now, but who could tell.

"The white one, next to the blue sailboat, the one with the gray flag atop the mast. We're going to have to get the key from

Benny, though. He's supposed to make sure it's gassed up, but you never know."

They both followed him down, while Orela snored quietly behind Jeff's right ear. The boat in question was a non-descript white power-boat with twin out-board engines, and a low windshield ahead of the passenger area. Jeff directed a low-volume comment to his wife.

"Not quite so on the nose, I guess. It's just a little guy."

She shrugged.

"Wait and see."

They reached the end of the ramp, and passed onto the docks proper, heading directly for the harbormaster's office. For Jeff, the déjà vu just gained strength, but Sophia gave no outward sign of concern. He thought that made sense, since he'd been the one to walk this the first time, not her.

Priest led them up the steps, and pulled open the door without any hesitation. They entered the building right behind him, and for Jeff, similarities diverged once more. Windows ringed the space, but there was only a small desk in the center of the room, and the man that sat behind it looked nothing like Sophia. He was morbidly obese, with a friar's ring of white hair surrounding a bald pate. He didn't look up when they came in, his bright red lips pursed in concentration as he studied the

open ledger in front of him on the scratched and battered desk top. He waved absently with one hand, not looking up.

"It's after hours. If you forgot your key, too bad for you."

Priest didn't hesitate, though his voice seemed a little lower than what he'd given them so far, and more gravel in it.

"Benny. If she was standin' here instead of me, your fat ass would be bleeding out on the floor."

Benny started, slapping the book closed, and heaving his not inconsiderable bulk to unsteady feet. Once he locked eyes with Priest, though, he rolled his eyes and sat down again, his chair squeaking in violent protest. Jeff thought there was a slight hesitation in the whole interaction, though. He didn't have to look to know that Sophia had caught it too.

"You're a prick. I should tell him you're doing imitations of him."

Priest spread his hands wide.

"It's my nature, ya fat tub. Need the key for twenty-eight. Got a full tank?"

Benny's fear had seemingly evaporated, and his indifference appeared to have reasserted itself. He opened his book again, and didn't look up when he spoke, but again there was the slightest pause, and the page in his hand fluttered a little as he turned it.

"Dom killed twenty-eight last week. Leroy says that one of the props is history, and it'll take him at least a day or two to untangle all the shit wrapped around the prop shaft. You're gonna hafta use fourteen. And yes, it's fueled up."

Sophia muttered,

"And, there it is. Did I call it, or did I call it."

Jeff nodded. Priest wasn't done, though.

"You tellin' me that ancient piece of shit is the only other boat we got here right now?"

Benny shook his head, apparently once again lost in his ledger.

"No, I'm tellin' you it's the only one you can have. She told me the other two should be ready to go for her, should she need 'em." He did look up then, a questioning look on his face, as though he'd just read the room again in his head, and come up with an uncertain result.

"Why you headin' out? That's the kid, right? She's on her way here. Why not just wait 'til she gets here? And who are they?"

Priest hesitated, but only for second.

"None of your fat-ass business, that's who. I may not be high on the totem-pole, but I'm sure as shit higher'n you."

Benny just went back to his book of numbers, waving one hand lazily a few times. Jeff glanced sideways at Sophia, and saw the frown on her face as Benny gave answer.

"Whatever. Do what you like, but fourteen's your only option. Key's in the cupboard."

Priest went to the back wall, opened a small cabinet, and hooked out a set of keys, one among many inside, and pocketed them. He looked at them, meeting their eyes for the first time since the incident at the top of the stairs. He looked nervous.

"We gotta go."

They followed him out of the office, and onto the docks. He headed across a connector to the central leg, and then turned left, continuing on past slip after slip until they reached the outer edge of the marina, where the larger boats were.

Slip fourteen wasn't the empty one, however. It was the one to the right of it, and the craft floating there bore no resemblance to the one that had started all of this for them. It was a cabin cruiser about thirty feet long, and not in great shape. It was of wooden construction, and varnish was flaking away from the sun-bleached wood almost everywhere above the water-line. On the fly bridge, the canvas cover was in tatters, and several of the port-holes along the lower deck were cracked, or missing glass entirely. Jeff stared at it dubiously.

