

VALENTINE'S DAY

Well, I was certainly going to have a terrific Valentine's Day. My ribs hurt, my head ached, and my black eye throbbed. To top it off, I was sitting in a cold exam room off the ER at Cleveland MetroHealth, freezing and getting sick from the smell of antiseptic. I tried to stand up, but felt my legs start to give. You could have heard my moan as far away as Akron.

I took a deep breath, and immediately knew I'd broken a couple of ribs. The street thugs had worked me over good. Their message was clear. Forget I ever heard the name Sam Jameson. The beating had the opposite effect, etching the name permanently in my memory. Oh, yes, I would remember Sam Jameson.

And when I got mobile again, I'd make sure he remembered me. More importantly, I'd make damn sure he'd remember the woman he'd abandoned.

I'd first heard his name about five days earlier. His girlfriend, a big woman, nearly forty, with dyed-red hair, swept into my office, took a seat at my desk, and promptly burst into tears. I tried to remember which movie I saw this in, since very few of my clients dropped by unannounced before enlisting my services. Generally, only lawyers paid surprise visits, since the Cuyahoga County Justice Center sat half a block from my office. Greta was not a lawyer. She was an artist, though you wouldn't know it by the loud, low-cut dress she wore.

Greta Rensileer. That was her name. She described herself as an "influential and well-respected sculptor." I'd have to ask my better half about that. I'm a musician when I'm not detecting. Margo's the art critic when she's not reporting. Anyway, Greta was an artist who, apparently, had had a fight with her live-in boyfriend of five years, Sam

Jameson. Money, she said. It had been the previous Saturday night. At the climax of the fight, he screamed at her, stormed out, and hadn't returned since. I suggested she file a missing persons report with the police. She adamantly refused, saying the police would only humiliate him. I made a mental note to call a friend in Homicide later.

I got the usual info. They lived in Garfield Heights, just to the south of Cleveland. She managed a bookstore in University Heights. She proudly announced that he was an engineer for Huntington-Sheen, an industrial equipment manufacturer with a huge office out in Independence. She listed a couple of sports bars and restaurants she thought he'd frequent, though she herself had never been to any of them. Already, I was suspicious. When she said he tended to work long hours and socialize little, all the alarms in my head blared. This guy was hiding something, probably a younger woman.

She handed me his picture. It surprised me. She was a big woman, slightly overweight, and not aging very well. The man in the photo looked like a male model, with sandy hair, hazel eyes, and a Clark Gable smile. I studied the photo closely, wondering if I'd seen him before. I had an overwhelming sense of déjà vu.

"Has he ever been in trouble with the law?" I asked, trying to figure out where I'd seen him before.

Greta looked extremely shocked. "No! Never! Sam is the most honest man I've ever known!"

I shrugged. "Had to ask. What about court? Has he ever had to testify in a civil suit or a criminal trial? As a witness?"

She shook her head, still dabbing running mascara from her eyes. "I don't think so."

Maybe I'd done a background check on him, which would make this case a helluva lot simpler. "How long has he worked for Huntington-Sheen?"

"Ten years," she said. "He was there when they were still a defense contractor."

Ten years. I definitely had not done his background check. If he had started there in 1991, I would have either been in college or just starting with the Brunswick Police Department. The only thing remotely close to detecting I did back then was write parking tickets. "Hmm... I could swear I've seen this guy before."

After another twenty minutes of crying, then ranting, then crying again, Greta Rensileer signed the contract, handed me the check, and gave me one last bit of information. Jameson, according to her, drove a 1992 Geo Prism.

I almost snorted coffee through my nose when she said that. Why would an engineer for one of the most prestigious industrial design firms in Cleveland drive a nine-year-old car that was better suited for pizza delivery?

Of course, if he was that cheap, it was no wonder she fought with him over money. If Margo were ever that tight with cash, we'd have split years ago.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in a hotel parking lot across the street from Huntington-Sheen's monolithic glass building. From across Rockside Rd., I had a clear view of their parking lot, and the only entrance in and out of the place. From one in the afternoon until well after seven, no dark blue Prisms entered or left the premises. The entrance had a guard booth. Anyone entering the lot would have had to stop, affording me a nice long look, not that I saw anything useful.

The next day found me back in that same hotel parking lot. I passed the time listening to talk radio and making calls. The first went to Sgt. Frank Windsor, who

worked Cleveland's Homicide unit. Frank and I had worked together quite a bit since my days as an insurance investigator.

