

# DIBS

by  
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A faint glint of chrome between the waxy leaves of the mountain laurel and the rhododendron was what first attracted their attention. It was something that shouldn't have been here, only one reason for chrome in a rain swept gully. The boys glanced up towards the roadway above them then, and saw the trail of broken trees and bushes left behind.

Once they knew what they were looking for, the path was pretty easy to trace.

From above, though, the car would be nearly invisible. It was why no one had even been aware of an accident when they'd first walked up.

Now that they knew what to look for, it was easy enough – even for a group of kids – to reconstruct what had happened. Blind curve, rain-slick macadam surface with just a dusting of loose gravel – either fallen from the back of a DOT truck or simply washed down from the hillside above – to make traction an illusion. Throw in a guardrail that *almost* extended far enough into the curve to prevent a car leaving the road at just that spot, and all the elements were there.

In fact, once they scrambled back up the hill to examine the scene, they immediately picked out skid marks on the grassy shoulder. Dumb luck. Had the driver maintained control for just a fraction of a second longer, the heavy guardrail, galvanized steel sections bolted into thick hardwood posts spaced apart at regular intervals, would have slowed him sufficiently to keep him on the highway ... or at least left evidence enough behind that he'd gone over to have

alerted a passerby that something had happened. Evidence enough for somebody to have gone for help.

As it was, that hadn't happened. As a result, there was really nothing from the highway – unless, like the boys, you were already aware of an accident and were simply piecing the clues together – to indicate anything out of the ordinary had taken place.

Bad for the driver, but lucky the boys had happened along.

Doubly lucky when you consider they weren't even supposed to be here.

He was probably going too fast for conditions, but the rain had come and gone and the roads seemed clear enough, and to be honest, he was more concerned with putting some distance between himself and the last little town.

Sonny Chandler was a salesman – sorry, he corrected himself, a 'documents solutions specialist' – for a national copier company. A pretty damn good one, too, before the economy went south and the whole concept of a disposable income had followed for most of the small business accounts Sonny worked. Most people he spoke with – small mom and pops mostly, or some poor guy suddenly finding himself struggling to replace a salaried income following the latest corporate lay-off – were fighting just to meet overhead each month, making his company's standard 'color multifunction system' featuring 'high volume duplication, image scanning capabilities and an optional three-hundred sheet document feed tray' a lot harder sell with FedEx Office centers springing up everywhere. Even 'bundled together in a budget-friendly package' Sonny's copier market had all but dried up.

Sales had dropped off as sharply as gas prices had risen, and Sonny, who spent anywhere from four to six days a week on the road – depending on what part of his territory he was hitting

at the time – found himself grinding his teeth every time pump prices went up. Higher travel overhead meant less commission, and with his last substantial sale three weeks ago – not counting repeat sales for toner and maintenance contract extensions for maintenance – Sonny could only thank his lucky stars for ‘base plus.’

Had he been a rookie rep on straight commission he’d be making nothing. Zero. Zippity-doo-dah. Even with his base – next to nothing – he was just barely scrapping by.

The only upside was the opportunity to meet and chat with small business owners in towns all over northwest Georgia, east Tennessee, western North Carolina and the whole of South Carolina. It wasn’t that Sonny was so damned affable that he just loved to get out and meet people, it was that his was a sprawling territory, but still small enough to map out a double circuit; one for the company, and one for Sonny Chandler.

It was the Sonny Chandler circuit that was keeping him in cash.

One of the few benefits of a down economy, especially in light of Sonny’s current business model, was that most of the people he came in contact with had a lot of time on their hands. Time to talk. Time to tell Sonny Chandler, who absolutely prided himself on being a good listener, all about their business.

When this had started happening initially, Sonny had resented it as an intrusion on his time. Talking wasn’t selling, and selling was the only thing lining Sonny Chandler’s pocket.

Over time, though, when things had been bad enough long enough, and with week after week between sales, Sonny – ever the consummate entrepreneur – began to recognize this talk time for the opportunity it was.

