

An underwater scene with a blue-green tint, filled with numerous bubbles of various sizes. In the foreground, a dark, metallic chain link is visible, and a hand is seen reaching out from the right side, possibly holding onto the chain. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and aquatic.

CLOSE- HAULED

A Sim Greene / *Figaro* Mystery

Rob Avery

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A SIM GREENE/*FIGARO* MYSTERY

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1

THERE were six of us aboard that night. Al had dropped *In Depth's* anchor into a sweet spot of flat water behind the north end of the breakwater where we were protected from the waves but could still see the sunset. It was one of his favorite places in the world to host a barbecue.

An endless chain of ocean swells, born of a storm boiling somewhere between Southern California and Hawaii, rolled in from the southwest. It wasn't quite high tide but as each new swell arrived, a wave crashed onto the seaward side of the breakwater sixty yards away, throwing spray into the air. Its unmolested brother to the north would roll on toward the beach, rise up, and form a waist-high wall of water for the surfers to ride into shore.

I sat on a padded bench on the bridge deck explaining to Ashley Barringer how the sunset, on clear days, would cast a momentary "green flash." Ashley was the fine blonde marketing director I'd been dating for the last six months. She was smart—she'd fought her way up through the ranks of a high-tech startup—and she was also fun, athletic, and believed that a smile was a woman's best makeup. Most importantly, she liked to sail.

"So we won't see the green flash tonight?" she said.

"Only on clear evenings," I said. "We've got too many clouds to the west."

"It'll probably rain tonight," said Al.

He was the old salt firmly planted in his deck chair, cigar somewhere in mid-career, arms folded over a bare chest. His short

muscular legs jutted from faded red canvas shorts. The shorts almost covered a wide scar on his right leg.

He propped his worn leather boat shoes onto the starboard bulkhead.

"It'll blow out, though," I said. "We'll still have plenty of good weather through the fall."

"You sailors are such romantics," said Monica. "Talking about rain on a beautiful evening like this."

She leaned in close to Al and he put his arm around her. Theirs appeared to be a happy and uncomplicated relationship with no discernible commitments. I felt a mild tinge of envy.

"So who's the new girl?" asked Monica.

"Jessica?" I said. "That's Reid's girlfriend."

"I thought his girlfriend was a redhead."

"That was three weeks ago," said Al.

"Reid's girlfriends seem to have a short shelf-life," said Monica.

We heard the door from the main cabin open and changed the subject. Jessica, a junior at the local university and probably half Reid's age, popped her head out and climbed the stairs up to the bridge deck.

"Do you guys have dinner out here every Wednesday night?" she asked.

"When the weather's nice," said Al. "And when Sim wins the Point Mugu Surf Contest."

"Second place this year," I said. "That Coastie from Bodega Bay won."

"Second place means you were the first loser," said Al.

"Well," said Ashley, "he is my first loser."

She patted my arm. Al shook his head.

"That fish was so awesome," said Jessica. "Awesome" was the most valuable adjective in her personal lexicon. "What kind is it and where do you get fish so fresh?"

"It's yellowtail," said Al. "I speared it this morning right over there."

He pointed west toward Santa Cruz Island.

Reid came up to the bridge deck with two six-packs of ice-cold Corona Extras. He was tall, almost my height, and lanky, with a short chinstrap beard mildly reminiscent of a modern-day Ahab. He put some of the bottles in the deck cooler and wielded a church key on the remaining six. He sat down next to Jessica and handed each of us an open bottle.

“Hey Reid, how come we never hold The Midweek Dinner on your boat?” asked Monica.

“My bank account shivers every time I fire up those twin diesels. I’d rather just bring the beer. It’s a lot cheaper.”

Reid had made a small fortune on Wall Street in his younger years and then, in early middle-age, brought his Ph.D. and *Dances With Fish* to Ventura County to teach economics, live in the marina, and chase college girls. Not always in that order. He had at least one redeeming quality, though; two field box season tickets between home plate and first base at Dodger Stadium.

“Here’s to tall ships and small ships and all the ships at sea,” Reid toasted. “But the best ships are friendships. Here’s to you and me.”

He raised his beer in the air and smiled as he put his arm around Jessica.

“The meek shall inherit the earth,” said Al as he raised his bottle. “The brave will get the oceans.”

