

## WRING THAT NECK

I stood in front of the palatial home, the smell from the box I held almost intolerable. I suppose that was the intended effect. The contents had sat unpreserved and unprotected by little more than a shoe box for about four hours, two and a half of which were spent driving back from Holmes County, as far from civilization as one could get. Worst of all, I had to drive back from central Ohio to suburban Cleveland during rush hour. The dead bird didn't seem to mind. I, on the other hand, was bewildered to learn just how far south Cleveland's traffic woes extended on secondary highways, all the way to West Virginia from the looks of things.

It all began the previous day, when Mason Garland summoned me to his Pepper Pike home just after lunch. Garland, a big man with an ego to match, had bestowed upon my tarnished knighthood a quest: find his daughter Brittany. The name made me cringe, conjuring images of a silicon-enhanced teen dressing suggestively, but pleading virginity. Garland's photo surprised me. The girl was, indeed, pretty, but she looked natural, strawberry blond hair, a hint of freckles, teeth not perfect, but beautiful just the same. Garland explained that he believed she had been abducted. I asked who might want to take his daughter. Garland explained that she had, just before graduation, had "a dalliance" with a boy, a "factory rat" as he described him. She made "absurd noises" about possibly marrying the boy, but Garland put a stop to that. Still, the boy would not stay away.

"I'll be honest, Kepler," he said, jabbing his cigar at me with his fat, stubby hand, "the boy's dangerous. He has no future, no prospects. My daughter is all set to go to

Princeton this year, and Goddammit, I'm not going to let some Polack loser ruin that for her by knocking her up."

I bit my tongue, being part Polish and having lost a few times in my life. "What if your daughter refuses to come back?"

"She will," he said, "if she knows what's good for her."

He handed me a generous check as a retainer, which assuaged my ethnic rage for the time being. Still, the Polack comment bothered me. So just how many WASPs did it take to screw in a lightbulb, anyway? "This boyfriend have a name?"

"Kotowicz," said Garland. "Eddie Kotowicz. Lives in Parma." He said "Parma" like it was a bad thing. I guess too many of us half-breeds, Polacks, and, worst of all, auto workers lived there.

"I'll get right on it," I said, and was promptly dismissed like one of his servants. Note to self: No more rich clients. There are plenty of lawyers to spend their money on me. Part of their job was to keep their clients from shooting their mouths off to us Polack losers doing their dirty work.

I got right on it, as promised. I had an account at the same bank as Garland. I had accounts in several banks, actually. I used them to cash retainer checks before someone could stop payment or close their account on me. With cash in hand, I promptly sought out Eddie Kotowicz' family. By evening, I had been threatened with a shotgun by Eddie's father, then given a lead. Mr. Kotowicz thought I was one of Garland's hired thugs come to harass him. I suppose I was, and I'd just drawn hazard pay.

Mrs. Kotowicz managed to negotiate an uneasy truce. It seemed she worried about her son, too, and offered to pay me to look for him. Mr. Kotowicz had been recently laid off from the Ford plant in Brook Park, with a recall looking less and less likely each day.

I told Mrs. Kotowicz that Mr. Garland's money spent just as good as hers, only he had more of it. She could keep her money. I'd throw in looking for her son at no extra charge.

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I started off early the next morning with the Holmes County address of Mrs. Kotowicz' brother, who lived in or near a town with the unlikely name of Big Prairie. Careening down I-71, I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

I got off the interstate at Lodi, on State Route 83. Lodi lay at the extreme edge of Greater Cleveland and/or Greater Akron, depending on your point of view. Turn right off the exit ramp, you found yourself in the midst of suburban sprawl with signs that farmland had still existed here in the last decade. Turn left, and say goodbye to civilization as we know it.

I turned left, immediately treated to blink towns narrower than the length of my car, curves that would challenge a Porsche's suspension - they tortured my aging Honda - and rolling hill upon rolling hill upon farm-dotted rolling hill. I passed through a Walmartized oasis called Wooster, and knew that was the last outpost of humanity I would see that day. I felt like Magellan.

