

MILK RUN

By

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CHAPTER 1

“JESUS CHRIST!” SIMON yelled as Lucas threw the Interceptor into a sharp left turn that took it bouncing up over the sidewalk corner and then roughly dumped it back onto the street again on the other side, tires squealing beneath them as sirens blared overhead. “Just because he’s driving a bus, doesn’t mean you have to drive like you are!” He keyed the radio. “706 continuing pursuit on Westwood road east.”

“I’m just keeping on his tail as you instructed,” Lucas replied over the dispatcher’s acknowledgement. “We don’t want him getting away again.”

“When I said ‘stay on him,’ it wasn’t meant as literal,” Simon said. The suspect—an accused serial rapist—had commandeered a bus that just went out of service at its last stop, after crashing his

previous vehicle into a row of parked cars that lined the curb just south of the bus stop. Simon and Lucas had been minutes behind—enough to allow the startled bus driver to be yanked out of her seat and thrown to the sidewalk before the suspect stole her ride.

“Seriously, back off a bit,” Simon scolded again as Lucas closed the distance, leaving barely a foot between their KCPD Interceptor and the KCATA city bus. “If he brakes suddenly, we’re going to crash.”

“Nope. My reflexes are much quicker than yours,” Lucas said.

“I’m really glad right now I didn’t let you take my car,” Simon added.

“I’ve been in the Charger when you drove like this,” Lucas replied, turning to look at him.

“Watch out!” Simon shouted and winced as Lucas turned just in time to brake and serve to the side, narrowly missing popping up over another

curb and into a street pole. "God damn it, keep your eyes facing the front!"

"You do not need to repeat this every three minutes."

"I'll stop when you actually do it," Simon snapped. He braced himself by planting his feet and grabbing the handle beside the door to his right as Lucas executed another sharp turn in pursuit of their fleeing suspect.

Simon keyed the radio. "706 continuing pursuit on Ward Parkway north at—" he glanced out at the nearest street sign—"Rockwell Lane."

"Copy, 706," the dispatcher confirmed.

Simon glanced over again at his partner, who had a very pleased look on his face. "This is supposed to be sex crimes' problem. You just had to be the one to spot him."

"There is a city-wide BOLO out for him," Lucas said. "We are to arrest on sight. I am following orders."

Sometimes, Simon resented Lucas' android dedication to restating the obvious. "It's called bitchin'. It's something I tend to do when my life's in danger." He glanced over at the speedometer. They were topping sixty miles per hour. "I didn't even know city buses could go this fast. They usually just dodder along."

"Sixty isn't that fast these days," Lucas commented and followed the bus around a sharp curve, tires squealing as he struggled to avoid swerving into a line of cars parked alongside the road—once again sending Simon slamming against his seat and door. "We're perfectly safe," Lucas added.

"Oh yeah, perfectly safe," Simon said as he dared opening his eyes again. Suddenly, the week off they were about to get to spend in court was actually sounding appealing.

"You know, I never complain when you drive," Lucas observed.

"I'm a better driver," Simon muttered.

"I am accurately and safely executing all necessary maneuvers," Lucas countered.

"By better, I meant saner," Simon replied.

"What do you mean? I am under the influence of no nanoparticles," Lucas said, sounding puzzled—a reference to a prior case, in which androids throughout the city had been sabotaged via the deployment of nanoparticles to modify their programming.

Ahead, the bus rammed a car from behind car and pushed it sideways into a parked pickup, continuing on.

"We'll debate that later," Simon snapped as three black and whites appeared behind them and joined the pursuit.

"706, be aware, road blocks being set up at Broadway," the dispatcher reported.

"Copy," Simon replied into the mic, then muttered, "We just have to make it there in one piece."

Both vehicles were forced to slow down now as they wove their way through busy traffic.

"We've got help coming so you can ease off a little," Simon suggested.

"You are starting to sound like you think we're driving Miss Daisy," Lucas teased.

