

## Jolene

By Fiona Moore

“I’ve got a case for you,” said Detective Inspector Wilhemine FitzJames. “It’s a country singer whose wife, dog and truck have all left him.”

“Seriously,” she said, after my unprintable reply. “The dog died and there’s nothing much you can do about the wife, but I thought you might be able to help with the truck.”

I leaned back in my reasonably-priced office chair so I could see the screen better. “So, you want me to try and patch things up between them? Bit outside my usual remit.”

The hand-lettered card under the buzzer downstairs read DOCTOR NOAH MOYO, CONSULTANT AUTOLOGIST, and I usually had to explain that to the uninitiated as “like a cross between a psychologist and a social worker, only for cars and other intelligent Things.” Wills, though, had been working for the London Metropolitan Police’s automotive crime unit for much longer than I’d been in practice, and was more likely to ask if you specialised in criminal, restorative, therapeutic or developmental autology, and if your clients were primarily cars, bots, or home appliances.

“Not sure you can.” On screen, Wills shook her mane of dreads. “The truck has been ignoring all communications, and doesn’t seem likely to agree to mediation. I was brought into the case because the fellow turned up at the station reporting an automotive kidnap, but it

didn't take long to establish that the truck had left him and was working for a new user.

Voluntarily.”

“As is his legal right,” I said, “Hers? Its?”

“Hers. Texcoco pickup. Name of Jolene.”

The name rang a bell, and, tediously, sparked an earworm. I told my inner Dolly Parton to get knotted. “If she didn't violate the terms of her contract, she's free to leave and work for someone else.”

“That's what I told him,” Wills said. “But he's having trouble coming to terms with it. Kept claiming she'd been kidnapped. Got upset when we repeatedly told him that the police can't investigate a crime that isn't a crime. I thought maybe you might be able to help. Either patch things up between the two of them, or help him understand and move on.”

“Okay,” I said. I hadn't had many cases recently, and was also hoping to move on, to an office that wasn't deep within an old industrial park and shared with a local construction and demolition company. Maybe print out some furniture that was more comfortable than it was reasonably priced. “Tell him my fees, give him my address and suggest he makes an appointment.”

“So. DI FitzJames tells me you're a country singer,” I said, keeping the doubt out of my voice.

Peter McBride certainly looked like a country singer, or my untutored idea of one anyway. In his late forties, tan-coloured White, smile lines and crows' feet, lean without being skinny. Clint Eastwood with a hint of John Wayne. Actually, more like Timothy Dalton in working-man drag than either. And the greater London area is not generally known for its contributions to the country music genre.

McBride gave that sideways nod people do to acknowledge a partial truth. “Weekdays I work for an insurance company. Weekends I sing. Written a few songs of my own, but people still prefer the classic ones. Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Willie Nelson... I sing covers down the pub, or at events. Performances at car shows.” His voice was pleasant; South London, but he’d cultivated a hint of a generic American drawl to lay over top of it, presumably to go with the rest of the aesthetic.

“You do a lot of car shows?”

A more definite nod. “Used to go all the time. Jolene was three-time national champion in the haulage vehicles category.”

Aha. I realised where I’d heard the name before.

I don’t much like car shows. I spend too much time working with intelligent vehicles to want to spend my spare time with them as well (shades of the old joke about the tragic sex life of the gynaecologist’s wife), and I have better things to do with my weekends than standing around tracks oohing and ahing as cars performed feats of skill and dexterity, or else wandering through the rows telling high-speed Ocelot roadsters and limited-edition Ariel cabriolets that they’re beautiful. But I wasn’t unaware of them, in the same way, I suppose, that a veterinarian is generally familiar with Crufts Dog Show, or a physiotherapist with the local track and field athletic scene.

“Supposing you tell me about Jolene,” I said.

McBride’s face tensed, the smile lines disappearing. “You said you’d help get her back,” he said.

