



THE SOILED DOVE OF SHALLOW HOLLOW

by Sean McCluskey

Sean McCluskey is a federal agent on a fugitive task force in New York and appeared briefly on a reality show about it, experiences that convinced him, he tells us, that he much prefers fictional to real crime!

The problem I have in bars is my mouth—booze goes in, words come out. It was no different that night in Jimmy Hat’s Whitefish Grill on Tybee Island, Georgia. And the pool table didn’t help.

Because I was winning, schooling some bikers in the art of billiards. And the thrill of victory makes me loquacious. I regaled them—and the nearby patrons—with the tale of my latest investigation, which, in my impending memoirs, will be immortalized as “The Mystery of the Missing Maltipoo.” They thrilled to my prowess, tracking down and rescuing that nice old lady’s beloved pet from a dogfighting ring, along with a dozen other pups.

I also talked about a murder I’d once solved after the police gave up, but I’m not as proud of that one. Too easy.

About half-past ten, I collected my winnings and retired to the bar for a cocktail. As I sipped, a feller sat next to me. Tall, skinny, and pale, with a beak nose instead of a chin. He wore a Jimmy Hat’s baseball cap over dark glasses and a baggy polo shirt with some complicated logo on it. I’d seen him lurking around the billiards table.

“Was that story you told true?” he asked, his accent from someplace north of Tybee Island. Boston, I figured.

“The dog may have been more Shih Tzu than Maltipoo.”

“Not that. The murder case. Finding the real killer. Getting that guy out of jail.”

“Every word, save the occasional dramatic flourish.”

“You’re a private detective?”

“Nope. Just sort of stumble into things.”

“I’ve never met anybody who just stumbled into a murder investigation.”

“The investigation was over. The cops reckoned they had the real killer. But his niece was convincing, so I poked around. Figured I was on the right track

when people started beating me up.”

“You still do stuff like that?”

“Depends.” I set down my drink. “On who’s asking, mostly.”

He stuck out a hand. “Jody McDounagh.”

“Shane Caine.” His hand was soft, not leathery like my grizzled mitt. “Folks call me Cutter.”

“Why? You cut people?”

“Not even in lines. It’s ’cause of the rigging style on my sailboat.”

“I’m asking because I need somebody good at finding stuff out. Somebody who knows the area.”

“I’m not from around here.”

“I thought, with the accent . . .”

“Mine’s Alabama, not Georgia.”

“Oh. Well, good at finding stuff, then.”

“Your dog’s missing?”

“I’ve been robbed.”

“There’re these fellas called the police.”

“It’s not something the police can help with.”

“When the dealer takes your money and doesn’t come back with any dope, lad, chalk it up as a life lesson and move on.”

“I look like a junkie to you, bro? I was robbed. And assaulted.” He yanked off his glasses, revealing a fresh black eye.

“Cops can’t handle that?”

“It’s a long story. Look, I can pay you.” He unclipped his watch, a heavy chunk of silvery metal, and slid it over. “That’s a TAG Heuer. It’s worth two grand, easy.”

I didn’t touch it. “Somebody punched you and stole everything but that?”

“I didn’t have it on me at the time.” He patted his laptop bag. “It was in here, locked in my car.”

The watch was a fancy thing, face full of dials on a thick steel band. Damned nice. “They stole something from you worth more’n this?”

“Lots more. Like I said, long story.”

“If I’m supposed to follow you someplace dark to hear it, I warn you that the most expensive thing I currently possess is this drink.” I sipped. “And its value is rapidly decreasing.”

“I’m not looking to rob you. We can sit right here. Just listen, for two minutes.” He raised a hand to the bartender. “Another for my friend here. And a Brunhuber for me.”

I picked up the watch. The back was engraved. I squinted in the dim barlight. *Jody, all my love. Forever, Kris.*

Our drinks arrived, his beer and my salty dog. McDounagh pulled some bills from his pocket and dropped a twenty on the bar.

I nodded at his cash. “Who robbed you? Helen Keller or Ray Charles?”

“This was out in my bag too. Most of my cash got stolen.”

I held up the watch. “Kris okay with you giving this away?”

“She’ll understand. Once you hear, so will you.”

I raised my glass. “Regale me.”

“All last week, I was at a tech conference on Hilton Head. After five days of start-up guys talking *synergy* and *disruption*, I had to get out. I drove down

here, to see the real South.”

Jimmy Hat’s was a regional chain of beachside bars, about as authentically Southern as a Cracker Barrel. But what do Yankees know?

“I was in here last night, around midnight,” he continued. “There was this girl sitting by herself. Not beautiful, but cute. Different from the other women. No tats, younger, not on the prowl.”

I thought his assessment uncharitable. The biker gals were tattooed, but the artwork was lovely. Some women down the bar were enjoying a girls’ night out, but there wasn’t much prowling from any of them, sadly. “So you bought her a drink? Told her a two-minute story?”

“Something like that. She told me her name was Dove.”

“Like the soap? Or the ice-cream bar?”

“I assumed it was a nickname,” he said. “Cutter.”

I raised my glass. “*Touché*.”