"A Star Wars quote comes to mind."

Sophia snorted.

"I don't think she'll make point five past light speed."

Priest leapt over the gunwale onto the rear deck. He pointed both fore and aft, speaking to them over his shoulder.

"Cast off those lines, and get on. We don't have much time." He slid the doors to the main salon open, and went inside. As they separated, Sophia to the front and Jeff aft, the engine rumbled to life. They quickly unwound the mooring lines from the dock cleats and tossed them onto the deck, then also made their way onto the rear deck. From inside, they heard Priest's seemingly frantic query.

"We clear?"

Sophia answered.

"Yes."

The boat instantly lurched into motion, accelerating as it turned away from the dock. Jeff steadied Sophia, having grabbed the edge of the salon doorway. He helped her keep her feet, both of them leaning slightly forward as the speed continued to increase. Priest wasn't wasting any time.

They passed through the main salon, now illuminated by a weak yellow light fixture above. The hull liner was cheap plywood, the top veneer peeling away from the substrate in places, and the bench seating along the sides and at the small table behind and below the captain's chair was upholstered in a

worn black fabric, torn in many places. Everything smelled of old cigarettes, alcohol, mildew, and disinterested decline. Jeff knelt before one of the benches, and carefully transferred Orela from her place on his back to the musty upholstery. She didn't even stir. Free of her, he followed his wife.

Sophia stopped at the top of the short stairs between the captain's chair and a tiny galley to the left. They presumably led down to the cabin areas below. The passage was unlit, and the smell from below was even more depressing. Sophia stared out through the bifurcated windshield at the darkening water rushing toward them. The left side was cracked in enough places as to be difficult to see through, but the pane of glass in front of Priest was intact.

"You know this is a no-wake zone until you pass those buoys, right?" She said mildly, pointing ahead of them.

Priest looked at her sidelong, the frown on his own face deepening.

"Lady, I was under the impression you didn't want to die. Correct me if I'm wrong, because that's what'll happen if we get caught. We ain't got time for rules."

From behind them, Jeff spoke.

"It's true, babe. We're hoping to avoid any Imperial entanglements. You know, just to beat that joke to death."

She shushed him with a backward wave. Her attention was now fully on Priest.

"Your boss must frown on that type of thinking."

Priest shook his head in apparent mystification.

"You're a real piece of work. I'm tryin' to save your asses."

Sophia was on him like a snake, pulling the automatic once again in a blur of motion. Priest flinched away from it, but kept his hands on the wheel, and they didn't move at all.

"No, you're not. I might buy it if what happened above the marina hadn't, but that little play you and Benny put on for us was a joke. Everything says you're not rank and file.

You're management. You're *invested*, aren't you?"

Priest didn't answer. He let the moment spin out, hands steady on the wheel. Sophia didn't let it drag on, though.

"That wasn't a rhetorical question."

Priest sighed, raising one hand off of the wheel in apparent supplication.

"Fine. I'm not as far down the ladder as I may have represented, but I'm not leadership like you think. I ain't inner circle."

"More bullshit." Sophia was fierce. The hand holding the gun was steady, but seemed to vibrate all the same.

Priest shrugged, but their trajectory through the lake didn't change. His hands were rock-solid. His next question was almost conversational.

"What do you need from me, to get that gun out of my face?"

Sophia didn't hesitate.

"What's your plan, then? How far back are they? How will they come at us?"

Priest sighed.

"Their boats are faster. Despite what you think, I really am trying to get out ahead of them.

I know this lake better than any of her other pilots. I know the shoals, I know the islands. I could tell you that it'll make a difference, but since you seem so concerned with the truth..." He paused momentarily.

"It won't.

This piece of shit will make forty knots, maxed. I doubt we'll make back lake at all if we hold to that, so make it thirty-five, just to get there.

Those other boats she held back can do that and a half all day. It don't matter what I do."

Sophia didn't answer immediately. Jeff could see she was deep in analysis mode. When she did respond, it was with that same distracted air she used when she needed more data points, but was still figuring the total problem.