“I said I’d help with the situation,” I said, trying to adjust to the abrupt drop in temperature. “Whether she comes back or not depends on her. But maybe I can help patch things up between you two. So, let’s hear your story. Start wherever you want to. You were—are-- her rider?”

A nod. From what I remembered about car shows, the vehicles themselves were the ones engaging in the feats of skill, but there needed to be a human in the cab: partly out of tradition, partly for direction and strategy, partly to engage the override switch in emergencies. I've known a few riders, though never as really close friends. Most of them had that risk-seeking personality I associated with stuntmen and mountaineers. For me, freelance work is precarious enough that I don't need any more excitement.

"Maybe tell me how you met."

McBride's face relaxed, the smile lines coming back. "I've been on the car show circuit for years," he said. "Singing, yeah, but I was also a part-time rider with the Rebels."

Again, I'd heard of them vaguely. "They're a pod of Texcoco utility vehicles, aren't they? Mixed-category performance team, ensemble work?"

A nod. "Good team. A little unambitious, but good."

The observation seemed strange to me, but I let it pass, resolving to find out what he meant by "unambitious" later, and why it was a problem.

McBride was going on with his story, back in his relaxed, friendly, John-Wayne mode. "It was the Greenwich heavy-vehicle show. I was second string rider for their pickup pair. Enjolras and Eponine." The names threw me for a moment before I remembered that car pods, especially Texcoco ones, often go in for group names on a theme. Les Miserables seemed a little romantic for a macho performance team, but there you go.

"I noticed Jolene because she was competing solo."

"That's unusual," I said. "Especially for a Texcoco."

Cars are social machines, and pods provide them with company and a way of organising (working cars' money usually goes straight into pod accounts, which fund repairs, autology sessions, upgrades, and leisure pursuits). Some have greater personal attachment to their pods than others, usually depending on the make. I'd met a few Verves and Ariels who

were podless, through my professional activities, and their podlessness was usually part of the problem they were seeing me for. I'd never even heard of a Texcoco on her own before this.

McBride nodded, his eyes bright. "Beautiful red pickup. Orange and pink detailing over the wheels. No regular rider, either. She'd hired one for the day, and he'd bailed on her. So I introduced myself. I offered to be her rider, and we just clicked. She had this way of moving; stop and start on a dime, turning in curves." He got an oddly gentle, lyrical tone to his voice as he spoke. "She came second; highest she'd ever come up to that point. My wife had just left, I wanted to spend more time on the circuit, wanted to compete for awards, not just mess around like the Rebels do. So we-- Jolene and me-- talked about going in as a team. That was about five years ago," he concluded. "A year later, she had her first national win. Went on to two more. We were talking about doing the world championships just six months ago." He briefly got a look that made me think he might be tearing up. "She could do it, too, if she'd focus a little more. I don't understand."

"If you don't mind talking about it," I said, as gently as I could, "what's she doing now?"

McBride slammed his fist on the arm of my reasonably-comfortable visitors' chair, startling me and doing the chair no good. "She's working in a quarry," he growled.

"A quarry?"

The fist tightened, the teeth clenched. "You know. Beldite Mining Company, just down the road from here. Diggers get the stuff out of the ground, pickups haul away the spoil. That's what she's doing. Grunt work. Like any ordinary truck." A tense sigh. "She's special. It's a waste."

I nodded gently. "Did she say why?"

“No.” Emphatic. “We’d had a contract at first, but we forgot to renew it. And one day, she just didn’t turn up for practice. Wasn’t in her garage. I asked, found out she was at the quarry. Wouldn’t talk to me, either.” He met my eyes, his own wide and sad. “That’s why I went to the police. I reckon the guy that runs the quarry talked her into it. She’s a nice lady, but too trusting. He might have made it sound like better work than the show circuit.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. But if she won’t talk to me…” he shrugged.

“This… guy… who runs the quarry,” I said. “Do you know him from before?”