With no business to speak of, what these small shop owners tended to talk about instead was how they got started, what made them unique, the nuts and bolts of their operation ...

And, with a few casual questions – questions that Sonny grew more adept at slipping innocently into these conversations – their security systems. Truth be known, though, ‘security system’ – at least for most of these guys – make their set-up seem a lot more technical than it really was. If they existed at all, most were pretty simple: door alarms, maybe a security cam covering the front register, or – more likely than not – a heavy duty deadbolt on the backdoor.

Sonny wove the fiction that he’d only recently graduated to selling copier, and before that had been in the security business for years. He wasn’t selling anymore, but he still maintained a professional interest. Sure, he’d be happy to look over what they had, maybe give a semi-professional evaluation. No charge.

It gave him enough information to earmark the businesses that had a good chance of turning up on the Sonny Chandler circuit a month or so later, give or take a day. Just enough time so as not to develop a pattern that might be red-flagged during an investigation (‘Copier salesman, huh? You know, that’s funny, ‘cause there was a break-in down in Honea Path about a month ago, and the owner there told us the exact same thing.’).

No sir. Sonny was smarter than that.

He wasn’t kidding himself, though. Sonny knew it was wrong, what he did. But, soon as the economy turned around ...

He wasn’t holding his breath on the whole stimulus package thing, and while he was strictly small-time, taking – okay, *stealing* – only enough each month to make ends meet, he didn’t see himself weaving his way back onto the straight and narrow any time soon.

Soon as things turned around, though, Salesman of the Year. And that was a promise.

Until then, it was all just penny ante. Crimes of opportunity. A thousand bucks a month maybe in a good month, and never enough in any one place for any of these guys to lose their shirt. Hell, not like he was stealing their life savings or anything.

Also, Sonny was careful not to get too greedy. He might hit someplace every few weeks, maybe double up if things were tight, and never twice in the same county. He had learned that isolated break-ins would likely as not be handled locally. Sometimes by the county, but – especially the smaller ones, and Sonny specialized in small – usually by the town cops, ‘Bubbas with Berettas,’ Sonny liked to call them. Guys who earned their badges more because of who they knew – or were related to – than because of any training or expertise they might have. Guys that made Barney Fife from the old Andy Griffith Show look like that smartass David Hodges from CSI.

It made everything else easy. Piece of cake.

Sonny had just come from one of his personal sales calls – a pretty sweet one, not the best, but still profitable. Feeling a little rushed, and paying more attention to the rearview mirror probably than he should have been, he didn’t see the rain-slick curve until it was too late.

He had hit a tiny diner in a tiny town just south of Asheville, South Hominy – swear to God, that was the name of the town; sometimes you just can’t make this stuff up. It had been about a month and a half since he’d called on the owner, sweet old lady, reminded him of his maternal grandmother – but that didn’t stop him from emptying her cashbox.

Problem came as he was leaving. Sonny had heard a car on the next street over. It could have been anything, but that late at night in a small town, he had immediately thought ‘patrol car’ and gotten spooked, so instead of taking his time – nice and easy, everything in the trunk

where it wouldn't turn up in a casual (read 'warrantless') search, and pull out of town nice and slow, just passing through – Sonny had carelessly thrown the bag into the front seat beside him before pulling away.

Turned out not to be a cop after all. Just some yahoo, probably drunk and trying to slip in just before sun-up without waking the wife, and Sonny had pulled away without incident.

He had only gone about five miles, though, north up NC-151 and on his way to the interstate, when he started thinking about the bag of cash there on the seat beside him. Spooked by the car back in Hominy, Sonny hadn't taken a whole lot of time with the money, just scooping up cash by the handful out of Aunt Bea's lockbox. Hadn't even taken the time to count it.

If he'd just left it there – on the seat beside him, not back in the diner – he would be in Asheville by now, feet up on the bed in a Best Western with a box of Krispy Kremes and a coffee, watching Wheel of Fortune and mapping out his regular afternoon sales calls.