"The way you drive I wish we were," Simon answered and then they spotted flashing lights up ahead as traffic slowed to a crawl and became very congested from the KCPD road block. Horns honked and a few drivers yelled out open windows into the night.

Inside the bus, Simon saw the suspect's head turning back and forth as he looked around, seeking a way through. Saturday night on the Plaza was busy enough, but with road blocks, it was a madhouse.

"Yeah, asshole, you hate this, don't ya?" Simon muttered.

"You are calling me an asshole now?!" Lucas said, shooting him a surprised look. "What happened to your favorite 'shut the fuck up'?"

"I was talking about the suspect," Simon said. "He's about to make a move."

Sure enough, the suspect had been slowly edging his way through the jamming traffic to the middle lane, beside the wide, grassy median. He suddenly accelerated and bumped up over the curve, tearing across the grass.

"Son of a bitch!" Simon said as Lucas followed, throwing him around yet again in the Interceptor. "I'm gonna come outta this looking like we had a bar brawl."

"Last bar brawl we had, you just watched while I did all the work," Lucas cracked.

"Really, shut the fuck up," Simon said as Lucas chuckled.

Unfortunately for the suspect, Ward Parkway was split at this point by Brush Creek, which ran between slanted, heavily landscaped slopes. The

bus was bouncing over flowers and bushes and barely missing scattered trees as it angled across the lawn. Then it crashed over the sidewalk, sending up sparks from its undercarriage as it bounced down onto the street and sideswiped the rear of a car waiting to turn on Ward Parkway curving left to head west across the overpass.

“This is insane,” Simon said and keyed the radio, “Suspect turning left on Roanoke. Better seal off the whole Plaza quick.”

Lucas followed, shooting after the bus across the sidewalk, but avoiding the waiting cars and making his own left on Roanoke. Simon glanced back to see the black and whites were following but not having as easy a time navigating the grass.

The bus moved across Brush Creek and then took a sudden right on the southbound lanes of Ward Parkway, moving against traffic, though the road was currently clear due to the roadblock at the next intersection. Lucas followed.

“Where the fuck does he think he’s going to?”
Simon wondered aloud.

The bus continued rolling the wrong way in the right lane, next to Brush Creek, then suddenly turned, hopping up over the curb and following a sidewalk that angled down to the shoreline. Lucas followed.

“He’s losing it,” Simon observed. “Slow down. There’s nowhere he can go but back toward the street.”

Lucas followed the bus up over the curb onto the sidewalk then tried to catch up, pulling the Interceptor onto the grass parallel to the sidewalk in an attempt to cut the bus off from returning to the street.

“Careful! There’s not enough room,” Simon warned.

“It’s wide open,” Lucas said as he steered wide around a park bench and then came back parallel with the bus again as Simon saw the darkness of the water up ahead.

"He has to stop," Simon said.

But the bus kept ploughing onward.

"He's not stopping," Lucas observed.

"He's crazy," Simon said.

"That would explain the rapes," Lucas answered.

Lucas slowed the Interceptor but the bus continued until it came to the end of the sidewalk and shot off, splashing down into the water as the suspect spun the wheel turning so he was headed straight across back toward northbound Ward Parkway and then swinging south.

"Fuck!" Simon said. "Turn us around."

Lucas was watching the bus, then suddenly hit the accelerator, shooting off the edge of the sidewalk into the water and turning to chase the bus.

"Are you crazy? The motor will choke out!" Simon warned. "The Sergeant is going to kill us."

"It's not that deep here," Lucas said.

“It’s deep enough, slow down,” Simon answered.

The bottom of Brush Creek had been covered in cement in the 1930s in a failed attempt to lessen the risk of flooding and portions had a sort of round, arced steps down. The bus hit one shortly thereafter and bumped, gears grinding, as the suspect tried to hold speed and plough on down, but then he hit the water at the bottom and it was deeper and bus began sputtering and came to a stop.