We drank to the toasts and I realized how happy a man can be with a marvelous sunset before him, a cool ocean breeze whispering across the deck of a capable boat, and a beautiful blonde to put his arm around. A beautiful blonde who smiled.

A small flying fish launched into the air off our starboard bow. It veered to the right, inches from the water, and plunged into the sea fifty yards away. You rarely saw them in the harbor mouth. Something bigger must be chasing it. From the north came a formation as tight and precise as the Blue Angels; brown pelicans fly-

ing low over the waves, wingtips barely touching the water. Poor little fish. Predators above, below, and all around.

Nothing dies of old age in the sea.

“Sim, are you still planning on taking *Figaro* over to the islands this weekend?” asked Monica.

“No, it’ll probably be next weekend if the weather’s any good,” I said. “Labor Day is coming up and the islands will be packed so I’ve arranged with my boss to take that holiday the weekend before. Ashley’s conference ends Saturday morning so we’ll probably leave then and come back Monday evening. You two want to join us?”

Al shook his head. “Pass,” he said. “I gotta clean this boat up.”

A variety of other vessels—cabin cruisers, fishing skiffs, sailboats returning from the local Wednesday afternoon races, and a couple of brightly painted and annoyingly loud ocean-racing speedboats—passed behind us on their way to or from the blue Pacific. The eternal train of harbor traffic. Some of the skippers recognized Al and waved as they passed.

“It seems wrong for you to sell this beautiful old boat,” said Monica.

“She’s a good boat,” said Al. “But I can’t take her to the Caribbean with me.”

He paused to drink more of his beer.

“Warm water, blue skies, fine rum,” he continued.

“That sounds awesome,” said Jessica. “Sign me up for that.”

“And the occasional hurricane,” I added.

“Never mind,” said Jessica.

The boat rolled slightly with the passing, close astern, of a large commercial sport fishing boat. Amateur fishermen crowded the rail and drank beer while the crew bagged the fillets they’d sliced from the unlucky fish. Dozens of gulls followed the boat and cried for remnants of the catch. Some of them flew over us toward the breakwater with fins, heads, or other castoffs in their beaks. More gulls waited on the rocks to fight over the spoils.

“Let’s toss the leftovers to the birds,” said Jessica. “Would that be okay, Al?”

“Sure. Do it off the stern, though. That’ll keep the birds downwind and the guano off the boat.”

“I’m sure glad that cigar is downwind,” said Reid. “What are you smoking these days, Al? Old boxer shorts?”

“Every man should have a few vices, albeit carefully chosen ones,” said Al.

Reid smiled, fully aware of his own chosen vices.

Ashley and Jessica carried the leftover bits of barbecued yellow-tail down to the main deck and tossed pieces into the air. The birds responded with characteristic enthusiasm and soon the area behind the boat featured more flapping wings and screeching gulls than a Hitchcock movie.

Jessica shrieked loud enough to frighten some of the birds and all eyes turned to her.

“My glasses!” she said.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” asked Reid.

“I just threw a piece of fish at a seagull and my lousy sunglasses fell off,” she said. “There goes a hundred and fifty bucks.”

“Don’t sweat it,” said Reid. “I’ll buy you some new ones.”

“But those matched this outfit perfectly.”

A smarter fellow would have let it end there. Another pair of sunglasses sacrificed to Poseidon.

“You want to do it this time, Al?” I asked.

“And put down this fine cigar?”

“Okay. I’ll give it a shot, I guess. Depth?”

“About twelve feet,” said Al. “The sun’s going down so it’ll be getting dark at the bottom. And the water’s murky here by the breakwater. Better take that flashlight under the console.”

I grabbed the rubber-coated underwater light from its mount under the helm and fished a pair of goggles out of the tackle tray. I peeled off my T-shirt, kicked off my Nikes, and stepped up onto the starboard bulkhead.

“There goes the manly hero,” said Monica.

Gauging the distance and the need to clear the deck rail below, I pushed outward as I dove. I put my left hand over the goggles to keep them from being torn off my face and broke the surface. The water closed in behind me and I felt that strange but familiar feeling of being at home. A creature of the sea.

The dive gave me more than enough momentum to reach the bottom and I dry-swallowed to equalize the pressure in my ears. I found a good-sized rock and held it in my left hand to counteract my natural buoyancy so I wouldn't have to spend a lot of energy staying down.