He did still have a sales route to maintain after all, and sometimes he even got an order.

Instead, he had rolled his car to the bottom of a ravine, a hundred feet off the highway and covered in foliage so thick he might never be found. Hanging there in his shoulder harness and suspended over the passenger door – the car had settled on its side – Sonny did a quick check. No blood and no pain. Ordinarily a good thing, but this time Sonny was pretty sure that wasn't the case. There was no pain, but neither was there a whole lot of feeling. Okay, no feeling, to be honest, and he couldn't move his arms or legs. Couldn't even wiggle his fingers or toes; he had tried.

It didn't look good. He remembered the car rolling a number of times before it had finally settled here in this wash below the curve, and now he was trapped at the bottom of a mountain in

a couple of thousand pounds of twisted steel, unable to call out or blow the horn or do anything to attract attention, even if anyone was there, which they weren't.

Trapped and paralyzed and likely to die here, and all because he couldn't keep his eyes of the bag and on the road for another thirty minutes.

Sonny was hanging there, frustrated and feeling sorry for himself, when he heard the noise. Unable to call out or turn his head to see where the noise was coming from, he was pretty sure he could make out voices, several of them, and the sound of footsteps and sliding in wet leaves on the slope above him.

It sounded like kids. No, he corrected himself, it sounded like salvation.

Thank you, God.

"Over here!" one of the voices called out to the rest, "I found it! Looks like a car!"

There was a flurry of sliding, scurrying feet coming suddenly closer and then pattering to a stop at the bottom of the gully.

"Gee, Mr. Wizard, you think so?" There was general laughter all around as the rest of the kids – Sonny thought about four of them from the sounds of their voices – laughed at the one who had announced that the three thousand-odd pounds of twisted, smoking metal, four tires easily visible where it had come to rest on its side 'looked like a car.'

Right away though, the talk turned serious. Sonny could hear small footsteps approaching, dead leaves and scree making tiny crunching sounds as the kids moved hesitantly closer, then the hollow scrambling of someone climbing up onto the side of the car, lying on its side in the narrow ravine. Climbing up for a better look.

"I think this guy's dead," a tiny voice whispered.

Where the car had settled, Sonny couldn't see anything through the windshield but dead leaves and scrub brush, the wall of the ravine, but then finally the kid who had announced to the rest that 'this guy was dead' poked his head into Sonny Chandler's field of vision, leaning in just slightly through the open window.

He appeared to be about eight years old – with no kids of his own, and only one nephew he saw about every third Christmas, Sonny wasn't very good with ages – and dressed in cut-off jeans and a Bart Simpson t-shirt. He poked his head slowly into the car.

Sonny wanted to reassure him. What he *didn't* want to do was maybe spook the poor kid and scare away maybe his only hope of rescue, but found his was unable to talk or turn his head. He wondered absently if the two things were related. He had managed not only to paralyze himself over his bag of cash – he never did get a chance to count it, having just started fanning through the bills when his left front tire found the gravel and left the road, but he was pretty sure it was less than five hundred bucks – but to crush his throat, as well. A twofer. Great.

Instead, hanging there in the nylon harness of the seatbelt, Sonny could only follow the kid with his eyes, hoping to get his attention.

But before he could, another small hand snaked in to pull the first kid up and out of the way, and a second head popped into the car. This one was a little older, a little bigger. The leader of the little band of yard apes. Sonny was becoming frustrated now, wanting them to finish up with their little adventure and send someone back for help.

He blinked his eyes rapidly hoping to get the boy's attention. It was the only movement he was capable of. It worked.

The little sandy-haired kid turned and looked directly at him, surprised. Sonny was briefly afraid the kid was going to bolt, but then he leaned in close.

Sonny blinked again in case he'd missed it. Three quick ones.

The kid blinked back, also three times, but said nothing.

Sonny waited for a moment, but still the kid didn't say anything. He blinked again, starting to feel a little foolish. Blink. Blink. Blink. Maybe the kid thought he was seeing things the first time.