The curves and hills became more severe as I crossed into Holmes County. Someone once told me that these were the Appalachian foothills, with the actual mountains a hundred miles east in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. I believed it. The slow-moving Amish buggies, which seemed to outnumber cars here, didn't help matters. I damn near slammed into two of them.

After rounding a particularly tight curve hugging an enormous hill, I came to the village of Millersburg. I found my way to the center of town and pulled into a Shell near the town square. On the far side of the square, a squat cinder-block building sat tucked up

next to an enormous church, Holmes County Sheriff's Dept. emblazoned on the sign. I wondered if I should introduce myself. Then again, one never could tell how these rural cops might react to a private investigator, especially one from "the big city." I shrugged off the idea and bought a county roadmap.

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There are two things one should know before leaving a fifty mile radius of Cleveland, Akron, or Columbus by car. One is that it's a whole other world there. No cabs prowled downtown. No twenty-four-hour grocery stores would satisfy those midnight munchies or beer runs. Beyond the county seat, cell phones were either useless or enormously expensive due to roaming costs. At high noon, you could tell these towns roll up and go dark at nine.

The way they name their roads is truly bizarre. They don't. They only number them. Mrs. Kotowicz' brother, a farmer named Elmer Holst, lived on Township Road 257. After spending twenty minutes in a diner up the street from the Shell, I located the road. It took another forty-five minutes of driving another twisting, winding state highway between cow pastures and through rolling hills. State Route 39 took me through a collection of buildings dubbed "Nashville." A right turn onto yet another twisting, winding highway, and finally, I found Township Road 257.

I nearly missed it, thinking it was a driveway or a tractor path. Not only did the road lack a name, it lacked pavement. The Honda skidded along the dirt road, kicking up gravel and dust as it went. Soon, I happened on a farm with a huge white barn behind a simple frame house. Chickens milled about the lawn and in front of the barn. A windmill towered over the farmyard, populated by a battered Ford pickup, an equally battered and

ancient Mercury Cougar, and a Toyota Corolla almost as old as my car. I spotted the Cuyahoga County plates on the car right away.

Getting out of the car, I went over to the Toyota and slowly circled it. The car had Cleveland all over it, the plates and bumper stickers for the Browns, the Indians, and the Cavs. Another bumper sticker displayed a large green hemp leaf, but the writing had worn off long ago.

Inside the car, various fast food wrappers, newspapers, and old coats lay in the backseat and on the floor. Obviously, the owner seldom cleaned it out. The seats were grungy, and a roach clip hung from the rearview mirror. Had it not been for the "Polack loser" comment, I might have agreed with Garland about his daughter's boyfriend. Amazing these two even met at all.

With a loud crack, something exploded behind me, something glassy. I spun around to see it was my rear passenger window. Slowly, my eyes moved to the house, where a tall man in his forties stood. He was a lanky fellow, dark-haired with a beard like Amish men commonly wore. He also wore one of their straw hats with a pair of overalls.

I put up my hands. "I thought the Amish were a peaceful people."

The man pumped the shotgun once more. "We aren't Amish." He spoke clearly, without that accent you hear in the movies, the one that sounds Swedish. He had a plain Midwestern drawl, maybe less polished than what I was used to hearing in the city. "Who are you?"

"I'm Nick Kepler. I'm a private investigator."

The man approached me carefully, keeping the shotgun aimed at my chest. "What do you want?"

"I was hired to find Brittany Garland and Eddie Kotowicz. Eddie's mother said they'd be here. Are you Elmer Holst?"

The man shook his head. "Go back the way you came, stranger. Tell Garland I'll kill him or anyone else who sets foot on my property." He fired the gun over my head, then pointed it back at my chest. "Now get out of here, trespasser!"

I kept my eye on him as I got into my car, but said nothing. Nor did I let him see the Browning I had strapped on under my windbreaker. I couldn't draw on him anyway. I was on his property. Trespassing was in the eye of the property owner, especially when they wielded a shotgun.

