

Sharp 9th
A Skinner Malloy Mystery Novel
by Sean Cronin
Chapter 1

The I, Me, Mine Tavern is a converted factory of dark brick and black beams on the lower West Side, close to the river. It smelled damp and moldy when we loaded in early Sunday night. By midnight it was packed and the scent had changed to beer and sweat.

Gillian was singing under the bright stage lights in tight hip huggers and a designer ripped baby-tee. She hadn't done a gig since she'd been attacked, but she seemed relaxed as she moved with the R&B rhythm. As usual, her hips had an affinity for the snare drum and I had an affinity for her hips.

Doc on the drum kit had a James Brown one-beat accent going for a song of mine. The tune never sounded so funky.

Gilli sort of whispered the last verse. It came from deep in her chest,

"There's mist on the water, dark on the land

I'll crawl to the river, I can't hardly stand

My tears keep falling, the night fills with dew

But don't think I'm thinking about you."

I moved stage front, picked out a girl in the audience with a lot of skin showing and smiled. She was stylish-Goth in strappy chrome heels, black fishnets and what looked like, in the dark room and the bright hope that springs eternal in men's breasts, a black rubber mini skirt. She had long, thick, black hair and the requisite big dark eyes. She smiled back at me. I'm told Goths aren't as somber as they used to be.

The audience came mostly from ad agencies, marketing outfits and investment firms, young, twenties and thirties, almost all dressed in traditional New York black-on-black. There was the mandatory smattering of post-modern punk attire – shiny blue camo. The sartorial stew was seasoned with a pinch of neo-Goth and a dash of stoner plaid. They all moved to the beat.

Most had come to see me, I guess. Some, the cognoscenti, were there for the heavyweights on drums, bass and keyboards. A few came to see Gilli. I hoped they were all there to donate to the cancer charity, which was what the gig was for.

Couples danced and singles swayed in place. Light filtered down from track lights in the dark ceiling beams and flickered off Martini glasses and long-necked beer bottles.

It was a casual gig and the band was so good I didn't have to lead it. No pressure. I had fun voicing horn-like triplets, trying to capture the great old soul sound. My 1960 Jazzmaster was plugged straight into an old, beat-up Super Reverb amplifier. The knife-edged shine of the notes flying from the amp hit me, cut past me, touched Gilli's bare lower back, spread and soared into the crowd. R&B. You can't ask for more than that.

She turned away from the mic, raised her hand above her head and nodded at me. Her smooth skin glowed under the red spotlights. Sweat on her forehead and cheekbones, her long auburn hair shining.

I turned toward Doc and he took the tempo down on the toms and ride cymbal. Terry on keyboards swelled the B3 sound into a ninth chord and J. J. on bass thumped out big, measured notes on the root and fifth. I bent a ninth up, added some B. B. King vibrato and felt the suffering and hope that lives in a sharp ninth note - not major, not minor, somewhere else.

We held the chord as Gilli scat-sang an Ella-type riff, smooth and desolate. Then she shifted into her husky speaking voice and said into the mic, "Thank

you. Thank you from the children at Saint Vincent's Hospital. Thank you so much for coming out tonight. You're great, you're generous, and you're fighting childhood cancer. You rock."

Doc hit, smack, boom, boom, boom and the stage lights went out.

In the blinding bright circles of the spotlights' afterimage, like the flares we tossed over the enemy, I felt Gilli's soft, moist cheek against mine, caught the scent of soap in her hair. She lightly put her hand on my chest and whispered, "Got to talk to you. Not good. They fired me." Then she was gone into the crowd.

I stood at the bar with Paige Caldwell, the Goth. Early twenties. Skin radiantly white. A lovely moonlight white. I've had more experience than most guys in the arts of feminine skin care and makeup, but her super-white radiance was unprecedented, even for me.

