



SHIT HAPPENS

MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH

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SHIT HAPPENS

I was pretty drunk or maybe I'd've figured out what was happening a lot sooner. It'd been a hell of a day getting to Long Beach from the east coast, though, kicking off with a bleary-eyed hour in an Uber driven by a guy who ranted about politics the entire way, then two flights separated by a hefty layover because Shannon my PA is obsessed with saving every penny on travel despite—or because—of the fact she's not going to be the person spending hours wandering an anonymous concourse in the middle of the country, trying and ultimately failing to resist the temptation to kill the time in a bar. Once I'd had a couple/three beers there it seemed only sensible to keep the buzz going with complementary liquor on the second flight, and so by the time the cab from LAX finally deposited me on the quay beside the boat I was already sailing more than a few sheets close to the wind.

When I say “boat” I mean “ship.” The company conference this year was on the Queen Mary, historic Art Deco gem of British ocean liners and once host to everyone from Winston Churchill to Liberace, now several decades tethered to the dock in Long Beach and refitted as a hotel. I stood staring up at the epic size of the thing while I snatched a cigarette, then figured out where the stairs were to get up to the metal walkway that took you aboard. I hadn't even finished check-in before a guy I know a little from the London office strode up and said everyone was in the bar and it was happy hour for God's sake, so what the hell was I waiting for?

I hurried my bag to my room and brushed my teeth and changed my shirt, taking a second to remind myself of the name of the British guy (Peter something-or-other, I evidently hadn't noted his surname) so I could hail him when I rocked up in the bar. See? Totally professional.

The bar turned out to be at the pointy end of the ship, and—wonder of wonders—featured an outside area which not only had a great view over the bay, but you were allowed to smoke there *while drinking*, which meant there was basically no good reason for me to leave it, ever, or at least for duration of the conference. The bar wasn't even super-crowded, because the conference didn't start in earnest until the next day: I'd only arrived Thursday because Shannon had been able to shave a few bucks off the flights that way. Of course it meant paying for an extra night on the boat, but she assured me that was actually a good thing because of some unfeasibly complex points system she's got me locked into—and then began explaining it in detail and cross-referencing it with her own plans for the weekend—but after a while I basically stopped listening.

Most of the guys and girls present were from outposts in Europe, arrived early to make a head-start on recovering from jetlag, which many seemed to believe involved the consumption of alcohol at a pretty brisk rate. I knew most only by sight but when you work for the same multinational tech giant and have access to strong, relaxing beverages—and are all a little hyper as a result of being away from home, and out of the normal grind—it's not hard to get along.

Peter-from-London insisted on taking me on a tour of the boat to point out the curved metal and worn wooden paneling and general faded-grandeur of the whole deal (out of Brit pride, I suspect, and also to temporarily remove himself from the sight line of a freakishly tall woman from the Helsinki office whom he'd evidently slept with at the previous year's event, and who was drinking hard and fast with her colleagues and staring at Peter like she either wanted to bash his head in or else renew their acquaintance right away).

Aside from that I stuck to the bar—itsself no slouch when it came to looking like the set from some glamorous black and white movie where people spoke in *bon mots* and drank cocktails and broke into dance every ten minutes. I was all too aware that I had to give a gnarly and unpopular presentation explaining why the update to our flagship virtual networking module had been delayed *yet again*, but that wasn't until Saturday and hey, it isn't every evening you get to drink heavily on a damned great boat.

I drank. I chatted. I went out front to smoke and watch the sky darken and the lights from the city across the bay come on—and then gradually start to dwindle and fade, as a fog rolled in. I stuck to beer in the hope this

might help the hangover remain dreadful rather than crushing, and after a while this started to catch up with my bladder. Luckily my earlier exploration of the boat with Peter (the Finnish woman was now hanging with our group, and it was becoming clear that the only vigorous acts on her mind were the kind that would have a bedstead banging against a cabin wall into the small hours) had included locating the nearest john.

It was down a narrow and windowless corridor that led down the middle of the boat and seemed to have escaped the attention of most of the guys, who instead marched off down one of the much wider walkways on the outer edges, to the main restroom mid-ship that—while significantly larger and nicer—was much further away. The closer one looked like it had been converted out of a far more lavish single toilet (there was still a lock on the outer door to the corridor, and the sink, two urinals, and stall retrofitted into the space were seriously cramped) but never let it be said that I can't make do with what's available, especially when I really do need to take a piss.

Coming from the sophisticated Old World as most of these people did, the proportion of tobacco users was higher than with an all-American crowd, and by nine o'clock over half of us were in permanent position out on the smokers' deck. Peter and the Finnish chick were nowhere to be seen, suggesting that a two-person tour of some low-lit and discrete corner of the boat might be under way. A few of the others had staggered away toward other regions of the boat, looking a little green around the gills, though promising to come back once they'd had some air. The view had also disappeared, blotted out by a dense, chewy fog that was getting thicker and thicker and smelled very strongly of the ocean.