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The sheriff laughed so hard you'd have thought I was the Second Coming of Sam Kinnison. About my age, early thirties, with close-cropped blonde hair, he looked more like a trainee than the top law enforcement officer in a rural county. He sat behind his simple metal desk, shaking his head, chuckling. "You just barged right into Elmer Holst's farm, expecting to knock on the door and find his nephew and girlfriend there?"

I shrugged. "That's always worked in the past."

The sheriff continued laughing. Stephen Miller, as his badge labeled him, at least had a sense of humor. This was good. Mine had vanished with my car's window. "Toto, you aren't in Kansas anymore." He chuckled some more. "See, Elmer's had vandal problems. Then we found pot plants some kids were growing on his farm, Amish kids, if you can believe it. So he's a little paranoid." He wiped his eyes and settled a pair of round, wire-rim glasses on his nose. "So, who's your client, Mr. Kepler?"

"I don't think..."

Like flipping a switch, his face went from jovial to scowling. "Don't bullshit me, Kepler. I may be a hick, but I'm not stupid. You don't have the same legal protections a lawyer has. Who is your client?"

I sighed. Usually, the Cleveland Police cut me slack when I withheld my clients' names. They generally assumed, not always happily, that I was onto something. Miller didn't seem to buy that. "My client is Mason Garland, of Pepper Pike, Ohio. He hired me to look for his daughter."

"Okay," said Miller. "You're looking for the daughter of some wealthy guy from a swanky suburb. So what brings you to God's country?"

"Her boyfriend's mother suggested I pay her brother a visit."

"That would be Elmer."

I nodded. "I take it that was the Mennonite with a shotgun."

Miller rolled his eyes. "Look, Kepler, I don't know what you people up north think of us, but we're not all Amish and Mennonites driving horse buggies and black cars. Hell, I have a satellite dish in my front yard. As far as I know, Elmer Holst hasn't seen the inside of a church, aside from the odd potluck dinner, since he moved back here from Akron fifteen years ago."

"So he's originally from here?"

"Yeah. The Holst family left here in the seventies, rented out their farm, and headed for the bright lights of Akron, occasionally dropping by to visit relatives."

Left for Akron. When I was a kid, we all wanted to leave for someplace a little more glamorous, like Chicago or New York or Los Angeles. Bright lights, big city. Of course, from the Cleveland suburbs, we wanted brighter lights and bigger cities. I guess from Millersburg, Akron looked bigger and brighter. "So why'd Elmer come back?"

Miller shrugged. "You saw what Reagan did for the rubber industry in Akron. He's one of those blue collar kids who thought daddy would get him on at Goodyear or Firestone. The economy tanks, and all the tire plants head to Georgia and Alabama, where the labor's cheap. And the remaining plants don't pay a living wage. So Elmer came home and restarted the family farm."

It was a variation on a story I knew so well. Kid graduates, expects a job from Ford, GM, the tire plants in Akron, or the steel mills. Unfortunately, the only thing that trickled down in the eighties was the rust from the old steel belt. To me, it was worse than the Great Depression. "Does he do well?"

"As well as anyone can expect here." Miller took a sip of coffee from a mug with a Holstein cow on the side. "Folks in this area are pretty tight-knit. He trades with some of the Amish, gets carpentry done in exchange for machine work. You know the Amish won't use machines themselves."

I nodded. "How come he dresses like them?"

Miller cocked his head. When I described what Holst, he grinned. "You really don't get too far south much, do you?"

I shrugged. "I faithfully attend at least four Ohio State games every year."

Miller shook his head. "That's I-71, wall-to-wall suburbs from the lake to Cincinnati. That isn't Holmes County or anywhere else in this part of the state. You're in the outskirts of Appalachia, Mr. Kepler. These aren't quite mountain people, but they aren't stupid hicks, either. Most folks leave their doors unlocked twenty-four/seven, but they don't trust strangers. Terrorists, we call 'em here."

"Terrorists?" I had visions of suicide bombers and shadowy commandos brandishing AK-47's.

