

TWENTY-THREE

Under a lead-colored sky, the *Pilar* eddied out of the slip at the Naval yard where Hemingway kept her stowed. The 38-foot cabin cruiser resembled nothing more than an army tank, painted combat green, with a noisy 75-horse Chrysler engine powering it. It glided over the ocean's choppy surface effortlessly, like a Panzer over insignificant mounds of sand. The boat's wide beam kept her steady on the water but Emmet could feel every wave, every ripple in the sea's surface in his broken ribs.

Watching Emmet wince as they went out past the reef and into open water, Hemingway asked him if he was sure he was up to the trip. When Emmet nodded his head, Hemingway added, "Good. Because I don't go back 'til there's fish in the boat. Not even for my sons when they get seasick. You ever been seasick, MacWain?"

"No," said Emmet, without hesitation, but thought, he'd never been out on a rough sea with broken ribs either.

Past the reef, the seas showed evidence of a storm nearby – whitecaps blew off the waves like scarfs caught in the wind – but it still seemed far enough away not to worry about it. Radio reports indicated that the storm was maintaining strength but was moving more easterly. People who had been hurriedly shuttering windows, stopped or slowed down their progress and the feeling was that it would be safe for business as usual.

Storm or not, Hemingway was undeterred. It was as if he welcomed the opportunity to challenge nature. When Emmet had asked him if he was worried about the storm, he replied, "Hurricanes are like shitty boxers. They skirt around their target but seldom hit it."

Emmet sensed that Hemingway was trying to be both apologetic and grateful when he proffered the fishing trip. He knew that to some men fishing was a way of bonding and that, to Hemingway, it was as vital as his own blood; the offer to join him no less significant than an outright gesture of peace.

When he had shown up at Emmet's door that morning at 6:00am, the writer had been so pathetic that Emmet had let him in and poured him some coffee. He was scrubbed clean and was sober but his eyes were sore and puffy and his hands shook noticeably. He actually looked more presentable when he was intoxicated. At least then he was at ease with himself which he clearly was not now. He sat down heavily at the oak table that held the crime scene evidence and began to humble himself.

Eyes downcast, ashamed, he said, "I'm an asshole. I think too much of myself at times and when I'm drinking I think everyone else should, too. You and me, we got off to a bad start. Mostly, because I was in a bad way, in a fix I didn't know how I got into. If you subscribe to dime store psychology they'd probably say I was being defensive because I was in a vulnerable position. I'd just say that sometimes my mouth is running before my mind's in gear. I do know you've done nothing but try to help me and for that I'm grateful."

He hesitated, wringing his hands like a father whose daughter is late getting home from her first date. Glancing up sheepishly, he asked, "Can we start over?" Then he placed a brown paper bag, with the top twisted around a bottle, on the table.

Emmet opened the bag and chuckled. "Irish whiskey?"

"Sorry. It's the closest thing they had to scotch at the package store this early."

Emmet smiled. "That's fine. Thanks." He opened the bottle and poured a capful of the amber liquid into their coffees. "This will be a good eye opener. Besides, I already have some

scotch.”

“So I see,” said Hemingway, noticing the bottle of scotch that Pauline had brought over the day before. “I keep that same brand at home, though I couldn’t find any this morning.”

Emmet’s gaze met Hemingway’s and neither man spoke for a moment. Then, Emmet said, grimly, “The other night when I saw you at the bar, I meant what I said about Pauline.”

The writer raised his cup of Irish coffee and peered through the steam that rose from its inky surface. “I’ve always said, you should do sober what you said you’d do when you’re drunk and that’ll help you to keep your mouth shut. But, I seldom learn from my own lessons.”

Emmet had made his point and that was that. He was not a man to hold a grudge, nor one to make idle threats.

The two men stood up and shook hands. Then, they finished their coffees and went fishing.

Rounding out the crew that morning were two other men. Carlos Gutierrez, a man Hemingway often hired to captain his boat while he fished, and a mate whom he hired off the docks. Hemingway had noticed him hanging around, admiring the Pilar. As was common with Hemingway, if he suspected a man was down on his luck, he’d offer him some work. Speaking Spanish, he’d asked the man if he’d ever acted as mate and when he replied, “*Si, Papa,*” he’d hired him on the spot.

“*Como se oumo?*” said Hemingway, asking his name.

“Tito,” he replied.

