

## RACE CARD

Three shots rang out in the mist. I jumped out of my car as soon as I heard the gunfire, my own weapon drawn. I ran through the pouring rain toward the Eagle Avenue Bridge. A fourth one exploded as my feet hit the embankment.

The first shots sounded like a .22. This last shot had to be a police weapon, like a .357. My pulse pounded in my ears as I sprinted to a spot just below the bridge. The hulking, black drawbridge loomed like some gigantic prop from "Bladerunner", the Cleveland skyline dimly lighting it from downriver. In the faint, colorless glow, I could barely see where I was, let alone the where the shots were fired. A couple times, I nearly tripped over debris.

"Reese!" I shouted, approaching the base of the bridge. I could hear the sound of a horn up ahead. A freighter was approaching from the lake, signaling to raise the bridge. I could see it making its way in from upriver. I still couldn't see Reese or his attacker clearly. "Reese!"

As the bridge deck started to rise, the freighter's lights lit up the bank. That's when I saw Reese kneeling. I skidded to a stop just behind him. "Reese?"

He was on his knees, head in hand, obviously not believing what had just happened. He didn't touch the body lying before him.

I stepped around body and crouched to check for a pulse, a formality really. A young man of about twenty-five or so, he'd never reach thirty. The hole in his chest ended any chance of that. If he hadn't died instantly, he certainly died before I reached him. It's a little disconcerting to touch a warm body with no pulse.

Even in the dim light, I could see Reese's face. "What happened?"

Reese shook his head, not looking up at all. "I shot a cop, Kepler. I shot a cop."

Two weeks earlier, I had opted to have an early workout one afternoon. I lived in Lakewood that year, but worked out at a place in North Olmsted, bit of a drive. Vic, the owner, and I went way back. Like me, he'd been a cop in Medina County just to the south. That earned me a nice discount.

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!"

I sat up from my bench presses to see Ty Wolverson stomp his way into Vic's Gym. He still wore his police uniform as he stormed his way to the locker room. I looked at Vic, the fifty-something winner of any Jesse Ventura look-alike contest. "What's up with Wolf?" I asked.

Vic shrugged. "Beats me. He's always pissed off about something." He smiled. "Maybe it's that time of the month."

A wadded up towel sailed at Vic and hit him in the head. I could see Diana, Vic's shapely aerobics instructor glaring at him.

"Gee, Vic, you're so sensitive," I said as I made my way over to the treadmill.

"Up yours, Kepler," said Vic.

"Well, I am in awe of your sensitivity and cultural awareness." I glanced back at the locker room door. "Of course, Wolf probably has good reason to be pissed off all the time. If I had to ride with a psychopathic cop for a partner all day..."

"I thought you did have a psycho for a partner."

Maybe I cringed. "I turned him in, then had to quit for my trouble." Well, sort of, but I didn't feel like retelling that story.

A few minutes later, Wolverson was on the treadmill beside me, doing his obligatory warm-up. A scowl marred his buzz-cut good looks. Women would probably chase him if he didn't always look so angry. I'm not that bad myself, but I wasn't nearly as lean as Wolverson. Instead of a military cut, I had my black hair slicked back to keep it manageable.

As I hit my stride, I glanced his way. "Hey, Wolf. How goes it in the world of real cops?"

"Fuck you, shamus," he muttered as he started his run. "At least no one served you in front of your chief."

I shrugged as best as I could while running. "What happened?"

"She finally did it. She asked for a divorce."

This wasn't exactly a news flash. "I thought you'd been waiting for that for months now, ever since she shacked up with that shyster out in Brecksville."

Wolverson huffed. "A deputy came to the station today. He had papers to serve. From my loving wife's boyfriend. Emotional cruelty." He said the last part in a very mocking tone.

I bristled involuntarily. When I was a cop, there was such a thing as professional courtesy. I'd watched a few deputies serve papers on cops when I worked down in Brunswick. They always took the officer aside and did it in a quiet matter. "In front of your boss?"

Wolverson shook his head. "In front of everybody during morning briefing. Cuyahoga County always sends a man out to discuss prisoner transfers, narcotics cases, and so on. The guy they sent out this morning had one more item on the agenda."