I headed indoors—accepting in passing the offer of yet another pint of the strong local IPA, from some suave dude from the Madrid office—and wobbled off down the corridor. Two collisions with the wall en route made me realize I ought to slow the drinking down, and I promised my tomorrow-morning self to at least consider the idea.

When I got inside the gents' I saw the stall door was closed and felt the customary beat of gratitude for the fact that my digestive system decided long ago that one comprehensive defecation per day (early morning, in the comfort of my own home, right after my first coffee and cigarette) is all it needs. As I stood swaying in front of the urinal furthest from the stall (still almost within arm's reach) I glimpsed a pair of shoes planted on the floor within, dark slacks pooled on top, a couple inches of pale, hairy calves.

I coughed as I began meeting my own needs, as is my practice, to let the guy in there know he was temporarily not alone.

Nonetheless, a moment later, there was a quiet but clear straining sound.

I winced—it's bad enough knowing there's some dude nearby voiding ex-food out his ass, without getting auditory updates—and tried to hurry my business.

A moment later I heard another noise from the stall. This was more of a grunt. It was followed rapidly by another, broken in the middle by several panting intakes of breath. And then one more. Long, low and painful-sounding.

"Shit," the guy said, in a low voice. "Ah, fuck."

"You okay in there, pal?"

The words came out without conscious thought. There was silence from the stall, and I realized the guy maybe hadn't heard my warning cough earlier. Awkward.

But then he made a groaning noise again. It was five seconds before it tailed off this time.

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding wretched. "I'm sorry."

I was well-oiled enough to be breezy about the situation, and it was something of a relief to be talking to a fellow American after a couple hours parsing foreign accents. "No problem. I'm just glad I didn't have whatever you did. What was it? An entire bowl of jalapeños?"

"No."

"Hot sauce? Stick to the ones you know, is my advice. Some of those local-brand bad boys will put you in a world of sphincter-pain if you're not used to them. I've been there, trust me. Avoid anything with Ghost Chili in it, for sure."

"Nothing like that. Just..."

There was a sudden and very loud growling sound, evidently from the guy's guts. Then a splashing noise.

And then—wow.

I mean, *holy cow*. One of the worse stenches I'd ever experienced. Maybe *the* worst. There's that saying about how your own farts never smell as other people's, but seriously. This was *bad*.

I abruptly realized I'd finished peeing and there was no reason for me to be there anymore. I hooked myself back into my pants and muttered a "Good luck with that, buddy," farewell while I took the single step from the

urinal to the washbasin—again realizing just how drunk I was, when I managed to bang my shoulder into the clearly visible corner wall. The smell had blossomed further and was so very bad that I considered going rogue and leaving without a hand-wash, but (though I won't spend the ten frickin' minutes some guys will, like they're about to perform heart surgery and have spent the last hour with their hand up a cow) the habit's too deeply ingrained.

I held my breath, did a water-only rinse and grabbed a paper towel. The guy groaned again as I was making a hash of drying my too-wet hands, the paper tearing into damp shreds. There was another growling sound and I flapped off the last remnants, knowing a similar noise had prefigured the smell last time and having no desire to experience the second wave.

Too late. This time the splashing noise was shorter and louder and far more explosive. I had my hand on the handle to the outside door when I heard something else, however. It was quiet, a sound he'd tried his hardest to keep inside—a kind of focused, tearful gasp.

"Shit, dude," I said, stepping back from the door. "You don't sound good at all."

"Sorry," he said, quietly.

"Look, is there someone out there that I should tell... Like, a friend, or something? I could let them know you're having a moment, and will be back out in a while?"

"No," he said, quickly. He sniffed, hard. "I'm fine. I'm just...it feels *really* bad."

"Definitely not a chili-related malfunction?"

"Haven't eaten any in days. And it's not...look, it's not my actual asshole that hurts, okay? It's..."

He broke off, and groaned again.

The second wave of the smell had hit me now, and it was a struggle to speak in a non-strangulated tone. "Is it the Norovirus?" I'd endured that back when it was new and fashionable a decade ago, and it's not a good time.

"I don't think so. I had that a few years ago. It's fast and liquid. And it sucks but it doesn't actually *hurt*."

"This hurts?"

"*Hell* yeah."

I couldn't believe I was having this conversation when there was a beer and convivial company waiting for me nearby, but it would have felt rude to simply walk out. "Though not at the point where stuff, uh, exits?"