The kid blinked again – three times – and, without pulling away, called to his friends still gathered outside.

“Naw,” he announced, grinning broadly, “This guy's alive, I just saw him blink.”

Sonny relaxed. Finally.

But then he saw the small pair of eyes move past, down to the passenger door on which the car was resting, and to the paper bag. The paper bag with a fistful of tens and twenties hanging out of a tear in the side.

The eyes widened.

“Hey!” the kid called out, forgetting all about Sonny, hanging three immobile and trying desperately to shake his head, *No. Me! Forget the money, what about me!*, “There's money in here! Looks like a fortune!”

Not a fortune, Sonny wanted to say. A few hundred bucks. Certainly not enough to end up paralyzed – maybe for life? It was the first time that had occurred to Sonny – in the bottom of a washed out gully in the middle of nowhere.

No, not a fortune at all. A mistake, that's what it was. A really big mistake.

Sonny's reverie was interrupted by a stampede of scrambling feet as the whole crew climbed up onto the side of the car and more heads poked into the driver's side window, jostling Sonny carelessly around in the shoulder harness and trying to get a look at the cash.

Then the circle of heads pulled back and a pair of legs appeared. Jean shorts, scraped up knee and a pair of muddy tennis shoes. Hands snaked to pull Sonny's upper body out of the way while one of the smaller kids lowered himself into the car, dropping past Sonny and onto the passenger door. Scooping the rogue bills back into the bag with the rest, he rolled it all up together and shoved in down the front of his t-shirt, then stood and held both arms up overhead for the others to pull him out.

Other than as an obstacle to be moved aside for easy access, no one was paying any attention to Sonny anymore at all.

The two little legs disappeared the way they had come in. Hands released Sonny, and he could hear more scrambling as the kids slid off onto the ground, then a ragged collection of 'oooooohs' and 'aaaahs' and 'how much is in there?' as everyone turned their attention to the bag.

There was no pain, but Sonny realized suddenly he was very tired. He'd think about what to do later, vaguely hoping the kids would still be around when he woke up.

They were.

When Sonny came around again – he wasn't sure how long he'd been out, but the shadows had lengthened into late afternoon – it was to one of the kids crawling over him into the front seat. He could hear another one or two poking around in the back.

"Check the glove box," someone called from outside, "Maybe there's something in there ... maybe a gun!"

It was a valid assumption, Sonny agreed. Had he come across a car in the woods and found a sack of money, he would probably have jumped to the same conclusion. The guy was a thief. A criminal. Only stood to reason that he would have a gun.

Only problem was that Sonny wasn't a thief. Sonny was a copier salesman. Even when he was relieving unsuspecting shop owners of cash and easily-pawned valuables – cameras and computers were particularly easy to move – he never thought of himself as a thief.

He cut his eyes over to the kid squatting down against the passenger door, rifling through the papers and detritus of his glove box: mints and gum and maps and reading glasses, an owner's manual and insurance card. The kid picked up the card.

“Say's this guy's name is Randall Chandler,” he called out to the others, waiting outside on the hill to see what else might be found. As the kid looked up through the driver's window and into the sunlight, he seemed to noticed Sonny's arm for the first time, dangling there beside him and rocking back and forth each time he brushed up against it. The Jacques Lemans Tempora was a nice watch, one that Sonny had picked up in one of his first 'stops,' a little mom and pop jewelers down in Saluda. He could probably have gotten six or eight hundred bucks for it, but instead kept it as a souvenir. Not anymore.

“Hey,” the kid called back up, “I got dibs on the watch!” Sonny noted absently there was no feeling as the kid slipped the watch from his wrist.

Another head poked inside. The sandy-haired leader. He looked down at the kid at the glove box, conceding the watch. Finder's keepers. Then he looked back at Sonny.

“Prob'ly a different guy,” he said, referring to the name on the insurance card, “I'm guessing the car is stolen. Randall Chandler is probably the guy who owns it.”