This was getting interesting. "So what happened?"

Wolverson bit his lower lip. "The sonofabitch strolls up to me at the end of the briefing, shoves a summons at me, and says, 'You've been served.' Where does he get off? Fairview Park is not the Sheriff's jurisdiction! It's local!"

I managed a shrug. "Yes, but Fairview Park doesn't serve papers. Maybe the guy was in a hurry."

Wolverson smacked the stop button hard and turned to me. "C'mon, Kepler, you were a cop for awhile. Didn't you ever cut a guy a break?"

I kept going at the same steady pace. "I let other cops get away with speeding, illegal turns, even parking in the handicap zone. And I never mentioned it again." I hit my stop button, then turned to him. "Look, he had a summons to serve. You were there, so he served it. Maybe he didn't know how to handle it with a cop. I've served a couple of cops on duty since I got my PI license. Not pleasant, but I do my job."

Wolverson rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah. I forgot. You're a boy scout. That's why you didn't last down in Brunswick."

I started the treadmill up again. "I didn't last because the chief at the time asked me to overlook something more than traffic violations." I settled back into my original pace. "I've got a serious problem with wife-beaters, especially ones wearing a badge."

It was Wolverson's turn to shrug. "Oh, yeah. Petoskey. Whatever happened to him?"

"His wife got smart, filed charges, and had him locked up in Mansfield," I said. "I wonder who's bitch he is now."

A hint of a grin flickered on Wolverson's face for a moment, then the scowl returned. "Well, I didn't beat my wife. I just dozed off during Sportscenter. Why should I be punished?"

I nodded. "You shouldn't, if you weren't a complete bastard."

"I wasn't. But after the briefing, and the Chief and Sergeant Wotowski haul me in the office and read me the riot act. How dare I embarrass the force, and how dare I think I'm above the law? Like I had control over the situation! Christ, Kepler, I'm a human being! Then that shit Grubinsky comes up afterward, starts kissing my ass."

I rolled my eyes, remembering how Grubinsky ended up as Wolf's partner.

"What? The little psycho thinks your divorce is going to save his job?"

"If he hadn't shot his mouth off to that college kid he busted for DUI, he wouldn't have to save his job. But I'm convinced he really wanted her to blow him. Now the dumbass says he wants to fix the deputy so this never happens again."

"What did you say?"

"I told him to stay out of it, or I'll go to the chief and say he's hopeless. Besides, he screws with an officer on another force, he'll end up the Polish Rodney King real fast." He ran for a couple of minutes, then added, "You know, I wouldn't have as big of a problem with Grubinsky if that deputy'd just pulled me into an office and did it quietly. Dammit!" He slammed his fist into the treadmill's control panel. "Goddamn that nigger deputy!"

I hit the stop button, turned my back on Wolverson, and hung my towel around my neck. "I gotta go, Vic," I said sourly. "Margo's expecting me."

On the way out to the parking lot, I managed to cool off, finally unclenching my fists. I left, telling myself this was nothing more than Wolf blowing steam.

I'd forgotten Wolf's tirade after a few days, convinced his future ex-wife had set him off. Ten days later, I sat in my office, staring out at a dull, grey November morning. It had been dead all week, so I amused myself playing Minesweeper on the computer.

"Are you Nick Kepler?"

I looked up from my screen, trying to look like I was busy reading something work-related. "Yeah. Got a process you want me to serve?" When deputies dropped by my office, they usually had a summons.

The deputy was tall, much taller than me, with a thin face that looked prone to smiling. He wasn't smiling that morning. He was black, fairly dark, and broad-shouldered, with a slight gut that might have been the result of the coming holidays. "No, I'm here on a personal matter."

I sat back to listen. "Interesting. A deputy sheriff needing a private investigator. So, can I help you solve the Sam Sheppard case?" I grinned.

The deputy did not. "I'm afraid it's not that, Mr. Kepler." He sat down when I gestured to a visitor's chair. "My name is Rick Reese. I generally work in Narcotics."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Reese?"

He sighed. "About a week ago, I started receiving phone calls at my home. Nothing serious. Someone would call, then hang up, like they kept misdialing a number. We ignored them the first couple of nights. Saturday, though, I was out in the garage when my wife tells me I got a phone call."

