

Shady Lady

By Jack English

“Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind.” *King Lear*, Act IV, Scene i

Chapter One: Murder

It was 10:00 o'clock on a Tuesday evening. Jack English was in his office finishing a legal brief. An insurance company was trying to skip paying his client a half million dollars on a technicality.

A cold, sleety rain beat against the window in sheets. It was the kind of rain Atlantic City got when the weather couldn't make up its mind whether it wanted to rain or snow. He was bone tired, but the brief had to be in the judge's hands first thing in the morning.

He was about to grab another cup of coffee when he looked up and saw her standing there. Tall and slender, he wore an expensive trench coat. A fedora hat was pulled down shielding her face. She looked like she had just stepped out of a spy movie.

For a moment, his heart skipped a beat. *Melinda McGeorge!* he thought. She was his first love, and she pulled on his soul with the gravity of a thousand suns. She was also an embezzler and a multiple murderer.

“Jack,” the woman said as she raised her head a little revealing her face. “Jack, I'm in trouble.”

The instant she called his name, he knew it wasn't Melinda McGeorge. It was Sheila Gray. Sheila was a high-priced call girl that the casinos used to keep high rollers coming back. She was also an occasional client. She didn't smoke and she didn't do drugs, so she was OK with him. What consenting adults did in the privacy of their rooms was their business.

"What's the matter, Sheila?" he pointed to a wing chair opposite his desk. "Take off your coat, it's dripping wet. Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea?"

"I'll take off my coat, but I can't stay long enough for tea. I'm in a jam. I think I'm being framed for murder."

"Tell me about it."

"You know Judge Leo Hardin?"

"Camden County Superior Court judge, right?"

"That's the one. He's dead."

"What happened?"

"The story is going to be that I shot him."

"Did you?"

"No, of course not. Shooting people is bad for business."

"Tell me what happened."

"I was partying and had just finished with a client. We were lounging around in robes. My host leaves fresh robes in every room so his guests can feel comfortable and casual before and after sex."

"Who was the client?" English asked. "Who was the host?"

She smiled a sweet smile. A smile you might expect from a little girl on her way to Sunday school. “It’s bad for business to name names.”

“It’s bad for a defense if we don’t have names.”

“Maybe later,” she said.

“Continue.”

“We heard shouting and something crashing. So, we stepped out of our room and into the living room.”

“So, you were partying at someone’s house.”

“Maybe. A young girl, no more than a teenager (I think her name is Connie) was making fun of Judge Hardin. She said he was old and fat and smelly and the only way he could get someone to come on to him was for money. Then she started berating his manhood -- or lack of it. He put his hands around her throat and started to choke her.

“‘Do something!’ I said to the guy with me. He did nothing. He simply stood there trying to hold his robe closed and said, ‘It’s none of our business. Let’s go.’”

“He pulled me back in the direction of the room. I resisted. Hardin had two-hundred pounds on the girl. I took a step toward him. One of the other girls, I think she calls herself Tiny, pounded on Hardin’s back and shouted for him to stop it. Hardin continued choking Connie. She was turning blue.

“Tiny picked up a vase and smashed it over Hardin’s head. He let go of Connie and seemed dazed for a second. Then he turned on Tiny and

slapped her so hard, it knocked her off her feet. She hit her head on the corner of a marble table and blood poured out of it -- so much blood.

“‘We gotta’ help her,’ I said to my client. He continued holding my arm and wouldn’t let me go.

“Security came. My host always has at least two men standing by in case things get out of hand. By this time, Connie recovered a little from being choked and rather than getting away, she went back to berating and cursing Hardin. This time she cursed him for hitting Tiny. He turned on Connie and began choking her again.

One of the security guards put his arm around Hardin’s neck and pulled him off her. Hardin, who must weigh three hundred pounds, fought back. Somehow, Hardin got the man’s revolver. As he pointed it at the first security guard, the second one opened fire and hit Hardin in the neck. Blood sprayed out like a fire hose.

“Hardin dropped his gun and grabbed his neck. He looked straight at me, his knees buckled, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed to the floor.

“The shooter checked Hardin. ‘Dead,’ was all he said.

“The other guard checked Connie and shook his head no. Then he checked Tiny and shook his head no again.

‘We got to get out of here,’ my client said, grabbing my wrist hard and dragging me back to the bedroom where we had left our clothes. As we

got dressed, he said, ‘We were never here! Understand?’

“I said sure. I always agree with clients, no matter what I am thinking.”

“As you can see, it’s sleeting. There is a small coat room off the main entrance foyer. We had left our coats there. We grabbed them and made a hasty exit.