"No. Inside. Like there's a fist squeezing your fucking guts. And lets go, but then squeezes again, even harder."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's really not. And it came on super-fast. I was hanging out in the bar, having a blast, and suddenly there's this searing pain. I got here just in time. Look, I'm Carl, by the way. Carl Hammick. From the Madison office."

"Rick Millerson," I said. "Boston."

"Oh, hey. Any update on the RX350i?"

"Still delayed."

"I figured."

"Keep that to yourself until Saturday, though. I'm doing an announcement thing on it."

"Sure. Rather you than me, pal."

"Tell me about it."

I was about to wish him well and get the hell out but it occurred to me that the guy could have touched a bunch of stuff on his way in. I'm never sure how communicable stomach bugs are, but—especially with the presentation to make—this guy's problem was one I really didn't want to have.

I stepped back to the sink and washed my hands properly, using plenty of soap. From now on I'd be making the longer trek to the other bathroom, too. While I dried my hands there was a grunting sound from the stall, and a sharp intake of breath. I rolled my eyes. I'd really had enough of this scene now, especially the smell.

"Another wave coming in?"

"I think so," he said, between gritted teeth. "Holy crap, this feels even fucking worse."

He made a non-verbal sound. This time it was an actual sob, hard, fast. Followed by another.

I was trying to work out what I could say that would be reassuring but not too weird, when I realized my phone was buzzing. I pulled it out and saw Shannon's ID on the screen.

I was torn between not wanted to answer—especially in these circumstance—and knowing I probably should. One of the reasons I

tolerate Shannon's tight-fisted travel booking policy and pay her significantly more than I have to (and in fact stole her from another office, somewhat controversially) is she's the best PA I've ever had, or even heard of. That includes knowing how to deal when I'm out of the office. Reminders pre-set on my phone, remotely updated. Digest email of where I need to be and when, and with whom, and why, delivered to my inbox at 6:30 every morning. If necessary she'll send a brief text to alert me to late-breaking changes, but she won't call unless it's something I'd look dumb for not being right on top of—like some fresh disappointment in the slow-rolling train-wreck that is the fucking RX350i.

The guy in the stall grunted again, harsh and loud. There was a sudden bang on the door to the corridor. I flipped the lock before anybody could come in.

“Busy,” I said, loudly.

Whoever was outside rattled the handle and banged on the door once more, but then seemed to go away. Shannon went away too, so I guess it hadn't been that important after all.

“Thanks, man,” Carl said, between gritted teeth. “Bad enough having you in here. No offense. But I'm not selling fucking tickets for this.”

“I hear you. And look, I'm going to leave you in peace, okay? When I'm gone... Maybe you could bunny hop out of there and lock the outer door? Give you some privacy, right?”

“Sure, if I ever get a chance to get my ass off this...”

He stopped talking suddenly, making a sound as if he'd been punched in the gut, and a moment later I heard that bad stomach-growling noise again. Shorter, but really loud.

“Christ,” I said, reaching once more for the outer door—but my phone started ringing again. It was Shannon, again. If she was pinging me multiple times then I really had to engage. “Look, uh, Carl—I'm actually going to have to take this call, okay?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

“Just try to...”

“Try to what?”

“I dunno. The smell, dude.”

“I can't help it.”

“I get that. But if you can hold it back for a couple minutes that'd be super-cool.”

“I’ll try.” The last word was strangulated, and ended in a gasp.

I hit answer. “Rick?” Shannon said, immediately.

“Well, yeah, Shann, of course it is. This is my phone, right? Kind of caught up in something right now, though.”

“Are you drunk?”

I hoped I’d hidden it better. “Shannon, Christ’s sake, of course not. Well, a little, yes, obviously. Okay, I’m drunk. What’s your point? And why are you calling me?”

“You need to leave.”

“I need to what?”

“Didn’t you *see my email*?”

“Email? No—when?”

“*Over an hour ago.*”

“Shannon, I’m *at the conference*. I’m talking to people. From, all over the place. London, Helsinki, uh, Wisconsin. I can’t be checking my phone every ten minutes.”

“Haven’t you seen the TV?”

“The bar doesn’t have a TV.”

“*There’s no TV?*”

“It’s not that kind of bar.”

“Rick—you need to get on land.”

“I’m *on land*, Shannon—seriously, what the heck?”

“No, you’re on a boat.”

“But it’s *attached* to the land. By...walkway things.”

“It’s in the actual ocean, still, though, right?”

“I guess, *technically*, but...”

“On TV they said to stay away from the ocean. Any part of it. That everybody should *stay away from the ocean.*”

“What are you *talking about?*”

Carl grunted again suddenly, far louder than before. This time the growling was coming up out of his mouth, like a long, rasping belch.