“She said she was in from Savannah, visiting family. I talked about the conference, and she had lots of good questions. Very savvy. Before I knew it, it was last call. She suggested we go someplace. She wanted to hear more about what I do.”

“What do you do?”

“I work for a software-design company called Incipient Paradigm, in San Francisco. My team does n-space algorithmic data vectoring.”

“Wow. Can’t blame a gal for wanting to hear more about that.”

“Point is, we were hitting it off. We went over to the Cove Harbor House.”

A beachfront hotel, down towards the Tybee Island Marina. Damned fancy. “That’s where you’re staying?”

“She is. Was, anyway.”

“So you went to her room and, uh, vectored some algorithms?”

“Yeah, things led where they led. Everything was going great. And then . . .” He took a long pull off his beer.

“Let me take a swing,” I said. “Door busts open and there’s her husband, looking none too thrilled. Words are exchanged, violence ensues. That encompass it?”

“Her fiancé,” said McDounagh. “But good guess. Guy looked like a red-headed gorilla. Bigger than you, even. *Dove, how could you?*” he said. *‘I’m out looking for work, and this is what you do?’*”

“Looking for work?”

“That’s what he said. She was yelling, he was yelling, and I just wanted to get the hell out of there. I grabbed my pants and headed for the door.”

I pointed my glass at his eye. “That’s when he remodeled your front end?”

“That’s when the gun came out.”

“Gun?”

“Some little Saturday Night Special. I don’t know much about them. He pointed it at her, and I jumped in front.”

“Damned heroic.” I tapped my glass to his bottle.

“For all the good it did.” He touched his eye. “I grabbed the gun and started swinging. He dropped it, but when I tried to pick it up, he nailed me with a sucker punch. He was pretty big, and I was pretty drunk. When I woke up, they were gone. So was my wallet. He must’ve snatched it. Had a couple grand in there, and my credit cards.”

“What then?”

“I got the hell out of there.”

“You talk to anybody at the hotel? Go to a doctor?”

“Couldn’t. They’d take one look at my face and call the police.”

“Yeah, about that. Why no cops?” I held up the watch again. “Why’re you offering this to some drunken braggart in a bar instead?”

He sighed. “My work ID was in my wallet.”

“So?”

“I can’t report it stolen.”

“Why not?”

He took another sip. “Incipient Paradigm is on the leading edge of predictive information processing. Anything with variable outcomes, they’ll be able to forecast. Elections, stock markets, the fifth at Belmont . . . anything. With ninety percent-plus accuracy.”

“I’m a coin flipper, myself. But what’s that got to do with the price of Scotch in Scotland?”

“The research is potentially worth billions, which means Incipient Paradigm is security conscious to an insane degree. Having an ID card stolen like that is a firing offense.” He finished his beer in one long gulp. “This is the best job I’ve ever had. I can’t lose it. Not over this.”

“You’d rather give that gun-toting gorilla another chance to knock you out? Or worse?”

“I have to get that card back, without the company knowing. I don’t care about the guy going to jail, and he can keep the money. Hell, if I’d found him tonight, I’d have given him that watch for it. I just need to find him.”

“That’s why you’re here? Looking for her?”

“I’ve looked everywhere. Here, the Cove Harbor House, every other hotel on the island. Driving around, hoping to see them. I don’t know what else to do. I need that card before work tomorrow.”

“Can’t you call in sick?”

He patted his bag. “I work remotely. I have to log on to the company network first thing Monday. The only way to do it is by inserting that card into this computer.”

“Maybe you should’ve kept that card locked up in your car with everything else.”

“Yeah, thanks, bro. Hindsight’s twenty-twenty. Like I said, I was pretty wasted last night. Look, I’m begging you. If I don’t have that card by eight A.M., I’m screwed.”

According to the TAG Heuer, there were less than ninety minutes left in Sunday, which gave McDounagh nine hours and change. It also said his two minutes were up. I finished my drink.

“Well, here’s some good news,” I said. “You didn’t get robbed.”

“I was there, bro. I’m pretty sure I did.”

I shook my head. “You got badgered.”

“I got what?”

“It’s called the badger game. Real old scam. The hooker finds a stranger in a bar, a feller who looks like he—”

“You’re saying she’s a *hooker*?”

A few heads turned from the hen party down the bar. I raised a hand. “None

of y'all, ladies." I turned back. "Yeah. Figured that was obvious."

"Obvious how?"

"No offense, lad, but . . ." I motioned towards the bar mirror, where his computer-geek physique was contrasted with my own rough-hewn masculinity, if I may be indulged some vanity. "Do attractive young women routinely flock to you?"

"I do all right." His tone told otherwise.

"I'll play along. But she also said she was visiting family. Why's she staying in a hotel? Even if her relatives don't have a guest room, Savannah's twenty minutes away."

"Maybe she was tired, and didn't want to drive home. And maybe she didn't want to mention her fiancé."

"Yeah, about him. If she's cheating on him, why'd she take you to the hotel room where they're both staying?"

"Maybe . . . she thought he'd be gone longer. Looking for a job." His tone was wavering.

"If her man's out of work, why're they staying at the Cove Harbor House? Place is probably getting two hundred dollars a night, even this late in the season. And it was after last call, you said. What job was he looking for at two A.M.? Grave robber?"