“He had his car and I had mine. We were parked at opposite ends of the house. We went our separate ways. I was just a few feet from my car when I reached into the right-hand pocket of my trench coat. I expected to find my gloves. Instead, I found this,” She held a snub nose .38 in her hand.

“Your gun?”

“I never saw it before in my life.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Somebody put it there. I’m pretty sure this is the gun they shot Hardin with.”

“And now your prints are on it.” English inserted a mechanical pencil in the trigger guard and lifted it to his nose. “It’s been fired recently.”

“What should I do?”

English handed the mechanical pencil to Gray. “Don’t talk for a minute. Don’t do anything but hold that pencil.”

“It’s getting heavy.”

“Trust me, Shelia. And listen carefully to what I say.” He laid a sheet of copy paper on his desk. Then he reached into a bottom drawer and pulled out a container of Clorox wipes and set it gently on

his desk. “Excuse me a minute while I use the men’s room. Please place the gun on this paper before I return.”

English went to the men’s room, stared at the ceiling for a few seconds, then washed his hands and returned to his office. The gun was on the white sheet paper when he returned. It had a clean fresh smell.

“What do we do now?” Shelia Gray asked.

Chapter Two: Vanish

“You need to leave town for a while,” Jack English said. “Do you have a phone?”

“Yes,” Sheila Gray said.

“Is it on or off?”

“I turn it off before I leave for a client meeting. No point in helping an eager beaver assistant prosecutor bust me for prostitution. And, clients appreciate the discretion.”

“Good. I’d like you to be someplace close in case there are developments, but not too close. Don’t tell me where you are going or where you are staying.” He reached into his desk and pulled out a burner phone. It was still in a plastic blister pack. “Use this to contact me. Don’t use it to contact anyone else.” He handed her the phone.

“Do you have cash on you?”

“A little. A few hundred.”

“Good.” He reached into the center drawer of his desk and pulled out an envelope. “This is a Jane Doe credit card. It can’t be traced it back to you. It has a \$2,000 limit. Whatever you spend, you will have to pay me back later.”

“Got it.”

“Here’s the plan. I’m going to drive you to the Atlantic City Airport. My phone will be off, so no one will be able to track me there. Once we get to the airport, you are going to turn on your phone and call Spirit Airlines. Ask whether they have any international flights leaving in the next hour. If not, inquire about a flight to Houston. Ask whether you can pay cash. We’re going to hang out in a parking lot for about ten minutes. Turn off your phone and I will drive you to the Philadelphia airport, and from there you can vanish for a while. But don’t go too far. Just far enough. Where is your car?”

“I left it in a church parking lot three blocks from here.”

“Good. Give me your car key and tomorrow I’ll have someone drop it off in your condo’s parking garage. I’ll mail you the key. It will be waiting for you when you return.”

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English set his brief aside and went to get his Porsche. The sleet had turned to rain. It was cold and steady. He pulled in front of the office. Sheila Gray slid in. They drove to the Atlantic City Airport. Gray turned on her phone, called Spirit Airlines, asked about flights, and then turned her

phone off again. Anyone using cell towers to track her movements would find that was her last known location.

“What should I do with my phone?” she asked.

“You’re not going to be able to use it for a while. I better take your SIM card just in case. I don’t want you accidentally turning it back on, at least not until we figure this thing out.”

She handed him the phone. He managed to get the SIM card out and put the phone back together. He slipped her SIM card into his wallet. There was no telling what she information she had stored on it or how a prosecutor might use that against her. He didn’t want it falling into the wrong hands.

Then they headed up the Atlantic City Expressway to the Philadelphia International Airport. On a good day, you can make it in an hour and twenty minutes. In such rotten weather, it could take two or three hours.

Often, when it was cold and rainy in Atlantic City, it is snowing further inland. The rain changed to sleet where the Atlantic City Expressway crossed the Garden State Parkway. The sleet changed to snow at the Egg Harbor Toll Plaza. Visibility dropped. Dark tire tracks were cut into an inch of accumulated slush. Most people have the good sense to slow down in the snow, but there are a few people who see driving in a snowstorm as a personal a challenge. A green Land Rover roared by them.

Slow and steady, English thought. If Gray was being framed, he didn't want to get into an accident with a fugitive in his car, especially not a fugitive accused of killing a judge. A few miles on, just before the Expressway dumps into Route 42, a police car came up behind him, rolling its red and blue lights. He could see a second police car behind the first, also with its lights on. They were closing fast.