"Who was it?"

"A man, probably in his late twenties or early thirties by the sound of his voice."

"What did he say?"

Reese sighed again, giving me an idea what the caller said. "He said, 'You're going to die, nigger. You, your bastard kids, and your slut wife.'" I could see his eyes narrow as he spat the words out, his tone cold.

I could also feel my teeth grinding, and forced myself to stop. "What did you say?"

"I told him I'd hunt him down, that it'd look like he tried to shoot a cop."

"And his response?"

"He said, 'That's what you think.'"

"Was that it?"

Reese shook his head. "There were four more calls, one where he described how he was going to rape my wife and kill her right in front of me." He stayed amazingly calm, but I could feel the pent-up rage from him just the same.

I couldn't help clenching my fist at my side this time. Still, I had to keep the interview going. "What happened after the last call?"

"Nothing, for a couple of days, then Tuesday morning, as I'm headed to work, I find a big red swastika painted on my door."

Okay, this was some nasty shit. "You call the police?"

"Uh-huh. I told my boss, too. They've been watching the place ever since."

"And?"

"Four days later, I took my oldest son to the doctor over in Mayfield Heights. When I came out, I found 'Die, nigger, die!' spray-painted all over my car."

I nodded. "Where do you live?"

"Cleveland Heights, on Sylvanhurst."

Cleveland Heights wasn't the whitest suburb in Greater Cleveland. It wasn't the blackest, either. Sometimes, the mixed neighborhoods had one or two imbeciles of either color trying to start trouble. "Have any problems with your neighbors?"

Reese shook his head. "Not a one, other than some borrowed lawn tools."

"Kids have any run-ins at school? Gangs? Skinheads?" What, exactly, besides skin color, was the difference between gangs and skinheads? They were both bigoted packs of criminals.

"Nope. I send them to Holy Name."

I nodded, having attended St. Mary's down in Medina. "Good school. What about your wife? What does she do?"

"She works here."

"Pardon?" It took me a second to realize he meant the company providing me with office space. "Oh. Western Reserve Insurance. What department?"

"She works in Auto Claims," said Reese. "I'm surprised you didn't recognize the name."

The light went on in my head. "Carol Reese. Yeah, I know her. Worked in Specialty Niche for awhile. Her cube was next to mine before they made me a 'consultant.'"

Reese managed a short laugh. "That's an interesting way to put it."

"It's an interesting way to get your office rent-free, at least until the next reorganization. Has she done any claims that might have gone wrong? Deny a claim or charge any uninsured motorists?"

"That's a possibility. Her boss is checking."

"What about you? Anyone you sent to Mansfield or Lucasville?" These were Ohio's two toughest prisons, with Lebanon a close third.

"I thought of that, too. The Sheriff's Department is checking any arrests and subpoenas I've had in the last year."

I nodded. "Okay, now the big question. Why a private investigator? Why not have the Sheriff handle it? Or the Cleveland Heights Police? Or Mayfield Heights, for that matter?"

"The Heights has seen nothing since the day I called them, and the Sheriff can't keep watching the place forever. He's moving, Mr. Kepler. He called Carol here at work. Threatened to kill her if she stepped outside the building. I had to come pick her up in a cruiser. The Cleveland cops are looking into it, but they're waiting for him to do something drastic."

This was not good. He had three towns and the county on this guy's tail. "Cops don't like PI's working their cases. We can't even do homicides unless a suspect hires us." Unfortunately, that didn't stop a few clients from coming to me. "They're not going to like me getting involved."

"I understand that," said Reese, "but this guy smells cops. He knows when he's being staked out. He doesn't call us at home anymore, and he's attacking us in different jurisdictions. This guy knows how cops act. He may even be a cop for all I know."

"That would complicate matters. What do you want from me?"

"You're not a cop, Mr. Kepler."

"I used to be."

"Yes, but for five years, you were a claims investigator, and a private investigator since then. You don't 'smell' like a cop. Besides, Carol told me about how you work. You

rent cars, dress down, hide in places no cop would think of using. You have fewer regulations to deal with, fewer restrictions."

"Well, that's open for debate."

"And a private investigator tends to be less conspicuous, especially to the media."