“Oh shit,” he groaned, when it abated. “Oh Jesus fuck.” He sounded confused and desperate.

“Shannon,” I said. “Can you give me a simple, declarative sentence to respond to? Imagine you’re texting me. Try that.”

She said something but I couldn’t hear it because of another sudden barrage of blows on the outer door. It wasn’t the kind of sound you get from

a person requesting entry. It sounded more like someone trying to break in.

“Busy in here,” I shouted. There was a momentary pause, and then the banging sounds started up again, even harder.

“Tell them there’s another restroom down the boat,” Carl said. He sounded very tired. “My head really hurts. I can’t take the banging noise.”

I opened my mouth to do that but the banging suddenly stopped. There was silence.

Then what sounded like a scream.

I stared at the door.

“What...was that?” I’d forgotten I still had the phone pressed to my ear, and Shannon’s voice startled me. It sounded as though she was right there, as if our heads were on pillows alongside each other. Which they never have been, though since my divorce she’s the one woman who’s seemed to give a damn, my mother being down in Florida and also the most foul-tempered and least maternal person I’ve ever met.

“I don’t...know,” I said.

“Was it a *scream*?”

“Kind of, yeah.” She sounded panicky, and I spoke as calmly as I could. ‘Look. *Who* is saying *what* on TV?’

“It’s on all the stations,” she said. “And the Internet. Twitter’s gone insane with it. A few hours ago people posting about odd things happening. Kind of, well, nobody really seems to know. Things going weird, near the coast. And not just in one place—everywhere. Not the lakes. Just the ocean. Something’s wrong with the ocean.”

“But *what*?”

“I don’t *know*,” she said. “A fog coming in.”

“A fog,” I said, remembering how it had been on the smokers’ desk when I left it...what? Ten minutes ago? A dense sea fog. Getting thicker and thicker.

“Right. But then it started to snowball and now they’re saying it’s not the fog after all, or maybe that’s part of it but not the main thing. But nobody *knows*.”

“Stay on the line,” I told her.

“Hell’s going on?” Carl said. His voice sounded weak and strained.

“I have no idea,” I said, flipping over to Twitter on my phone. All my follows and followers are business-related—tech rivals and bloggers and a bunch of “influencers” and “growth hackers” who are super-annoying but I

nonetheless track in case they start trash-talking the company and in particular the fucking RX350i and why it's *still* not on the market. As a result my feed is usually crushingly dull.

One flick with my thumb showed this wasn't the case now.

Nothing tech at all. A mass of retweets from news organizations and randomers, blurry footage of people running, others asking if the country was under terrorist attack—and yes, a consistent message urging people to get away from the coast.

“What are you *doing*?” Shann asked.

“Looking at Twitter. It's a dumpster fire. What the fuck?”

I heard another scream from out in the corridor. This one approached like a siren and went past like one too, as though someone was sprinting down the corridor outside.

The sound suddenly cut off.

The silence afterward seemed so loud that I barely noticed the growling noise from the stall, followed by another explosive release of air and something splashing into the toilet bowl.

“Oh no,” Carl said, very quietly. “That's...oh no.”

“Who's that?” Shannon asked, sounding freaked. “I heard a voice your end.”

“I'm...in the restroom. It's a guy from the Boston office.”

“Carl Hammick?”

“You *know* him?”

“Not in person. But it's my job to know—”

“Whatever. Shann, what *I* need to know is...”

I tailed off. I didn't know what I needed to know. My Twitter feed was still spooling down the screen, absurdly fast, more of the same. I flicked sideways to trending stories and saw identical retweets, the same information—or lack of it—being rotated very quickly.

Then one popped up that said: *Santa Monica to be evacuated?*

My heart was thumping now. It was impossible to believe this was real. But then there was a retweet of something that looked like a genuine news source. The problem with social media is it'll recycle bullshit without anybody stopping to check it has any basis in reality, but then—there it was: a different source saying the same thing.

This source was CNN. And regardless of the 45th president's views on the matter, I consider CNN to be real fucking news.

There was a thudding sound above me, then a heavy crash. I didn't know the boat well enough to know what would be on the next floor but it sounded like some large piece of furniture had been overturned. I hoped it was that, anyway—because if the noise had been caused by the collision of a *body* with something, the person could not have survived.

“Shannon,” I said. “Where are you right now?”

“In the car,” she said. “You're on speaker.”

“Going where?”

“Wait...” She stopped talking, and I caught the faint sound of other voices in the background.

“Are you with someone?”

“No—it's the radio. There's some guy from the army saying they think *definitely* it's the water now.”

“Not a terrorist thing? I saw—”

“No. They bailed on that idea half an hour ago. This isn't terrorists. It's *something in the water.*”

“But what *kind* of thing?”

