

Chapter 7 – Under the Waters

New York was growing, even across the Hudson. The only thing that crossing the river effectively did was eradicate the precocious need for art, granite or marble, but it did nothing to thin the throngs that crawled through the cities looking for a better life. Jersey City was more the essentials; an amalgam of factories, diners, markets, and gas stations.

A gas station just up from the new Holland Tunnel had gone from out of the way to a major hub almost overnight as the new thoroughfare opened. The glass walls looked out on the almost never ending stream of cars pulling up to the pumps. Inside the place was packed with snacks, sodas, oil, sunglasses, and the truly useless. Denny was tired, he hadn't slept since leaving Chicago, hadn't showered or changed his clothes. He just wanted to get to Shakes and the Fat Lady and get out; the east coast made his skin crawl.

Denny could tell that the attendant behind the counter was going to try and chat him up. He had the look of a guy who wasn't happy unless he was making noise. That was the kind of guy Denny really hated.

"Bit of a sweet tooth you have there." The attendant chirruped as Denny laid his hodge-podge collection of candies and chocolates on the counter.

"Helps me stay awake on these long drives," Denny answered dully, hoping that he would convince the kid to keep quiet. He didn't hold out a lot of hope for that, though.

"Long drive, you sound like you just got off the boat." The kid went on happily. He had a way of figuring that people who didn't talk much just needed the right encouragement or a friendly smile to get them started.

"I'm from out of Chicago." Denny instantly regretted saying a thing. He should have let the teen think whatever he wanted instead of getting dragged into a talk.

"No kidding!" The attendant was hardly paying attention to what he was doing, just staring at Denny and trying to look like he knew just what he was talking about. "From what I hear it's a nasty business up there. That Capone and Bugs Moran should just do us all a favor and kill each other, am I right?" He didn't laugh; he tried hard to look serious, mimicking his old man no doubt.

"You're not shy are you?" Denny had heard plenty of people talk about how far gone Chicago was, but always in whispered conversations with good friends, not random strangers from out of town.

"The whole lot of those hoods and mooks should just drop dead. If I ever meet one I know just what I'll do."

"What would you do?" Denny asked. He didn't like it when people talked about him as if he was an insect that needed to be squashed or filth scraped from a shoe. All his life he'd heard how worthless he was, and all his life he'd wanted to put a stop to all that talk.

"I'd give them one right between the eyes."

In one swift, fluid motion Denny drew his gun, planted it between the kid's eyes and cocked back the hammer. "Just like this?" He didn't wait for an answer. He pulled the trigger

and watched as the back of the attendant's head splattered against the wall and the useless body tumbled to the ground. Holstering the gun at his shoulder and picking up his snacks, Denny dropped his money on the counter. People might have a dour expectation of those in his profession, but it was no reason to live up to it by stealing from a dead man.

Heading across the parking lot, Denny moved his eyes but not his head. The next person heading into the store was still a few feet out; he had plenty of time to make it to his car. The Victoria started up smooth and he pulled out just as the screams began to issue from the station. He was merging with traffic by the time the unfortunate souls came running out. The car handled better than any Denny had driven before.

Driving into the Holland Tunnel there was a moment of near terror at plunging down underneath the Hudson. The long monotonous cement walls streamed past, the lights flashing overhead rhythmically, but he never forgot about the tons of water rushing past over his head.

"You realize we're going under the river right now?" Denny made a stab at conversation, but he knew it was a feeble one.

The silence was soothing at first and yet the sound of the clerk's voice kept bouncing around his head. The guy had just wanted to talk. Maybe he was being too taciturn, maybe his company just wanted to talk too, and he hadn't said a word since they'd left Ohio.

"I do regret this, you know." Denny even surprised himself when he said that.

In answer there was a terrified whimper from the backseat. A glance in the rearview mirror gave Denny a vision of a woman, her face stained with tears and running make-up. She couldn't make herself look at Denny, even at his back. She looked to her lap and absently ran her hand through her husband's hair, avoiding the bullet hole where Denny had shot him. When Denny had asked for the car, the man had tried to put up a fight, then he'd tried to protect his wife, then Denny had grown tired of messing with him. The man hadn't known that Denny didn't kill women, but he couldn't leave her back in Ohio to call down the law when stealth and speed were so essential.

"It's really a nice car—how much this set you back?" Denny tried. It was odd, normally he craved quiet and people kept yacking, now he was trying to strike up a conversation and he couldn't drag a mumble out.

The car lurched up the incline and into the sunlight and they were surrounded on all sides by the brick and mortar of New York, the sidewalks clogged with pedestrians, street vendors selling their wares, and a flurry of smells both nauseating and tempting. Denny had always known that it would be difficult to track a man in this bizarre place, but the city was almost overwhelming even to him.

Bugs Moran wouldn't care if he killed half the island as long as he caught Shakes and brought home the Fat Lady. He hoped that it wouldn't come to that, but looking around he wasn't sure what it would take.