He narrowed his eyes and gave it a good think. Really fired up that software engineer brain. "Okay, I'll bite. What's this 'badger game'?"

"The hooker spots a prosperous-looking feller, entices him with her wiles, and lures him into a compromising position. Then the husband, brother, or fiancé shows up hollering, demanding cash or valuables to make it all go away."

He thought some more, wanting to poke holes in my theory. I decided to help, because there was a big one.

"The part that confuses me," I said, "is the gun."

"I thought everybody packed heat down here."

"The badger game's a nonviolent affair. It relies on the victim's shame and guilt, not threats. They had no way of knowing you wouldn't go to the police, so it was foolish to point a gun if they weren't willing to use it. But if they were willing, why leave a witness?"

"Somebody would've heard the shot."

"Tiny gun, you said. Turn up the TV, wrap the pistol in a pillow, and nobody hears a thing."

"Jesus."

"The gun doesn't fit," I mused. "That's curious."

One of the bikers from the pool table swaggered over and leaned a tattooed forearm on the bar. "Yo, Cutter," she said. "You drunk enough yet to let us win our gas money back?"

"Sorry, darlin'," I said, showing her my new watch. "I'm with a client."

* * *

The obvious starting place was the scene of the crime, so McDounagh and I set off for the Cove Harbor House. Bar noise faded behind us in the warm, salt-scented night.

"I already checked," McDounagh said. "The room we were in was empty."

"Thought you didn't talk to the staff."

"I looked through the patio doors this morning. It's on the ground floor, around back. The curtains are open, and it's all made up. I called the desk from a pay phone and asked for Dove, but they said there was nobody in the place by that name. Asked them to connect me to the room, but the clerk said it's been empty all weekend."

"That didn't strike you as suspicious?"

"I never saw the front door, so I couldn't give the clerk the room number. I just said it was on the south end, ground floor rear. Maybe they checked the wrong one."

"Never saw the door? How drunk were you?"

"We went in through the patio."

"So for all you know, she and her man picked an empty room, jimmied the slider, and lured you in. Leaving no trail whatsoever."

He sighed. "That's possible."

"Well, lucky for you, the badger game's tough to pull off without a staffer on board. Usually the night clerk, who can keep the room empty, handle noise complaints, and get the maid to clean up after. That's who to start with."

"We can't talk to the staff. They'll call the cops."

"We aren't talking to anybody. I am."

The Cove Harbor House glowed with soft, warm light. Whitewashed gravel crunched under his loafers and my sandals as we approached the lobby doors.

"What's Dove look like?" I asked.

"Tiny. About five feet tall, thin, very pale. Hair so blond it's almost white, and kind of feathery. Very retro."

"Sounds lovely," I said. "Give me some money."

He stopped. "I gave you my watch. I thought we had a deal."

"The cash is just for show. It'll all be coming back."

He pulled out his roll. "How much?"

"Couple hundred oughta do."

"Couple hundred's all I have left."

"Work's out perfect, then. If I'm right, Dove and her man are attracted to easy money. We need to put some bait in the water to catch our fish."

He handed me the cash. "I'm trusting you, bro."

"You also trusted Dove." I stuffed the bills into my pocket. "But let's not dwell on the past."

He actually chuckled. "Guess I'm a sucker for a pretty face."

"Stop, I'm blushing. Wait here."

I strolled into the lobby. It was all varnished wood and gleaming brass, a style some landlubber no doubt thought nautical. There was a young feller behind the front desk, sporting artfully tousled hair, a suntan, and a tight polo shirt to show off his muscles. The nametag perched on one pectoral slab said *Randy*.

"Evening, sir," he said. "Checking in?" If I looked out of place, he was professional enough not to show it. I wore a guayabera shirt and newish khaki shorts, which for me was a tuxedo. My hair and beard were long, but not quite unkempt. A girlfriend had once said I looked like Jesus Christ if he were a Jimmy Buffet fan. Blasphemous, but accurate.

"Hello, lad," I said. "I was just over at Jimmy Hat's, talking to that sweet bartender. Redhead, stacked, wedding ring? She suggested I amble over here

and speak to the cutie—her word—at the front desk. Said you could maybe introduce me to Dove.”

The moment of truth. I’ve never been to a tourist town where the bartenders and the hotel staff weren’t in cahoots with the local ladies of the evening, but there was a first time for everything. If I was wrong, the next thing I’d get from Randy would be a blank look.

Randy smiled. “I do like bringing people together, sir.”

“I can make it worth your time.” I hauled out some of McDounagh’s money and fanned five twenties like a poker hand. “I’m awfully lonely.”

Randy’s smile widened. He reached for the cash, but I drew it back. I was portraying a horndog, not a moron. He nodded and picked up the desk phone. Cradled the receiver to his ear, touched a single button, and sat back.

“It’s Randy,” he said. “I have a gentleman who’d like to meet Dove.” He listened, and his waxed brows creased into a frown. “They did? When?” Listened some more. “Okay, hold on.”

Randy covered the mouthpiece with his hand. “Sir, Dove is temporarily unavailable, but there are other friendly girls nearby.”

