

## MIGHT JUST TAKE YOUR LIFE

It was a cool evening in early May. With business, not to mention my social life, in a lull, I opted to stay downtown and catch a game at Jacobs Field. The Tribe's late spring skid meant no trouble getting tickets. I used to have to twist arms and jump through hoops. This season the Indians did not impress. At least they had available seats and cold beer.

After the game, I walked the eight blocks back to the garage at St. Clair and Ontario. The breeze off the lake felt good. I felt good. I decided to take an extended weekend, starting the next morning. The flat tire ruined my good spirits.

I always told clients with stalker problems to watch themselves in parking garages, to park in crowded garages where there might be witnesses to an assault. Take someone along, I'd say, especially at night. At ten o'clock on a Thursday night, stadium beer still buzzing mildly through my brain, I paid little heed to my own advice. Why would I? I had most of the Cleveland Police working across the street at the Justice Center. How long did it take to swap out a tire anyway?

I'd just gotten the jack under my car when I heard the ratcheting sound of a revolver.

"Don't move. Stand up slowly. Keep your hands where I can see them." The voice was low, unremarkable, male. "We're going to pretend I'm giving you a lift. Put the jack back in the trunk."

I worked the jack out from under the car and put it back in the trunk. "You realize CPD Headquarters is right across the street." I turned to my assailant. "And you're on video."

He was tall, about six-three or so, and lanky, with long, wavy blonde hair tucked under a dirty Indians cap. With his back carefully turned to the security camera, he took the small snub-nosed gun from his coat pocket. "Do you think that'll matter if you're dead?"

"What do you want? My wallet?"

"Forget the wallet. We're going for a ride."

"How do you know I don't have a gun?"

"I watched you. You came out to your car around six and put it in your trunk. Then you went to a ballgame. Those pesky terrorists have fixed it so you can't carry weapons into a stadium. Isn't that unfortunate?"

I wouldn't have taken a gun to a ballgame anyway. It's a myth that PI's always carry. In fact, I'd had the gun on me because I'd done a skip trace earlier that day. He didn't need to know that.

"Move over to the van and get in the side door," he said. "Don't try anything funny. You'll be dead before the attendant can call the cops."

"You do realize you wouldn't get far if you shoot me."

"I know, but you'd still be dead, so what difference does that make? Now, shut up and get in the van." He gestured to a white Ford Econoline outfitted for commercial use.

I turned and kept my hands at my sides, walking slowly toward the van, my eyes darting about. I could probably leap to the sidewalk, but at three stories above the alley,

I'd break a leg at best. He could probably shoot me where I lay. I climbed in through the van's side door, which he locked behind me. There was no inside lock. He'd erected two cage barriers, like in police cars, blocking off the back of the van and the cab from my seat.

"Just get comfortable," he said. "You're not going anywhere. Now be quiet while I pay the attendant, or I'll shoot both him and you."

*And bring in every cop and deputy sheriff from across the street,* I thought. I didn't think that mattered to him.

We rolled out of the garage. He took time to make idle chitchat with the attendant before turning left onto Ontario. Just above Public Square, he turned right and headed out of downtown.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in Edgewater Park. Dusk had emptied the park of everyone but illicit lovers and the odd dope peddler. The van driver killed the motor and turned off the lights.

Turning back to me, the pistol in his hand where I could see it, he said, "This is how it's going to work, Kepler. I want to know where a friend of yours lives. You're going to take me there. If we don't find her, I'm going to take you somewhere else. I don't want to alarm you, but you're most likely going to die tonight. If you're lucky, I might just take your life, nothing else." He waved the gun toward the back. "However, I may have to use some tools of persuasion if I don't like how you cooperate. Have you ever been burned, Kepler?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"You'll find out soon enough. You'll probably guess it before I tell you. It doesn't matter. You and I and your friend have some business to take care of. Cooperate, and you'll die easy."

"And if I don't?"

"Do you know what a welding torch will do to your penis? Your balls? I would think you'd prefer a bullet to the brain. You'd never know what hit you."

I looked around my cage. I only had the seatbelts. The seat went to the floor, and my captor had made damn sure he left nothing for me to use on him. The sides had no windows. The locks had been stripped from the inside. "Why?"

In the dark, I could see his cold smile. Outside, Lake Erie crashed against the beach below us. Somewhere out on the water, a freighter's horn blew low. He turned and fired up the engine. "You killed my brother, Kepler. Or you had a hand in it. Either way, my brother disappeared one night after trying to teach that cunt a lesson. Now you're both going to pay."

*Oh, shit.* I know whom he meant now. There was no way out of this one. "You think I'm going to help you kill Angie Warren?"

As he worked his way back onto the Shoreway, he laughed. "Probably not. She moved, you know. Right before I got out of prison. My parole officer says if I go looking for her online or through public records, I go back to Mansfield."

We headed east, back into downtown. Soon we were on the Innerbelt heading south. I watched as downtown and the Flats rolled by, glittering in the night. When we

came to the I-90 split, he said, "You might as well tell me where she is now. Otherwise, we're going to have to go someplace private to talk."

