

Wednesday: 0600

The travel alarm clock went off, and I rolled onto the floor. Once there, I hooked my feet under the bureau and did 100 crunches, reversed and followed with 100 leg-lifts then finally 100 push-ups. After swallowing a handful of vitamins, I went into the shower. At an early hour, the water ran hot for 15 minutes.

Not knowing what the day would hold, I went fully armed; the Beretta strapped on my ankle, and the Colt fastened into a shoulder holster under my right arm. It felt good to be back in my own uniform: loose, khaki trousers; a blue, button-down Oxford shirt and leather jacket. Even my feet felt more comfortable in deck runners rather than polished black dress shoes.

The cloudless sky was turquoise blue except for a reddish hue in the east. Being a prudent sailor, I took warning, especially when the government Dodge refused to start. I popped the hood and scraped some corrosion off the battery terminals with my survival knife. The engine finally kicked over after I pulled off the air filter cover and wedged the choke wide open. It was not a good omen.

I reached the Coast Guard base by 0645. No guard stood at the gate. The senior chief boatswain mate and the small boat interested me most, so I headed first to the white and gray boathouse on the waterfront. A lanky seaman dressed in paint-stained coveralls sat near the door practicing her knots. She directed me back across the parking lot to the first floor of the main building, where I found the small boat station's office.

Two men talked in the office on either side of a dented gray steel desk, both still wearing civilian clothes as they sipped coffee. Even in civies, the senior chief was easy to distinguish from the first class; Senior Chief Drucker looked older, thinner and paler with gaunt, slack cheeks covered by a slight gray stubble. He stood beside a steel file cabinet, pouring coffee from

a thermos into a ceramic mug. I had passed a coffee urn out in the work area, so I reckoned his personal supply had been enhanced for medicinal purposes. The first class wore a plaid hunting shirt, blue jeans and scuffed cowboy boots, but the distinguishing feature was an enormous key ring dangling from a belt loop. He wore his long sideburns in a style no longer fashionable, but a mustache clipped well within regulations. He drank out of a white plastifoam cup from the stack by the urn. I wondered if they ever talked about their separate coffees. Did senior chief ever offer a dollop of his special elixir?

I introduced myself, calling the man with the thermos “Senior Chief,” and the one with the keys “Boats,” the customary name for a first class boatswain mate.

“How’d you figure us out so quick?” Drucker asked.

“I’ve never been to a station where the chief wasn’t drinking coffee and Boats wasn’t carrying the keys to everything from the paint locker to the toilet paper dispenser,” I joked.

The first class stood and offered his hand. “Larry Normand, but go ahead and call me Boats if you prefer.”

The senior chief shook my hand also. He had a strong grip and a tattoo of a snake coiled around an anchor on his forearm. His mustache was clipped tight; his graying hair slicked back from a slender scar across the peak of his pale forehead.

“I didn’t know CGI had any real detectives,” Drucker said. “The only agents I’ve met couldn’t take fingerprints without covering everyone with ink.”

“Well, Senior, you know why there are so many boatswain mates in the Coast Guard, don’t you?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Damn, nobody else does either,” I said.

He sat down, chuckling and scowling at the same time. “You got any idea what happened to our crew yet?” he asked in a sharp tone.

“Not yet, but I was hoping you’d both tell me everything you know about the case so far. Senior, if I can talk to you first and then Boats, I’d appreciate the time.”

“Nothing more important around here, so you have my full attention,” Drucker told me, motioning for Normand to leave the office. “If Boats has something on his schedule, he’ll go cancel while we chat.”

When Normand departed, I settled on his wobbly chair which rocked back and forth no matter how I shifted my weight. The senior chief told me pretty much the same story I’d heard from Andrews, Dunlay and Fraser. Galloway’s seventh axiom about investigations: ask everybody to repeat the story and then see if there are any discrepancies that warrant investigation. The details didn’t change, but his reactions were different. I wondered if he was upset because they went out without permission.

“I wouldn’t have minded them taking the boat out, if they’d told me what it was all about,” Drucker said.

“So, you don’t know why they went out?”

“No. As far as I know, they didn’t tell anybody, either where or why. They came in early and took the boat. My duty petty officer didn’t even know they were gone until they radioed to say they were heading down the St. Mary’s River.” He sat erect, elbows resting on the edge of the desk, flexing his hands and tugging on his fingers like a third-base coach in spring training.

“But that’s the opposite direction from where the boat was found,” I wondered aloud for his benefit.

“Yep, but if we followed them, we’d gone the wrong way. Say they waited to make their initial radio call because they figured we’d call the locks and have them stopped. That’s my guess, of course.”

I wanted to like Drucker; he sounded decent and concerned. Fraser said Drucker drove his men hard, but he seemed like the kind of boss who could make you want to work hard. Still, there were doubts, like Andrew’s connection between the crew’s performance marks and the senior chief’s arrival. And I felt almost certain that he was starting his day with a stiff drink – usually a clear sign of an alcoholic.

When Larry Normand replaced Drucker behind the desk, he wore a uniform; dark blue pants with touches of white paint, a wrinkled pale-blue shirt and deck shoes instead of boots. He couldn’t add any new information either. If I believed in conspiracy theories, I may have thought these many versions sounded so similar because they’d been rehearsed at length. That thought ran through my mind when Normand used a few phrases identical to some things both Dunlay and Drucker had said. I attributed the similarities to the professional jargon of the search and rescue business, like the peculiar languages of jet jockeys and computer twidgets. After a while I became distracted by the way Boats fiddled with the pencils on the desk.

