

CHOKER EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

The ancient freighter inched closer to the shore. Its depth finder beeped softly as the bottom rose rapidly towards its keel, with a nearly empty hold, twenty feet below. Any false move on the helmsman's part would put them on the mud. That could spell disaster for all of them. An inquiry by the Coast Guard would not go well. People would have to die.

A gentle breeze blew in from the east, from the shore. He imagined he could smell honeysuckle over the stench of diesel oil, rusted steel decking, and sweat. He mopped his brow with a dirty sleeve and peered into the gloom. He could just make out the red flashing laser. When it stopped flashing and showed as a steady glow, he would have to stop the ship's forward progress immediately—no mean feat for a rusted out World War II era freighter with an iffy boiler, slack steering, and a displacement of nearly sixteen thousand tons.

He rang all stop, then reverse, and the ship churned to a halt. The anchor, heavily greased and muffled with sacking, bumped through the hawse and dropped with a splash. The steam ship, *Saifullah*, its name painted in white on its stern and prow in both Arabic, and English, heaved to, bow into the current, and thumped against a barge moored some fifty yards from shore. Except for the binnacle's glow, no lights showed—no running lights, all of its portholes painted over—nothing.

When the ship settled, a second anchor was let go aft. He peered off to the starboard. A series of intermittent flashes, this time green and difficult to see, were directed toward him. He murmured into the microphone attached to his headset. The forward anchor chain was allowed to play out. The one aft hauled in. The ship shifted toward the stern.

He signaled for the crew to complete unfastening the hold's hatches and to swing the ship's crane amidships. They would need lights now. The fog that allowed them to move in earlier had started to lift. They would have to work quickly.

* * *

Nick Reynolds had too few hours to fly at night with any degree of competence. That's what his instructor had said. Nick conceded he might be right at some level but he, like many thirty-somethings, had become a risk discounter. Six years in the navy, four in nuclear submarines, made him confident, perhaps too confident. Flying an airplane provided fewer degrees of freedom for mistakes than say, sailing a boat, a skill he also possessed. He'd brushed off attempts to dissuade him from night flying.

"I can do it, no worries. I have my IFR rating, I'll be fine." He smiled at his instructor and finished his preflight walk around. He handed in his flight plan and took off, serene in the knowledge that if he followed the channel buoys to a point two miles south of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, then swung southeastward, he'd raise Cambridge. From there he would have an easy final leg to Salisbury.

Nick's bravado faded when, minutes into his flight, he ran into thick fog. Had the weather report mentioned it? If so, he'd missed it. A moonless but clear night did not intimidate him, but flying blind in fog under those same conditions brought him to near panic.

He called the tower at BWI, Baltimore–Washington International, and felt better when they described the fog bank as only a few miles across. They also reported he'd

drifted a few miles from his course. He'd need to correct it. He tried to remember what he should do in fog; rely on his instruments, climb, or descend? Climb seemed the most logical but he had an assigned altitude and climbing might put him in the path of a commercial jet on its approach to Baltimore Washington International airport. He decided to drop down to 500 feet, skim the water at that relatively safe altitude, and see if he couldn't spot some lights from shore or ships out in the channel.

Moments later, he broke out of the fog bank. There wasn't much to see. To the east and west he saw the flashes of bright lights and the spreading star shells from a half dozen firework displays. The headset and engine noise kept him from hearing them, but he could imagine the thumps from the explosions. *Happy Fourth of July*. In front of him and a little to the southwest he could just make out the dim outlines of a ship. He should be over Eastern Bay, he thought, south of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, and not near the channel at all. As he drew closer he saw the ship had a loading crane positioned on its starboard side and in the process of offloading or retrieving something from a barge. What looked like a buoy, dangled from the crane's cable.

Funny that. The Coast Guard usually handled buoys. And as far as he knew no ships' channel came this far into Eastern Bay. The ship below him did not have the classic white hull and bright red-orange marker stripe of a Coast guard vessel. It looked more like a tramp steamer from an old movie, barely showing either running or marker lights. And what would anyone be doing on the Fourth of July, in the middle of the night, and so close to shore? Not positioning a buoy certainly.