I told him about Jameson. He thought the part about the car was bullshit, but he'd keep an eye out for it. If there were signs of a struggle, or that the car was stolen, I'd either surrender the case to the police or work with them the rest of the way. Calling Frank kept me in their good graces.

It started to snow before noon. I didn't like the color of the sky, which had gone from white to dark grey. I hated February, and this was why. I shook off my doldrums and called Huntington-Sheen. I was not going to sit through a snowstorm without getting some sort of lead.

It took me five options to get through. "Human Resources."

"Hello, my name is Nick Kepler," I said. "I work for the insurance company..." Just not on this case. "I'm looking for an engineer who works there. His name's Jameson. Sam Jameson."

"Hold please." I heard what sounded like the Muzak version of "Anarchy in the UK." I couldn't be sure.

So I waited.

And waited.

And waited. Nearly ten minutes later, as the first salt truck lumbered its way up Rockside, someone answered.

"This is Katherine Policastro," said an older woman with all the warmth of an Alberta Clipper dumping a foot of snow. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Kepler, ma'am," I said, slipping into my patented Joe Friday mode.

"And you work for...?"

God, what a snide tone. "I work with the insurance company, ma'am." I cut her off before she asked too many questions. "I have some important information for one of your engineers, a Sam Jameson."

"Are you sure you have the right firm?" she asked. "This is Huntington-Sheen Industries."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "That's where my contact information told me to find Mr. Jameson."

"I'm afraid your information is inaccurate. We do not have a Sam Jameson working for us."

"Really?" I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. "Has he ever worked there?"

There was a long pause as, it seemed, Ms. Policastro debated the legality of that question. I do background checks, so I knew I could ask. I heard keys tapping. "No, Mr. Kepler, we have never had a person named Sam Jameson in our employ. He's not in our database."

So he never worked there. Interesting. "Well, thank you for your time, ma'am. I'll have to look for Mr. Jameson elsewhere. Goodbye."

"Who did you...?"

I hung up before she could finish the question. As I pulled out of the hotel parking lot, I realized that I was going to have to pound a lot of pavement in the snow. Why didn't I stay with the insurance company full time?

Greta Rensileer lived in a boxy one-story home in Garfield Heights on a nice tree-lined street. The shape made it look like a glorified double-wide trailer. The lawn had lots of artsy-craftsy type ornaments carefully laid out, but covered in snow.

Greta greeted me at the door clad in a silk bathrobe that was too small for her. The effect was not pleasant at all. Her ample bosoms threatened to spill out of the front if she didn't keep it tied together right. Her legs weren't made for such a short robe, either. I wanted to think I'd dropped by unexpectedly, but I had called her from the office two hours earlier.

Glancing around the living room, I saw no pictures of Jameson and her. There were pictures of her. There were bizarre sculptures that looked like half-formed naked people. A couple suggested that the figures were having sex, but they were so malformed I couldn't really tell.

"I'm sorry," she said, hustling about the house. "I got involved in a sculpture and forgot the time. I barely had time to throw something on when you rang the bell."

"You didn't have to change clothes for me, Ms. Rensileer," I said, somewhat sympathetic.

"Of course not," she said, almost proudly. "I never wear any when I sculpt. It affords me greater intimacy with my work."

I didn't want to ponder what that meant.

"So, have you found that wayward man of mine, yet?" she asked, sitting in a chair, elbows on knees, leaning forward, giving me an unwanted look at her breasts.

I frowned. "No, ma'am, and I called Huntington-Sheen when I couldn't watch the building anymore."

"And?" she said expectantly.

I sighed. "And they said he's never worked for them." I sat down opposite her, still forced to see down her robe. She did nothing to cover herself. "I'm checking police

reports to see if he ditched his car, but, without some sort of lead, it's going to be very difficult to find him."

With a couple of sniffs, she put her head in her hands and began weeping. "Oh, this can't be! This can't be!" She looked up, tears running down her cheeks. "Mr. Kepler, I wasn't completely honest with you yesterday. Our fight wasn't just about money."

"It wasn't?"

She shook her head, and sobbed a couple of times. "I'm pregnant!"

I tried not to react, but it was hard. Jameson had been lying to this woman for years now, and dumped her as soon as she became pregnant. I wondered what else he had done to her. "Ms. Rensileer, I hate to ask this, but did Sam ever... abuse you in any way?"