I asked Normand to show me the boat, and we walked down to the waterfront. CG44323 was the only boat at the dock that morning. I assumed the others were already out searching.

“Only three people have been aboard since it was found,” Normand told me. “The Mountie went aboard and tied on a tow line up forward. Mister Jaspers was aboard when it came back, and then the detective from the Soo police who did the fingerprinting. Still got that damn dust all over everything, too. Pissed me off because Sunday afternoon I had the duty section scrub down all the boats.”

“Who’s Jaspers?” I asked, recalling Dunlay’s mention of him the night before.

“Chief Warrant Officer Jaspers. He’s the assistant operations officer, works for Miss Dunlay.”

We walked down the dock and stood beside the 44-footer, its radar antenna on the cabin's roof still rotating. The motor surfboat is one of the most unattractive boats in the Coast Guard fleet, built for seamanship, not showmanship. The superstructure is streamlined, so it will roll completely over and come back upright rather than remain capsized. The cockpit is big enough to hold two or three crewmen. Everyone else aboard sits in a compartment located down on the stern. Ugly like an H-3, but I’d heard 44-footers compared to tanks.

A yellow polypropylene cord fenced off the boat. I ducked under it and went aboard, observing every detail. Normand remained on the dock. He was right about the dust; the gray fingerprinting powder covered every possible surface. First impressions are essential, so I stopped and looked around. Immediately I saw that Normand was wrong about one subject.

“Did Jaspers come back aboard after the detective dusted for fingerprints?” I asked.

“No, the captain restricted all access until you got here.”

Across the deck tracked two sets of footprints visible in the gray powder. The clean, smooth prints would belong to the detective’s leather-sole wingtips. The other print showed traction like hiking shoes or construction boots. The tracks were so obvious that I knew somebody had come aboard during the night when they couldn’t see the powder. Although curious, it was worthless information: In northern Michigan, there were thousands of similar boots – a pair for every hunting license.

I stepped onto the coxswain flat, a small cockpit where the helmsman, radar operator and lookout all huddle together. More dust covering everything; I had to blow the fine powder off the

dials to read the instruments on the black dashboard. As Dunlay promised, the 44-footer remained the way it was found. The radio controls above the helm were still illuminated; set to Channels 16 and 22. A thin, yellow line swept around the radar screen, and even the Loran unit in the right-hand corner over the radar still showed a position. Loran stands for Long Range Aid to Navigation. A Loran unit is a radio receiver; the system uses a grid of radio waves that covers most of the globe. Comparing two different radio signals from separate transmitters, the Loran unit determines a position by the intersection of the two wavelengths.

There were no navigation charts on the small bench in the corner, but I assumed Dunlay had taken them to plan the search. I started out and then glanced back at the Loran unit. The two sets of six red digits weren't flashing; someone had locked the unit on a position. The Mountie who found the boat may have done that so there'd be a record of where to start searching. On the other hand, the coxswain may have fixed his position when he got into trouble. I scribbled down the numbers in my notebook.

I walked forward around the bow. Again, nothing seemed out of place. The mooring lines were tied and stowed, hanging on the starboard rail. Aft of the cabin, a canvas tarp still covered the spool of towing hawser. The boat's EPIRB, its emergency distress radio beacon, hung in its cradle. If the boat had capsized or even listed hard, the EPIRB would have automatically begun transmitting its signal. RCC Scott had recorded no satellite hits in the vicinity.

Four rubber fenders hung against the hull, two on each side.

"Do you tie the boats up against each other?" I called to Normand.

"No, each has its own berth."

"Why are there fenders on both sides?" I asked.

“It came in with fenders on the port side. Jaspers rigged those on the starboard when he tied her up.”

This presented something of a puzzle. The starboard fenders were put in place before the small boat was moored. If the fenders on the portside had been used to come back through the locks, Jaspers would have brought them aboard once they cleared. So it seemed the original crew had used the fenders to come along side either a dock or another boat once they cleared the locks, somewhere in Lake Superior.

I stepped down to the fantail and peered into the turtleback, a cabin on the stern where passengers and crew sit on narrow benches. Inside were only a few immersion suits and bagged lunches with a two-liter bottle of soda-pop.

I climbed off the boat. “What time does it get dark here?”

“About 9:30,” he figured.

“And how late did the duty section work last night?”

“Senior Chief had them working on the boats because the search started so early this morning. They finished after 22 hundred.”

“And when did the new duty section arrive?”

“The boats left before sunrise, so they were here about zero five hundred.”

That left a seven-hour gap when an unknown subject wearing boots with heavy tread walked across the deck. I grew angry with myself; I should have boarded the 44-footer as soon as I arrived in the Soo the night before. I wondered what this blunder would cost.

“Anything else I can help you with?” Normand asked.

“Not right now, but could be later. I may have some more questions about the area and the station.”

I started toward the administration building when Normand called me back to ask if I was finished aboard 44323; he wanted to shut the gear down to spare the batteries and also get the seamen busy sweeping off the dust. I told him to have fun. Then I walked up to the group operations center to chat with Lieutenant Dunlay.

While I'd been inside the station talking with Drucker and Normand, a high, thin cast of gray clouds came in; the morning was neither shadowless nor overcast, the kind of day when trout skim the surface during a Mayfly hatch and snag easily on my special nymph tied with the mask of an English hare. I wished I was fishing.