"Like where?"

"In the boonies, no one can hear you scream."

It took half an hour for us to get from downtown out to Brunswick, a suburb just over the county line to the south. We rode the whole way in silence, some country station out of Pennsylvania the only voice.

In Brunswick, we headed west through town, past Pearl Rd., the town's main drag, and on out into the dark. The driver said nothing. He simply chain smoked the entire time.

When the lights of Brunswick and civilization faded behind us, he said, "My mother and sister think Joe's still alive. They think he's hiding from someone."

"Maybe he is," I said. "What makes you think Angie or I killed him?"

"I'm not stupid, Kepler. That bitch put a restraining order on him. And the cops who threatened him the night before? I know they're buddies of yours. I also know you've been sniffing Angie up since you were about nine."

"I know this is beyond your comprehension, Kopinski, but Angie and I really are just very good friends."

I saw him bristle when I said his last name. "Yeah. Right. You can't tell me you haven't tried to get up in that. What are you? Gay?"

"No, but I heard *you* were, down in Mansfield."

The van accelerated. Good.

"You don't know shit, asshole. You don't know anything."

"I know you were in hock with some bad, bad men when they picked you up, Andy." I smiled as I watched him bristle at the sound of his first name. "So, who's bitch were you? How many hummers did you have to give to get out from under that debt?"

"Fuck you."

The van accelerated faster. I fastened my seatbelt. I decided to cool it for a bit. I'd found his hot buttons.

We rolled through Litchfield, a tiny village west of Brunswick. The town had a roundabout at the center and little else at the edges. We were heading into Lorain County, into farmland and Amish country. God help me if I survived and had to get back to Cleveland from there.

At the county line, I said, "So you think Angie killed Joe. Why is that?"

He said nothing, but I could feel the van accelerate again.

"Angie's just a wisp of a woman, not even a hundred pounds soaking wet. What do you think she did?"

"Ever heard the song 'Goodbye, Earl'?"

I snorted. "You think any prosecutor would charge a woman with killing Joe over that? That deputy sheriff that night would have shot him between the eyes if he hadn't backed down."

We blew through a stop sign. I didn't think Kopinski saw it.

"Woman's got to show a man respect," he said. He was now doing about sixty.

"Man's gotta earn respect. The only thing your brother ever earned was money selling pot."

"Shut up, Kepler."

"Do you do that, Andy? Do you smack women around to feel like a man? I'll bet you do after sucking all that black dick in prison. Or did you toss their salads for them?"

"Shut the fuck up." He had the van up to seventy-five now. I watched another stop sign sail past.

"I figure a man who beats a woman is usually pretty worthless, and Joe was pretty worthless. Kicked out of every band he joined, couldn't even hold a factory job for minimum wage. Wonder if he pissed off his supplier. Say, Andy, do you think the Jamaicans would even waste bullets on a loser like your brother."

At ninety miles an hour, he jerked his head around, the snub-nosed revolver in his hand. "Goddammit, Kepler, you're gonna..."

We barely heard the horn.

"Oh, fuck!" He turned back in time to see the van drift into the car's path. He cut the wheel hard to the right. The van skidded and clipped the car with its left rear fender before sailing over the ditch and into a field.

"Fuck me!" Kopinski screamed as a tree appeared in the headlights.

I leaned back, hoping to minimize the whiplash, and put my arms around my head.

No lights flashed, but the world exploded in a cacophony of shattered glass and groaning metal. Something popped like a firecracker. For a moment, I was weightless...

I awoke to find myself intact. I had half the van between me and the tree. Kopinski wasn't so lucky. He'd been pushed back next to me, trapped behind a deflated airbag in the steering wheel. I reached over and felt for a pulse. He was still alive.

I had managed to protect my head, but my arms bore the brunt of the impact. My left arm tingled when I moved it, and my right arm felt bruised. To my right, the sliding door sat ajar, not open wide enough for me to climb out. I pulled on it. It wouldn't budge. My best bet was to pull the heavy wire cage out and crawl through the cab.

Pale yellow light from a streetlamp in the nearby intersection streamed into the van. I looked over at Kopinski again. Blood ran from his mouth and his ear. He also had a nasty leg wound. Looking down, I saw the little pistol; it looked like a .32 in the dim light. I couldn't tell. Smart money said that was the firecracker noise I'd heard when we hit.

I unhooked my seatbelt and started pulling at the wire cage, now bent and loose from the van's frame. I had to pull it down into my lap and push forward to make a big enough hole to crawl through. Even then, I had a cab full of tree to contend with.

As I crawled into the cab, I heard Kopinski moan.

"Help me," he said, virtually no strength to his voice. "Oh, God, please help me."

I turned to face him, his face all bruised and bloody. "You were going to kill me, Andy, and you wanted me to help you kill Angie."