She kept sobbing, said nothing, but nodded.

"Did he ever beat you?"

She looked up and nodded at me. "I got him to stop, though. He's really a troubled man."

Troubled man or not, too many times I'd seen women stay with these creeps, hoping to change them. Sometimes it was a fatal mistake for the woman. "How?"

"I let him... I let him..." She shook her head as she tried to catch her breath. "I let him have me whenever he wanted, however he wanted." She looked up at me, almost defiant. "If I let him do what he wanted with me in bed, he wouldn't hurt me the rest of the time."

I scowled. "Greta, where I come from, that's called rape. You want me to bring back a rapist?"

She just sat and stared for a moment. I could see no bruises or scars on her, but that didn't mean she hadn't been abused. A change came over her slowly. "You say he lied about his work?"

I nodded. I knew where this was going, and some small part of my mind screamed for me to back away. Unfortunately, Greta had pushed my hot-button. Although I was outwardly in control, inside, I seethed. My police career had ended over a scumbag like Jameson. I thought of my former partner, now sitting in Mansfield, thanks to my efforts. I needed to detach myself from the situation. Rage, however, held sway. At least outwardly, I stayed calm. "Yes, he did. The personnel department says they've never heard of him."

"I still want him," she said. "I'll pay anything to find him now. I'll pay you to kill him and bring me his head."

That snapped me out of that red haze I'd fallen into. "Greta, I'm a private investigator, not a hit man. I'll locate Jameson. I may even give him a piece of my mind, but I won't kill him." She looked like she'd been slapped. I stood and crossed over to her. "I'll find him, Greta. What you do once he's found is your concern. Deal?"

She stood up and wrapped me in a big bear hug. With her strength, I couldn't believe that Sam Jameson had beaten her or forced himself on her. "Oh, thank you, Nick! Thank you! If there's anything I can do for you..."

I returned the hug, even though I noticed that her robe had come open. "It's okay, Greta. I'll find him for you."

I gave the room another glance, still wondering why there were no pictures of Jameson at all. I felt her hand brush across my ass as we parted. It made me uncomfortable.

"You've got that look again."

I looked up from my dinner at Margo, my live-in lover and moral compass. Dark-skinned with large eyes, she had a statuesque build that could have made her millions as a model. It hadn't hurt her career as a TV reporter, either. She stared at me with that same look of maternal concern that had kept me out of trouble so many times these last three years. "What look?"

"That look," she said, "you always get when you're out to get someone."

I shoved a fork full of mashed potatoes into my mouth. "I'm not out to get anyone."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," she scolded with a slight smile. "And don't lie to me. What's going on?"

I sighed, put down my fork, and explained to her about Greta and Jameson, leaving the sexual abuse part for last.

"Let it go," said Margo. "I know why you're upset, but let it go."

I looked up at her. "No, you don't know why I'm upset. I've never told you why things like this really bother me."

"I know about your partner down in Brunswick. Hell, I covered the story for Channel Four. But you have to let it go. You can't just keep fighting the same battle over and over again." She took my hand. "Remember when you thought that cop you workout with was a racist?"

I nodded. Ever since Margo and I had started dating, racial slurs had become a sore point with me. I wondered if they'd be if I lived with a white woman instead. "That was different."

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't. When he blew off steam, you took it personally because of me. It's the same with your ex-partner."

I shook my head. "No, it goes back further than that."

"To what?" Margo looked hurt. I guessed she thought she knew everything about me. I thought she knew enough.

I pushed back from the table. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Nick, what is it?"

I turned away from her as I walked over to the picture window in our living room. It was snowing again. I felt cold. "I don't want to talk about it." I turned around to see her coming toward me. My God, she looked beautiful. I took her into my arms. "I know you mean well, babe, but it's not something I'm ready to talk about yet."

She kissed me. "But you will."

I ran my hand through her hair and kissed her forehead. "To you? Absolutely." Someday.

It was nice knowing I wasn't alone in the world. I wondered if Greta would still be alone after this.