“Stop here!” Simon yelled and Lucas slammed on the brakes. “If we’re lucky they can save the unit.”

Lucas released his seatbelt and popped open his door, jumping out and splashing through the water in the direction of the bus.

“Fuck,” Simon said as he opened his door and saw the water level. Then he growled and undid his belt, lowering himself more carefully than his partner and hurrying after him, trying and failing not to splash. The water smelled of algae and

clumps of floating water plants moved around him as he waded through.

As they approached the stalled bus, Simon saw that the two double doors on the right side remained closed and tried to get a view through the windows, but they were too high.

“Is he still in there?” he wondered aloud.

“I believe so,” Lucas responded as he headed along the right side of the bus toward the door and Simon followed, having surrendered to the inevitable and picked up his pace to catch up.

Both drew their weapons as they neared the bus doors.

Suddenly, the front doors whooshed open and Simon and Lucas halted, guns ready, waiting.

“Come out with your hands up, police officers,” Lucas called.

There was no response.

After a minute, Lucas shot a puzzled glance back at his partner.

"He's in there, he opened the door," Simon said, motioning for Lucas to approach. Through the corner of his eye he caught sight of the black and whites pulled up on the edge of the shore, lights flashing. *At least they had the sense to stay put*, he thought.

Lucas hesitated.

"Go get him," Simon urged and Lucas slid forward cautiously.

As he reached the bus's open front door, they heard a blood curdling scream, and then the suspect literally flew out, swinging from a bar inside and slamming feet first into Lucas who fell back under the water, his arms scrambling to catch himself.

Simon turned, trying to aim his gun but the suspect burst off Lucas and dove right into him, knocking Simon down too, and then they were underwater and Simon was fighting for air.

The suspect pounded him in the chest and face then broke free, hurrying off as Simon struggled and tried to pull his head above water.

Suddenly, a hand was pulling him and he saw a concerned Lucas looking down and pulling him up. "Are you all right?" the android asked.

Simon nodded. "Yeah, get that son of a bitch." Then he realized he'd dropped his Glock. "Fuck. My weapon." As he leaned back and felt around his feet for it, Lucas splashed past after the fleeing suspect who was wading north again.

Lucas made surprising speed through the water and threw himself forward, tackling the suspect and struggling with him underwater for a bit, before emerging, dragging the suspect cuffed with him as he holstered his weapon.

"Find it?" Lucas called as he looked back at his partner.

"No. I need a flashlight." Simon saw his partner's satisfied look and nodded. "Well,

congratulations. You owe me a new pair of Dockers and new leather shoes.”

“They can be washed,” Lucas said.

“Not the shoes,” Simon said as he followed Lucas with the suspect back toward the Interceptor. It was the craziest chase he’d experienced yet in his career, and he’d had some doozies. He sighed with relief as they reached the Interceptor and he motioned toward the shore. “Take him to the uniforms, will ya? I’ll see if the unit’s still running.”

As Lucas splashed off with the suspect on a beeline toward the waiting uniforms, Simon climbed into the driver’s seat and took a moment to catch his breath. “That’s the last time I let you drive,” he muttered then keyed the radio to call it in.



“WELL, IT STARTS,” Sergeant Brian Delmater confirmed after the tow trucks had pulled the Interceptor back up onto the shore. Late forties, tall,

with a thickening paunch and limbs and thinning hair, he was Simon and Lucas' current commander in the Generalist Squad at KCPD Headquarters.

"You're damn lucky," Deputy Chief Tony Cardno growled as he stood with hands crossed over his chest and glared at them with piercing green eyes. "The under carriage is probably torn to shreds and who knows what damage the mechanics will discover. What the fuck were you thinking?!"

Simon scoffed, pointing to Lucas.

"I was trying to stay on his tail," Lucas said matter-of-factly.

"You're not funny, Detective," Cardno scolded and shook his head, turning away. Tall and thin with short brown hair and a plain face, he was the first gay man to ever rise so far in the KCPD's ranks. Tough and all business but fair, usually.