Another shrug. “Sort of. He comes to the shows a lot. Knows a lot of the cars, hangs around, talks to them. Buys the riders beers. Some of them like him.”

Not you, I thought. “His employees… Texcocos?”

A nod. “Of course. Best of the heavy vehicles.”

Some Verves might disagree, of course, but that was beside the point. “Did she ever join a new pod, after she met you?”

“No,” McBride said. “But she’s not in the mining company pod either.”

This was a surprise. The line of reasoning I’d been pursuing was fairly obvious—that she’d joined for the social life. “No?”

“I checked the registry. She’s not listed.”

“Huh.”

McBride looked like he was going to attack the chair-arm again. “Talk to her,” he said. “Tell her to come back.”

“I can’t just—”

“The thought of her dinging up her bodywork out there. Awful,” McBride continued, ignoring me. “Wasting those timing and turning skills. She’s doing it to punish me. Me and the whole show circuit.”

“Why would she want to—”

“Just talk to her. Get her back on the circuit. She’s got to be bored of this by now.”

McBride stood, and I realised that I was feeling a sense of relief that the interview was over.

“So, you talked with her?” McBride leaned forward, hands between knees.

I shook my head. “Sorry to disappoint you,” I said, “but she wouldn’t talk with me either.”

“Well—”

“—I can’t make her,” I said, reading the look on his face. “Beldite’s Thing Resources Manager says she’s happy. I had a look around the place and spoke to the pod leader—bulldozer, name of Henshaw—and any of the other machines who wanted to talk. The setup is fine. Work procedures are transparent. No one’s being abused or overworked. Most of the vehicles belong to the union. No evidence of coercion.” And I didn’t see why there should be, I mentally added. It’s not like the resource extraction industry is so short of Things that it needs to kidnap them.

“Could be a cult,” McBride countered. “You know. They say they’re happy but they just think they are. Brainwashed. Need someone to show them the way out.”

I shook my head again. “I’ve worked with cars that have had that experience,” I said. “It’s easy to spot once you know what to look for. There was nothing beyond the usual Texcoco collective spirit.”

It hadn’t been hard to pick her out of the crowd, even in a busy operation like that one. Not just the paintwork, but there had been a certain showiness to her movements that the other haulage vehicles didn’t have. Fast stops and starts, precise dumps and pickups. Like a supermodel in a crowd of normal people. But she seemed to be doing it just for fun: the joy of movement, free-wheeling because she could.

“I think she’s OK where she is,” I said.

I debated whether to tell him the other thing I’d figured out. The name “Jolene” wasn’t on the register of the quarry’s Texcoco pod, it was true. However, looking at registration dates, I couldn’t help but notice that a female pickup answering roughly to her description had applied for membership in the last couple of weeks.

Using the name “Friday.”

Instead, I said, “I’d take comfort in that, and move on.”

McBride swore, gripping the armrests of the chair—now I really was going to have to get them replaced. I decided not to mention her new name, or pod affiliation, or, indeed, to continue with the case.

Wills looked down at the remains of her latte, swirled it in its cup as if seeking inspiration. “There’s something else you should probably know about this McBride,” she said.

I’d been spending the past half-hour of our usual Wednesday-morning-meet-for-coffee session telling her the non-confidential version of how the McBride case, otherwise known as “Jolene, please don’t take my van”, had worked out. Having not heard from him in several days, I was assuming he’d either got the closure he needed, or was seeking it somewhere else.

Either way, I didn’t expect any further developments, and was working on turning it into an anecdote to tell in professional-social settings for years afterwards.

“Oh?” I said, watching two walkbots at the pedestrian crossing, laden with packages, negotiate with each other for position.

“Yeah,” Wills said, having a sip. “I was looking through the records, seeing if I could find which pod Jolene was with—or had been with, as I later found out,” she added. “The pod

itself dissolved; seems to have been one of those cult of personality things, a pod leader who dominates the rest till they can't take it."