"Tourism is the big industry here. Everyone wants to visit the Amish and see their quaint and peaceful ways. And the Amish, God bless those quiet capitalists, are happy to take their money. But traffic gets bad about this time of year. All those city folks taking a nice summer trip to the country. The Amish started calling them terrorists. The name stuck." He leaned back. "So, this girl's seeing Elmer's nephew. How old is she?"

"Eighteen."

Miller nodded. "She's an adult. Not really anything your client can legally do."

I shrugged. "I explained that to him."

"And?"

I grinned. "He handed me a check. Isn't that what rich people do?"

Miller laughed. "Yes, Mr. Kepler, they certainly do. Even the guy that owns this one-horse town. Would you believe he even built his own suburb?"

I did a double-take. "Suburb? This town can't have more than two thousand people."

"I know that, and you know that. The old man, however, wanted a suburb. So he built a ritzy development on some land he owned, just behind his supermarket."

"At least he didn't move your football team to Baltimore."

"Point taken." He got up, revealing a little bit of padding around his middle. Not quite a beer gut, it still spoke of living well. I guess being the top gun in Holmes County did that. Or all that Amish cooking I keep hearing about did. "Let's head out to Elmer's. I'll take you in my cruiser. He'll talk to me."

Or shoot out the window. Somehow, I didn't think Miller would arrest him if he did.

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City cops drive state-of-the-art machines that look like Darth Vader's toilet inside. The computer, radio, light controls, and video camera are all built into the dashboard and the seats. Nearly 400,000 taxpayers can afford to give cops get plenty of gear to manage the bad guys. When I was a suburban cop, we didn't have such Knightrider cars, but it was still a nice setup. A suburb is a smaller area, needing fewer cruisers, so a town like the one I used to work could spend a little extra on rides for their force.

Miller, though, worked in a rural county whose entire population might fill Jacobs Field, assuming everyone brought relatives. The county had given him an off-the-lot model with mountings for a laptop, separate controls for lights, and no video camera. He caught my frown when I got into the aging Crown Victoria.

"Don't knock it," he said with a grin. "She's got horses under the hood. Besides, have you seen the cars most folks drive around here?"

I nodded as we pulled out of the Sheriff's Department lot, watching a loud, salt-corroded Buick roll by us. "Good thing you don't have emissions testing around here."

Miller drove much faster than I had dared through Holmes' treacherous curves and hills, winging past Amish buggies we only saw seconds after cresting a hill and whipping around semis as though they were subcompacts. I gripped the dash for dear life. Miller didn't break a sweat.

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at Elmer Holst's once more. Miller told me to wait in the car while he went to talk to Holst. I watched for about five minutes while they exchanged words in hushed tones. I got tired of the noiseless gesturing and finally got out of the car. Miller didn't seem to notice. Holst watched my approach with a glare, but said nothing.

When I reached them, I stuck out my hand to Holst. "Hi, I'm Nick Kepler. You shot out my window earlier."

"You were trespassing!" He turned back to Miller. "Steve, I want this man arrested. He came onto my property, snooping around that car."

I put up my hands. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! I tried to tell you I'm just looking for two people. Both their parents are worried about them, and your sister suggested I talk to you."

He scowled at me, but I could see his eyes cloud over a little. Strike a nerve, did I? "Then why didn't you tell me that?"

"I did. You were busy shooting at me."

Miller positioned himself between me and Holst. "Look, Elmer, Kepler's a private investigator. He's looking for your nephew and his girlfriend. Says your sister sent him. That's all."

"My sister can't afford no private eye."

I wanted to laugh, but bit my tongue. I haven't heard the term "private eye," even on television, in years. "We're sticking the girl's father for it. I understand he's given Eddie a lot of grief."

"Who told you that?" asked Holst.

I snorted. "The father bragged about it. Apparently, I'm just a dumb Polack he's hired, so why not brag?"

Holst started laughing. "Polack!"

I sighed, trying to figure out if he sounded more like Beavis or Butthead. "Look, I can't make Eddie or Brittany leave with me. I just need to see them and verify that they're alive and well. What happens after that is between the rest of you."

"And if he hires you again?" asked Holst. "What's to stop him from sending you back down after Eddie or his girlfriend?"