*I'm not a thief*, Sonny thought angrily. He'd broken into about a dozen places. Total. All of them at night and nobody hurt, had stolen maybe five thousand dollars in his entire criminal career, and now all of a sudden he was John Dillinger. Scruffy-assed little bastards.

Then he added to the kid at the glove box, "While you're in there, check his pockets."

*Now wait just a goddamn minute*, Sonny thought, indignant that he was being treated so callously by a gang of little juvenile delinquents. Couldn't they see that he was injured? Didn't they know they were wasting time? Sonny didn't know a whole lot about emergency medicine, but he was pretty sure that the sooner help arrived – *real* help, not a bunch of greedy little kids – the better his chances for recovery.

In the beginning, he'd been worried that 'help' would include the police. Highway patrol, at least. They would find the money, ask around in the area – he was still only a few miles from South Hominy – and then, after giving Sonny a day or so to recover, they would finally get around to asking about the cash. The first hour or so, he'd even tried out a couple of alibis, but now he didn't care, he just wanted out. They find out about the cash – or even uncover Sonny's little crime spree across three states – so what? Not like he had a record. Even if some little Podunk county judge threw the book at him, what were they be talking? Five year? Ten, maybe? Tops. Then probably only years or maybe even months of time served and parole.

It had bothered him at first, but Sonny had sense determined that it was something he could live with. Better than rotting out here in the woods; better than being picked apart by animals.

Kids needed to get their asses in gear, though. Get back up to the highway and flag somebody down. Call nine-one-one. Something.

Instead, this one kid – the ‘dibs on the watch’ kid – was pawing through his pockets, and Sonny briefly marveled at the detached ‘watching this happen to someone else’ feeling of seeing the kid turning out his pockets with no accompanying feeling. No feeling at all.

Fishing into Sonny’s back pocket, the hand came out with a wallet, first fanning open the bill compartment and scooping out a thin stack of fives and tens before slipping the driver’s license from its clear plastic pocket and passing it up to waiting hands. Then he tossed the wallet onto the floorboards. Sonny was confused briefly, then he realized What’s a ten year-old gonna do with credit cards?

“Son of a gun,” he heard Sandy-Hair announce from above him, “What do you know, guy’s name really is Randall Chandler.” The head dropped back in through the window and turned to Sonny, nearly touching nose-to-nose. “How ya doing, Randall,” he smiled an innocent, little-kid smile, “... got anything in the trunk?”

It took the kids more than an hour to go over everything – front seat, back seat, glove box, trunk, Sonny’s overnight bag and all of his pockets – before finally deciding the bag of money and the handful of bills in Sonny’s wallet were the only things worth taking.

If they’d been a little older, little bastards probably would have stripped the car, too, Sonny thought, sold it for parts. After satisfying their initial curiosity about who Sonny was, they had ignored him completely.

It was getting on towards dark by the time Sonny heard them settle themselves on the bank of the gully, laughing and joking as the leader counted out the bills and divvied everything up between them.

“*Eight hundred and twenty-six bucks,*” Sonny heard someone announce, sure it was probably Sandy. It actually surprised him a little. It was couple hundred more than he had guessed at, eyeballing the contents of the bag on a rain-slick state road, weaving through the mountains at sixty-five miles an hour with one eye on the road and the other making a quick guesstimate of his take. He was already into the skid before realizing that one eye probably wasn’t enough to pick up on a thin scattering of gravel on a particularly bad curve.

“Let’s see, that’s,” Sonny heard the pause of the ten year-old ring leader struggling through the intricacies of long division, “... a hundred and thirty-seven bucks apiece,” another pause, “and four extra bucks to me for doing the math.”

They all laughed at that one. One hundred and thirty-seven dollars for each of them, untraceable – Sonny realized wryly that ‘untraceable’ in this case simply meant that their parents wouldn’t be told – they weren’t going to quibble over an extra four bucks.