“They don't *know*. Just *get onto land*, Rick.”

I heard another person run past in the corridor, this time shouting—a deep, tearing, guttural noise. It sounded like a man's voice, and he stopped to hammer on the door of the restroom with a truly terrifying degree of force, before running on. “That may not be a straightforward undertaking. Sounds like things are pretty fucked up out there.”

“Rick—*get off the boat.*”

The smell was truly appalling now. I'd stopped noticing the warning sound of growling from the stall and further splashing sounds. The last couple of pints I'd drunk had come home to roost, too, and I felt muddle-headed, off-kilter, unprepared. *Really* drunk.

So much that it took me a couple of seconds to get my head around the fact my phone was vibrating, again, and work out what that meant. Another incoming call.

The screen said: PETER ???—LONDON

“Hang on, Shann. Don't go away.”

“What are you—”

I muted her and accepted the call. “Pete?”

“Where are you?” Pete said. He sounded terse and clipped and pretty drunk but a lot more together than I felt.

“The john.”

“Which one?”

“The small one you showed me. Near the bar.”

“Is the door locked?”

“Oh yes.”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

“What the hell’s going on? Where are you?”

“Up on top. Of the boat. Came up here with Inka to...doesn’t matter.”

“Is she there with you?”

“Not anymore. I pushed her down the stairs.”

“You...*what?*”

“We left the bar because she was feeling queasy. I assumed it was just jetlag combined with a truly astonishing amount of vodka, and also perhaps she had something else in mind—but no, she genuinely wasn’t feeling well. So I escorted her to the restroom. When she came back out she said she felt better and so we came up on the top deck for some air but then she started behaving *extremely* strangely and...”

“Pete, wait one second. My PA’s on the other line.”

I flipped over and said: “Have you heard anything new?”

“No,” Shannon said. “They’re recycling the same clip.”

“Are you still driving?”

“Yes. And Rick—”

I cut her off and flipped back to Pete. He’d evidently missed what I’d said, and had just kept talking in the meantime. “...blood dripping down my fucking cheek. I had no choice—she *was trying to bite my face off.*”

“Christ,” I said. “Is anybody else up there?”

“No. Hang on, shit. I can smell burning.”

“What kind of burning?”

“The *burning* kind of burning, Rick. I...oh. In the fog...there’s a glow. I think the burning smell’s coming from the shore.”

“Where the walkways are?”

“No. The other shore. Where *the city is.*”

I abruptly remembered there was one thing at least that I could do to improve the situation. I pulled out my cigarettes and lit one.

“You can’t smoke in here,” Carl said, from the stall. His voice sounded weak.

“Seriously? Have you even been *listening?*”

“It’s no-smoking in here.”

“This room smells like I am literally *inside a turd*, Carl. That’s on you. So deal with the fucking cigarette smoke.”

“Who’s that?” Peter said, in my ear.

“Carl. From Boston.”

“I know Carl. But what was that about a smell?”

“He’s... Carl’s experiencing intestinal difficulties.”

“Oh fucking hell. Get out of there,” Peter said, very seriously. “Get the fuck out. Now.”

“You told me to stay *in* here.”

“Yes, but that’s what happened with Inka. Weren’t you *listening?*”

“I missed that part—I flipped across to my PA to check she was okay.”

“Inka’s stomach...it gave out. When we were up here. It growled and then there was a flood of—it was truly disgusting. But then she said “Oh, I feel a lot better now”, and *that’s* when she came at me and tried to bite my ___”

“Carl,” I said. “How’re your guts feeling now?”

The answer came in the shape of a sound in the stall. Not a growl, but an explosive impact of something in water.

“Oh no,” he said. “There’s more blood in it.”

“*More blood?*”

“It’s everywhere.”

I took a cautious step back from the cabin door. From this angle I could see a patch of the floor within the stall. It was liberally splattered with red. I looked up and saw there were splashes of blood all the way to the ceiling too.

“But...I feel better,” Carl said. “A lot better.”

I heard running feet again outside the cabin. More than one set. A distant shout, and broken, high-pitched laughter.

“I think it’s over,” Carl said. There was a strange, dreamy quality to his voice. “Yes. I feel fine.”

I’d lowered the phone but I could hear Pete’s voice from the speaker, still shouting at me to get out, to run.

“Uh, maybe you should stay where you are,” I told Carl. “And I’ll go find a doctor or something.”

“I’m good.”

“There’s *blood all over the place.*”

“That’s okay. Honestly, Rick—it’s all fine.” His voice sounded normal. Strong, confident. “And thanks for being a pal. Is that Peter Stringer you’re talking to? From London?”

Stringer, *that* was it. “Yes.”