* * *

I spent the next morning doing what PI's normally do, but only Loren Estleman ever writes about. I went to the library and started combing the newspaper archives -- specifically, Plain Dealer -- for any mention of Jameson. I had already requested a credit report on Jameson, police records, and even Ohio Bell. So far, I'd found three Sam

Jamesons listed in the phone book, an attorney in Wickliffe, a student at Cleveland State, and a dead man. The dead Sam Jameson was the first one mentioned in the Plain Dealer, an obituary from three months earlier. There were others, all Associated Press stories from other cities. None of them looked like Jameson, not even the elderly black man from Birmingham who'd shot a skinhead trying to torch his house. That Jameson instantly became my hero.

During lunch, I went through my scribbled notes and photocopies while munching on a Reuben at the Sportsman's Deli. So far, everything pointed to nothing. The man was a ghost. I expected the police records would come up dry as well. I thought about calling Greta to find out where Jameson was born and raised, but somehow, I figured that, too, would come up blank. I'd look into that later.

I stared at the photo. The male model stared back at me with his Clark Gable smile. It was starting to look like a smirk. I knew him from somewhere, but couldn't remember where. I swore when I found him I'd put a fist through that smirk.

Disgusted, I took the folder back up to my office and tossed it on my desk. I needed to push this case away for awhile, needed a clear head. I was ready to head for the gym when I made a quick check of my email. I had a message with the address "samjam@northcoast.net" and the subject "Back off!!!!" I checked the message properties. It was a simple text message, no vicious scripts or html code embedded. The text was malicious enough, suggesting I'd be found in the Cuyahoga River with my dick shoved in my mouth if I didn't drop the case.

"Wrong move, asshole," I said aloud. I called Tom Keller, a drinking buddy and an IT consultant in the same building. He said he'd look at the message and see if it could be traced. Tom had contacts at NorthcoastNet, having installed three of their web servers.

For a malicious message like this, the Internet company would practically drive me to the message's source.

I called Greta at her bookstore around five and gave her an update. I told her that I couldn't find any trace of him in my records searches, although I still had reports due in Monday morning. She took this quite well until I mentioned the email.

"Oh, Nick, be careful! I worry about you out there." She spoke in a high, breathy tone that reminded me of a soap opera actress. "I never realized he was so dangerous!"

This woman was really naive. No wonder Jameson was able to take advantage of her like that.

Just like my sister with her ex-husband.

"Don't worry, Greta. I've dealt with far worse." Actually, I couldn't be sure of that, but I had to say something. I hung up and cruised around Garfield Heights and surrounding towns, hitting bars and circulating Jameson's photo. I came away with no leads, a mild beer buzz, and several propositions to spend the night. Some of the ladies seemed enamored with the idea of a Real Life Private Eye. Where were these women when I was unattached?

I went home to sleep off my frustration.

I spent Saturday morning prowling the shops of Garfield Heights. I hit them all: auto parts, grocery, delis, hardware, even a nearby Wal-Mart. Just like in the bars, no one had seen Jameson before. I called Greta at work with my daily report and started to head home to Lakewood when I got a call.

"It's Windsor," a voice like gravel growled at me. "I found your car."

I almost ran off the road. "Really? Where?"

"In Tremont," said Windsor, "or rather below it. We're waiting on a wrecker to fish it out of the drink." He paused, I assumed, to puff on one of his cheap cigars. "I ran a check on the plate, buddy. You'd better come down here."

I got the location and sped off to Tremont, a seedy, but gentrifying, neighborhood that overlooks the Cuyahoga just below downtown. The car was actually down in the Flats. By the time I got there, a flatbed was hauling a 1992 Geo Prism sedan out of the brown water. A crowd had formed at the site, but the police had cordoned it off. As soon as I gave a uniformed cop my name, he escorted me to the water's edge. Windsor was waiting for me, a cigar clenched in his teeth.

Frank Windsor was a greasy-haired man of about forty, dressed in a tan raincoat. He scowled as the water-logged car was pulled up onto the wrecker's flatbed. "Our guess is it tanked some time last night. Maybe a drunk driver. Do you know a Greta Rensileer?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That's my client. Why?"

Windsor gestured to the car. "'Cause that car is registered in her name. Why didn't you just have her file a stolen car report?"

I shook my head, not quite believing this latest twist in the case. "She gave me the impression it was his car." I watched as water drained from the car and rolled back into the river. It was in the forties, and the snow had turned to slush. My shoes were soaked from it. "When she hired me on Wednesday, she told me it was his. After she told me he'd sexually abused her, she didn't mention that the car was in her name. I suppose it slipped her mind by that point."

