

Survival
by
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I must have sensed the big speedboat's presence before I became consciously aware of it. I was only half alert, and I heard only half a sound—far away and muffled by the fog. Every boat in the cove had an engine. It was the middle of the night, but one of Earl Studt's Marina's two small launches might still be ferrying boaters to the dock. His store was open all night. Yet something didn't fit.

It's what I felt that alerted me to what I heard. A palpable resonance emanated from engines of immense horsepower. When we'd motored in from the Chesapeake Bay, I'd automatically surveyed the other boats, checking out the competition. Nothing sat in this cove, sailboat or stinkpot, with more than two hundred horsepower. This new sound didn't belong.

Still sitting in the cockpit of *Seawitch*, our Morgan 38, I looked toward the bow. I could barely make out the forestay. I tilted my head backward as my eyes tracked along that braided, stainless steel wire, following it from the bow toward where it was attached to the top of the mast. Half-way up it disappeared into the fog. Aft of our thirty-eight foot sailing yacht I saw nothing. The lights of other boats should have been visible in the night's darkness, but the fog blanketed everything. No lights. No stars. I listened to that low rumble, letting it suffuse my body, trying to become a divining rod that would turn toward its source. Abruptly, the sound stopped.

Sarah's head still rested on my shoulder. Her eyes were closed. She sat beside me on the aft bench. Her body leaned against mine, and I could feel her slow, gentle breathing. Her first time on a sailboat, and she'd been a quick study. Ropes were called lines, lines controlling sails were called sheets, lines that pulled the sails up the mast were called halyards. If she heard it once, she owned it.

My left arm still encircled her slender waist. I moved my hand to her shoulder and shook her awake.

She sleepily raised her delicate, oval face toward mine, her features barely illuminated in the soft glow from the cabin lights. "What's happening? Damn, I'm stiff all over. What time is it?" She adjusted the black silk bandeau that kept her jet black, shoulder-length hair from falling over her eyes.

"Something's not right."

"What do you mean?" She straightened up, suddenly alert.

"There's a pair of very big motors out there." I struggled to keep my voice calm. "They don't fit."

She gave me a perplexed look. "I don't get it."

"I looked around when we came in. I didn't see anything in the cove with engines that powerful."

Sarah peered out over the stern of the boat. Her voice sounded edgy. "Tell me about boats with big motors."

"Cigarette speedboats are the archetype. The larger ones are over forty feet long. They run twin V-8s. That pair of engines can pump out well over a thousand horsepower, some close to two thousand. That's what I heard. There wasn't a Cigarette or anything else in that class here when we came in, and no pleasure boater would have simply wandered in since, not in this fog. It doesn't feel right."

Sarah slowly turned her head side-to-side, straining to pick up every sound from every direction. "I don't hear a thing."

“It stopped.”

She stood up, untied the sweater from around her waist, and pulled it on. “Why are you so concerned about a new boat in town? Maybe they just got caught in the fog, and this is the first harbor they found.”

I stood up beside her. I found myself clenching and unclenching my fists. “This fog didn’t come up fast enough to catch anybody. They were out in it deliberately. Some purpose brought them here, in the dark and in the fog. They’re up to something, and they don’t want anyone to see them do it.”

“You think they’re after us? That’s ridiculous.”

Amorphous bits of data wriggled in from the fringes of consciousness. They crawled toward one another. They formed curves, then lines, then edges. They solidified into puzzle pieces, collided, then clicked into place. I understood.

“Not after us, Sarah...” I took a deep breath. “*They’re after you.*”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “You’re building this whole big case out of a sound you don’t hear anymore.” She sat down.

I sat on the port bench and turned sideways to face her. Then I stared out into the fog.

“Your imagination is running nonsensically wild,” she said. “Even if someone did know we were on a boat, how could anyone know we’re here?”

“They could have watched us board. The number’s on the sail and the name’s on the stern. Following a sailing yacht would be a cinch in a Cigarette class boat. Our sail would be easy for them to see, but we’d never spot a speedboat. They ride low in the water, hidden by the waves.”

She sat quietly for a moment. She shook her head. “Even if you’re right, we’re safe enough for tonight. Nobody could even begin to find us in this fog. If you want, we can call the local police in the morning.”

I nodded slowly in agreement. I sat and thought and stared out into the fog. A couple of times I imagined I saw a flash of light way off, like a searchlight beam, but I couldn’t be sure.

Sarah started to say something, but then stopped abruptly. I gave her a quizzical look. She raised her index finger, then held it to her lips. I shut up. I clenched my fists again. My fingernails dug into my skin. We listened. The vibration came from behind. It crossed the water as one element of a low-pitched growl, a tiger stirring, only for a moment. The searchlight beam flashed again in the distance. Now I knew. So did Sarah.

“Shit.” We spoke in unison as we looked out past the stern.