Jack English took his foot off the gas and let the car slow itself without hitting the brakes. The police cars roared past them and kept going. A car had skidded off the road and was pointing in the wrong direction. It was the green Land Rover. Skid marks from the roadway led to a tree. The Land Rover was smack up against it and was beginning to burn.

Sheila Gray glanced over, "We're taking this nice and slow. Right, Jack?"

"Right."

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They drove in silence for a while. Then English said, "Tell me about this party house."

"I don't want to get too specific," Gray said. "It belongs to a rich guy. He's some kind of investment genius. He has a lot of friends who are high flyers, literally. Investors fly to Atlantic City to visit him. They show up at the house and if they have a golden key, security lets them in."

"A golden key? Is that a figure of speech?"

“No, it’s a literal golden key. It’s about the size of a house key and it has a number on it. If you party with someone, you get the number of their key and text it to a phone number. The next day, money is wired into your account.”

“Fascinating, but I need a name, Sheila. What’s his name?”

“Don’t press me on this, Jack.”

“So, this guy -- it is a guy, isn’t it? This guy supplies sex to rich people. Why the secrecy?”

“You’re missing the big picture, Jack.”

“So, fill me in.”

“It’s about sex and money.”

“And you think people come to him because he can make them money?” English asked.

“The rumor is that my host makes lots of money for lots of people. Money is how he draws people in. He talks money. He takes them to dinner. And then he begins to feel out their weakness. If its drugs or gambling, he cuts them loose. Too risky. When I say he cuts them loose, I mean he invests their money and keeps them at arms-length. But if their weakness is sex, or pornography, he reels them in. He keeps a stable of young women who have just the right attitude toward sex, just the right aptitude for sex, and just the right attributes for sex, if you know what I mean. My guess is that a lot of these young women are under-aged.”

“You mean like nineteen or twenty?” English asked.

“I mean like sixteen or seventeen. Some might be young as fifteen. So, this isn’t just about sex, and it isn’t just about making money. It’s about sex and money and blackmail.”

“Blackmail?”

“I spotted cameras in the room my client and I used. I’ve been down that road before with others. So, I know how to put a Post-It over the lens. I try to protect my client’s interests.”

“Very noble.”

“They seem to appreciate it.”

“Where does this mystery host get these underaged girls?”

“Some are runaways, some he picks up from homeless shelters, some he recruits online.”

“Where does the blackmail come in?”

“He likes to video his guests having sex -- having under-aged sex, to be specific. I understand he only uses his recording when someone threatens to expose his operation.”

“If he likes underaged women,” English asked, “why were you there?”

“Some of his clients are squeamish about sex with underaged woman. So for them, he calls on other professionals, like me.”

“How long has he been doing this?”

Gray glanced at English, “My sources say he has been doing this for twenty years.”

“And he’s never been caught?”

“Friends in high places. He doesn’t just recruit investors into his little sex club. He recruits powerful people from all over.”

“Like Judge Hardin.”

“Like Judge Hardin. I’ll bet you would recognize half the names on his client list.”

“Does he have a client list?” English asked.

“No idea. By all accounts he is a genius. Maybe he keeps it all in his head.”

Chapter Three: Gun

It was 2:00 am by the time Jack English dropped Sheila Gray off at the Philadelphia International Airport. The snow stopped and the temperature dropped. Road slush froze solid. Traction dropped practically to zero. He followed a series of snow plows and salting trucks most of the way back to Atlantic City. He passed four more accidents, and each one was an invitation to slow down.

It was nearly five in the morning when he sat back down at his desk. He made a cup of coffee and stared at the gun. He went to the janitor’s closet and found a pair of rubber gloves. Then he went to his stationery cabinet and found a box of oversized manilla envelopes. He pulled one out from the center because it was less likely to have his or his secretary’s prints on it. He used a permanent marker to write on the envelope in big letters:

To: Atlantic County Prosecutor

He composed a note on his computer, taking care not to touch the paper. The note said:

This may be the gun that killed
Judge Hardin.

I have no proof of that fact.

He wrapped the gun in more copy paper and slid it and the note into the envelope. Then, still wearing gloves, he walked the package to the mailbox in front of the Atlantic County Courthouse. It was only two blocks from his office. He dropped the envelope in and walked away.

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It was 10:00 the next morning before a representative of the United States Postal Service opened the box and started pulling mail out. He got to the envelope with the gun. There were no stamps on it, no return address, it was addressed to the county prosecutor, and it was heavy.

He stopped what he was doing, walked into the Courthouse, and approached the first officer he saw. "Officer, there is a suspicious package in the mailbox outside."