I drew more twenties from my pocket. “I’ve heard good things about Dove.”

“It’s not the money, sir. She’s just not around.”

I pocketed the bills with a sigh. “Perhaps it’s the Lord’s will, guiding my feet from this sinful path.” I turned towards the door. “Thanks anyway, Randy. Have a good night.”

“Sir, I know a lot of really nice girls,” he called, as the door shut behind me.

McDounagh was where I’d left him, pacing. “What happened?”

“Good news—you were definitely badgered.”

“How’s that good news?”

“Because it means that clerk knew how to get hold of her. Has her on speed dial, right on his desk phone.”

“He called her?”

“Tried to. Whoever picked up told him she was ‘temporarily unavailable.’”

He looked at his wrist, where his watch used to be. “How long?”

“Longer’n we want to wait. We’ve only got until tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yeah,” McDounagh said. “About that.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“There’s a notice printed on the card. *Substantial reward if found. No questions asked.* With a toll-free number.”

“So it may already be too late.”

“I probably would’ve heard from corporate security if they’d called. But it could happen any time.”

“A ticking clock,” I said. “We’ll need to get aggressive, then.” I strode out to the sidewalk, where a molded plastic newspaper box labeled *Tybee Tymes* sat beneath a streetlight. I opened the unlocked box. As usual, it was full.

“We’re going to aggressively read the newspaper?” McDounagh asked.

“It’s not a real newspaper,” I hauled out the whole stack. “Just ads and classifieds.”

“You think the hooker’s got a classified ad?”

“Not that kinda paper.” I carried the bundle down the path, around the side of the building. I dropped it on the gravel and dug into my pocket for my lighter.

“What’re you doing?” McDounagh asked.

I flicked open my lighter and sparked it up. I’ve never smoked—not tobacco, anyway. But the Zippo, a winged parachute embossed on it, had been a gift from my sainted mother when I’d graduated Ranger selection. I touched flame to newspaper.

“What the hell, man?” McDounagh asked as the bundle flared.

“Count to thirty, then holler ‘Fire.’ Don’t stop till you see lights going on in the windows. Afterwards, take off. I’ll meet you at Jimmy Hat’s.”

I ran off around back of the hotel, stopping short of the lobby’s rear entrance. I crouched behind an azalea shrub and watched the TAG Heuer slice off half a minute.

“There’s a fire!” McDounagh screeched from around the corner. “Help! Help!”

Very dramatic—lad coulda been an actor. I peeked into the lobby and saw Randy jump up.

“Fire!” wailed McDounagh. “It’s out of control!” Apparently, Randy appreciated his performance too. He ran for the front door, snatching a fire extinguisher off the wall as he passed. Damned heroic.

I trotted inside, leaned over the counter, lifted the phone’s receiver, and tapped the same button Randy had. A phone number appeared on the little screen, and I committed it to memory.

Someone picked up on the first ring, as I was replacing the handset. “Chimney Creek,” growled a male voice, with a molasses-thick Georgia accent. “How—” I hung up.

Chimney Creek? That’d make things easier. My plan had been to call a friendly detective from that aforementioned murder case and ask her to reverse-trace the number Randy had called. But Chimney Creek was where I’d been headed anyway. I skedadddled out the back.

* * *

“What the hell’s Chimney Creek?” McDounagh asked.

“The Chimney Creek Marina,” I said, racking his car’s seat back for leg room. “Go out to Estill Hammock Road, turn left, and take it to the end.”

He guided his Kia rental out of Jimmy Hat’s parking lot. “Why would Dove be at the marina?”

“No idea. Maybe she works there. Maybe the fella who answered the phone’s just a middleman. Randy calls him, and he calls her on a throwaway cell phone or something. Smart, actually. Makes her harder to find.”

“Maybe the guy who answered was the fiancé.”

“Nope.”

“How do you know?”

“Trust me, lad. I do this for a living. Sort of.”

We rolled through the gate at the Chimney Creek Marina. It was smaller than the Tybee Island Marina by the hotel, and catered to a seedier clientele: cut-rate charters, unaccredited JetSki rentals, and boat tramps like myself. There was an end-of-summer party going on down at the docks, accompanied by the twang and thump of some country/hip-hop hybrid.

McDounagh parked at the clapboard clubhouse. Bare-breasted mermaid figureheads on every corner exuded the sophistication of nautical pursuits. The number from Randy’s speed dial was emblazoned on the sign.

“What’s the plan?” McDounagh asked. “Start another fire?”

“We’ll swing by *Wayward*.”

“Where?”

“My boat. To pick up my secret weapon.”

“Which is?”

“Jolly Juice.”

* * *

“Jolly Juice?” asked “Cranky” Jack Shaftoe, in the same whiskey-ravaged growl I’d heard on the phone at the Cove Harbor House. He peered at the mason jar of clear liquid I’d set on his desk, in the cluttered bird’s nest of his office. “What is it? Everclear?”

I nodded. “Flavored with dissolved Jolly Ranchers. This one’s peach, which they discontinued a few years back. I figured you’d like it especially.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re from Georgia.”