Sonny, with nothing else to do hanging there in the front seat as he was, did his own math. Eight twenty-six minus four. Eight twenty-two divided by one thirty-seven was ... six kids. It was the first accurate count he’d been able to get on the gaggle of kids that had just spent the better part of an afternoon crawling in and over his car like rats.

*Okay, he thought, Fine, a hundred and thirty-seven bucks. Congratulations on your good fortune. Now, can we get on with this, please?*

He was hanging here, trapped and maybe dying (hard to tell with no pain, but a slide down a hundred-foot embankment ... there *had* to be internal damage, right?), and all these scruffy little hoodlums cared about was ‘divvying up the loot.’ Okay, fine. It was over. He wouldn’t begrudge them a little excitement, in fact it was probably best for him. They wouldn’t want their parents *or* the police to know about the money, right?

In that case, there was no crime. Just another harried salesman racing through a route that stretched over three states and in a hurry to get to his next appointment. Should've been spending more time with his eyes on the road instead of working on his sales pitch.

He would probably be ticketed. Too fast for conditions, certainly – that was always a good coverall charge that could be tagged on after the fact – and his insurance rates would go up. No big deal. At least he couldn't be charged with leaving the scene of an accident, he giggled at that one, a little giddy now that his ordeal was nearly over.

With any luck, they could patch him up. A little rehab, God willing, and in a few months maybe he might even be back on his feet. They could do miracles with neurosurgery these days.

But no more crime, Sonny promised himself. No more targets of opportunity.

He'd never been a particularly religious man, but it wasn't much of a stretch to take something like this as a sign from God. Yes sir, that was all behind him. From now on he was Randall 'Sonny' Chandler, copier salesman, and his route the straight and narrow.

But first he had to get out of here. First the kids had to ...

Wait a minute. Where were they going?

Making their way back up to the road and home, the kids talked about nothing but the money – nearly a hundred and fifty bucks apiece, a small fortune to a ten year-old.

The trick, though, would be not letting the parents find out.

Very least, they knew they would be expected to give the money back, and then the groundings would begin. Why hadn't they called someone to report the accident? Why hadn't they at least told their parents?

Well – duh! – how about because they’d been somewhere they weren’t supposed to be in the first place? If the parents ever found out they’d been this far out Old Williamston Road, this far outside of town ... well, forget about the wreck and the money, they’d be in enough trouble already. Grounding wouldn’t even be a question; the only question would be for how long.

Better to just put the money away somewhere, spend it a little at a time. Better to just keep their mouths shut about the whole thing.

Yeah, all of them decided together, definitely, that would be best.

Walking past the curve that Sonny Chandler had missed, they all chipped in to erase the traces of his car leaving the road, scuffed tennis shoes spreading the gravel out naturally onto the narrow shoulder of the road.

Driving by on the curving road now, no one would ever notice.

It was dark and getting cold. Sonny could feel the chill of the air on his face still, even though there was nothing from the neck down. The kids had disappeared hours ago, and for a while, Sonny had waited, sure that they would be sending someone back for him.

As night settled in though, and time stretched into hours, he realized it wasn’t going to happen. Nobody was coming for him.

In fact, the only noises he heard now was a snuffling around the car and a series of low, guttural growls. The occasional snap of something canine at something else. Sonny remembered a local farmer that had be in during one of his stops – a hardware store, he seemed to remember – complaining about the coyotes that had been seeded into the area by the Department of Natural Resources to help keep the deer population down.

*Great*, Sonny thought as he heard a fight break out over something the kids had probably left behind, *Our tax dollars at work*.

Then he heard the scraping as they tried to jump up into the car. He seemed to remember that coyotes were supposed to be pretty smart, like dogs. Only a matter of time before one of them found his way in, and then the rest would follow. They had smelled him, he guessed, out here in the woods, probably bleeding. He had no idea, but figured that's what probably attracted them.

Like the kids, just out poking around in the woods, and then discovering Sonny.

Just a target of opportunity.

THE END