"I think it's fortunate you two will spend the next week in court," Delmater said. "You're not earning brownie points on this one." He chuckled.

“Hey, we caught a serial rapist,” Simon protested.

“Which is the one thing that saved your asses,” Delmater said. “And why you deserve a milk run—like getting that witness to court and testifying. But you might want to go over chase procedures with your partner again.”

“Fuck, the guy stores everything in that computer brain, how was I to—”

“Your soaked clothes would say different,” Delmater teased, cutting Simon off. “Look, you got your man, that’s what matters. The rest will blow over, but keeping a low profile will make that happen faster.” He patted Simon on the shoulder before walking away to rejoin Cardno and the KCPD tow truck operators.

“Do we check out another unit or—” Lucas started to say.

Simon cut him off. “Oh no, we have a shit ton of paperwork waiting for us back at headquarters. Once we hitch a ride.”

Lucas looked around at the other cops as if seeking a likely candidate for chauffeur. Instead, Simon pulled out the flashlight he'd borrowed from a uniform and stuffed in his pocket and headed back for the water.

"Where are you going?" Lucas asked.

"To find my weapon," Simon said. "Bring your enhanced android vision and help me."

"Right," Lucas said and followed.

"Just had to follow him," Simon muttered. "Just what I want at midnight, standing around soaked to the bone and having to go back in again."

"Is it my fault you dropped your gun?" Lucas teased.

"Shut the fuck up or I'll make you search for it alone," Simon cracked as Lucas chuckled and they headed down to the shore again.



AS MUCH AS he'd always despised technology, the one thing Simon was grateful for when it came

to department paperwork was computers. They worked on reports and accident forms until past three a.m., before parting ways to head home—Lucas to his apartment near the River Market, and Simon to the Fairway house he'd inherited from his grandmother and called his unofficial residence. Per ancient department regulations requiring all KCPD officers to live inside the city limits, he also kept an apartment down south listed as his "official" residence but Simon had hardly been there in years.

After a quick shower and change into sweats, he fell into bed and slept until he was awakened at eight a.m. by voices arguing on the street outside. He spent a few moments in a haze until it dawned on him—*I know those voices.*

He jumped out of bed and hurried to open the front door to see his ex-wife Lara and their fifteen-year-old daughter standing beside Lara's Toyota Forerunner at the curb in full mother-daughter discussion.

"I can't help if they change my schedule, you know that!" Lara said, frowning with anger.

"Sure, just another promise to your daughter blown off as usual!" Emma countered, equally angry, her hands on her hips.

Simon noticed the Forerunner was parked at an odd angle by the curb, with increasing space between the passenger side and curb.

"Nice parking, Lara," Simon joked. "You know we still cite people for being too far from the curb?"

Lara shot him annoyed look, her anger momentarily redirecting from her daughter to her ex. Emma had the same long dark hair and blue eyes as her mother, and both of them were darker complected than Simon. Their voices even sounded similar, especially when they were angry. "Don't blame me, blame your daughter."

"What?" Simon looked at Emma, confused. She was grinning ear to ear, her anger erased by pride and excitement.

"She's got her learner's permit," Lara said.

“You let her drive all the way over here?!” Simon said, not even trying to hide his disbelief.

“No, just from a few blocks away,” Lara protested.

“We haven’t covered parallel parking yet, sorry,” Emma said, her smile fading under embarrassment and uncertainty now.

“And I thought Lucas had a death wish,” Simon said.

“You’re not helping,” Lara scolded. “We need to encourage her, help her. In fact, it’d be real nice if you could find time to take her driving while she’s here.”

“In my car?!”

Lara frowned. “Yes, in your car. Don’t be an ass.”

Simon raised his hands in mock surrender. “I’m just learning about this, okay? Give me a moment to process. Why are you here at eight a.m. and not dropping her at school?”

“Teacher in service,” they both answered together.