“They’re using short bursts of power and floating in,” I said. “They must be checking each boat in the cove.”

Her voice quavered. “If they were trying to get to the dock, they’d have all their lights on, and they’d be making as much noise as possible.” I could hear her fighting for control. Fear clung to her voice. She was afraid of more than what might happen in the next couple of hours. I sensed a deeper trepidation of what tonight signified, of the changes that had begun to ripple through her life.

I tried to sound confident. “We have two advantages. We’ve got radar, and we’re one of a whole lot of boats, all standing still. They probably have radar too, but until they get close enough to see us we’ll look like every other boat in the cove. We can identify the Cigarette because it’s moving.”

“What now?” Sarah stood beside me, watching and waiting—a coiled wire. With every moment her five foot, six inch frame wound tighter.

I wanted to comfort her, but I couldn’t. We had work to do.

“Stay put and keep watch,” I said, taking her hand and squeezing it. “Yell for me if anything gets close.”

I ran below, grabbed the radar dish, and carried it out to the cockpit. The boat's owner had installed an antenna that could be stowed most of the time and raised only when needed. The boat seemed to rock a little extra each time I tried to fasten the dish onto the mounting bracket behind the aft bench, but with Sarah's help I managed to get it set and fastened. She pushed the rocker switch, and the stainless steel pole telescoped up, just like a car antenna, but with the dish on top. The pole began to rotate. The radar looked around.

This was the first time I'd ever set it up. I glanced at Sarah. “Pretty neat, huh?”

“I guess.” She looked dubious. “Where's the thing you look at that tells you where the other boats are?”

I stood there for a second, with a blank mind and an expression to match. Then I groaned in despair.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“The radar video display is in the cabin over the chart table, all dry and comfy and protected from the elements.”

“So how do you watch it?”

I pointed toward the cabin. “You go in there and sit in front it.”

“That's absurd. You drive the boat from out here!”

“I guess it's a team affair.”

“OK, show me where the display is and how it works.”

Fear was giving way to determination. I looked at her with new respect.

Self-control is always half the battle. She was winning hers. I started to concentrate on mine. I motioned for her to follow and climbed down into the cabin. I turned on the radar display and we studied the round gray circle. We were the white cross at the center. A great many green dots flickered around us. Only one moved. It approached in a slow, zigzag pattern through the cluster of moored boats in the cove. The fog itself presented reason enough to move with care, but no reason to repeatedly cut the engine. For a boat, its motor is its brake. If the crew of the *Cigarette* had been innocently in search of a mooring, they would have kept the engines on, they would have had their lights on, and they would have been talking to Earl. I switched on the radio. It remained silent. I climbed up to the cockpit and looked out over the stern. Sarah stayed by the radar display. Periodically, a patch of fog glowed as the *Cigarette's* searchlight reached into the night. I returned to the radar screen and stood beside Sarah, my arm around her waist. Sarah leaned her body against mine. I felt her shiver with the tension of approaching danger. We'd face it together.

We watched the screen. There was nothing to say, nothing to do. The advancing green dot moved closer. It neared a stationary dot. Then they blended together. I whispered to Sarah, “They've stopped at another boat.”

I felt her body relax a little. She tapped the face of the radar monitor with a nervous finger. “Maybe there's no danger after all.”

A crackle of speech burst from the radio—a male voice, pitched low at first then thrown higher by panic. “*Sandwich* calling Studt. *Sandwich* calling Studt. Jesus Christ! We're being boarded! What the hell do you guys want? Take the damned money. Take whatever you want. No. Leave her alone! Stop it. No! Don't—”

The high-pitched crack of an M-16 cut him off. Its report almost stuttered, the radio screaming the blast an instant before the sound waves themselves raced to us from across the water. Three shots. A pause crawled through the slush of near frozen time. Three more shots.

Earl's voice came on, like the caller's, sleepy and scared. "*Sandwich? Sandwich?*" He received no answer. Then a flurry of voices from many boats crackled on and off, asking and telling.

Sarah looked at the radio. "*Sandwich?* Not a lot different from *Seawitch*." I nodded. "Especially in the fog. Poor bastards. That should've been us. From the sound of it, they're after a woman. When they realized they had the wrong one, they killed her."

Sarah's voice turned to ice. "*They're after me.*"

"Every boat in the cove will want to get out of here," I said. "But they can't see through the fog, so they'll stay on their moorings. Earl will call the cops, but the fog on the roads will slow them down, and once they get to the dock they won't know what to do. We're on our own. The Cigarette will keep coming."

Sarah slammed the edge of her fist against the chart table. "Do we just wait here?"

"We're not dead yet. Stay with the radar and let me know if they get closer."

I ran to the forward stateroom and crawled to the locker. A rush of ideas raced through me as I worked. A plan formed.