Now, I got the picture. The PI must have been the Sheriff's idea, or one of the captains on the suburban forces. "Who's paying?"

"I am."

Definitely a county idea. County governments are notoriously cheap until someone wants a new stadium. I pulled a contract out of my desk. "My in-town rate is fifty dollars an hour, plus expenses. I make it a point to report to you daily until the case is solved or you terminate it, more or less often if you like. You will receive a final report with your itemized bill." I sat and thought for a moment. "My retainer is two thousand dollars, applied toward your bill. As I said, though, I'm an ex-cop, and this case strikes a nerve with me. I'm going to forgo the retainer and just bill you..."

He slid a check, made out to me, across my desk and began filling out the contract. "I keep an emergency fund for sudden expenses. This is an emergency."

"I see." Western Reserve wouldn't pay my monthly retainer for another week, so this was welcome cash. "Just one thing before we get started. You said a PI would keep a lower profile. Is Carol aware that I live with Margo Westphal from Channel Four?"

"She knows. Most cops like Margo. She cooperates when we need to keep things quiet." Reese finally grinned. "Carol said you're even better at it."

"Where's Carol now?"

"At her mother's in Toledo. I thought it best if she and the kids lay low for awhile. That way, it's just him and me."

"And me."

I parked my car along Sylvanhurst at around eight that evening. Reese had called off the Cleveland Heights police, in case the unmarked cars scared off the graffiti artist. My boring grey Honda blended in with the sedans, minivans, and SUV's that populated the local driveways.

I couldn't keep the car running. That meant no heat, a very bad idea for mid-November. I cracked the window, pulled my fleece jacket around me more tightly, and waited for Reese's unwanted decorator to show.

This is the boring part of the job, the part that requires a coffee can. I settled in, listening to what passed for rock on WMMS. After the fifth song in a row by yet another Pearl Jam clone, I switched to the classic rock station out of Akron. It would be a long wait.

By 1 AM, he still hadn't shown. I called Margo and told her I'd be heading home soon. She informed me that she had the morning off, so the night wouldn't be a total waste. As we began discussing how to best entertain each other, I saw it. A pair of headlights appeared at the end of the street. I hung up and slumped down in my seat. The car rumbled by, a black muscle car I could just make out from where I sat. I waited for the car to pass, then craned my neck to have a look.

The car now sat under the street light directly in front of Reese's house, a white ranch that mirrored all the other ranch homes on this street. Someone got out of the car, a man with a baseball cap pulled down over his face and leather jacket crept up to the house and slipped around the side. I couldn't make out who it was at that distance. At least, he couldn't see the street from behind the house.

I slipped out and back to the muscle car, a '71 Plymouth Duster. I pulled out my notebook and jotted down the plate number, then decided to mark him, kicking in his tail light. I ran around opposite side of the house, and slipped around the corner. I caught him spray-painting "White Power!" on Reese's back door. "Why not try 'Give peace a chance'?"

Through a blue ski mask, I could see his eyes widen. He must have jumped ten feet into the air. He dropped his spray can and sprinted. I didn't follow him, instead picking up the spray can with a rag to avoid marring the fingerprints. I probably should have called the police, but I decided to let him stew for a day. Besides, I had his license number and maybe his prints. I'd give them to Reese in the morning. I called Margo and told her I was on my way home.

Reese had the next day off, perfect for a little covert surveillance. I met him at the Sportsman's Deli, next to my office, to plan our attack. His car had been hit the last time he was off from work. The culprit hit him in Mayfield Heights, well away from his home or downtown Cleveland. We decided to lead him on a wild goose chase to flush him out today.

I followed Reese throughout the morning, stopping first at a Penzoil. Of course, a lube shop was an unlikely place to hit him. His Toyota sat on a rack, with Reese in the waiting room. I parked across the street at a Speedway. If anything, I attracted more attention than he did. The Speedway manager, a pudgy blonde in her late thirties, came out and asked why I had been sitting in her parking lot for forty-five minutes.

I flashed my license at her. "Official business, ma'am." I sounded like Joe Friday. "A police matter." I neglected to tell her I wasn't a cop, just a consultant.

"Are we going to be robbed?" she asked in sudden panic.