“And they pushed up my trip by a day, so here we are,” Lara added. “You get to start your week with her early.” She looked him over for a bit, hesitating, then asked, “What happened? You look like hell.”

“Usual late nights on the job,” Simon said. “We caught a major suspect last night.”

“That rapist?!” Emma asked, a little too excitedly and Simon shot her a stern look. “It was on the news this morning.”

“Yeah,” Simon said.

Emma chuckled. “You criticize my driving and your unit ended up in a creek?”

“I let Lucas drive,” Simon snapped, not enjoying her amusement.

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear that story,” Emma said, reaching for her phone. Her friendship with her dad’s partner was a source of something between

amusement and annoyance for him, especially when they chatted like school girls.

“Let him be, he’s resting,” Lara said as Emma started typing a text.

“Lucas doesn’t sleep,” Emma replied.

Lara threw up her hands. “I gotta go. She’s all yours.” She turned and started walking around her Forerunner toward the driver’s side.

“You’re way too peppy for eight a.m.,” Simon said, looking at his daughter. “I thought teenagers were supposed to drag their feet and whine about needing more sleep.”

“Yeah, well, I got to drive, so...”

“I’m going back to bed,” Simon said and turned back toward the house. “Wish your mother well and try and keep the noise down.”

“But you’re off all day, can’t we go practice driving?” Emma teased.

Simon flipped her the bird and disappeared inside as he heard his daughter cackling over her mother’s scolding, “John Simon, I saw that!”



THE CASE WAS Lucas' first as lead detective. A simple fraud case involving a fake real estate developer selling shares to multiple investors, it had been the perfect case to bring him up to speed as a full Detective, Simon thought. The witness, Jeff Browning, sixty-eight, was a veteran of the Gulf War, a retired salesman who looked like everybody's grandfather. One of those nicest guys in the world types who still saw the world through a lens of optimism a grizzled cop like Simon could only envy.

He was waiting for them at his condo, part of a large retirement village off Wornall at West Meyer in an area called Armour Fields, south of the Plaza area. Simon drove in his classic 1995 red Dodge Charger, stopping at the curb just after 9:30 a.m. and waiting as Lucas went to the door to knock and return with Browning, who slid comfortably into the back seat.

"You ready for this?" Simon asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"Born ready," Browning said. "You guys look tired."

"Yeah, it was a long night," Simon said. Both he and Lucas were wearing suits to look nice and professional for court. But the circles around his eyes were harder to hide.

"Can't believe I fell for it, to be honest," Browning confessed. "I feel like a doddering old fool. Pretty sure my kids and grandkids think so."

"It happens to a lot of people," Lucas said.

"These people are professionals," Simon added. "Very good at what they do. Very smart. Lots of smart victims. It doesn't mean you're dumb."

"Feels that way. Can we stop for coffee?" Browning asked. "I ran out and I hate to start my day without a good hit."

"You sound like an addict," Lucas observed.

Simon and Browning answered at the same time: "I am." "He is."

Simon added, "I'll stop at a Quik Trip on the way."

"They must be smart to get two dozen people falling for this," Browning said, switching back to his scammers again.

"Actually, it was spread over several years and developments but all connected," Lucas corrected.

"Still, good to know I'm not the only fool," Browning replied.

"The papers looked legit. They were very well done and professional," Lucas said. "But all of them were forged."

"These types perfect their schemes over many years and attempts, too," Simon said. "Getting better and better at fooling good hearted, decent, trusting people."

"Yeah, well, I'm not so trusting these days, I'll tell you that," Browning said.

"Testifying is your chance to get revenge, in a way," Lucas said. "To make sure they pay for what they did, get punished."

"I just hope my doddering old mind can remember all the details," Browning joked.

"What matters is that you remember your part in it and testify the best you can on what he told you and what you saw," Simon said.

"That part is crystal clear," Browning said. "So let's make sure the bastards go away for a long time."