I swore. "So she'd have been traumatised in more ways than just normal podlessness." Not just losing your pod, but in a way that involved that kind of breach of trust... experienced autologists would take years to sort that out. I was amazed she'd even been still driving.

"I'd assume so. What's more immediately important, though, is that I found out what happened to the dog."

"You said it died?"

"Yeah. Hit by a vehicle. It's rare, but it still happens."

I was having some thoughts about where that might go. "Was the vehicle... Jolene?"

"Yeah."

"Huh," I said. "Didn't tell me that. Things aren't supposed to kill sentients." I hesitated before asking, "was it deliberate?"

"That's where it gets weirder," Wills said. "It was an incident during a practice session. Seems Jolene was having trouble with one of those precision exercises where the vehicles have to follow a course, avoiding hitting targets. McBride didn't think Jolene was taking it seriously enough so... he put the dog on one of the targets."

I really shouldn't have been drinking coffee when she was talking. I put the mug down and swallowed. "Jesus."

Wills nodded grimly. "You can guess the rest. She didn't know what he was going to do till she was out on the course. It's currently an active case, but neither McBride nor Jolene would talk to the police, and the animal crimes division have been run off their feet lately, so no arrests yet. Either way, it happened not long before she left."

I tapped an order for another latte into my phone and sent it to the counter, wishing we'd picked a café that did stronger drinks too. "What sort of a bastard..."

"And I know where your mind's going," Wills said, "and yes, I did check the details of what happened to the wife. Tilly McBride. No cases pending there, but I recognised the name of the lawyer she used when she filed for divorce." A sip of coffee. "Mostly does pro bono work at A Safe Place."

"Which safe place—" The penny dropped. "Oh. The domestic violence charity."

"I'd say Jolene is well out of it," Wills said. "Seen too much of the human variety, myself. At least she found an escape route."

The next morning, as I checked my messages, I felt a sinking sense of disappointment as I discovered a search alert for news items on McBride. I'd done it a few days earlier, but it had been trapped in the spam filter.

It just seemed like the case would never leave me alone.

Out of pure obsessive completism, I clicked on the search.

Most of the items were from the sports section, and related to Jolene's meteoric career on the car show circuit. A couple of smaller pieces from local news sources and country music sites, announcing McBride's singing gigs; they dwindled away as he spent more time on the track. There didn't seem to be a revival in the absence of Jolene, but then, maybe it was taking him a while to get back on the horse. So to speak.

Then, an item relating to a house fire in southwest London.

Curious as to what the connection was, I clicked through and read.

At first I thought it was a false positive. A report on a fire in a duplex, which had spread to houses around the street. Initially believed to have been electrical, police were treating it as possibly arson, though not saying quite why.

One dead.

A forty-year-old woman named Tilly McBride.

The incident had taken place not long before Jolene had won the nationals for the first time.

My hands hit the touchpad to start a new, more detailed search. Had Jolene known? Had she found out? Was there any way--

My phone rang.

It was Wills. "You need to get to the Beldite quarry straight away," she said. "It's Jolene. There's a taxi outside for you."

The taxi had evidently been briefed, and she got me there at speeds which were potentially illegal.

It wasn't hard to tell where the action was at the quarry. The vehicles had all stopped. They and several police cars had formed a ring of flashing emergency lights around a red pickup truck.

"This is your last warning," Wills was saying. "Get out of the cab, Mr McBride." Switching off the amplifier on her phone's mic, she turned her somber face to me. "He took her by surprise. Jumped in and engaged emergency override. We're treating it as vehicular kidnap and hostage-taking."

"And you want me to..."

"I don't know, talk him down or something." She thumbed the mic and thrust the phone at me.

"Mr McBride?" I said uncertainly. "It's me. Noah Moyo? The autologist?"

No answer.

I tried to make eye contact through the windshield, saw only a set jaw and lowered brows.