I shook my head and continued my monotone. "No, ma'am, just simple surveillance of an undercover officer, making sure he's all right." I gestured to an insurance office across the street, hoping she'd lose interest in me. I had to end this quickly. "Thank you for your cooperation, ma'am. Have a nice day." As Reese pulled out of the garage, I made a mental note not to park at any more Speedways while tailing someone.

I followed Reese to an auto parts store, a Home Depot, and a Giant Eagle supermarket. After Home Depot, I became aware of an older car in the vicinity, an old Mercury Monarch that had seen better days and too few tune-ups. It marked the driver as an amateur, with its loud exhaust, noisy valves, and glaringly dull paint. The driver picked up Reese on the Cleveland's lower east side, a predominantly black section. Already calling attention to himself, he had also neglected to cover his shaven head.

I watched the skinhead get out and follow Reese at a discreet distance to the Giant Eagle. The skinhead did not enter the store, but stood outside, appearing to read the ads in the window. The largely black clientele rewarded his efforts with dirty looks and an occasional epithet. Pretending to read a *Rolling Stone*, I tried not to laugh at him. Still, I held off making a move. I wanted to catch him in the act of vandalizing the car. No doubt, it would drive Reese's insurance rates up, but it would be worth it. Reese himself could arrest the guy and hold him until the city came to haul him away.

Reese left Giant Eagle for a strip mall in Mayfield Heights. The skinhead and I followed him to a dentist's office not far from where Reese's other car had been spray-painted. I took up station near a drug store in the same strip mall and waited. So did the skinhead.

After Reese had been inside for about five minutes, the skinhead got out of his car. He carried a spray paint can and a tire iron. I watched him cross the lot, then got out of my car and moved in on him. Along the way, I pulled out a screwdriver I had in my coat pocket and proceeded to puncture three of his tires. He didn't seem to notice. He had started to spray paint "nigger" on the hood when I came up, my Browning 9mm drawn.

"Drop the spray can and the tire iron, and turn around slowly," I said quietly.  
"Now!"

He did not respond until I shouted at him. The can and the tire iron hit the ground instantly as he whirled. His eyes went wide as he saw the gun. "Wha- Wha- Leave me alone, man! This ain't none of your business!"

"I've got a retainer that says it is. It's not nice to spray paint a deputy sheriff's car without his permission. Is that the same paint can you used last night?"

"I... I... I don' know what you're talkin' about, man! Leave me alone!"

When it comes down to it, skinheads were nothing but white trash gangsters. Like most gangsters, this one could barely string together a sentence.

I aimed at his knee. "One move, and I'll put a hole in your leg."

Yes, Virginia, he was an idiot. Like an idiot, he lunged at me and knocked me on my ass, winding me. I couldn't get up, but somehow held onto the gun. He rolled off me, and ran to his car. I heard him gun the motor, and could smell the fresh gas coming from his exhaust. As he tried to get away on three flat tires, I caught up with him, yanked him out of the car, and threw him to the ground. Not surprisingly, the heap stalled.

Before he could get up, I leapt on top of him. He brought his feet up, but I managed to roll away, bringing my elbow down on his chest. Before I could pin him

down, though, he landed a right cross on my jaw, sending me onto my back. He scrambled to his feet and took off across the parking lot. I went after him.

He ran out onto Mayfield Road, right into the start of lunch hour traffic. I jumped in right behind him. Horns blared and motorists screamed obscenities as we dodged oncoming cars. He tried to make for a Denny's on the far side of the gas station next to the strip mall. I managed to tackle him before he reached the door. With adrenaline pumping through my veins, I rammed the heel of my hand into the back of his head, smacking his face into the parking lot a few times. His nose bled. Hauling him to his feet, I shoved him against the wall. "Do you know how much trouble you're in, asshole?"

"What do you care about that nigger?" he whined. He was nineteen or twenty, and his eyes had that dull luster that comes with booze or marijuana. "Leave me alone!"

I hit him in the gut, doubling him over. He slumped to the ground. "Don't move. Don't even breathe."

"Freeze!"

I put my hands up, thumbing on the Browning's safety. "Mayfield Heights Police, right?"

Someone began patting me down, then took my gun and my wallet. I saw the skinhead react, but didn't have to turn around to know that guns were trained on both of us.