I pulled out the yellow plastic case—guaranteed waterproof to thirty-five feet—marginally adequate for storing guns and ammunition in the humidity of the Chesapeake Bay. In the case were a stainless steel .357 revolver, holster, five speed loaders and a flashlight.

I clipped the holster onto my belt, loaded the revolver, and holstered it. Then I dropped the remaining four speed loaders into my left front pocket, the flashlight into my right.

I called out to Sarah, "How far away?"

"One hundred yards. There aren't many boats between us now."

I drew back the curtain to the pilot berth, pulled out the spinnaker, carried it to the cockpit, then climbed forward until I stood on the bow. No easy trick in the dark, but I knew the boat. The Morgan was headed into the wind. A steady breeze blew out of the south—five to ten knots. The whole plan depended on it staying that way. The big speedboat approached from behind us, from the north.

I felt for the spinnaker halyard, found it, took the knife from my belt, and used the serrated blade to cut partway through the braided, polyester rope. Then I attached the spinnaker sheets and worked the sail carefully into the big cloth tube that held it to the deck. I ran back to Sarah.

"Thirty yards," she said. "Nothing between them and us."

"Forget the radar. I need you at the wheel." I reached under the chart table and found the half-gallon can of Coleman Lantern fuel and the butane lighter. I switched off the cabin lights and handed Sarah the flashlight. We climbed out to the cockpit. Sarah stood behind the steering pedestal. The sound of those two powerful engines droned steadily now, louder than before. I started our fifty horsepower diesel. I had to put a hand on the deck to feel the engine running. I couldn't hear it over the Cigarette's. Both boats were near blind in the fog, and both were equally deaf.

"Sarah, when you can just make out the bow of the Cigarette, shift from neutral to forward. Then turn the wheel all the way to port."

"Where are you going to be?"

"With the spinnaker."

"What's a spinnaker?"

"The big sail that balloons out in front of the boat." My voice stuck in my throat. My mouth felt dry. I had to swallow before I could speak again.

"They'll slow down when they think they're close. The cockpit of a Cigarette is a long way back from the bow, but they might have a lookout stationed forward on the deck, so crouch

down. Don't give them a target."

I kissed her gently on the forehead. "For luck." Then I scrambled over the deck, toward the bow.

I reached the forestay. A cold, wet spray blew off the bow. I unclipped the spinnaker halyard from the mast, attached it to the head of the sail, and then drenched the spinnaker with lantern fuel. The medicinal odor of naphtha hung close in the humid air. I hoped I wouldn't have a long wait, or the fuel would evaporate. I rested a hand on the revolver. That was plan B. I wouldn't let them take Sarah.

I toyed nervously with the lighter in my pocket. All at once the Morgan lurched forward. The deck bucked beneath my feet. My trembling, sweaty fingers slipped on the forestay, but I held on. I reached down and severed the mooring line. The boat spun to port. I had to haul on the spinnaker halyard with both hands. At first the big sail hung back as the boat turned, but then it ballooned out to my left, inhaling the wind and straining at its sheets. It ascended like a great specter, barely visible in the night sky. The one hundred and eighty degree turn ended with a jolt as the bow of the Morgan thudded against the bow of the Cigarette.

I lit the spinnaker. Red-yellow flames shot straight up. When they reached the head of the sail, I gave the halyard a little slack, then yanked it hard. It separated at the cut, and eleven hundred square feet of flaming nylon fell forward with the wind, away from the Morgan and onto the Cigarette. I cut loose the spinnaker sheets and tossed them after the sail.

I craned my neck toward the stern and yelled to Sarah, "Straighten the wheel and hit reverse."

Either she heard, or she knew instinctively what to do. I hadn't thought to tell her before. I felt the Morgan shudder, then it backed slowly away from the Cigarette.

The flames grew. Reds and yellows whirled across a backdrop of black. Like frenzied dancers they twirled and swirled along the deck of the Cigarette and into its cockpit. I could smell the plastics burning. Dying men shrieked. Living fireballs leapt into the bay.

I called to Sarah for more speed and ran toward the stern. I'd barely reached her when the blast came. I jumped, grabbed her, and took us flat. The explosion turned night into day. I hadn't known how much fuel remained in the Cigarette's twin tanks. It had been enough.

I couldn't keep myself from rolling onto my back and looking up. The sky swarmed with burning splinters floating through the air, glowing fireflies in the fog. A few struck the Morgan, but they snuffed out as they hit.

While I gazed at the sky, Sarah leapt up and ran to the steering pedestal. She shifted into forward and slowed the boat to a halt. She'd learned fast, and she kept her mind on the task at hand.

The Cigarette had become a burning smudge on the water, a few floating bits of debris. Quiet settled over the cove. Dead men make no sound.

I dropped anchor. Sarah and I sat side by side on the aft bench. We waited for the sun to rise. We waited for the fog to clear. We waited for the police. We held each other close.

The End