Emmet didn’t care for the man. His hair was long and unwashed and his teeth were thick with tartar. His body smelled as if he had not bathed in days and when he walked past Emmet, a scent of oily smoke wafted after him. He was too quick to make jokes, affecting a familiarity that he had not yet earned. Emmet didn’t like his eyes, either. They were heavily lidded, giving him the appearance of being sleepy but darting quickly about, like some predatory lizard, taking in everything, evaluating, assessing.

In true Florida fashion, the sky opened intermittently and allowed a brief and optimistic ray of sunlight to poke through. During one of these transient moments, Carlos stopped the boat and pointed out a weed line where he suggested they might find some bull-nose dolphin.

Hemingway was excited and quickly baited the hooks of several large, sea-duty rods and reels. When he asked Tito to assist him, it became evident the mate was not experienced with proper baiting. Hemingway noticed but did not say anything to him. Instead, he finished baiting the hooks himself and handed a rod to Emmet and the mate and kept one for himself. Carlos stayed behind the wheel of the boat.

The writer caught the first dolphin and left the fish in the water to draw the rest of the school near the boat. Within twenty minutes there were half a dozen bull nose dolphin on board, each twenty pounds or better, their blue-green color adding life to the drab deck as they flopped around still fighting their extrication from the sea. They were magnificent game fish and Emmet thought they were beautiful as the elusive sun peaked out and lit up their gleaming sides.

Hemingway was as gleeful as a school boy and the fish box was soon full of dolphin with a couple of mackerel added to the catch. When there was a lull in the action, the writer opened some cold beers and sat down, handing one of the beers to Emmet and keeping one for himself.

“Get Carlos and yourself a beer, Tito,” he told the mate. “I’ll watch your pole.”

Tito smiled revealing his plaquey teeth and did as he was told.

“Hard to believe there’s a hurricane brewing when you can fish like this, eh?” said Hemingway, looking for an opening to conversation.

“Well, it’s a bit choppy for my taste,” said Emmet. “But the fish don’t seem to mind.” Hemingway laughed. Then, his face became serious.

“Why do you suppose that Negro tried to frame me, then kill me? It doesn’t make sense.”

Emmet answered quickly. “You’re right. It doesn’t make sense. It’s obvious he wanted to kill you but I’m sure he didn’t try to frame you. I don’t think he’s capable of that kind of thinking or planning. Someone else did that.”

“So why did he want me dead?”

“The girl must have meant something to him and he believes you killed her.”

“What do you think?”

“I think someone is trying to make it look like you killed the girl. But, to be honest with you, there is some evidence that is both intriguing and disturbing to me.”

“How’s that?”

Emmet closed his eyes and visualized the crime scene.

“It appears she was already laying on the floor when the blade was brought down on her neck. I think she was struck first. Here,” said Emmet pointing to the temporal region of his head. “With a fist.”

“And it’s possible I did that while I was...drunk?”

“Yes,” said Emmet, bluntly. “Unless we found someone else responsible for it, it would be something a defense attorney would have a hard time explaining. Still, there was so much blood around her body, it would indicate that she was still alive when her throat was cut.”

Hemingway looked at the fish blood covering the deck of the boat and closed his eyes, his face blanching. “If I thought I had anything to do with that girl’s death, I’d blow my brains out. She was a wonderful and brave woman.”

Emmet said nothing but took note of Hemingway’s sincerity. He also noted the familiarity Hemingway lent the woman; he had previously denied knowing her. Both men took long pulls from their beers.

“Do you think you know who is trying to frame me?”

“No. I thought if I got to know you better, know your acquaintances, and maybe look into your accounts I could get some clues.

“Yes, of course. Anything that might help. You know, Lauth will want to put the whole thing off on the Negro...”

“I won’t let that happen,” said Emmet, sternly.

Just then, he heard a squeak, the sound of a rubber sole on the slippery deck. Turning, he caught Tito standing behind them. It appeared to Emmet he was eavesdropping.

“Would you gentlemen like another beer?” Tito offered.

“Sure,” said Hemingway. “Fetch us up one, would you? Now, where the hell did those fish go?”

As soon as the men resumed fishing, something hit Emmet’s line. Something big. His thick rod doubled over and the line began to sing as it was yanked from the reel.

“Ho-ho, MacWain,” said Hemingway. “You’ve caught a monster.”

Emmet struggled against the onslaught of whatever had hit his bait. The resistance caused his muscles to tighten in his torso, squeezing his broken ribs. The pain showed on his face.

“Want me to take him?” Hemingway offered.

“No” Emmet grunted, then quipped, “This...is...uh...fun.”

Hemingway laughed. “All right then, man! But, let me get you my fishing harness. It’ll take some of the pressure off your ribs.”