I smiled. "Well, first, I have to accept the case, and two of my standing retainers don't permit me enough time to come down here and get lost." I paused for a second. "Or have my car in the shop replacing bullet-riddled windows."

Holst's jaw stuck out hard as he pressed his lips thin. "You won't try to force them?"

"Sheriff, watch me closely." As Miller fixed his gaze on me, I reached under my jacket, pulled out my Browning, and popped out the clip. I pocketed the clip and handed the weapon to Miller. "I'm now unarmed. Unless Sheriff Miller hands me back my weapon, I'm in no position to force anyone to come with me." I glanced at Miller "Besides, I'd lose my license in about ten seconds if I attempted to abduct someone."

Holst nodded, but his eyes were narrow as they watched me. "All right. You can see them. You can talk to them." He stepped up to me, trying to look threatening. "Then I want you the hell out of here. Go back to your rich boss and tell him if he sends anyone else, I'll fill them full of lead. I'll fill him full of lead." He turned to Miller. "It's trespassing, Steve. I'm not having it."

Miller nodded. "Show us the kids, and I'll take Mr. Kepler back into town."

Holst led us toward his barn. As Miller warned me to watch my step, I slipped in something greasy, then landed on my ass in it. As I got up, I realized I had chicken shit all over my pants. Holst threw back his head and laughed.

"Maybe I won't shoot them," he said. "I'll just let the chickens shit all over the lawn and let them slip in it." He kept laughing.

I wiped my hands on my jeans. It didn't matter now. They were ruined. "Is there a store where I can get a replacement pair around here?"

Miller, who didn't laugh, but smiled just the same, shrugged. "We can stop and get you a pair when we go back."

"Thanks."

We followed Holst into the barn.

"Eddie!" he hollered at the top of his lungs. "Brit! Come on out! The Sheriff's here!"

First one head poked out over the edge of the hayloft, then another. The first belonged to a dark-haired boy in his late teens. Eddie, I presumed. The other I recognized from Garland's picture as Brittany.

"What's going on?" asked Eddie, in a pinched, raspy voice.

Miller stepped up the base of the loft. "Eddie, Brittany's father has sent someone to talk to both of you. Come on down."

"Tell that bastard I said, 'Fuck off!'" This came from Brittany. So much for Mason Garland's little princess. "I'm not going back!"

"It's not just your father, Brittany," I said. "Eddie, your mother asked me to see if you were all right, if you were well."

They traded looks, then stared back at me, both still scowling.

"I have Mr. Kepler's weapon," said Miller. "He won't force anyone to return."

"I need to take a message back to your parents," I said.

"Tell Mom and Dad I'm fine," said Eddie. "Then tell old man Garland to go fuck himself."

I smiled and nodded. "I'll probably tell him that anyway."

"Come on down," said Elmer. "I don't think this guy means any harm."

Eddie sighed, then both heads disappeared. Moments later, Eddie, then Brittany, started making their way down the ladder from the hayloft.

"Come on," said Miller. "Mr. Kepler's had a bad day. He's had to learn how to drive around Holmes County. Elmer shot out his car window." He looked to me and cracked a smile. "And he slipped in some chicken shit."

That drew a laugh from Elmer and the kids. I was not amused.

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"He locks me in my room!" said Brittany. "Sends one of his security goons to follow me on my dates, tries to plan my life down to the last second! I won't go back!"

I nodded. "Were you abused in any way?"

"I'd say locking up a teenage girl and keeping her under surveillance is abuse," said Miller.

I shook my head. "Maybe, but it's not enough to stop a man like Mason Garland. Brittany, did he ever hurt you or..." I let it hang. I wasn't really sure I wanted to go there, but I left her the option.

She shook her head. "No, but he beats my mother." Her eyes started to well up with tears. "I hear them screaming at each other every night. Finally, when I turned eighteen, I decided to run for it. Eddie said we could hide out here until he could think of where to go."

Absently, I clenched my fists at my side, my mind already working on some way to nail Mason Garland. "What will you do?" I asked. "Neither of you have money or jobs. Sooner or later, you're going to have to do something."