Windsor's cigar fell out of his mouth. "Slipped her mind? Kepler, you're losing it as an investigator."

I shook my head. "No, Frank. When she hired me, she told me she didn't want the police involved. They would humiliate Sam."

"Sam?"

"Her boyfriend. Remember?"

Windsor nodded in recognition. "Well, we're involved now. Not just Cleveland, either. I'm going to have to call Garfield Heights, too. Maybe the Sheriff. You'd better give me what you have."

That was easy. I had nothing, or rather, next to it. We went over to a nice warm cruiser, and I gave Windsor the whole story, showing him the photo of Jameson.

"You weren't kidding about bunco, were you?" he said, lighting another Garcia y Vega. "I'll bet he's scamming women all over the city."

I shrugged. "Wouldn't know. He lived with my client, though."

"Yeah, yeah, and he worked late hours for an industrial firm that never heard of him." He turned to watch the lab technicians go through the empty car. "But he had her car. We haven't found any police reports on him, and the credit bureau's come up blank. He's not in the paper or the phone book, and no one in Garfield Heights has heard of him. You know what that sounds like to me?"

I shrugged. "A ghost?"

"A bigamist, and not a Mormon bigamist, either."

Definitely not a Mormon bigamist. There was nothing pious or holy about Jameson. The idea had been in the back of my mind. Not so much bigamy, but... Is it adultery when you're just living with someone? Hearing it aloud, though, came as sort of

an epiphany. I didn't think Jameson was a bigamist, but he was definitely a con artist.

"Could be, but I'd need evidence of another woman. Do me a favor, Frank."

"What's that?"

"Let me tell her about the car. I have a feeling she'll take it better hearing it from me."

Windsor smirked. "Right. And you save your retainer."

I drove out to Garfield Heights, expecting Greta to be home by now. The house was dark, but Greta might have been in her room, working on sculpture. I hoped she put on more than a robe this time. I went to the door and knocked. No one answered. Out of curiosity, I checked the door. It was unlocked. I don't like unlocked doors. There are parts of Ohio you can leave your doors unlocked 24/7. None of them are this close to major cities, or the bigger towns. I slipped inside and pulled out a flashlight.

The house was pretty much as I remembered it, maybe a little messier. There were some dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. I poked my head into one room. Inside were two half-finished sculptures, both malformed bodies in some sort of suggestive position. Chunks of plaster and stone littered the floor, and her tiny silk robe hung in one corner.

I moved to Greta's bedroom. That one was in total disarray. The sheets smelled sour and looked like they hadn't been washed since the original Browns left town. Clothes were strewn about the place. On the nightstand, I spotted a file. The tag read "Nick." Was it information for me?

Or about me? I opened it up and found photocopies of my Yellow Pages ad, a couple photos of me at some social function with Margo where I was "Ms. Westphal's companion." A faded news clipping told about my part in busting a racist cop a couple months earlier, not an incident I cared to remember.

The copies of earlier news clippings made my blood run cold. They came from the *Plain Dealer*, the *Akron Beacon-Journal*, and the *Medina County Gazette*, all dated 1996. The headlines read "Brunswick Officer Arrested for Domestic Violence", "Cop Stops Partner from Killing Wife", and my personal favorite, "Ptl. Kepler Faces Excessive Force Investigation." One clipping brought back some fond memories: "Ex-Cop Petoskey Gets 10 Years for Beating Wife." The last clipping was a blurb from the *Gazette*: "Kepler Resigns Brunswick Force Amid Investigation." I was looking at the end of my police career in black and white. At least I did my job and was a free man. Petoskey now lived in Mansfield Penitentiary.

Other things in the file included my business card, a sheet of yellow legal paper contained my name, my office address and number, my cell phone number, and my...

Home address? How did she get that? When Margo and I moved in together, we agreed to leave our phone number unlisted. We didn't want to be harassed by irate spouses and worker comp cheats I'd caught, nor stalkers obsessed with Margo Westphal, Channel Four News. So how did Greta get my home address? It wasn't in the phone book. I didn't give it to her. Did she follow me?

I put the file back and slipped out the door. Greta was just pulling up in a cab. I waved to her and waited by my car. "You weren't home, but your door's unlocked. I went in to make sure nothing had happened to you."

This put a huge grin on her face. She rushed over and gave me a big hug and a peck on the cheek. "Oh, Nick, you're so sweet." She stepped back. "Do you have something for me?"