I moved deliberately and took my time panning the beam of the powerful flashlight back and forth under the boat in an effort to find the prized sunglasses. The beam caught a piece of anchor chain off to the left, an empty soda can off to the right. Ahead was a golf ball.

How does a golf ball find its way to a harbor mouth?

Forward and to the left again I saw more of the same anchor chain, a man's brown loafer, and a market crab the size of a dinner plate. To the right, a rigger's knife too corroded to be of further use. No sunglasses here, either. Forward again.

When I panned the light to the left a third time, I realized that the shoe I'd seen before held a foot. A leg and more anchor chain stretched forward out of the flashlight's beam. Another crab ran across the ankle. My heartbeat raced and I suddenly felt the need to surface. I moved forward again. I didn't get much time to look at the man but I saw the tattoo on his left forearm and instantly knew he was one of us.

2

I forgot about the sunglasses, dropped the rock, and headed back up. I surfaced near the boat and pulled myself up onto the swim step.

“Hey, Al. Get down here.”

He heard the tone in my voice and hopped down from the bridge deck.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Better call 911. There’s a body down there.”

Reid wandered over.

“A drowning?” asked Reid.

“Not unless the guy was trying to swim away with somebody’s anchor chain,” I said.

Reid shook his head and closed his eyes. Al let out a low whistle.

I stepped onto the small aft deck and reached into the plastic bin where Al kept his diving gear. I grabbed some fins, a mask, and a weight belt.

“Can I borrow your underwater camera?” I asked.

“What for? It’s not your job.”

“I think the guy’s a squid,” I said. “About your age, I’d guess. If it turns out that he’s Navy, I might wind up working the case.”

Al walked into the aft cabin of the boat and returned with a digital camera in a waterproof case, an underwater flash, and a small compressed-air bottle with an attached regulator.

“My other tanks are empty,” he said. “This pony bottle will give you about ten minutes.”

“That’s all I need. I just want to get some good shots before anybody disturbs the body.”

Jessica walked aft toward us.

“Did you find my sunglasses?” she asked.

She looked at the camera and diving gear and her brow wrinkled. Reid took her arm and walked her away from the stern.

“Hey, what’s going on?” she said.

Al went forward to find his cell phone and I went back down.

The body lay in twelve feet of water at mid-tide. Two fathoms. I examined the scene while taking photographs. I’d recovered a few drowning victims in the past—part of my job—and this one looked like he hadn’t been in the water long, a day or two at most. He was, or had been, a Caucasian male, early to mid-fifties, of medium build, with a thin blond mustache and longish hair that flowed behind him in the slight current. His open eyes stared directly at me but not with the vacant, disinterested look that belongs to the dead. They implored me to release him. The rest of his face had frozen in that moment of terror when death became a reality.

He wore a white button-down business shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. The faded blue fouled-anchor tattoo on his left forearm was typical of sailors who’d served overseas thirty or more years ago. The shirt itself had faint blood stains over the chest but I couldn’t see any bullet holes or other signs of obvious trauma without moving the body. And I knew better than to do that. He wore tan slacks, penny loafers sans socks, and about fifty feet of 3/8” anchor chain. It’s hard to swim in an outfit like that.

I tied a marker buoy to a rock and placed it a few feet from his head so the Sheriff’s department wouldn’t have any trouble locating him. Then I took about sixty photos of the body, the chain, and everything nearby. I also found Jessica’s sunglasses.

We heard the whine of the Harbor Patrol boat’s engine well before the boat rounded the jetty. I handed the camera back to Al.

“Can you copy these pictures for me before Jerry grabs the memory card?” I asked.

“Done.”

Al took the camera below and I put away the diving gear. Jerry tossed me a line as he pulled the boat up to *In Depth's* port side.

“Who’s been injured, Sim?”

Jerry was the classic California beach boy turned water cop. He stayed in shape and surfed every morning he could find a decent break off our part of the coast. When there wasn’t a good swell running, he’d swim a mile in the open ocean for exercise. He didn’t care much for liveboards but he treated me pretty well since I was the guy who got him onto the base to surf Point Mugu when the big winter swells came in.

“The body’s down below,” I said. “Looks like a murder. I dropped a buoy near the victim and snapped some photos.”

“Are you sure it’s a murder?” Jerry asked.

“Your call, Jerry”

He thought for a minute.

“Okay.”