Her pretty athletic arms were laced with a vine-like sheath of tats in a reptilian theme of dragons and serpents, with a couple of Maltese crosses tossed in. The abundance of the amphibian exhibit on her arms was artistically counteracted by her minimalist sheer silk blouse tied, very neatly, just below her perky breasts, which were noticeably tattoo-free and unencumbered by undergarments.

"Skinner Malloy, right?" she said.

"Yep. Hi."

"I've heard of you. Never heard you play live. You're good."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"You in the 'Me' just for the charity?"

'Me' is the hip cat's term for the I, Me, Mine Tavern. 'Me' trips more lightly off the tongue than Harrison's full lyric after a few colored martinis, which are ubiquitous in the place.

I nodded and took a sip of beer.

She said, "I liked the girl singer. You play with her a lot?"

"We've done a few charity things over the past few months. She doesn't sing professionally anymore."

"Hey, wait. That rape. In the news, maybe a few months ago. Are you that army hero guy? Caught the..."

"Never been in the Army."

"Okay, okay, don't get aggressive," putting her hands up like I'd pulled a gun. "Just a thought. It will come to me. I've got a very good memory."

I smiled and said, "You've got beautiful eyes, too." They were very dark, almost black.

"Well thank you, sir. That what you tell all the girls?"

I shrugged.

She rolled her eyes toward the high, dim ceiling. "You're not very forthcoming, are you?"

I smiled at her sweetly.

"Great," she said. "Okay, is this a real charity gig?"

"What the hell you think?"

"Money doesn't always get to the people who need it."

"You always so cynical? The band doesn't take any money. Whatever we get from the cover charge we give to St. Vincent's Hospital."

"It's sweet you do this."

"An obligation for me, in a way."

"Admirable impulse. You doing any real concerts? For money?"

"No touring for a while. Some studio stuff will come up, maybe."

"So, Skinner, how do you make a living? Am I too pushy?"

I said, "Not really. Maybe a little aggressive. Oddly inquisitive."

"I can live with that," she said. "So, how do you make a buck?"

“And persistent.”

She smiled a warm, insincere smile and asked, “So, income?”

“I put out a new CD about a month ago,” I said, sidestepping that.

“Doing well online. Of course, you don’t make money online. You need some airplay. I heard one of the commercial radio networks might pick up one of my tunes. I’m not holding my breath.”

I saw Gillian across the room. She was surrounded by a half dozen of the black-on-black crowd, all men. She tossed her silky hair and it glowed softly gold in the light from the Japanese-shaded lamps hanging from the ceiling twenty feet above. She managed to embrace all the guys in her laughter.

“She your girlfriend?” Paige asked.

“Huh?”

“The girl singer? The tall one with the gorgeous auburn hair? The one you’re staring at.”

“No, she’s just a friend.”

“Right,” she said.

“Really.”

Paige had a silver ring in her left nostril, which disrupted the aquiline flow of her nose. The charcoal makeup around her dark eyes made her face look a bit cadaverous. I thought I’d tell her she wasn’t maximizing her physical assets, in a spirit of helpfulness. But then I looked her over some more.

There was an extensive expanse of toned, white skin below her breasts. A silver chain hung from her navel, snaked down her lower belly and clipped on a studded black leather belt that, ostensibly, held up her impossibly low-cut, sprayed-on black mini skirt.

“A gentleman,” she said, although it might have been a question.

Smoking is a wonderful social accessory. Buys you time. Unfortunately, the sovereign state of New York, along with most of the industrialized nations,

no longer see it that way. But I've adapted. I pulled out a strip of nicotine gum, ran my thumbnail down the foil package, popped out a square and slipped it into my mouth. Cinnamon Surprise tasted like cumin mixed with aluminum flakes.

"Maybe. Look, I'm one of those mid-level musicians virtually no one's ever heard of," I said savoring the noxious gum.

"But I've heard of you. Because I know music. Come on, test me.