I nodded. "Not good. They found the car."

"Where?"

"In the river." I looked off to the north, then back at Greta. "Why didn't you tell me it was registered to you? I could have had the cops look for it as a stolen car."

"I told you I didn't want to humiliate Sam," she said. "But I guess that doesn't matter now, does it?"

I shook my head. "No, but now they're going to be looking for him anyway. See, they don't take too kindly to people dumping cars in the river. There's enough crap dumped into it already."

"Well, as long as I have you to protect me..."

I looked toward the house. "That's another thing, Greta. That door was unlocked when I arrived. You can't leave it like that in a major city like this, especially with Sam on the loose."

She patted my cheek then kissed me there again. "Well, I'll do what you say, Nick. I'm really touched that you're looking out for me."

I started heading back to my car. "That's what I'm paid to do, ma'am."

As I drove away, the thought of that file kept gnawing at me. Was I going to have to investigate my client?

* * *

Sunday morning I spent with Margo. Monday was Valentine's Day, but neither of us would have time to celebrate. We celebrated a day early. I'd already bought her a gold

herringbone necklace the previous day. She would give me my gift later that day, but first, she wanted to thank me for the necklace.

After she thanked me, we lay naked in a tangle of sheets, Jameson and Greta light years from my mind. I was perfectly happy to just lie there quietly with Margo and forget there was a world outside our building. The cell phone intruded loudly on our peaceful morning. "Kepler."

"You want me, asshole?" The voice hissed like a snake. I couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman.

"Who is this?" I asked, oblivious to the fact that I was naked in front of the window.

"It's me, motherfucker. The one you've been looking for all week."

Jameson. My grip on the phone tightened. My teeth ground. "How did you get my number?"

"Oh," he hissed, still not letting me hear his real voice, "I can get anything out of that cunt Greta whenever I want." He paused for a moment. "You wouldn't stay away when I told you, would you?"

"That's what they pay me for." I'll just throw in kicking your ass for free. "What do you want?"

"I want you to leave me alone," said Jameson, "but I guess you won't as long as Greta's paying you. Is she giving you something extra on the side, Nicky boy? A little bit of Dutch treat on top of your retainer? You know she likes it when you slap her around a bit. Loves it, the sick bitch."

I saw the look on Margo's face. She could see me getting angrier by the second. She took my free hand and squeezed, calming me a bit.

"Where are you?" I said in a low, even tone.

"Meet me below the Eagle Avenue Bridge, west bank. Come alone." The line went dead.

I looked at Margo. "Gotta go to work." I started getting dressed. Margo looked a little distressed when I strapped on the Browning 9mm.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Carrying some insurance," I said, putting a fresh clip into the gun. "It was Jameson. He sounded testy." I grabbed the cell phone and speed-dialed Frank Windsor at home. "Don't worry. I'm bringing backup." A voice mumbled on the phone. "Hi, Frank, it's Nick. I found the driver of that Prism. Think you can not show up near the Eagle Avenue Bridge until the right moment?"

"Kepler," he growled, "you need to get a fucking life!"

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The Eagle Avenue Bridge is this big, black metal behemoth that spans the Cuyahoga River. It's flanked by two towers that raise the deck nearly fifty feet to let freighters pass inland or toward Lake Erie. It's an ugly, but cherished, Cleveland landmark.

I walked along the river's edge, keeping my back to it. From behind one of the bridge supports, a man in a long, black coat approached. He didn't look like Jameson. He was younger, balding, with a thin mustache. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"You Kepler?" he called out.

I nodded as I approached.

"I'm Johnny. I was asked to meet you here."

I looked around, searching for another person. No one else appeared nearby.

"Where's Jameson?"

Johnny just smiled. "Couldn't make it. He asked me to deliver a message for him."

I unbuttoned my coat, just in case. Johnny was faster, and I found myself staring down the barrel of a .45. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I should have used the belt holster instead.

Johnny reached under my jacket and relieved me of the Browning. "I'll take that, if you don't mind. Turn around, hands behind your head."

What had I gotten myself into? As I put my hands behind my head, I wondered just who, exactly, Sam Jameson was that warranted me being hit execution-style like this. Slowly, I did as I was told.

"On your knees," said Johnny.

"This won't hurt a bit, right?" I said. "Just like the movies?"