Jerry called it in to the Ventura County Sheriff’s Department and told us that the Search-And-Rescue unit was on the way. He worked his way around the boat, getting names and phone numbers and taking notes. It was predictably unproductive as I was the only one who had actually seen anything, but it was the usual police legwork and it needed to be done.

I grabbed a towel, dried off, and watched as Jerry questioned the others. Ashley and Monica appeared to be shocked at news of my discovery. Jessica was overwrought. Reid talked a lot and tried to comfort the women. Al showed no reaction.

Jerry finally turned to me. He asked me about how I found the body and I told him the whole story from seagulls to sunglasses.

“Why’d you go back down there?” he asked.

“To take some photos,” I said. “Basic preliminary police work.”

“It’s not your jurisdiction, Sim.”

"I'm pretty sure the guy is Navy and it just might wind up in our office."

"Have you got the photos?" he asked.

Al produced the memory card from his underwater camera and handed it to Jerry. The SAR unit arrived moments later in their giant inflatable quick-response boat. By that time, the beautiful sunset had been replaced with a pitch-dark night lit only by the buildings ashore and the sporadic flashing of the red and green harbor entrance lights. Al pointed out the marker buoy to them and they dropped their anchor north of the body. The two rescue divers worked rapidly to get their equipment ready.

"You guys need any help?" Al offered.

A uniformed Sheriff's deputy stood up.

"Who are these people, Jerry?" he said. "And why are they here?"

"Just some liveboards partying," said Jerry. "These two guys," pointing at Al and me, "are Navy. They found the victim."

"Well, get them the hell outta here so we can do our job," said the deputy.

A little fire showed in Al's eyes. His voice lowered.

"That guy couldn't find his ass with both hands and a flashlight," he said.

"You know, Al," said Jerry. "One of the problems with growing old is that people no longer look at you as being much of a threat."

You couldn't really blame Jerry for being wrong. He didn't know Al as well as I did. He didn't know how Al had gotten that scar on his leg. Al smiled at Jerry the way an alligator might smile right before taking your arm off.

We weighed anchor and motored back into the harbor.

3

MONICA, Ashley and I stayed on the flying bridge with Al as he piloted *In Depth* down the main channel. Reid and Jessica joined us as we entered the main harbor. I tried to remember who it was that had suggested we anchor off the north end of the breakwater and then decided it probably didn't matter. Reid tried to buoy our spirits by suggesting we tie up at Tugs for a nightcap, but the mood was considerably less than festive. Jessica just wanted to get off the boat as quickly as possible.

"How come everybody seems to hate you guys so much?" asked Ashley.

"They don't hate us," said Monica. "The harbor management and the patrol just think that those of us who choose to live on our boats are more trouble than we're worth. So the people who run the marinas stop accepting liveaboard applications and then hope we'll eventually go away."

"We get blamed for everything," said Al. "Some weekend warrior's kid flushes a turd into the harbor and the patrol points at us. Like we'd crap in our own backyard?"

"The five of us are the last ones at Vintage Marina," I said. "When Al sells his boat and leaves, he won't be replaced."

"Five?" asked Jessica. "I only count four of you."

"Judith lives on that old wooden cabin cruiser a couple slips down from me," said Reid. "But she's a bit of a loner and doesn't hang out with us very much."

We motored past Channel Islands' small but brightly-lit commercial dock and watched the jib crane unload plastic crates of sea urchins from a gray utilitarian work boat. A bare-chested diver watched as the crane operator moved the crates into a refrigerated truck and made entries in his load book.

"I can't believe people actually eat those nasty things," said Monica.

"I tried it once in a place outside Yokosuka," said Al. "It looks like a poodle's tongue."

A few groans followed Al's description.

"They give you two pieces of the stuff stacked on little rice cakes," continued Al. "I only ate the second because everybody else was watching me."

The groans turned to chuckles.

As we got closer to J-dock, Reid and I hopped down to the deck and hung the boat fenders from the ship's bulwarks. Al expertly maneuvered the large trawler into its slip and we made her mooring lines fast to the dock cleats. Al handed me a thumb drive as I stepped off the boat.

"Your pictures," he said.

"Thanks."

Reid and Jessica hopped off the boat and walked over to Reid's sport fisher, Monica volunteered to stay and help Al finish cleaning *In Depth*, and I left to walk Ashley back to the parking lot. There wasn't a lot of small talk; no 'See you next week' or 'Great dinner, Al.' It wasn't the usual conclusion to The Midweek Dinner. But it wasn't normal for us to discover a murder victim, either.