He busted into a rheumy cackle. “Well, the South must rise again!”

Cranky Jack was the night-shift dockmaster at the Chimney Creek Marina. He resembled an otter: compact, whiskery, and sly. His grimy tee had a pack of Bronson cigarets rolled in a sleeve, the better to show off a globe-and-anchor tattoo on his shoulder. I knew him from the handful of times I’d tied up there. Jack dealt in stolen parts, insurance fraud, and crappy weed. Accessory to prostitution would not be a great leap for him.

Jack excavated drinkware from the detritus on his desk. I poured a generous draft into his, a beer stein that exhorted *Grab Some Crab!* Mine was a shark-shaped coffee mug that I filled to the gills. We tapped them, fin to claw, and drank.

“So, what you want?” Jack asked, knowing I hadn’t dropped by to share an exciting development in grain alcohol.

“I’m lonely, Jack. And Randy at the Cove Harbor House said you could help with that.”

He guffawed. “That boy’s the peter-puffer. Not me.”

“He said you could set me up with Dove.”

He took a long swig. “Why’s he telling folks that?”

“He didn’t tell folks, Jack. He told me. He knows you and I are friends.” I pulled some of McDounagh’s cash from my pocket. “And he appreciates my generous nature.”

He narrowed already tiny eyes. “Why you looking for her?”

“Why’s a man generally look for a woman?”

“Lotsa gals around here.” Jack nodded towards the window, where the sound of the dock party hammered the glass. “Right down there, shakin’ their asses. Why you looking for *her*?”

I nodded, surrendering to his country-boy cleverness. “She stole something.”

“Hookers steal. Sure as the sun sets and the moon shines.” Jack took another long pull. I leaned in and topped it off.

“She took my lighter,” I said.

Jack stopped, mug halfway to his lips. “That Ranger one? From your ma?”

“Last night, at Jimmy Hat’s. I lit her cigaret and set my lighter down.” I affected a sheepish grin. “Then I exchanged pleasantries with another young

lady, maybe a bit more pleasant than Dove liked. When I turned back, she and my lighter had left.”

“Sum’bitch,” said Cranky Jack. I’d lit one of his coffin nails for him when we first met, and the emblem on my lighter had sparked a conversation, him talking about his war and me about mine.

“It may have been inadvertent on her part,” I said.

Jack shook his head. “She’s a thief. Her and Mickey both.”

Mickey was McDounagh’s dancing partner, I assumed. “I don’t want to involve the police. The lighter’s only valuable to me.” I set some money on Jack’s desk. “I’m offering her a reward for its return. And to anyone who can point me in the right direction.”

“They live on Mickey’s boat,” said Jack. “It’s an old Corsair thirty-one he says he bought with lawsuit money, from when he got hurt at the GM plant in Tennessee. Showed up in it one day, him and her, looking for work.” He took another big gulp of Jolly Juice. “That’s where he turns her out of too.”

“Boyfriend and pimp. Convenient.”

“He’s a fool. Pretty gal like that. He’s a good mechanic, so I keep him on, but it’s no way for a man to act.”

His disgust, I noted, didn’t stop Jack from relaying phone calls to them, probably for a cut. But I didn’t want to spoil our pleasant chat. “Randy told me they’d left. Seemed surprised by it.”

“This was gonna be a big weekend for ’em. Mickey knew about the end-of-summer party. Always some tourist looking to spend time and money on her.”

I’d figured that, which was why I’d set McDounagh on my sloop with a pair of binoculars, to keep watch for them. “Why’d they light out?”

“When Dove finds a real rich-looking mark, he gets something extra.” He cackled again. “Lucky you didn’t get badgered, son.”

“I’ve led a charmed life.” I sipped from the great white’s mouth.

“Anyway, I think that’s what happened last night.”

“Somebody got badgered?”

“Must’ve. Usually after a big score they take a couple days off, in case somebody calls the sheriff.”

“Where do they go?”

Jack leaned back in his battered chair. Took another sip. Looked out the window, then looked at the money. I dropped two more twenties onto the pile and waited.

“Your ma gave you that lighter?” Jack asked.

“Yep.”

“Ain’t right, her taking that.”

“Nope.”

We drank.

“They’ve gone down to Shallow Hollow,” said Jack.

* * *

Shallow Hollow Marina, the online guidebook read. *1 Foxtrot Trail, Shallow Hollow, GA*. Thirty-three reviewers on the Sea Board website had rated it 1.7 anchors out of a possible 5. Of the listed amenities, things like food and lodging, the only boxes checked for Shallow Hollow were Fuel, Alcohol, and Trash.

We took McDounagh’s Kia, speeding south on Interstate 95. I’d suggested taking *Wayward*, but he’d said it was faster to drive. That was true, but also a

problem. I'd been to insular little places like Shallow Hollow before. The moment his foreign car with out-of-state plates rolled in, word would pass to Mickey and Dove. The best way to sneak into a marina, I'd told him, is on a boat. But he was understandably in a hurry, and he was the client.

About halfway, we stopped at a rest area for bathroom breaks and vending-machine coffee. I made an offer to drive the rest of the way, which McDounagh accepted. He'd had a long day, and the stress looked like it was wearing him pretty thin. His polo shirt and khakis hung off him, like he'd somehow lost ten pounds since we met.