"Nick Kepler," said the voice of the man who frisked me. "Private investigator. So, Mr. Kepler, what are we investigating today? This kid's bad haircut?"

Another officer, definitely a Mayfield Heights cop, stepped around and hauled the skinhead to his feet.

I kept my hands up. "I was hired by Deputy Reese of the Sheriff's Department to catch this guy. If you go over to the dentist's office over at the strip mall, you'll find the beginnings of a racial slur scrawled across Mr. Reese's hood. It's a blue Camry with a Sheriff's sticker in the rear window."

"Put your hands down," the first officer said as he handed me my wallet. "So this is him, eh? The guy Reese called about last week? Looks like a skinny little twerp to me."

The skinhead was sobbing like a baby as he was being cuffed.

The officer, a slightly overweight man in his late forties, his hair steel grey, holstered his weapon. "You will, of course, have to come to the station and answer some questions."

I shrugged, rubbing my sore jaw. "All part of the job."

The overweight cop handed me back my gun.

We spent the afternoon at the Mayfield Heights Police Department. The overweight cop, named Grbek, questioned me for about forty-five minutes, giving me the requisite hard time over a private dick working a police case. I listened to the lecture, then quietly pointed out that my retainer came from a deputy sheriff.

Once we were through, he led me to a room just outside of Interrogation. I guessed I was allowed to continue, having been properly scolded. Through a one-way mirror, we watched Grbek's partner question the skinhead. If he had trouble speaking when I chased him down, he was blubbing like an idiot now.

"Advise him of his rights?" asked Reese.

Grbek grinned. "Hell, yes. We even had him read them twice before having them signed."

"And he didn't ask for a lawyer?" I asked, a little surprised. I looked at the skinhead, now crying as the Mayfield cop patted him on the shoulder. So, maybe I wasn't surprised.

Grbek sighed. "Yes. He said he would like a lawyer. Later. After he talks with his parole officer. Says he doesn't want to look guilty."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, he's obviously not a master criminal."

Grbek's grin widened. "Not quite." He looked pointedly at Reese. "Recognize him, Deputy?"

Reese leaned in toward the glass and squinted. "That's Mack Burnett. I busted him a few years back for selling ecstasy. He had a lot more hair back then."

Grbek nodded. "He met some friends in Lebanon. Seems the neo-nazi types have been recruiting. Apparently, they were impressed that trailer trash like Burnett could still make a small fortune selling a high class drug right in Tony Carlo's backyard."

Tony Carlo was a local businessman whose grandfather once ran the Cleveland's Pierani crime family. Rumors still circulated that Carlo had quietly taken over the organization. There were also rumors that Elvis lived in Parma. Unlike Grbek, most cops I knew gave the Elvis rumors more credence.

"So that sonofabitch was getting even with me for sending him up the river!" Reese slammed his fist into the wall. Burnett and Grbek's partner both jumped.

"Oh, it wasn't just him. He's just the hired help," said Grbek. "You made a friend out in Fairview Park last week."

"Who?"

Grbek sighed and handed Reese a Motor Vehicle Report. Reese's jaw dropped, and he handed me the paper.

"You're kidding!" I said. "Him? I know him."

Grbek nodded. "A lot of people do. We ran that plate number you got last night, Kepler. And after that, we had his boss check out the parking lot, where, as expected, he found a 1971 Plymouth Duster, black with a busted tail light. Lo, and behold, the plate matched." He looked at Reese. "Your vandal was none other than Patrolman Ty Wolverson of the Fairview Park Police."

I felt sick. I knew Wolverson was angry over the divorce summons, but I thought he would have taken out on his wife, preferably in divorce court, but possibly by selling off her possessions. That had been my suggestion.

"Are they picking him up?" asked Reese.

Grbek shook his head. "They decided to bust him when he gets to the station. They'll deal with him then. Right now, he has no reason to suspect they're on to him."

I sighed, shaking my head. "This wasn't how I wanted the case to pan out."

Reese shrugged. "Is there any good way for it to pan out?"