"Suspicious how?" the officer asked.

The mailman told him.

The officer called the bomb squad and they cordoned off the area.

The bomb squad X-rayed the package and determined it contained a gun. They opened it just to make sure, and called Roy Packett, the county prosecutor. The bomb squad placed the gun in a plastic evidence bag. The note about Judge Hardin was in another plastic evidence bag.

Packett carried the evidence bags back to his office and laid them on his desk. He got on his computer and found the phone number for Judge Hardin's chambers. "This is Roy Packett, Atlantic County Prosecutor. May I speak to Judge Hardin, please?"

Will McDuff, Atlantic County's best detective, stood at the corner of Packett's desk listening. He could only hear Packett's side of the conversation.

"When do you expect him in?"

There was a pause.

"Can you call him at home? This is an urgent matter."

There was another pause.

"Does his wife know where we can contact him?"

There was a final pause.

"Please have Judge Hardin or his clerk call me immediately when he comes in." Packett hung up and looked up at McDuff. "What do you think?"

"Let's talk to the judge's wife and find out what she knows," McDuff said.

“We don’t want to alarm her, just in case the judge just wandered off somewhere.”

“Like where?”

“I don’t know. Do you know Judge Hardin?” Packett asked. “He’s one cheeseburger short of a heart attack. He may be in the hospital somewhere. Call all the hospitals in Atlantic and Camden Counties and see whether he was admitted anywhere. Call his clerk back and see what kind of car he drives and get the license plate. Check for traffic accidents, stolen cars, anything. I think Hardin lives in Haddonfield. Call the local police and ask them to let you know if Mrs. Hardin files a missing person report.”

“They are going to want to know why,” McDuff said.

“Tell them, he didn’t show up for court this morning and the Atlantic County Prosecutor has an urgent matter for him to consider. That should be enough for now.”

“And if the wife files a missing person report?” McDuff asked.

“Then we come forward with the gun.”

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It was 3:00 in the afternoon and Patrolman Nick Evers, was about to set up a speed trap on a stretch of Route 206 that runs through the Jersey pine barrens. The desolation on that stretch of road practically begged people to pour on the gas. His best collar was a guy in a Datsun 240Z that hit 118 miles an hour. That was a sweet ticket to write.

He eased his patrol car onto the shoulder of Route 206 near Nascohaug Road. Nascohaug Road led to an even more desolate area deeper in the pine barrens. As he pulled off Route 206, something caught his eye. It was a big car, half a mile down Nascohaug Road. It was pulled up under a pine tree. *Maybe somebody's in trouble*, he thought. He eased his patrol car down Nascohaug Road and stopped behind the car. It was a big Mercedes. He checked the plates. It was on a watch list. The note said to contact Detective McDuff, Atlantic Count Sheriff's Department.

"Dispatch, this is Evers. I think I found that missing Mercedes everybody's been looking for. Can you patch me through to Detective McDuff, Atlantic City Sheriff's Department?"

It took a couple of minutes, then he heard. "Detective McDuff, how may I help you?"

"This is Patrolman Nick Evers, Hammonton PD. I found your missing Mercedes."

"Is there anybody with the car?"

"I did a quick walk around and didn't see anybody."

"Evers, be careful not to disturb any footprints or tire tracks. And don't touch anything."

"Detective?"

"Yeah?"

"The watch list did not say, 'Do Not Approach,' so my footprints are going to overlay any that were there already."

"Great!" McDuff snapped.

“Odds of finding good footprints or tire tracks are slim anyway. It’s all sand and pine needles out here.”

“Well, don’t touch anything else!”

“Too late. You are going to find my finger prints on the door handles. I tried to get in but it was locked.”

“Please just sit in your car until I arrive. Got it?”

“Sure detective, but what’s up? Why are you stroking out?” Evers asked.

McDuff didn’t want to give anything away. “It’s a missing persons case. Somebody with a heart condition. Tell me exactly where you are?”

“I’m a half mile down Nascohaug Road, off Route 206. You know where that is?”

“I’ll find it. Just stick with the car until I get there, OK?”

“Anything you say, detective.”

If the critical missing was a heart patient, and they climbed out of the car, they could be lying on the ground somewhere. Evers walked a ten-yard perimeter around the car, just to make sure no one was there.

It was cold so he got back in his patrol car and waited. While he did, he checked out the license plate. The big S-Class Mercedes-Benz belonged to one Judge Leonardo Hardin. *That explains the kid gloves and the detective’s interest*, he thought.