I felt a sharp crack to the back of my head and saw stars for a moment. Unfortunately, I didn't pass out from the blow. Too bad. The blood roared in my ears now. They hurt when I heard Johnny whistle.

"Charlie! Come on out! Time to teach Mr. Kepler his lesson."

I was face-down in the dirt, dazed, and didn't dare get up with the .45 against my head. I heard footsteps approaching.

"This the one?" a new voice asked, a male, maybe black. I couldn't tell. Someone grabbed the back of my collar and pulled me back upright.

"Yeah, that's him. That's the one she hired," said Johnny. "Let's do it."

I felt the butt of the .45 come down on my shoulder and groaned as I went down. I opened my eyes long enough to close them again before a large shoe made contact. After

that, all I felt was a series of blows to my ribs. Every time I tried to get up, I was shoved back into the dirt.

"From now on, you stay the hell away from Mr. Jameson," I heard Charlie growl. "Or next time, it'll be you they fish out of the river."

I felt a sharp blow to the back of my head. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I heard a police siren and two cars skidding to a halt nearby.

I came to in the E/R. One of the nurses told me I was in MetroHealth, that the police had brought me here. I had three cracked ribs, lots of bruises, and a mild concussion. I felt a lot worse. When I finally could sit up and start to think, I was seething. I wanted Jameson now. This wasn't just some con artist. Jameson had to be a real pro. It all made sense now. Greta couldn't call the police because Jameson would kill her if she did. Everything fit except Greta's file on me. I chalked that up to research. She must have done her homework before hiring me.

Margo came to see me not long after I regained consciousness. She tried to hug me, but I waved her off.

"Easy, babe. The ribs."

She started fussing over me like a mother hen. I could imagine what she'd be like with children. "What happened?"

"Jameson hired some thugs to work me over," I said. "He doesn't want to be found."

She stroked my cheek. "You scare me sometimes with your job."

I laughed, despite the pain. "I could go back to being a cop."

"Bite your tongue!" Margo had reported on too many police shootings in her time. "I brought your Valentine's Day present." She handed me a small box.

I started to unwrap it. "Honey, you didn't have to do that." I tore off the paper and opened the Dillard's gift box. It held a brown leather wallet with my name etched into it. Inside was a twenty dollar bill, and those damned fake pictures they always slip in there. I desperately needed a new wallet. Mine was falling apart. "Thanks, babe. You didn't have to give it to me now."

"Why not? Can you think of a better time?"

I didn't answer. As I pulled the fake photos from the wallet, I found one that looked very familiar. In fact, the first time I saw one just like it was Wednesday morning. I looked up at Margo. "I think I've found a lead."

"Well, well, well," growled Windsor as he barged into the exam room, an unlit cigar clenched in his teeth. "Maybe next time, Nicky, you'll give me a little more information. I could have put someone on the river with a rifle."

I smiled at him. "I take it that was you I heard just before I passed out."

Windsor spread his hands in mock humility. "What can I say? I should have been in the Cavalry."

"You want to drive tanks?" I said, deadpan. "What happened to the thugs?"

"Waiting on their lawyers," he said. "They claim they've never met Sam Jameson. How are you feeling?"

I slung an arm around Margo and pulled her close. "I got everything I need right here." She punched me in the arm. "Say, Frank. Can you pick up Greta for questioning?"

"Why?" he asked. "You think she knows something about these thugs?"

"Yeah. Apparently, Greta shops at Dillard's, too." I opened my new wallet, some of the fake photos still inside. I flipped through them and held one out for Windsor to see.

Windsor's cigar fell to the floor. "You've got to be kidding me!"

I shrugged, in spite of the pain. "I wish I was. Think you can lean on those two thugs for me?"

Windsor thought about this for a second. "I'll see if the prosecutor will cut a deal to get 'em to talk."

"That's all I can ask. That, and could you possibly arrange a visit with my client." I patted Margo's hand. "I'm sure she's worried sick about me."

Windsor already had his phone out. "Yeah. Right."

"Oh, my God, you've been shot!"

I somehow managed to keep from smiling. She was even more melodramatic than when she burst into my office a few days ago. I grimaced as I shifted in my bed. "I wasn't shot. I just took a beating. That's all."

Greta pulled a chair up next to my bed and sat down, leaning uncomfortably close to me. "You poor dear. You took all that abuse for me. Did you get my no-good ex-boyfriend?" She tousled my hair. I hated her for that.