The low clouds closed in on Vintage Marina. Thick moisture hung in the air. You couldn't really call it rain and it hadn't thickened to a true fog. Amber-hued dock lights glowed in the haze.

"Do you really think the guy you found was murdered?" asked Ashley.

I nodded.

“Couldn’t it have been an accident?”

“No,” I said. “Somebody wrapped him up in that chain.”

The metal hinges connecting the floating docks of Vintage Marina creaked and groaned as we walked toward the card-key gate that separates the ‘yachties’ from the general public. We walked up the ramp to the parking lot.

“Are you going to be okay?” Ashley asked.

“I’m a little shaken, I guess. It’s not like I haven’t seen a dead body before in my line of work. It’s just that I’ve never seen anything quite this cold and calculating. So deliberate.”

I didn’t share any more details. She didn’t need to know about the moment in time—the moment of death—frozen in the victim’s face. I opened the car door for her and she stood there and held my hand. She didn’t let go.

“It’s all so dreadful,” she said.

She put her arms around my waist and buried her head in my chest.

“I need you to drive me home,” she said.

She lived only a couple of miles away in a rented duplex a hundred yards from the beach. I drove her home, parked on the street, and walked her to the front door. She took my hand and led me inside. She cried and shivered and, eventually, fell asleep in my arms.

The vision of a drowned man looking at me in horror from the other side of death kept me awake for some time.

4

I woke before sunrise to a gray and drizzly Thursday morning that was unusually cool for August. Ashley was still asleep and I tucked the comforter around her as I got out of bed. I tugged on my shorts, strapped on my running shoes, and picked my gray University of Washington T-shirt up off the floor.

I've never attended the University of Washington or, for that matter, any other college. The T-shirt had been sent to me by a fabulous redhead who, for a few wonderful months, had shared the close confines of my boat with me before returning to the Evergreen state for another dose of higher education.

I slipped out Ashley's front door and jogged down to the beach for an early morning run. I headed south, running along the hard sand left by the receding tide, passed the Mandalay Bay resort, and continued toward the north jetty.

The sun tried to grind its way through the clouds to the beach but could only force a gray light through the low overcast. A thick fogbank shrouded the channel, daring unwary vessels to venture forth. I figured the edge of the fog to be just a little over three miles offshore as I could barely see *Gina*, the oil drilling platform that sits between Channel Islands Harbor and Anacapa Island, poking its nose through the mist.

The fog obscured the lighthouse on Anacapa but the foghorn, eleven nautical miles away, blew its low warning to the commercial vessels sailing these waters. A good percentage of the coastal shipping bound for Los Angeles passed through the strong cur-

rents and occasional thick fog that hides the steep cliffs and sharp rocks of the Channel Islands. Well over a hundred large ships have foundered on the islands' shores over the years but GPS and modern communications have all but eliminated the problems of current and fog.

Strong winds came with the night's rain and an above average amount of sea junk had washed ashore. Plastic soda bottles, a busted life preserver, a dead harbor seal covered with fat blue flies and sand fleas, and lots of kelp lay on the beach. I bent down to pick up some old Styrofoam coffee cups. It wasn't much in terms of total trash reduction but I like to think that it adds up over time. And there isn't a whole lot of room in a shorts pocket anyway.

"Whatcha got there, boy?"

I looked up to see Old Jed, king of the local beach bums, sitting on an improvised throne of seaweed and sand. He smiled as he sipped from a small bottle in a brown bag. He wore faded army fatigue pants, Converse All-Stars from a previous decade, a stained windbreaker, and an L.A. Kings bill cap. His wardrobe rarely varied. With a change of clothes and a longer beard he could have been mistaken for the bass player from that little old band from Texas. But you couldn't quite guess his age. He could have been forty or seventy.

"It's just an old cup, Jed. Nothing worth anything."

"Yeah," he said. "There's just junk on the beach today. Nuthin' worth nuthin' here."

He sat back a little farther on his seaweed mound and took another sip from the bag.

"Didn't see nothing wash ashore up north, did you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Should I have?"

"Big package," he said. "Never saw it up close but I seen it fall, I did. Fell off a boat right out there. I been watchin' for it but it ain't washed up here on the beach."

A spray of mist on the wind sent a shiver down my spine.