“He’s a solid guy. We should go find him—and work out what the hell’s going on out there.”

I heard Carl sliding the latch on the stall door, and mainly I was thinking: *Yeah, that’s an actual plan. Three of us, three guys together—that had to give us a decent chance against...whatever the hell was going on out there. Right?*

But then I saw that while Carl was approaching the door inside the stall, his pants were still down around his ankles. That seemed weird to me.

When he opened the door I semi-recognized him. We’d met before at some event or other. Though not like this. His lower half was naked and awash with red and brown liquids, and his eyes were bleeding down his face.

“I’m hungry,” he said, looking at my throat.

I kicked the stall door back at him as hard as I could.

He was knocked back into the stall, banging his head hard against the tiled wall. He stayed on his feet, however—slip-sliding in the confined space because of all the stuff on the floor, but remaining upright.

I heard Pete’s voice shouting at me to tell him what was going on, and put the phone back to my ear.

“Carl’s...I don’t think he’s okay anymore,” I said.

“Knock him out,” Pete said. “Do whatever it takes. Keep doing it until you’re sure it’s done. I had to kick Inka down the stairs three fucking times before she stayed down.”

I realized Carl was coming at me again and I slammed my foot into the stall door even harder this time. He crashed back down into the narrow space between the toilet and the wall. Started to move again, but sluggishly. As he turned his head I saw that the back of it wasn’t the normal shape. Impact with the wall had broken his skull.

He was still trying to get up, though, reaching out with hands that were trembling and shaking.

“Pete—what the hell are we going to do?”

“We’ve got to get off this boat,” he said.

“*How?*”

“Come find me up top.”

“Can’t you come down here instead?”

“Look, mate, this ship is full of people trying to kill people. I’m up for working together on this but I’d be out of my fucking mind coming back down to where you are.”

“Nice. Seems last year’s team-building weekend was a waste of money, hey.”

“There’s no ‘i’ in team, you twat, and *I* do not want to get *fucking killed*.”

“Wait a second.”

Still keeping an eye on Carl—he’d managed to lever himself up halfway to his feet again, but was still trapped behind the cistern, one eye open, the other closed—I flipped to the other line on my phone. “Shannon?”

“I’m still here,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Carl Hammick is trying to kill me.”

“Because of the delay on the RX350i?”

“No, Shann. Because *he’s lost his fucking mind*.”

“Get out of there. I’ll be as fast as I can.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m coming to get you.”

“You’re...Shannon, it will take *days* to drive here from Boston.”

“You don’t listen to a single word I say, do you?”

“I do, but...”

“If you *had*, you’d have heard me saying earlier in the week that because you were going to be out of town, I’d decided to visit my mother in Las Vegas.”

“You’re in *Vegas*?”

“Not anymore. I’m...oh, gosh.”

“What?”

“Another accident. It’s...god, that’s horrible. There’s dead...and people are... Eurgh. Everyone’s driving like maniacs. Mainly going the other way.”

“But you’re...”

“Coming as fast as I can.”

“But why would you even *do* that?”

“Because I’m your PA, you dick. It’s my job.”

“It’s really *not*, Shannon. And Las Vegas is a very long way from Long Beach. I mean, like, hours and hours.”

“Unless it gets much worse than this I think I can do it in five and I’ve been on the road nearly two hours already and I’m driving as fast as I can. I’m going to hang up now so I can focus on the road, okay? I’ll call back in a while.”

“But what about your mom? Will she be safe?”

“Nobody’s affected in Vegas. It’s a long way from the ocean. As a precaution they’ve made everyone stay indoors, wherever they were when the news broke. My mom’s locked inside the Flamingo with a hundred bucks in change and a long line of margaritas and literally could not be happier. Just get off the boat, Rick.”

And then she was gone.

I turned just in time to see Carl had managed to haul himself to his feet again and was shambling in my direction, grasping hands outstretched toward me.

I braced myself against the wall and kicked him in the chest as hard as I could. I didn’t land my foot squarely, though, and so he spun lop-sidedly away, crashing into the urinal I’d used, slipping and smacking his face really hard into the metal fixture at the top.

The sound this made was bad and the way he crashed onto the ground looked extremely final and I realized with incredulous bafflement both that he’d looked exactly the way they made these things look on television, and also that I’d just killed Carl Hammick from the Wisconsin office.

Except I hadn’t. After maybe three seconds of stillness, his fingers started to twitch, and his shoulders bunched as some impulse deep inside pushed him toward movement again.

I remembered I’d left Peter hanging. I kept a close eye on Carl and flipped to the other line. “You still there?”

“Look, I’ll meet you halfway,” Pete said. “You’re right. I can’t expect you to come all the way up top, and anyway that’s not how we’re going to get off the boat.”