"We think we have," said Windsor, walking in behind her.

I thought Greta would jump right out of her skin, a thought that made my stomach turn. "Who... Who...?"

"Detective Sergeant Windsor, Cleveland Police." He smiled, chewing on an unlit Garcia y Vega. "We have some leads pertaining to Mr. Kepler's investigation."

Greta looked back at me, her eyes wide. "Nicky, I don't understand."

Despite my ribs protesting, I sat up and faced her. "Tell her about the car, Frank."

"Your car has only one set of prints on it... Yours." The cigar bobbed in his mouth as he spoke. "If Sam Jameson took it, he's awfully meticulous."

Suddenly, Greta started looking around the room, almost like someone looking for an escape route. "I... I... don't understand."

I shrugged. It hurt. "I didn't, either. Not at first. Eventually, though, it started falling into place. No one's ever heard of Sam Jameson. No one in Garfield Heights heard of him. Huntington-Sheen never heard of him. Even the thugs he hired to lean on me have never seen him."

She gasped. "Surely, Nicky, you don't believe those awful men. Why, they might have come after me next. I might have been raped."

I lost it. "I am sick and tired of being played that angle!"

Greta jumped in her seat, recoiling and pouting like a scolded little girl. "Nicky, how can you say that?"

"Yesterday," I said, "when I went into your house, I found a detailed file on me. It had my business card, clippings of me and my girlfriend, and my home address, which I never gave you." My eyes burned into her, boring imaginary holes into her chest. "In fact, I don't give that out ever. Did you follow me home one night, Greta?"

"I was worried about you!" she whined. "Sam is so violent..."

"There is no Sam," I said quietly. "There never was."

She stood up, tears in her eyes. She was very good at crying on cue. "But, Nicky! There was! I'm carrying his child!"

"Isn't that what you told the manager you worked for at Huntington-Sheen?"

She whirled on Windsor. I thought she might take a swing at him. She didn't, but I could see it in her eyes the moment he mentioned Huntington-Sheen. "That bastard raped me, too!"

Windsor shook his head. "I'm surprised Margo didn't pick up on this one, Nicky. The station's were all over her four years ago." He looked at Greta with something of a smirk, casually unbuttoning his coat. "I got the police records from Independence about an hour ago. In 1997, you had to be dragged out of Huntington-Sheen after your boss accused you of stalking. You threatened him with a letter opener. Witnesses say you..."

"Shut up!" she hissed. It was that same voice I heard on the phone.

"They said," Windsor continued quietly, "you screamed that you were carrying his baby."

"Shut... UP!"

Windsor's hand went under his coat. "The Independence police dragged you from the building. The courts determined you were insane and sent you to Northcoast for six months."

"That... is... PRIVATE!"

Windsor shrugged. "It's also all over the news. You have a tendency to latch onto men. Your police record shows it. Four counts of aggravated menacing. Two sentences suspended if you went for psychiatric help. Didn't help much, did it?"

"SHUT UP!" She lunged at Windsor, only to run into his revolver. He pushed her back and held the gun on her.

"I've got to admit," I said, reaching for the wallet Margo had given me earlier, "the photo of Sam really fooled me." I opened it up to the fake picture of the guy with sandy hair, hazel eyes, and Clark Gable smile. "I know where I've seen him before now. I got another wallet just like this one two years ago. Do you shop at Dillard's, too?"

Greta jumped up, screaming at the top of her lungs, fists balled over her head. Windsor fired one shot into her arm. She crumpled to the floor, cradling her now-useless limb, whimpering. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm a..." She gasped. "I'm a bad girl..." She lay there sobbing as security and orderlies rushed into the room.

Windsor already had his badge out when they arrived. "Get this woman some help, then take her to the psychiatric ward." He cocked his head toward me. "She just tried to attack this patient."

The security guards hauled Greta to her feet. She hung there like a sack of potatoes, having to be dragged from the room. The orderlies helped her onto a stretcher as a nurse tried to look at her arm. Greta refused to be helped, curling up in the fetal position as they pushed her toward the E/R.

The last thing I heard from her was a blood-curdling wail.

I looked up at Windsor. "How could I have been fooled?"

Windsor holstered his gun. "We all were. Remember, we were looking for Jameson, too, until Margo gave you that wallet."

I huffed as I settled back into my seat. "At least her retainer was real."

"Yeah," said Windsor. "And so were those thugs she hired."