The harness was a leather contraption that strapped over the wearer's shoulders and attached to the fishing reel using small but strong metal clasps. It was designed to assist fishermen in long fights with large game fish.

Hemingway fastened it onto Emmet, hastily fastening the buckles and clasps, and tightening the waist and shoulder straps. He warned Emmet, "Keep your drag loose on the reel. If you don't and that monster pulls hard enough, he'll take the rod, reel and you over the side, lickety-split."

"Uh, thanks," said Emmet nervously. The harness fit comfortable and served its purpose, taking the pressure off of his ribs and giving him greater control of the rod and reel. It was a nice gesture for Hemingway to offer the device and Emmet appreciated his thoughtfulness.

The fish alternately pulled hard, then relaxed, then hard again. The end of the rod dipped each time, so that Emmet was able to develop a sense of timing and could brace himself against each pull, then reel in some slack when the fish let off, which was not often enough for Emmet.

"I'll bet that's a goddamn shark," Hemingway guessed. "Maybe a hammerhead, the way it keeps pulling straight down on your rod. They like to go to the bottom." Hemingway hated sharks with a passion. He'd lost many a good catch to the predators before he could land them in the boat. He said, "Bring the bastard up and I'll shoot your initials in its head with my pistol. I'm gonna have another beer. Anyone?"

"Sure," Emmet grunted. "Just put it in my free hand."

Hemingway laughed again and turned to get the beer. As soon as he did so, Tito stepped in close to Emmet.

"Let me help you, senior," he said. "You look like you're in pain."

Quickly, he reached over as if to help Emmet with the rod, then locked down the drag on the reel just as the fish pulled hard again. Emmet was jerked completely off balance. He dropped the rod but the fishing harness kept him attached to the reel. Sliding through the dolphin blood on deck and fumbling with the clasps on the harness, Emmet was instantly yanked over the side, smashing his knees into the gunnels as he went.

"Whoops!" said Tito, in mock astonishment.

Hearing the commotion, Hemingway turned from the cooler just in time to see Emmet being pulled into the water.

"Jesus!" he yelled. Dropping the beers, he grabbed a filet knife and raced toward the back of the boat. The water still churned frothy white where Emmet had gone in.

Hemingway dove into the roiling soup. The salt water burned his eyes but he kept them open as he pulled himself down using strong breast strokes and kicking for all he was worth. He was a strong swimmer but he could see that the fish had already pulled Emmet down about twenty feet and had no intention of slowing down. He redoubled his efforts and prayed the fish would stop its descent now that it had less resistance, or that Emmet could free himself from the harness that enslaved him to the fish. Hemingway had taken a deep breath before he dove in after him but he doubted Emmet had the time to do so.

Emmet knew he was going to drown.

It had happened so quickly. One second he was fishing, the next he was being pulled through the water by a tremendous and irresistible force. He'd instinctively gasped some air when he was pulled forward but the impact of slamming into the gunnel, then into the water, had knocked most of the air out of him.

He struggled, relentlessly, trying to keep his wits about him as his fingers worked the

cinches on the harness. He managed to get one shoulder buckle loosened but the fish pulled hard again, taking him father into the depths and tightening the cinch strap again. Emmet knew that, even if he were able to get free of all the buckles and straps, in another moment he would be so deep he would never make it to the surface before running out of air.

Suddenly, something grabbed him, wildly jerking on one of his flailing arms and slowing his descent. For a second, he thought it must be a shark and he was already too numb to feel its teeth. Then he realized it was one of the men from the boat and, though he couldn't make out who it was in the darkening depths of the sea, something told him it was Hemingway.

Even as his rescuer began pulling at the harness straps, Emmet's vision began to fade from lack of oxygen...

By the time Hemingway reached Emmet, they were over forty feet deep. His own lungs began to burn from the effort but he knew it had to be much worse for the retired inspector. His own pain lent him empathy for Emmet's suffering and he set to his task with renewed vigor. The filet knife flashed once and severed one of the shoulder straps. Again, and the second strap was cut. Now, he just needed to open the waist buckle and Emmet would be free. The waist strap was too thick to cut through and he might stab Emmet if he tried but it would be easy enough to open if he could find it in time. As his fingers found the buckle, Hemingway noticed they were no longer descending. *Thank God!* Hemingway thought for a second, then immediately realized what the lack of descent meant.

Whatever was pulling them down was now heading back up, toward them.