“Deal.”

“I’ll meet you at reception. Where I saw you when you first arrived. That’s where the main walkway is. Be as fast as you can, Rick. I’m not going to wait forever.”

“Understood.”

I ended the call and stowed my phone in my pocket. Carl was pushing himself up from the floor, slowly but irrevocably. I tried to think of something to say but couldn't imagine what it would be, and doubted he'd even understand it any more.

So I put my ear against the cabin door and listened. I could hear noises out there but they seemed distant and I couldn't tell what they were. The one lesson I learned from years of video games as a teenager is when you reach a new level you don't screw around. You get going immediately, before the situation has a chance to get worse.

I opened the door and stuck my head out.

The first thing I noticed was a long splash of blood on the opposite wall of the hallway. It was still dripping. There was another splash of something much darker and brown below it. It smelled bad and was still dripping too.

I glanced left, back toward the bar. Some of the sounds were coming from there. They weren't good sounds, and some of them were to do with the fact the place looked like it was on fire. An orange glow, crackling noises, the smell of smoke.

Nonetheless I started cautiously in that direction, as I recalled there was a lateral sub-corridor that would take me to the outer and much wider walkway, which I figured would be a faster and safer way to the stairs that'd take me down the single flight to the reception level.

I'd barely gone three yards before someone came lurching out of the sub-corridor. A waiter. One I'd been dealing with earlier, in fact—who'd put my Amex by the register so I could run a room tab. The card was still in there but I decided it was going to stay that way. The left side of the barman's face was raw and burned and he was missing an eye and most of one cheek and I could see his teeth through the hole. He was dragging one leg behind as he stumbled toward me, and leaving an unpleasant brown trail, but nonetheless closing in fast.

I swept my foot to hook out his good leg, and as he crashed to the ground I turned and ran back the other way.

The door to the toilets flew open as I got level, smacking me into the wall. Carl came staggering out, still with his pants around his ankles, still intent on getting his hands around my neck.

He managed it, too, but some instinctive memory triggered me to use the single piece of useful advice my mother ever gave me. Actually, it's more of a technique. I grabbed him by both ears and head-butted him on the

bridge of the nose. It's because of the implications of nuggets of maternal wisdom like this that I've never blamed my father for leaving home in the dead of night when I was nine, and never coming back.

Carl collapsed to the ground and I ran.

It was plain sailing down to the open area where the expensive little wine and cosmetics concessions were. As I hurtled toward the grand staircase, however, jumping over the prone body of someone I'd been drinking with earlier, I saw a woman coming up to my level. She was completely naked and liberally splattered with blood and it was clear both that none of it was hers and that she was keen to add to her collection.

She saw me and came running, and I didn't know for sure what language she was screaming in but I thought it was probably German, which would imply the Dusseldorf office. She was fast, and gleeful, and next thing I knew I was smashing backward into a curved glass cabinet that was probably eighty years old and quite valuable.

Thankfully I hit it at an angle and the shattered glass didn't sever anything important but then the woman was straddling me and trying to stuff a thumb deep into each of my eyes.

Her breath smelt awful, the kind of stench Carl had been producing in the toilet, but coming up the other way, out of her mouth. My eyes started to sparkle and meanwhile she was feverishly trying to knee me in the balls so I gathered all the strength I could muster and planted both feet firmly on the ground and thrust upward, trying to buck her off.

It didn't work but for a moment she was off-balance at least and so I twisted sideways instead, managing to roll on top of her. I banged her head down onto the parquet flooring—very hard—and scrabbled to my feet. She was snarling and I could barely see anything because of the stars in my eyes but as she started to get up I sent a swinging kick at her head and managed to catch her in the jaw.

I didn't wait to see her land but sprinted the remaining yards to the stairs, leaping down most of the first flight in one jump. This meant I nearly went sprawling and bounced painfully into the wall on the next return, but thankfully I kept my feet and half-ran and half-fell down the next flight.

As I landed chaotically in the reception area I saw a group of people attacking each other. It was impossible to tell who was trying to kill who. It's possible everybody was trying at once. I also saw Peter, at the reception

desk, repeatedly smacking someone's forehead down onto its polished walnut surface, lifting it up, and bringing it down again.

He saw me coming, whacked the person's head down one final time—there was enough of their face left for me to recognize him as the clerk who'd checked me in when I arrived—and turned to me, panting. His face and shirt were smeared with something brown. “You took your fucking time, mate.”

I sniffed. “Are you covered in shit?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I thought it might help.”

“Again—*why?*”

“When I came down the steps from the top deck I found out Inka was still alive, even though both her legs were broken. She grabbed my ankle and I fell down. We ended up rolling around in her, well, her *shit*, until I could get away from her again. I thought about wiping it off but then I wondered if maybe it'd help, if the smell would make these fucking loonies think I was one of them or something.”