He put his right wing over and started a lazy turn around the ship. The fog bank still lingered over most of the bay behind him. Nearby, a fireworks display had started, pop . . . hiss . . . flash. . . boom, pop . . . hiss . . . flash . . . boom—the last very close. Where would that have come from? When he had completed a little more than half of his turn he recognized the object suspended in the air beside the ship's hull. He scabbled for his cell phone, aimed the phone's camera lens toward the ship and pressed the "capture" button repeatedly. He opened the phone and speed-dialed. One ring, two.

"Come on, come on."

"Hi, this is Lizzy. I can't come to the phone right now . . ."

"Lizzy, pick up . . . pick up."

". . . but if you leave a message . . ."

"Lizzy pick up"

"Beep."

"Lizzy, call your uncle Charlie. Tell him that there is something really bad going on . . ." From the corner of his eye, Nick saw the orange trail of yet another rocket arc up and toward him. A very big rocket. Too big for the Fourth of July. The plane lurched. He dropped the phone. It slid under the pedals at his feet.

* * *

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"I heard an explosion."

A brief flash of light flickered through the port hole, just enough to light the tiny V-berth. A thump followed a second or two later. He rolled toward the girl and the thirty-two foot Jeanneau sail boat rocked to port.

"Like that one?" he said.

“Yes, only louder, and then there was all this splashing outside.”

“Splashing?” More flashes and thumps followed the first one. “It’s the Fourth of July, Deedee, there’ll be explosions all night somewhere. The splashes were probably caused by a school of fish breaking the surface.”

“Hell of a big school, then. It sounded more like people doing cannon balls off a high board—louder even.”

“If a school of big fish, rock fish say, were after a bunch of smaller ones and they all broke at the same time—”

“You think?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I’m going on deck to see the fireworks. That’s why we sailed over here in the first place, isn’t it? If it hadn’t been for the fog . . . If we can see the flashes it must have lifted or something.”

“Stay here, I’ll show you some fireworks.”

She laughed and stood up on the berth. The forward hatch was open so her head and shoulders cleared the deck line.

“Wow, you should see this, Ralphie.”

She climbed on deck and he felt the boat rock as she made her way to the cockpit. He grabbed a torch, wrapped a towel around his waist, and climbed up after her. The fog had lifted. The flotilla he’d planned to join in the bay had disappeared hours ago when the fog bank rolled in. Watching fireworks from boats rafted up in Eastern Bay had become a local tradition, but fog had ended this year’s gathering. They were alone.

“Look at that,” she said and pointed westward in the general direction of Gibson Island. Flash . . . pop . . . thump. “Hey, let’s skinny dip.”

“No, not in the dark.” He noticed for the first time that his marker lights were out. He’d forgotten to run the generator and the battery must have died. He hoped there’d be wind tomorrow. There was no way he’d get the little diesel started if both the cabin and engine batteries were dead. “The tide is running out. If you go over the side you could be caught in it and with no light—”

“Don’t be such a wuss. Turn on the torch thing and we can home in on it.” With that she dove into the inky black water and disappeared. He swung the light around looking for her. No sign. The light arced back and forth as he looked for her head to break above water.

“Deedee,” he called, “where are you?” His heart began to race. Then he heard her laugh. She’d swum under the boat and surfaced on the other side. Idiot! With a four and a half foot draft under the keel and in the dark . . .

“Come on in, you big sissy,” she shouted and stroked away into the night.

He dropped his towel and positioned the light so he could see it from the water. He’d lowered the swim ladder and started down when she screamed.

“What?”

“Ugh, I think something touched me,” she said and swam back to the boat. “I’m done here. Yuck.”

He pulled her aboard. He could feel the goose bumps on her body. She took a towel from the boom and dried off.

“Rockets red glare in the forward bunk,” he said and she giggled. He doused the flash. In the dark he scanned the horizon. A hundred yards out he thought he saw the outlines of a small freighter. He frowned and then shrugged.

Their lovemaking caused the boat to rock gently, bow to stern. They were too absorbed in it to hear the gentle thump as a Zodiac came along side, or to hear the muffled footsteps aft. Only the flash of light in their eyes told them they were not alone, but by then it was too late.