As Hemingway fumbled with the buckles something fleshy brushed his hand. It was Emmet's own hand as he released the harness himself. He was still alive but Hemingway could tell by his frantic movements he was in dire need of air and they were nearly fifty feet deep. The two men grasped each other's hand and kicked hard toward the surface. Hemingway tried not to think of what was coming up from below them.

They were still twenty feet from the surface when Emmet's diaphragm began to involuntarily convulse, trying to make his lungs breath. Emmet had to release Hemingway's hand to pinch his nose shut so he wouldn't inadvertently breath in seawater. Swimming with one hand slowed his progress to a crawl. Hemingway noticed and grabbed Emmet's collar, pulling him along.

When the two men reached the surface, Emmet released his nose and blood gushed into the water. His lungs gasped for fresh air rapidly and repeatedly. He would like to have rested a moment but Hemingway still had him by the collar and was pulling him along like a mother cat taking its kitten by the nape of the neck.

"Can't...can't...we...rest...for a moment?" Emmet pleaded breathlessly.

"Not now!" Hemingway yelled. "If that is a shark that pulled you over, he'll smell your blood and we're goners."

"Let me go then. Make a dash for the boat yourself."

"Like hell," said Hemingway and continued tugging Emmet along.

Carlos Gutierrez was at the wheel of the *Pilar* with the motor running. He spied the two men seconds after they surfaced, about fifty yards off the port side. He turned the wheel toward them and gunned the motor.

Tito stood in the cabin looking sheepish as he swilled a beer.

Emmet and Hemingway were still about ten yards from the boat when the hammerhead's

dorsal fin shot out of the water like a periscope on a German U-boat. Sensing Emmet's blood, it made a pass by the desperate swimmers investigating the source.

Carlos slammed the throttle into reverse for a moment, then killed the motor, letting the boat glide up next to the two swimmers. He grabbed a rifle out of the cabin and ran to the back of the boat to see if he could scare off the shark, or wound it with a lucky shot. The dorsal fin had disappeared. Keeping his eyes on the water around the swimmers, Carlos ordered Tito to help him get them into the boat.

Tito moved slowly, deliberately, as he picked up the long gaff with its sharp steel hook.

Hemingway reached the boat first and turned to help Emmet get up and in. Emmet was grabbing weakly at the gunnel, trying to pull himself up when Tito swung the gaff down on him. He had not taken the time to aim the hook, so the back of the deadly scythe glanced off of Emmet's shoulder harmlessly.

"What the hell are you doing!" Hemingway shouted.

Tito ignored him and swung the gaff again. But, Hemingway was charged up, adrenaline pumping, and he managed to snatch the gaff as it came down.

Carlos witnessed the attack, analyzed the problem and made a decision. He raised the rifle and fired a shot through Tito's chest. The impact at that range sent him somersaulting over the heads of the two men in the water.

Hemingway scrambled back into the boat. Immediately spinning about, he and Carlos each took one of Emmet's arms and pulled him safely on board.

Struggling to his feet, Emmet gasped, "Tito! Try to save him. Maybe he can tell us who he works for!"

But it was too late. The chest wound probably would have killed him but fate had something else in mind. Tito made an effort to get back to the Pilar, his arms reaching weakly toward the boat, blood pouring out of him like a chum bucket. The hammerhead came from underneath, striking Tito in the belly like a locomotive. The force brought him and the shark clean out of the water.

Hemingway got a glimpse of the beast and estimated it was about fourteen feet long. Tito was able to get out a strangled cry, then he disappeared into a bloody froth, the shark attached to his side like a giant, angry leech.

Emmet was assisted into a chair and Hemingway brought him a beer. He was clutching his side and the writer, being the son of a doctor and a former ambulance driver, feared he may have punctured a lung. He pressed his ear to Emmet's chest and ordered him to breath deeply. He repeated the order several times as he listened to Emmet's lungs.

"Your lungs sound clear and full of air," he reassured him.

"Sure you didn't hear a little seawater sloshing around in there?" Emmet joked.

The men all had a brief laugh – a release of adrenaline induced fear – and Carlos, never one to waste words, went back to the bridge and cranked the motor.

Hemingway got himself a beer and sat next to Emmet. Both men stared hard at the sea where Tito Ramone had gone down with the shark.

"Terrible way to go," said Hemingway. "Could've been one of us."

"But it wasn't," said Emmet, gratefully. "Thank you for saving my life."

Hemingway looked at Emmet. "You would've done the same for me. Already have."

Wordlessly, the two men shook hands. Then Hemingway sat back in his chair and took a long pull off his beer.

"I'll tell you everything you need to know, MacWain. About Appolonia Manneiro. About

the Cubans. Everything.”