"Okay, where'd that line come from? *'Test me, come on, and test me.'*"

"I just said it. Is this arcane repartee? Or are you just teasing me?"

"Paige, I'm not going to tease you with word games."

Her dark eyes seemed to get bigger, more luminous and I realized that maybe the makeup had functional advantages.

I said, "The line comes from a Dead song, *'Bertha.'*"

"I've heard of the Dead. Everybody knows the Dead. You call this a quiz?"

"It's a bit esoteric. But, you adumbrated the Dead. We all need to know our antecedents."

"You're a bit didactic for a musician. And don't preach to me." She gazed off to the side, seemed to slouch a bit, looked back at me with a hint of sneer.

"It's a meaningless world. Lectures can't change that."

I leaned down next to her ear and said softly, "And you're a bit too well spoken to be play Goth and get away with it. Your name's all wrong too, Paige, doesn't fit the Gothic image."

She smelled of perspiration and light perfume. She blushed, just her cheekbones and chest.

"Skinner?" came from somewhere far off. Then again, closer, "Skinner? Earth to Skinner."

Gillian was standing behind Paige, looking at me with one hand on her hip, the other resting lightly against her face. A study in perplexed amusement, though her eyes weren't in it somehow.

"Hi, I'm Gillian Carroll," she said to Paige, reaching out her hand.

Paige turned quickly toward Gilli, then slowly extended her hand.

"I'm Paige Caldwell."

They shook hands and broke contact fast.

Paige said, "I was just talking to Skinner and..."

"I don't own him. Be my guest. But I need him now."

"I think this is my exit cue," Paige said. "Skinner, my email is Paige-dot-Caldwell" and the rest was unclear. She moved away on chrome stilettos with a sway of her hips.

Gilli came up close to me. She tried a smile that faded quickly.

"Your place? About half an hour, okay?" she asked.

Gilli curled into a corner of my leather couch in front of the fire. It was about two a.m. The top leaves of the maple trees rooted into the sidewalk three floors below moved slowly against the tall windows that face east. The leaves were a slick yellow-green in the backlight from the streetlights that shined up through the high branches. The night sky above the maples was dark misty blue.

She'd put on a bulky gray sweatshirt of mine and a pair of pink and white slipper-socks she leaves at my place. Her hands were covered to her fingertips inside the thick fleecy cotton of the sweatshirt. Her legs were scrunched up tight under her on the butter-colored cushions. Her auburn hair flowed across her shoulders. One thick strand fell across the left side of her face.

I put two cups of espresso on the tin-topped coffee table, walked to the long wall of windows and looked down the street and across at the rooftops. Then I stood near the fireplace I'd built into the long brick wall running the length of my place on the south side.

"Fired me, just like that. They told me Friday afternoon. I didn't have a hint it was coming. Boss didn't even have the nerve to face me. Sent some lawyer. And listen to this, they had me escorted out of the building by security guards. A perp walk through the cubicles. That walk felt like it took hours."

I lit a Camel, breathed in deeply.

I said, "What did they say you did?"

Her eyes were a little red and there was moisture on her lower eyelids.

"Insubordination to a client. I didn't even know what they were talking about at first. It was like they were talking about someone else. I don't know. I've only been there five months. But I got a great interim review. Then they come up with this. I'd given a routine media report to two marketing guys from a major client, Consolidated Insurance, Eric Hopkins and Rick Granville. Granville's sort of a slug. Hopkins seems okay. Snotty, but he seems interested in the work. Goes to L. A. to observe the commercial shoots. It's more than most clients do. Their CEO was there, too. Maybe he just didn't like me or something. My boss said he stops by a few times a year to listen in, then goes out for a fancy lunch. I did my presentation, got virtually no questions and I left. Next thing, 'You're out.' Escorted by guards, Skinner. Jeez. I could hardly look at my friends tonight. I could see it in their eyes. The word's out. Damaged goods. And if you're a woman the rumors will be ugly."