“Does it work?”

“Not even slightly. It was a bad idea.”

“Hell yes.”

As we ran to the walkway Pete dodged over to the souvenir store, undoing his shirt and throwing it to the ground. Grabbed a Queen Mary sweatshirt and pulled it on.

As he turned back, he also picked up a souvenir coffee mug, shaped like one of the ship's funnels.

“Why the hell are you—”

I ducked just in time and the mug reached the target he'd intended—the head of the naked woman from upstairs, who'd come running up behind me. The mug smashed to pieces on her face and she fell like a sack of bricks.

“Dusseldorf?” I asked, as we looked down at her.

“No,” he said. “Warsaw.”

“Oh. Well, thanks anyway.”

“You're welcome. Now let's get the fuck off this boat.”

We ran through the doors and out into the fresh air, along the metal walkway toward the staircase that'd get us down to the parking lot. “Why

are we okay, though? Why isn't this happening to us too?"

"Don't know, don't care," Pete said. "That is a problem for another time, if ever."

"Jesus—look at it back in there."

There were now forty people or more in the reception area—all tearing at each other—with others joining them from above and below. It was hard to tell who were victims and which were attackers, though I did spot the guy from Madrid who'd bought me a pint I never got to drink, and it seemed like he was trying to escape, rather than kill. "Do you think we should try to..."

"Fuck that," I said. "I'm not going in there."

"I'm of like mind," Peter admitted. "But then what the hell *are* we going to do?"

"Get off the boat. Properly. Onto dry land."

"Obviously," he said, "but look." He pointed down toward the dock area. Figures were running back and forth, screaming. Some had weapons. Others were attacking people with their bare hands. "It's no better down there."

"So we find somewhere to hole up."

"For how long? And *then* what?"

"My PA is coming."

"Shannon?"

"How the hell do you know who my PA is?"

"Seriously? Everybody knows you stole her from the Chicago office by doubling her salary. All the other PAs are seriously pissed off about it."

"Okay, well, maybe that wasn't such a bad decision, okay? She's on her way from Vegas right now to pick me up."

"That's an impressive level of dedication."

"This is my point."

"She may not make it here, you know that."

"I do. But I owe it to her to be ready and waiting if she does."

"Definitely." He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out two small bottles, and handed one to me. "Here."

"Hell is it?"

"Jack Daniels," he said. "Stole them off the plane."

"You do good work, Pete."

"Cheers."

We knocked the drinks back in one, threw the bottles away and ran together to the stairwell and pattered down the three flights to ground level, pausing only to simultaneously kick a fat man who tried to throw himself down on us from the flight above, but thankfully missed us and instead landed with a bad-sounding crunch on the concrete landing.

At the bottom we stepped cautiously out into the parking lot. A car was on fire in the corner. In fact, every car I could see was in flames. The air was full of smoke and choked with the smell of burning tires and the sound of distant sirens. A helicopter flew fast and low over our heads but with no intention of stopping—instead heading out over the bay. When it was clear of land a soldier stuck a huge machine gun out of the side door and started firing down into the water.

“That doesn’t seem like a positive development,” Peter said.

“No. You figure something even worse is fixing to come out of the ocean?”

“Looks that way. Christ.”

“We’ve got to get farther from the ocean—and fast. Over the causeway and onto the mainland.”

“But how’s Shannon going to know where to come?”

“She knows where the conference was. She’ll have established the routes in and out. Knowing Shannon, she’ll text me a map with estimated walking/running/fleeing times under post-apocalyptic conditions—and knowing her, they’ll be correct.”

We headed across the parking lot toward the access road to the bridge back to the mainland. We both ran in a relaxed mode, keeping it loose, not knowing how far we were going to have to go. Pete clocked my style and nodded approvingly. “You run?”

“Of course,” I said. “Though only a 5k or so, couple-three times a week.”

“Me too. I hope that’ll be enough.”

“You’ll be fine. Your form’s pretty good. You still stink of shit, though.”

“*Everybody* does, Rick. I never realized the end times would smell this bad.”

“And it’s only going to get worse.”

As we ran onto the bridge we watched a group of four women in the middle, as they took each other’s hands, stepped up onto the ledge, and threw themselves silently into the bay.

“I fear you’re right. But there’s one thing at least.”

“What’s that?” I heard shouting behind and glanced back to see that a group of men were staggering out of the parking lot. Arms outstretched. Coming for us.

Peter saw them too, and picked up the pace. “Nobody’s going to give a damn anymore about the RX350i being late.”

Then both of us were laughing as we ran faster and faster, over the bridge and toward a city on fire.