"So why'd you join the army?" he asked as he handed me the keys. "I saw that Ranger badge on your lighter."

"Good eye. My daddy was in the navy. Didn't like him, so I figured I wouldn't like it. And I didn't want to dress like Donald Duck." I clicked the fob to open the car doors.

"*Be All That You Can Be*," he quoted, settling into the passenger seat.

"Apparently all I could be was a feller standing in a desert. Got to missing the water. I grew up in Gulf Shores, right by the beach." I fired up the Kia, its engine noise a polite Korean purr. "After I did my twenty, I bought a boat and pushed off. Mostly the Gulf, the Keys, and the Bahamas, but I've been to Nova Scotia once or twice."

"You just sail around?"

I shrugged. "Beats hitchhiking."

"What do you do for money?"

"Military pension and frugal living." I held up the watch. "Plus the occasional odd job."

He shook his head. "I couldn't live like that." He glanced at the dashboard clock again, like he'd been doing the whole trip.

"Don't fret about the time," I said. "If they were going to call the reward number, they would've by now. I doubt they'll get a sudden notion to do it at one-oh-one A.M."

"Maybe they didn't even find the card," McDounagh said. "It was kind of tucked away in my wallet."

Maybe. Or maybe they'd yanked the cash and tossed the wallet. A trash can near the hotel, the weeds beside Estill Hammock Road, or the waters somewhere between Chimney Creek and Shallow Hollow. But it was too pretty a night to spoil with pessimism.

"We'll know soon enough," I said.

* * *

I parked at the foot of Foxtrot Trail, by a Baptist church with a foreclosed sign out front. If they couldn't sell Jesus in Georgia, Shallow Hollow had fallen upon hard times indeed. We walked about half a mile down a narrow strip of crumbling asphalt, past tiny houses and rusting trailers. Hopefully far enough away to be missed by the dockside grapevine.

The open gates of the Shallow Hollow Marina emerged from the marshy haze. No fancy clubhouse or end-of-summer party here. The place didn't look like it had been built, so much as just washed ashore. Ramshackle pilings, festooned with tires, held swaybacked piers above the oily murk. Mosquito-clouded sodium-vapor lights gave the air a jaundiced tint.

I headed down the wharf, McDounagh trailing. There were a handful of

boats tied up. A Bayliner, a Glastron, and a boxy Bennington pontoon job, with jet skis and flat-bottom skiffs wedged between.

Down the far end, a shape resolved in the gloom. Long and rectangular, like a big shoebox tossed onto the water. My keen seaman's eye pegged it for a Corsair 31. Also, I'd Googled a picture of one when we'd searched for the marina online. *Kool Breez* was painted across the flying bridge, in blue letters with snowflakes.

"I reckon that's it," I whispered.

McDounagh eased up beside me. "They must be asleep. Right?"

It was a hot, wet night, but all the windows were shut, curtains drawn. I heard the hum of an air conditioner from the boat's rear, where the master stateroom would probably be. I pointed. "Back there, most likely."

"I guess there's one way to find out." McDounagh strode ahead and stepped onto the boat's deck, to the forward hatch. I followed, slower. He took hold of the latch and turned it.

"It's unlocked," he whispered over his shoulder.

"Mickey's got a gun," I whispered back.

"No, he doesn't. It was in the room, under the bed where I kicked it. I saw it when I woke up."

"You didn't mention that before."

"Slipped my mind, I guess. Come on. Let's get this over with." He opened the hatch and stepped inside.

I hesitated. Boarding another man's boat without permission is a big deal—they used to hang folks for it. But robbing nerdy data engineers is a crime too. I followed.

Going through that door was like time travel to the early 1970s. Wood paneling everywhere, surrounding apricot-colored linoleum and tangerine seat cushions. Pebbly carpet muffled our footsteps as we crept into the forward salon.

The helm was littered with beer cans and crumpled cigaret packs, charts scattered about. In contrast, the little galley across the deck was neat and shipshape. A fridge sported an array of state souvenir magnets, from the Chesapeake Lighthouse down to Key West's Conch Republic. On the aft bulkhead was a sliding door, shut tight, to the stateroom. Where Dove and Mickey probably were.

McDounagh eased towards the door. Very stealthy, for a computer nerd. "They probably have it back in there with them," he whispered.

"We should look in here first." Maybe we could resolve this without talking to the enterprising young couple at all. "Keep an eye on that door."

The only light in the salon came from a dim fixture above the dinette table, next to the hatch. The spoils of a spending spree sat there. A laptop computer, still boxed, packaged cell phones, and Walmart bags fought for space with cartons of cigarets, gift cards, and a heap of scratched-off lottery tickets. On the floor, a bunch of NASCAR-replica RC cars were haphazardly parked. Looked like McDounagh's cash and credit cards had been put to good use.

I sifted through the pile, but there was no wallet. Went to the chart table and looked under the maps. Nothing there, nor on the shelf between helm and windshield. All the beer cans had neat little holes punched in them, about pencil-sized. I shook my head. Some folks are weird.