"Tell me that's not all you are giving me right now."

Priest's reflection in the windshield showed them both a grin that was indeterminate in origin and motivation. His hesitation was negligible, though. He shook his head.

"No. I'll give you the only other thing I have."

"And that is?"

"There's a scoped long gun under the aft dining table banquette. Either one of you take over pilot duties, and I will put the chase boats down. I'll plot the course for you."

Sophia laughed then, with obvious delight. Her attention shifted from Priest to Jeff.

"You hear that, babe?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Priest sounded concerned.

"What am I missing, here?"

Sophia was practically crowing with happiness.

"You're not the only sniper on this boat, asshole. You just do the pilot thing, we've got this. Nice try, though."

Without any external communication, they separated, Jeff heading to the table and extracting the rifle and several loaded magazines from under the banquette in question. He tipped a small salute to her as he exited the salon, headed for the transom. She turned her attention back to Priest once he was outside, moving to the open salon door so that she could see

either Priest or her husband with a slight twist of her neck. Orela slept on, oblivious.

Priest could hear the Jeff's inquiry, but couldn't distinguish the actual words. The Sophia interpreted an instant later, though.

"Are you flat out?"

Priest shook his head, starting to reiterate what he'd said earlier.

"No, I told you...."

She interrupted, shaking her head.

"Hit it. All the way. We need all the distance we can get."

"Your funeral." He pushed the throttle all the way forward.

"We'll see."

The water ahead was mostly dark now, but light still shone on the mountain tops ahead, and the reflecting snow cast some glints across the tops of the growing chop. The wind was rising, and the boat began to tap its nose a bit as the water ahead roughened.

Sophia translated for Jeff again.

"He says we need a choke point where we can break either way after. Got anything close?"

Priest nodded, pointing off to the left.

"There are two islands close together. We can head up the middle, but they'll probably just split left and right, and hit us from both sides beyond."

She communicated this to the stern. Another question came right back.

"Are they the same, left and right, size-wise?"

Priest shook his head.

"Quarter mile long on the left, maybe a third of a mile right."

As she passed the reply along, she could now see two vessels far back in their wake. They were close enough though to distinguish the differences between them, even in the dimming light. One was the white craft that Priest had indicated earlier, the high dual hum of its twin outboard engines a counter-point to the low growl of the larger boat. It was probably half again as large as its companion, with an enclosed cabin. The glass of its windshield winked at them occasionally, as it caught the last of the reflected light from the mountains ahead. It was during one of these intervals the rifle boomed from the rear deck.

The wink of light dissolved in bright fragments as the glass windscreen exploded, and then there was only a dark rectangle where it had once been. The craft yawed to the right,

nearly slamming into the smaller boat racing along beside it, but it corrected course just in time to avoid a collision.

As the vessel steadied again, there was a brief muzzle flash from within the darkness of the cabin, and Sophia heard a metallic whine as a projectile ricocheted off of something above her on the fly bridge. There weren't any more after that, though, just pursuit.

Jeff asked another question, which Sophia relayed.

"How sure are you that they'll split, rather than follow us up the middle?"

Priest shrugged, a scornful frown on his face.

"Because, they know only an *idiot* would try to run the middle at full speed. This thing is almost twelve foot abeam. At the narrowest section, there's only about fifteen feet of deep water. What's that math tell ya?"

Sophia just turned and called,

"He's sure."

The reply came quickly. She turned back to him.

"Start easing off, but don't make it obvious."

Priest shook his head, but complied. The boat began to slow almost imperceptibly. Their pursuers began to gain ground even faster, and the distance between the two pursuing craft started to open, lending solid evidence to Priest's claim.

Sophia looked out through the windscreen in front of Priest. Only the tops of the two massive mounts were still illuminated, and the light was red and failing, but it was enough for her to see the two islands rushing towards them, the dark water of the channel between them hard to see. It would appear that they would pass into the channel almost even with their pursuers. The distance between the two chase boats continued to widen as they followed their outside lines, just as Priest had said they would. The smaller of the two actually accelerated, presenting more and more of itself broadside even as it pulled away abeam.