She looked up at the dark ceiling beams. "So anyway, I've got a meeting tomorrow with the boss lawyer tomorrow at my ad agency, Jordan Rubin at Omni Media."

"How'd you get that?"

"I called the guy. He said he'd see me. Maybe he'll tell me who got me fired. And why. It's a start. Then I want to see Granville and Hopkins.

"You got guts."

"I act as if I do. Really I'm scared. I just want to get another job and to move on. But who's going to hire me without a recommendation? Do you know how vicious the advertising grapevine can be? Anyhow, I think Hopkins and Granville are behind this, for some obscure reason. I just have to figure out how I can speak to them."

"They can't be hard to find."

"No, they're not. If I could get into the Consolidated Insurance building. No way without a pass. But, hmm, you know, Eric claims to be an art lover, like his boss Edmund Wilson. There are art galas. Very exclusive."

"How exclusive?"

"You'd have to be an artist or rich."

"It ain't me, babe."

"But Skinner, they do call you an artist, don't they? And I know of an art event coming up tomorrow night."

She picked up her coffee and took a sip. She put it down and slowly ran the tip of her pink tongue over her lips. "Oh, poor me. I'm feeling sorry for myself and listen, I heard this at the 'Me' from some of the guys. An accountant at Consolidated, Braddock, I think is the name, died tonight. Horrible accident. She choked on the chain of a swing, in a park up in White Plains. Ought to give me some perspective, huh?"

"Maybe it ought to. But people don't work that way when they're hurt."

"No, I guess we don't. Know what my mother told me when I graduated from undergrad school? She said a girl needs at least six months of savings, just in case."

"What do you have?"

"One month. Maybe."

"Oh."

"Yeah, I'm scared. Money, rent, food. I'm angry and embarrassed about being fired. It's all jumbled. It shouldn't be. I should be tougher than that now, with all the therapy and counseling. But Friday and Saturday I was a mess. I was locked in my apartment, shades down, in bed, just sick, wouldn't answer the phone, as you know."

"That's why I showed up in person."

"But I didn't want to see you. Or I did, I guess. I talked to you."

"For two minutes. From behind your door."

"I opened the door a little. I was a mess, Skinner."

"You looked fine."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know."

"Although I did not look fine and you know it. Thing is, since I was attacked, I can't tell what's making me weird. Maybe getting fired brings out feelings of, maybe, helplessness. I don't know. I'm screwed up."

"Anyone would be."

"I think I'm getting better and then it all falls apart. When I was in the hospital I finally admitted I can't make it in music. So, time to act like a grown up. Got all my credit cards and school loans into one payment, have this good job. I'm doing the therapy. The shrinks say it's about regaining control of my life. A 'process,' they call it. I was feeling pretty good about things. Then bam. I'm fired."

"There are other jobs."

"That's what I said to my mom when she was laid off. It's been two years and she's still looking for work. You know that."

The fire let out a soft hiss. Yellow flames weaved through the logs and put moving shadows on her face. I took the poker and stirred up the flames, sat on the couch.

“You ever been fired?” she asked.

“When I was fourteen. Candy Roberts kicked me out of her New Soul Review, for looking up her skirt. Allegedly.”

Gilli smiled a little. “Allegedly, huh?”

“I was, like, on my back, doing an alligator dance. I learned to dance in that group, you know. So anyway I was on my back like an alligator, performing a complex choreography of my own creation and Candy got the wrong idea.”

“Em.”

“Sure you don’t want a drink?”

“No.”

I got up and stirred the smoldering fire. A few weak yellow flames came up from the red coals.

I put my back against the brick wall and looked at her for a few seconds. Her arms hugged her chest and she rocked a little, like she was cold.

“I’ll help if you want,” I said.

“The art party. You could try to swing that.”

I nodded. “Anything else?”

“Sit and hold me a while?”

“Sure, Gilli. Sure.”