“Anything?” McDounagh asked. There was a tense edge in his voice.

“Still looking.” But there weren’t many places left to look. I went to the galley.

“It’s got to be in there.” McDounagh moved towards the stateroom door.

“Hold up.” The galley was neat as a pincushion, compared to the dinette and helm. No dirty dishes, no food left out, no trash. There was a narrow cabinet door under the sink. I tugged, and it came out on runners.

Inside was a garbage can, stuffed with boxes from Chick-fil-A and a pizza place called Just Like New Yawk. The spree had included a feast. The can was crammed full.

Right on top was a wallet.

I fished it out. It felt thin and empty. I didn’t want to get McDounagh’s hopes up, so I flipped it open. No cash, no credit cards, no driver’s license. But a stiffness in the lining, like a batten in a sail.

McDounagh looked back from the door. “You find something?”

There was a pocket behind the liner, like a secret compartment. I pulled it open. Inside was a white card.

“Let me see that,” said McDounagh. He started over.

I tugged the card out. It had the same Incipient Paradigm logo as McDounagh’s polo shirt. Next to that was *Jody McDounagh, Senior Development Engineer*. And next to that was a photograph.

“Cutter,” McDounagh said.

It was a color photo, full-face. Of a Black man, with a shaved head and startling green eyes. A strong jaw, white teeth, and a dimpled chin.

Definitely not the feller standing in front of me.

McDounagh—the man who’d told me he was Jody McDounagh, anyway—reached around under that baggy polo shirt. When his hand came back, it was pointing a little black semiautomatic at me.

“Aw, Cutter,” he said. “I really wish you hadn’t looked at that.”

“Who are you?” I asked. “Not Jody McDounagh, obviously.”

“I’m the guy being paid a lot of money to get this laptop and that card. The guy who paid you a lot of money to help.”

“By giving me Jody McDounagh’s watch?”

“He won’t ask for it back, if that’s your concern.”

That was low on my list of worries. He and his gun had taken first place.

“This can still work out for both of us,” the former McDounagh said. “Give me the card, and I’m gone.”

“Who’s paying you for this?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He raised the pistol, sighting down its barrel. “I’m a good shot, Cutter. I can put it in your eye from here. But I don’t want to. I like you. So just give me the card, bro.”

Behind him, the stateroom door slammed open. A big fella, redheaded and freckled, charged out. Mickey, I figured. All he wore was boxer shorts, revealing a brawny, freckled physique. There was an aluminum baseball bat clenched in his fist. “Get the hell off my boat, you two ass—”

McDounagh spun. A flash of light, a loud *pop*, and Mickey tumbled to the deck. His bat clattered away, and I heard the ping of McDounagh’s shell casing somewhere across the room.

In the stateroom doorway, I saw a woman. Tiny and blond, in an oversized

Florida Marlins jersey over bare legs. She raised her hands to her face and shrieked. McDounagh swung the gun smoothly towards her.

I charged, but he saw me coming. He started to pivot back, so I went to Plan B. I snatched a magnet off the refrigerator. As he raised his gun, I held the magnet over the ID card, like I was holding an invisible sandwich.

He looked at me, incredulous. "Cutter, what the hell are you doing?"

"You shoot me, this magnet's dropping onto this card. I'm no computer genius, but even I know that won't do it much good."

Dove stood in the doorway, staring down at Mickey. Blood was pouring out of his head, all over that awful carpet. "Dove," I said to her, "go on back inside."

"Stay right there, Dove," McDounagh said, not taking his eyes off me. She didn't move.

We all just kind of looked at each other, for what felt like a year.

Finally, McDounagh spoke. "I really don't want to kill you, man."

"We agree," I said. "So far, so good."

"Just put the card down and walk away."

"What about her?"

"She can go too. I hate killing people for free."

I looked at Mickey. "I reckon he was *pro bono*?"

"He attacked me. If you and Dove mind your manners, I have no reason to shoot either of you."

Sounded nice, but it didn't add up. He'd just murdered a man in front of two witnesses. By my math, he had nothing but reasons to kill us.

I nodded, like I'd fallen for it. "Dove, get dressed. We're leaving."

"Stay there," McDounagh said.

But this time, she listened. She ducked into the stateroom, out of sight. Straight to a phone to call 911, if she had a brain in her pretty head.

"Dove!" McDounagh half turned towards the door. Then he looked back at me. Now he had a math problem of his own. Geometry, specifically. Two angles to cover.

"Soon as she's decent, we'll light out," I said. "I'll leave the card on the dock for you."

He scowled.

"Everybody in the marina heard that shot," I said. "They're calling the cops right now. Just let us loose, take the card, and git. It's the only smart play."

"Yeah," he said. "The card. You know what? I'm pretty sure I remember that card having a chip, not a stripe. Nothing magnetic at all." He raised the pistol. "Nice working with you, Cutter."

Dove reappeared in the doorway, aiming something with both hands. A *twang*, and suddenly not-McDounagh had something sticking out of his neck. Pencil-size, with red, white, and blue fins on the end. A tiny arrow.