I spent the better part of the afternoon with the Mayfield Heights Police, retelling my version of the events several times for five different police departments. The Sheriff, Cleveland, Cleveland Heights, and Mayfield Heights all had charges pending against Wolf. Fairview Park's Internal Affairs showed up as well. Not surprisingly, they were the least happy with me. By the time I'd left the station, a small crowd of press hounds had started to form in the parking lot. I slipped into my wonderfully bland car and left the station unnoticed.

The rest of the afternoon I spent in my office. Dark clouds rolled in as a cold wind whipped off the lake. I didn't feel much like going out anyway. I had a meeting with the

claims manager for Western Reserve's Commercial Division, and needed to catch up on my paperwork. As I locked up for the day, I had a surprise visitor.

"I'd avoid I-480 if I were you. Fairview Park might pull you over for going fifty in a fifty-five zone."

I looked up to see Wolf standing in the doorway. "And I wouldn't come downtown if I were you. Not with all those deputies just up the street."

Wolf snorted. "I just spent two hours over there, thanks to you."

I stood up, hands on my hips. This was bad. I hoped he wasn't coming after me in my own office. "I was doing my job, Wolf."

Wolf's stare was cold, hard, and mean. "So was I."

"Vandalizing a deputy's house and hiring a skinhead to spray his car is your job? That's funny. That was never in Brunswick's police manual. Is it in Fairview Park's?"

Wolf shook his head at me. "You got part of the story right. That was my car last night, and someone did hire that shit Burnett to harass Reese." He stepped forward, closer to me, his eyes narrow. "And I am pissed at Reese for the way he handled that summons." We were nose-to-nose now. "But last night," he said in low, even tones, "I was doing my job."

I just stared back at him, almost daring him to throw the first punch.

"In Fairview Park," he added. "Alone."

I cocked my head. "Alone?"

Wolf nodded. "Alone. Grubinsky took the night off."

I threw up my hands. "You expect me to believe that? Hell, you called Reese a 'nigger' right there in the gym! What am I supposed to think?"

He huffed. "Look, I know why you take it personally. It wasn't directed at Margo."

I stepped even closer to him. "I'm sorry, but it was, as far as I'm concerned." I grabbed him by the collar. "Goddammit, Wolf! You called Reese a nigger, knowing damn well I live with one of the most visible black women in the city, then I see you and your car in front of Reese's house last night!" I shoved him back. "I suppose you're going to tell me that wasn't you last night."

Wolf pointed at me. "First, don't grab me like that again. I'm still a cop. I can still bust your ass for assaulting an officer. Second, you're right. That wasn't me there last night. I was on duty."

I was tempted to ask him how much he wanted for the Hope Memorial Bridge. I settled with, "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, I was." He started to relax, but not much. He was still angry, but I could tell the target of his wrath was not in the room. "Alone, though I was with a State Trooper on a DUI call about the time you saw my car." He was breathing hard. He spun around, stepped over to the window, and slammed his fist against the wall. "That sonofabitch stole my car!"

Outside, the street glistened as the rain came down. It wasn't quite six o'clock, and already it was dark as midnight.

"Who stole your car?" I asked.

"Grubinsky," he mumbled.

"Who?"

He spun around. "Grubinsky! That sonofabitch Grubinsky! My partner!" He kicked a trash can across the room. I didn't appreciate it, but I didn't say anything with him in this state. "He called off last night, complaining of stomach cramps." He shrugged. "Well, who were we to ask? We lost four officers this week to some sort of bug. So,

while I was out on patrol - by myself - my poor, sick partner busted my ignition and took my car out to Cleveland Heights."

I sat down on the edge of the desk. "And you have records from last night to prove this?"

"Hell, I have a State Trooper and a drunk driver who can prove it."

"Prove you weren't there." I looked out the window again. "But can you prove Grubinsky was the one who took your car?"

He shook his head. "No, but I know. He's been talking, ever since I got served at that briefing. Kept telling me how he was going to get Reese back for me."

I rolled my eyes. "I remember that now. Real nice friend. Framing you for a hate crime ... not a bright idea in this town."

Wolf just shook his head. "He was a problem cop. You know, the type that thinks the badge makes them God. They assigned him to me to quell his God complex. He sort of latched on like a puppy dog."