"When was this?" I asked.

“Night a’fore last, boy. Late.”

Another shiver.

“Where?” I asked. I’d already guessed the answer.

“Out there off the north end of the breakwater,” he said. “Right at the edge of the harbor mouth.”

He pointed at the exact spot Al had anchored his boat yesterday.

“Did you see the boat?” I asked.

“Sorta,” he said.

“What kind of boat was it?”

“It wasn’t so as I could tell you which boat,” he said. “It was too dark. But I seen a shadow over the moonlight moving real slow and I heard a boat out there growling a little. The light from the moon was just right so’s I could see the splash on the water.”

“Was it a fishing boat?” I asked. “Cruiser? A sailboat, maybe?”

“Real low down kinda boat but sorta long,” he said. “Thirty foot or so, maybe more. No navigation lights, neither. I figured they lost a package and I could find it and sell it. You know, finders keepers and all that.”

He looked at the bottle in the bag and made a frown.

“I sure as hell need the money,” he said.

“Do you remember what time it was?” I asked.

“Couldn’t really say, son. It was late. After the Mart closes.”

The Harbor Mart stayed open until eleven on weekdays. Old Jed might have been drinking — he usually was — and he’d have been pretty tight by midnight. There was probably nothing to his story.

“Well, it’s always good to talk with you, Jed, but I’d better get running again. Got to keep in shape, you know.”

“You do that, boy. You’ll let me know if you see anything good on the beach, okay?”

I left Old Jed perched on his seaweed throne, thought about his observations, and paid special attention to the flotsam on the beach as I continued my run south to the jetty. A piece of paper, a

business card, a shred of a shirt, anything like that could be evidence but there was nothing promising; nothing worth picking up. I turned back at the jetty and retraced my run north. Jed had moved on by the time I reached his seaweed sofa. I continued north to the lifeguard station at the end of Ashley's street and walked the last hundred yards to her apartment. She kept a spare key in a fake hollow rock in the garden by her front door. I let myself in.

I found her still asleep somewhere under her jumble of fluffy pillows and down comforter so I slipped into the shower as quietly as I could and washed off the running grime and salt. When I finished, I wrapped one of her thick white cotton towels around my waist and launched an attack on the kitchen.

Ashley didn't keep a lot of food in her house as she was, in her own words, "not much for cooking." But I dug through the fridge and found half a dozen eggs, some sharp Irish cheese with a green rind on it, a half package of mushrooms, and some sliced ham. A couple of leftover baked potatoes and an onion sat in the bottom of the vegetable drawer. I couldn't find any bread worth toasting but I figured I could transform the balance into a decent breakfast for two. I sliced and sautéed the onion, mushrooms, and potatoes and shredded some of the cheese. Ashley interrupted me before I could crack the eggs.

"Do you always cook breakfast naked?"

She stood in the doorway in her robe, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

"I always wear a towel whenever I fry something," I said. "Safety first, you know."

She grinned as she walked up and grabbed the towel where I'd tied it.

"And what comes second?"

Breakfast, obviously, had to wait.

We made omelets, later, and ate them by the gas fire in her small living room.

“Are you still coming to dinner Sunday night?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “At your folks’ house.”

“Pick me up at five?”

Meeting the parents. A milestone in a relationship. Or is it a crucible?

“Sounds great,” I said. “Are you gonna eat those potatoes?”

We finished breakfast and dressed and she drove me back to Vintage Marina so I could get ready for work. She dropped me off near the gate and a light rain began to fall the second she drove away. I opened the gate, walked down the ramp, and headed toward *Figaro*. She is such a pretty boat and I marvel at her every time I see her. I unlocked the hatch and stepped down the companionway into the cabin. The patter of rain on the deck increased as I pulled the thumb drive from my windbreaker, attached it to my laptop, and transferred the crime scene photos to a new folder on the hard drive.

I changed into the dark pants and khaki short-sleeved shirt of my service uniform, locked up *Figaro*’s companionway, and made my way back up the dock to my Jeep. A small folded piece of paper sat tucked under the windshield wiper; a note from Ashley thanking me for breakfast. She had drawn a little Valentine’s heart at the bottom next to her name. I felt like I was back in high school. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

My Jeep started on the first tick and all was right with the world. I called Jerry.

“Those photos turn out all right?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Absolutely. The Homicide unit says you did a good job.”