He shrieked, his gun went off, and the coffee maker on the counter beside me burst into shards. I lunged forward as he dropped his gun to claw at his neck. "Don't—" I hollered, just as he yanked the arrow out. Blood spurted in a powerful arc, like the drinking fountain in a Three Stooges picture. Punctured artery, for sure.

I charged in to plug it up. I'd seen people get hit like that—he had two minutes, tops. But he must've thought I was coming to whup up on him, because he scrambled back away from me. His foot crunched down on Brandon

Brown's number 68, and the toy race car zipped away as he stumbled on it and fell. His head slammed into the dinette table with a crack louder than those gunshots. He dropped to the deck and lay still.

I knelt beside him. I maybe could've done something about the hole in his throat, but that broken neck was beyond any combat lifesaver training the army ever gave me. The spurting blood stopped when his heart did. He gazed off at nothing through half-open eyes.

Across the salon, Dove was fumbling with the crossbow pistol she'd shot him with. When I stood, she jumped back and whacked into the bulkhead. The little arrows she held spilled from her grasp.

"Relax," I said, with my hands in the air. "Just listen." I kicked my former client's pistol away, across the linoleum towards the trash can. "I'm not coming any closer. Let's just talk."

She glared at me, wild-eyed. With no makeup and her hair tousled from sleep, she looked like a little girl. A very angry little girl. There were fresh bruises on her arms, and a fading one on her cheek.

I nodded towards the late not-McDounagh. "Dove, you know him, right? From the Cove Harbor House on Tybee Island last night."

"Ellie," she said.

"Beg pardon?"

"My name's Ellie. I don't know why you're calling me Dove. Y'all must've confused me with someone else."

"Ellie, I'm not a cop. I'm just someone dumb enough to try and help people with sob stories. That skinny feller hired me to find you. Said Mickey robbed him at gunpoint. I know all about Jimmy Hat's, and Randy, and Cranky Jack. And I know you recognize him."

She sighed. "We didn't have no gun. He did. We was just gonna badger him, but when Mickey come in, he grabbed it outta his pants. When him and Mickey started fighting, I hit him with the lamp. Maybe Mickey hit him some more. Then we ran off."

"One of you grabbed his wallet on the way out?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe."

I showed her the card. "This was in it. He wanted it back, said it was important, so I helped him track you down. But I didn't know the whole story. Ellie, I'm sorry about all this."

She looked down at Mickey. "Okay. Yeah." She didn't look particularly busted up over his passing, though that could've just been the shock.

"You should call nine-one-one," I said. "This was clearly self-defense."

"I don't want no police."

"I understand. But you won't be in trouble. He killed Mickey with that gun right there, and he was set to kill us too. You saved us both with your little crossbow. Damned heroic."

"I been shooting beer cans since I was little. I'm real good now."

"You're a regular Annie Oakley. Look, I'll tell the police the whole story. Whatever happened up on Tybee, we still had no call breaking into your boat. I'll take my lumps over that. I should've been smarter about this whole thing. Maybe I ought to quit butting into other people's problems."

"I don't want no police," she repeated. "I don't like 'em."

"There were gunshots in here. They're probably already on the way."

She shook her head. "This is Shallow Hollow, mister. Folk's shoot guns off all the time. Nobody's calling no police."

I had noted a distinct lack of approaching sirens. "You've got two bodies on your deck, Ellie. They're not going away."

"I know what I got." She chewed her lip. "Maybe I got tired of Mickey hitting me, so I went off for a bit. Maybe I came back and found all this. Maybe Mickey and him shot each other." She held up the crossbow. "Mickey was shooting beer cans all day yesterday. He was real good."

He might've been, but her story wasn't. More holes in it than those cans. But Shallow Hollow didn't strike me as the kind of place where an elite cadre of detectives would work relentlessly to uncover the truth.

"All right," I said. "There's a company in San Francisco that's offering a big reward for this card, and the laptop in that feller's bag. The phone number's on here, and it says *no questions asked*." I placed the card on the deck, pressing my thumb to the glossy plastic. "My fingerprints are on it, and they're on file. You change your mind about what you want to tell the police, they'll find me without much trouble. I'll tell them the truth, I swear."

Ellie looked at the card, the laptop bag, and back at me. Her eyes were dry.

"Maybe I will," she said. "Maybe I won't."

I nodded. "I reckon 'maybe' will do."

After that, there wasn't much left to say. I walked back out into the humid Georgia night. All the other boats were still dark. No worried neighbors, peering through curtains. No police cars full of eager crimefighters skidding to a stop. The only sign of life was an old-timer in a lawn chair down by the gate. He had a cane pole in his gnarled hands, a cigar in his teeth, and a line bobbing in the brine. He nodded as I approached.

"Catching anything?" I asked him.

"Fishing ain't about catching," he said. "Fishing's about trying."

I pondered his wisdom as I walked back to the Kia. I'd return it someplace up around Tybee Island. No reason for the rental company to get victimized along with everybody else.

After that, back out to sea. I'd make my way up the coast to Hilton Head, where that conference had been. See what I could dig up on Jody McDounagh, and try to follow the trail back to Kris. I figured she'd want that wristwatch a whole lot more than I did.

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