I frowned. I'd seen that type before. The shrinks usually weeded them out. At the rate Wolf was doing a slow burn, they'd be looking at him next. "When was his next psych exam?"

"Two months, but I was all set to go to the chief this week and tell him the guy's a lost cause."

"You did make him sound like Charlie Manson."

"Not quite, but close." He tensed up again, like he was ready to strike at someone, but, other than me, there was no one to strike. "Says he's gonna take care of it for me. I told him to keep his nose clean and stay out of it." His fists clenched at his side. "He just

wouldn't listen!" He pounded my desk with every word. "And now he's probably ruined my career!"

I sighed. "Where is he now?"

Wolf shrugged. "I don't know. I can't find him. Nobody can. They've been searching for him for the last hour."

"Does he know about this?"

Wolf snorted. "He has to. Your girlfriend did a bang-up report on it for Channel Four. You're not the 'confidential source' on this one?"

I shook my head. "Margo and I have an understanding about these things. I can't compromise clients to the media."

"I wish you'd teach a few cops that. All the local forces have leak problems these..."

My cell phone rang. "Kepler."

On the other end, I could hear rain against metal. I could also hear the horn of a riverboat in the background. "It's Reese. I gotta call. Meet me at Collision Bend on the west bank, near the old Bachman Foods warehouse."

"What? Who called?"

"I think you know. Be here in thirty minutes. Come armed." The line went dead.

Wolf looked at me like I'd lost my mind. I know I felt like it. "What?"

"I think I just found your partner."

Collision Bend is a hairpin turn in the Cuyahoga River, so-named because of the number of freighter accidents there over the years. The renaissance turning Cleveland's

industrial Flats into a party destination had not reached this far upriver. Warehouses still dotted the west bank, not far from the gleaming towers of downtown.

I sat in the Honda, waiting. I could barely see Reese. I could see another car, and I could just make out another figure walking toward him. On the way in, Reese called to tell me where he wanted me to park. He told me to stay put, to watch, to come running as soon as something happened. Goddamned fool was about to get himself killed pretending he was Wyatt Earp. Still, I did as I was told, loading my Browning and pumping a round into the chamber. I kept my thumb on the safety.

I hadn't been there more than ten minutes when I heard the shots. By the time I reached Reese it was over. He was on his knees, just staring at the corpse before him.

Reese shook his head, not even looking at me. "I shot a cop, Kepler. I shot a cop."

I turned the body over and found a wallet. I didn't need to check to know his driver's license said "Walter F. Grubinsky." I looked up at Reese. "Yes, but wasn't he trying to kill a cop?"

Reese just sat, staring into the dark, not saying anything.

I knew the feeling. I'd shot people before, and it always left me a little shaken. It's a cliché in stories where the cop or the PI goes on an antiviolence rant before kicking someone's ass. That's bullshit. There's no philosophy in putting a bullet through someone's heart. There's only instinct, adrenaline, and training. If you're lucky, training wins out. There's no angst or speeches ahead of the fact. Everything happens so fast that you rely on reflex, and get left either dead or wondering what the hell happened.

I looked down at Grubinsky. He wasn't much to look at in death. Short, not nearly as well-toned as Wolf, he looked like the type that might have been picked on a lot as a kid. I had no way of knowing. I only knew that he'd probably finished Wolf and, to some

extent, Reese. Maybe Reese was the bully in Grubinsky's mind. If so, his final revenge would be leaving Reese with the dead man's stare.

I stood up and pulled out my phone. "Do you want to call the police, or shall I?"

Reese stood. "What difference does it make? I'm a cop killer."

I looked back down at Grubinsky's body. The rain carried the blood across his chest and into a little stream running toward the river. "Grubinsky stopped being a cop the day he picked the phone up for that first call." I looked at Reese. "You killed an animal."

"He's still a cop."

I shook my head. "You haven't been over at Justice, have you? Every cop in the area was looking at Wolf like he was a cop killer. Now they're looking at Grubinsky that way. He was a fugitive. He's been wanted for the last two to three hours. You shot a would-be cop killer."

Reese handed me his gun. "Does it matter?"

To this day, I still don't know if it did. I only know Wolf and Reese would need some serious redemption in the eyes of their brother officers. It was something that kept me from ever wearing a badge again.