Sophia saw the rifle kick, and heard the loud report as Jeff pulled the trigger. One of the outboards on the smaller vessel suddenly changed pitch, whining higher for a few seconds before a grinding squeal and a loud bang followed in quick succession. Smoke began to pour from the nearest engine housing, and the boat began to slow, veering away as it lost momentum. As she watched, Jeff leapt to his feet, chambering another round even as he switched the rifle to his other shoulder, turning around to face the larger craft on the other side. He crossed the deck in just a few steps, and put a knee against the gunwale, firing from a standing position this time.

Sophia could hear the distant tinkle of broken glass, even as Jeff levered the bolt again, firing immediately. Then, the

island to their left interposed itself, and they entered the dim channel between it and its companion. Jeff crossed the rear deck quickly, and slipped past her through the salon door, carrying the rifle. He was intent on Priest.

"Full throttle."

Light bloomed ahead of them, and they saw Priest's finger leave a button on the console. The channel ahead through the single good side of the windscreen was now illuminated in harsh relief by a single search-light at the nose of the vessel, the shoreline to either side a blur of motion. Priest pressed the throttle control forward, and the craft accelerated slightly.

"How long until we're through?"

Priest's voice bled sarcasm.

"If I don't sink us, maybe three minutes. We'll know in about two."

Jeff turned, and made to leave the salon again, making eye contact with Sophia.

"I'm going up."

She stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"What's the plan?"

He shook his head.

"Too many assumptions, and too little time. We need some luck, and I need to see the backside of that other boat. Then I'll know if I can do anything. Gotta go."

She dropped her arm, turning her attention without another word back to Priest. Jeff exited the salon and clambered up the metal ladder to the fly bridge. She could hear his footsteps as he made his way toward the bow above, and then nothing, just the growl and vibration of the engine. She watched Priest make minute adjustments to the wheel, keeping them in the center of the channel.

About a minute and a half passed, and then there was a slight bump, and a grinding sound along the port side that was there and gone before she could recognize it and put a name to it. Priest cursed quietly. She thought she knew, but asked anyway.

"What?"

"That was the narrow bit, and we're still moving, so if we're not taking on serious water, then we've got another minute or so before we're through."

He said this without looking away from the twin island shores rushing past.

The seconds ticked out, and then the shore to the left disappeared. Ahead in the spot-light beam, the larger chase boat was cutting inward across their vector, in an attempt to cut them off and force them to either cut speed, or alter course. Muzzle flashes from the rear deck blazed in the twilight, and

she could hear rounds shattering wood and metal at the bow of their vessel, as they sought to disable the spot-light.

Above them, she could hear Jeff return fire. One shot, then two, and then a third boomed before the spot-light went dark in an explosion of glass and metal as the opposition found their mark. Darkness filled the space ahead, and then was almost immediately replaced as orange light bloomed at the rear of the vessel dead ahead. The engine noise, steady until now ahead of them, stuttered and then quit as flames expanded upward and the distance between the two craft diminished. Priest cut hard left, and had Sophia not been holding onto the edge of the galley counter, she would have been tossed to the side. It occurred to her in the moment that he may have been hoping for just that. She gritted her teeth in an effort to tamp her anger. She glanced over at Orela. Thankfully, the turn had only pushed her against the banquette back-rest, rather than spilling her onto the dirty floor. Her eyes were open now, and she was attempting to sit upright. She looked back at Priest. His jaw was set, and she could see the muscles clenching at the rear of it. He didn't look happy at all.

Through the wind-shield, she could see that they were passing by the burning craft at a distance of no more than fifty yards. Two bullets passed through the cabin as they drew even, one passing through at almost ceiling level from side to side

about mid-cabin, and another punching through the glass of the un-opened salon door seconds later, to exit through the far wall just behind her.

Then they were past, and headed out into open water as twilight descended into night. She turned, and through the damaged salon door, she could see the burning craft dropping away behind them, as the fire aboard continued to grow.

She sighed in relief. Priest stared forward, unchanged. Above the sound of the boat's engine, she heard Orela speak.

"Now she's *really* mad."