"Help me, Kepler. I promise I'll do anything you ask." He spat a couple of teeth out. "My leg." He groaned. "Oh, God, I shot myself."

"You wanted to kill Angie. Why should I help you?"

He coughed. "Why can't I feel my leg? Christ, get me out. Call an ambulance."

I looked around. I couldn't see anything beyond the brush where we'd landed. I thought I heard a couple of cars nearby idling, and hushed voices.

"Why should I save you? You wanted to kill Angie because she wouldn't let your brother beat her anymore. Fuck you."

"No, man... Oh, God, I think I shot myself. Kepler, I'll do anything. Anything you ask."

"Anything?"

"Yes. Please..."

"Okay. Go to hell and tell your brother I said hello." I turned and crawled out from through what was once the windshield. Falling into the brush, I tore my clothes and crawled to the road. An SUV and a station wagon had stopped to help those in the car we'd clipped. On solid ground, free of growth, I stood, rather unsteadily, and waved at the good Samaritans.

"Hey! My friend was drunk and ran us off the road. Did anyone call the police?"

An older gentleman, silver-haired, wearing a dark suit, rushed over and helped me to the station wagon. "Here. Sit down. What about your friend?"

Safely on the opposite berm of the road, I sat down next to the station wagon and leaned back against the car. "Who was in the car? Are they all right?"

"They're fine," said the old man. "A little battered and shaken up, but they're fine."

I took a deep breath and said a silent prayer of thanks for the first time in years. "That sonofabitch could have killed them. And us."

"You say your friend was drunk. Is he all right?"

I closed my eyes and rested my head on my folded knees. "I think he's dead."

"Since you used to be a cop," said Deputy Watkins of the Lorain County Sheriff's Department, "you can understand why I'm having so much trouble with your story. Some drunk interrupts you while you're fixing a flat and asks to hire you. So you drop what you're doing, hop in the back of his van, and take a ride out to the middle of East BF in Egypt, where he kisses a tree, killing himself and nearly killing you. Do I have that straight?"

"Yes," I said. We sat in a sterile white room at the Lorain County Jail. I had not been charged, so no lawyer was present. It was just me, Watkins, and some really bad coffee.

"Do you see the problems I'm having? Let's start with the most obvious. Why you? And why at ten-thirty at night?"

I took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. I guessed a little truth would help. "Andy Kopinski wanted to find his brother, Joe. He hasn't seen Joe in a year. Joe lived with a childhood friend of mine named Angie. Angie and I were pretty close, so Andy probably got my name from her."

Watkins scribbled as I talked. "Now we're getting somewhere. It's almost believable." He looked up from his notepad. "Except for the gunshot wound to the leg. Can you tell me why the late Mr. Kopinski died clutching a .32 in his right hand, and how it went off?"

"Like I said, he was drunk. I didn't realize it at the garage, but it became obvious after we were on the road awhile."

"And you made no attempt to stop him?"

"He had me sit in the back. All I could do was enjoy the ride. Anyway, once we were outside of Brunswick, he started waving the gun around as we talked. He was pretty upset, thought maybe drug dealers had killed his brother, then hid the body. Maybe they did. Joe used to run with some nasty characters."

"I'll bet. Andy, too. Were you aware Andy Kopinski had just been released from prison?"

"He mentioned that."

"Were you aware he had a small weapons store at his family's farm in Grafton?"

"No. What kind of weapons?"

"Enough to start several gang wars. Either someone else was using the farm, or he'd had the stash when he went to prison back in 2000."

Jesus, was that where he was taking me? "Honestly, I had no idea. He said he wanted me to come out to his family's farm so I could find clues to Joe's disappearance."

Watkins nodded, but he didn't agree. "And you're sure Kopinski was dead when you crawled out of that van?"

"Yes, sir."

"Positive."

"To the best of my knowledge, Deputy. If he was still alive, I may not have had the presence of mind to help him."

He got up and started for the door. "Call yourself a ride home, Mr. Kepler. We'll be in touch."

I hitched a ride with an off-duty cop when night watch ended. He had to go into Cleveland to fill out some sort of paperwork, and dropped me off at my apartment on the way in. I had to take a bus to get to my car. The flat was still waiting for me when I arrived.

I kept my promise to myself to take Friday off, although it was to sleep. By the time I had my car home, someone had left a message on my machine.

"Nicky," said a female voice I hadn't heard in six months, "it's Angie. Hey, listen, keep it quiet, but I'm back in town for the weekend. Call me, and we'll raise some hell together. 'Kay?" She gave the number to her motel, some fleabag I knew wouldn't ask for her ID.

I called her back. "Hey, Ange, it's Nick. Good news. You're finally safe."

I wasn't sure if I should have told her that I let Andy Kopinski die. She'd figure it out anyway. No one had questioned his brother's disappearance when Angie shot him, because nobody knew. I'd made the body disappear for her. Only one man suspected. As long as he wanted to hurt Angie the way his brother had, I couldn't feel any guilt in his death.

That didn't make being the executioner any easier.