Eddie squeezed her hand. "Tell Mom and Dad I can't come home again, not until Brittany and I are married and settled somewhere far from here. Maybe Pittsburgh or Wheeling. I can't risk him coming after us again until we've made a clean break."

I shook my head. "Not West Virginia. Do this. Go to Cincinnati. You can get a cheap apartment down in Clifton, by the university." I took out my notepad and jotted down a name and phone number. "This is a lawyer I've done some work for. She'll help you throw up some legal barriers to your father. She's an ex-assistant prosecutor, so she's got some connections with the cops down there. Get settled in, and try to do something more than factory work. Industrial jobs are dead in this part of the country. Try to get away from that as fast as you can." I leaned back. "I need to take Mr. Garland a message back from Brittany. Would you like to write something?"

Eddie looked at Elmer. "Were you going to dress a bird tonight for dinner?"

"Yeah," said Elmer. "Why?"

"Why don't I go into Loudonville for pizza instead." He got up, went out into the barnyard. When he returned, he held a chicken in his hands, its head twisted completely around. The legs and wings still twitched. He offered me the bird. "Here. You take this to Mason Garland, and you tell him that if he ever comes near me or my wife again, this is what will happen to him."

I swallowed. This was something Russian gangsters usually did to serve loan shark victims a late payment notice, only they generally used the family pet. "Okay. Was that legal? I mean, won't the SPCA have something to say about that?"

Miller shrugged. "I didn't see anything. Did you, Elmer?"

"I was going to serve that bird for dinner, but I guess we're having pizza," said Holst. "I'll get a shoebox for that."

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Ten minutes later, Miller drove me back to Millersburg. We stopped at Wal-Mart to replace my shit-stained jeans. The bird hadn't started to smell until I got stuck in the various traffic snarls between Wooster and I-71. Although I was pleased to see the Cuyahoga County line once more, the bird had started to stink. The wind whipped ferociously inside my car, since I had no rear passenger window to speak of. By the time I reached Pepper Pike, I had taken all my anger and focused it on Garland. As I rang the doorbell, I realized how pleased I was to have the dead chicken. It'd be a cold day in Hell before I delivered another one, though.

Garland's servant answered the door, an old man with a shiny forehead that ended somewhere behind his head. He wrinkled his nose when he saw me. His coal-black eyes flicked down to the shoebox. "What, pray tell, is that?"

"That, Jeeves, is a message for Mr. Garland from his son-in-law."

"You must be mistaken. Mr. Garland does not have a son-in-law."

"He does now."

Jeeves actually grinned.

"I understand that there have been some... er, hostilities between Mr. and Mrs. Garland." I waited for Jeeves to say something, then continued. "You don't have to confirm that. It's really none of my business."

"I would agree with you on that point, Mr. Kepler," said Jeeves neutrally.

I handed him the shoebox, then fished in my pockets for a business card, which I handed Jeeves. "If that's so, and Mrs. Garland would like to make it my business, please give her my card."

Jeeves took the card and let another grin flicker on his face. My, but he must have been one unhappy butler. "Is that all, sir?"

I shook my head. "Tell Mr Garland I'm keeping the retainer. I've put about fourteen hours into this, had my window shot out, and fell in some chicken shit. If he wants to demand a refund, tell him I'll send him an itemized bill. Two days work at my out-of-town rate, repairs and cleaning for my car, and a new pair of jeans. The jeans are negotiable. The car is not. Do I need to write this down?"

"Absolutely not, sir." His gaze moved over my shoulder to my wounded Honda. "Shall I recommend you to my next employer?"

I shrugged. "Only if he's a lawyer. Mr. Garland is the last domestic I take directly."

Jeeves bowed his head perfunctorily. "Consider it done, sir. And thank you for your service."

I winked and headed back to my car. I gave Jeeves about five minutes to give my former client the bad news. The last time I ever saw Garland before his divorce hearing, he was in his bathrobe, running down the road after my car, waving a dead chicken at me.