I couldn't see his right hand, but it was positioned so that it might very well be on the override switch.

"If you disengage the override now, and get down from the cab," I said, "then there's a chance you and Jolene might be able to work things out." I doubted it, but the point was to get him out of there. "If you don't, then the police will certainly charge you, and you'll never see her again." I tried to make eye contact, succeeded, fractionally.

"Mr McBride?" I said. Then I tried something else.

"I heard what happened to your dog."

The jaw tightened.

I took a chance.

"And your wife."

The right arm loosened slightly.

The pickup moved at a speed I couldn't follow, an instant flaming blur on my vision.

Then there was rushing, and shouting; a digger on its side flashing vehicular distress.

A bright red and chrome tangle, against the bowed steel wall of the site office.

Very red.

"I thought you'd like to know about Jolene," Wills said.

I hadn't been sure if she'd want to meet for coffee at our usual time, given what happened the previous week—I was still having disturbing dreams about the colour red—but she had.

"Is she OK?"

Wills nodded that sideways nod, hid her face in her cup. "They were able to reboot from backup. It was an older one. She doesn't remember what happened."

“Will she... be charged in connection?” I had sent what I’d found on the news search to Wills, in case it might constitute the basis for a claim of self-defence.

Wills shook her head, locks bouncing. “The physical vehicle was damaged beyond repair, so there was no evidence to contradict the witnesses who say that Mr McBride was in control at the time, and drove her into a wall. There’s an inquiry scheduled, but it’s almost a hundred per cent certain the conclusion will be a combined suicide and autocide. Jolene has indicated she won’t press charges in connection with the latter.”

“So it’s all OK?”

Wills thought a bit, as if there was something else to say, but she wasn’t sure how. “She’s changed her name. And her model.”

“Is she still at Beldite?”

A long pause, and a head-shake.

“She’s with a taxi firm now,” Wills said, in a voice heavy with meaning. “New pod. Henshaw and I both suggested it was in her best interests.”

“Why?” I asked. “Trauma? Media interest?”

Again the dreads shook. Another pause. “You remember that case history I gave you,” Wills said. “About the pod leader, and the dog, and McBride’s wife?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “And I told you about the arson—”

Wills cut me off. “There’s been more data coming in,” she said. “Did you know that Tilly McBride had been a judge on the nationals the year previously? That she’d been the only judge to give Jolene a low vote?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Cost her the prize. She’d had to wait a whole year to win. And did you know who the pod leader was, in the pod that broke up?”

“Jolene?”

“Yep.”

I swore.

“Makes you wonder what actually happened to the dog, doesn’t it?”

“Are you going to bring charges?”

“On what?” Wills sighed. “I’ve passed it on to the inquiry, but even if they take it into account, the narratives aren’t clear. The only ones who can untangle the story, can’t talk or won’t. And without that evidence, I can’t make a judgment.”

“So what are you saying?” I said. “In one version, she’s an abuse survivor, winding up in one bad relationship after another, till one of them turns homicidal and she takes matters into her own hands. In another, she’s a cruel manipulator, pushing the people and cars around her into doing terrible things on her behalf.” I thought about it. “There’s even a third, or a fourth, or a fifth... I just don’t know.”

A sideways nod from Wills.

“I saw him take his hand off the override.”

“Will we ever know why, though?”

“I suppose... it’d make a good country song.”

We finished our coffees in silence.

As I stood at the crossing, I saw a lone grey hatchback pass through the intersection. Taxi sign up; a woman, shopping bags, and small child in the seats. Solid, straightforward driving, five kilometres per hour below the speed limit. But there was a showiness to the stop and start that sparked recognition.

I suppose, however she looked, whatever she’d done, she’d always have that. Whether it was a natural beauty showing through whatever her exterior, or a flashy warning of chaos to come....

Sometimes, it was best not to know which version was true.

“Go well,” I said. “Whoever you are now. Go well.”