“Glad to hear it. I ran into Old Jed during my run this morning.”

“He give you some sort of trouble?” he asked.

“No, no. He said he saw somebody dump something into the water out where we found the body last night.”

“Out where you found the body, you mean,” he said.

There was something wrong in the tone of his voice.

“Yeah,” I said. “Jed told me he saw it go in.”

“That old bum’s a crank,” said Jerry. “I don’t know if it’s booze or meth or something else but the guy’s brain is scrambled like an omelet.”

I thought about the mixed metaphor for a moment and decided to let it pass.

“Well, it’s what he told me and I thought it best to let you know. You could pass it on to Homicide. They’d want to know about it and maybe talk to him.”

“Yeah, thanks,” he said. “By the way, they want to ask you a few questions.”

“Sure,” I said. “Anytime.”

I ended the call, drove through the North Mugu Road gate at Naval Base Ventura County, and began Another Fine Navy Day.

5

MY office door opened and Master Chief Joe Richardson walked in with two foam cups and a box of donuts. He put the box on my DoD-issue metal desk, handed me one of the cups, and sat down in the poorly-padded metal chair opposite me.

“You trying to poison me?” I asked.

“Only if I thought it’d work,” he said.

He fished around in the box and pulled out a packet of sugar and a small round plastic tub of regulation U.S. Navy creamer.

“Cream?” he asked. “Sugar?”

“I like my coffee black,” I said. “Just like my boss.”

He smiled and his white teeth gleamed past his ebony skin.

“That is so damned funny,” he said. “I just never tire of hearing racial slurs from my underlings.”

Joe was the rarest of bosses. He appreciated hard work, had a sense of humor, and protected the men who reported to him. He had a wife and five children but, as far as any of us could tell, he was all Navy all the time. He pulled the tab off the creamer, poured it into his coffee, and stirred in a half packet of sugar.

“Do you still want to get into the Chief Warrant Officer program, Sim?”

I nodded as I grabbed a donut.

“And you’re hoping to land a billet with NCIS, too, right?”

“That is A-ffirmative, Master Chief,” I said.

He smiled again and drank some of his coffee. I ate some of my donut. Probably the best thing the Base Mess ever baked. The cake

was light and crumbly and the maple frosting was airy and not overly sweet. Joe had something on his mind, something that bothered him, but I knew there'd be no point in asking about it. He'd tell me when he was ready.

"You're the best detective I've seen come through this office, Sim. The absolute best by any measure and I'll be sad to see you go."

"Are you telling me the CO has approved my application?" I asked.

Joe leaned back and folded his right leg over his left knee.

"No, Sim. He hasn't. He called me this morning," he said. "He wants to talk to you."

I drank some of my coffee and took another bite of donut.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," I said.

"There is no reason you should."

He reached into the box and tore a chunk out of an old fashioned.

"You got any idea why he wants to talk to you?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Neither do I," he said. "Usually, he'd sign the lousy application and send it in. But he hasn't signed it and didn't offer any reason why not. All he'd tell me was that he has an assignment for you that will require me to redistribute your entire case load."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that, either."

"He also said that you will report directly to him," said Joe. "I am not to inquire into your actions or supervise you in any way."

I drank some more coffee.

"That seems pretty unusual, Joe."

"That's because it is unusual," he said. "Pretty damned unusual. And I don't like it one bit."

He thought for a minute.

"He did *not*, however, tell me that I couldn't give you any advice, Sim. So I'm going to do that right now. Be very careful when you talk to him. Listen closely to what he asks you to do and don't

over-promise results based on what you think he wants. Don't even let him think you over-promised. And you damned sure better not under-deliver."

He finished his coffee and tossed the empty foam cup into my trashcan.

"Either way, I'm sure gonna miss you, Sim."

"How's that?"

"If you make Captain Overson a happy man, he'll approve your application and you'll be on your way to Officer Training Command Newport. Screw it up, though, and you'll go from Chief Petty Officer to E-Nothin' in no time at all. And you'll be humpin' your duffels all the way to the Black Hole."

The reference to the Naval base at Norfolk, Virginia, the place where sailors' careers go to die long and painful deaths, was not lost on me.

"What if I need some help?" I asked.

He stood up to leave.

"Beats me. You can ask Gil if you need something done but don't ask me." He threw up his hands as he walked out. "Love you like a brother, Sim, but I don't want to know anything about this."