"That's the attitude," Simon agreed. "You'll do fine." He pulled the Charger into the lot at a Quik Trip, pulling to a stop at a pump on the end of a row. Just across the barrier, a fuel tanker was filling the station's tanks, its pump emanating a steady drone. "I'm gonna gas up. You take him in and get what he needs," Simon said to Lucas.

They all climbed out and Simon went around to the pump while Lucas and Browning headed inside.

He'd almost finished topping off his tank when Lucas and Browning emerged from the Quik Trip with large, lidded coffee cups and hurried back to

the car. As Simon turned to hang the pump handle back on the housing, the tanker's air brakes hissed and it began rolling forward, inadvertently splattering him with water from a puddle underneath. Simon jumped back but the damage was done.

"Fuck!"

"What happened?" Lucas asked as he opened the door for their witness and Browning climbed inside.

"I'm soaked," Simon said. Both KCPD and judges tended to frown on officers showing up for court with less than pristine appearance, so he had to change. "Let's hurry, we have to go by my house."

He and Lucas got inside and he flipped on the lights and sirens and headed for Fairwood.

"Tanker got you, huh?" Browning observed from the back.

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Sorry about this. I’ll just slip on a clean suit and be right back out. We’ll still make it with time to spare.”

“No worries, I understand,” Browning said.

Ten minutes later, they pulled into his drive and Simon climbed out, hurrying inside. As he rushed around his bedroom, he heard Lucas and Browning enter the front door, chatting.

“This is a nice place, older classic style,” Browning observed.

“Yeah, John inherited it from his grandmother,” Lucas replied.

“I thought the KCPD required officers to live within the city limits,” Browning said.

“He has an apartment in the south of the city as well, but this is his main residence,” Lucas explained.

“Oh, gotta love a loophole.”

And then glass exploded and brick and wood thumped as gunfire erupted from outside and

strafed the house, Simon diving for cover and hoping Lucas and Browning were doing the same.

“Emma!” he screamed, wishing he’d checked on his daughter when he came in, but the gunfire drowned out any possible response.

Bullets tore through his curtains and across his mattress and Simon cursed as he crawled into the small walk-in closet for extra cover and laid on his stomach, reaching for his radio to call dispatch.

CHAPTER 2

JEFF BROWNING HAD first encountered them in the community center on game night. Two men handing out information on a special event to be held in the retirement center's community room that Saturday, as often occurred throughout the year. This one about opportunities for real estate investment. Jeff was immediately intrigued. He had equity and income he had thought about investing, so he went. What got him was the sales pitch. He knew they were putting on a show—talking up their best front, hype and all, of course, but when they promised to multiply the return by ten times in six to eight months, he was hooked.

They took his information and promised to be in touch and sent him out smiling along with a few others from the retirement community.

"It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it?" Jeff's pal O.C. Hicks said as they strolled out together.

"Yes, it does," Jeff agreed.

“You trust them?” O.C. asked.

Jeff shrugged. “They seem sincere for sure, but that short one’s a little shifty.” He should have trusted that instinct. The two men were dressed in nice suits and introduced themselves as B.J. Penred and David Clinton. They were both well-spoken, well-groomed, and well-mannered, and looked to be in their mid-thirties. Both seemed totally comfortable around senior citizens, which wasn’t always the case Jeff had found with those visiting retirement centers. Penred and Clinton moved among the center’s residence like they were right at home.

“It’s a hell of a profit margin,” O.C. said now, shaking Jeff out of his thoughts. “Ten times in six to eight months.”

“Yeah,” Jeff agreed. “Pretty hard to resist.”

The men had photographs of the development land in St. Joseph, Missouri which they planned to develop for mixed-use—building an office complex and set of apartments. Between rents and sales of

spaces, the huge return should come fast because the land was situated in a high demand, fast growing area. They'd knocked down some old houses and run-down gas and convenience stores and a few trees to clear it, but it had been sitting abandoned for two decades by then. The surrounding area was in the midst of one of the biggest building booms the area had ever seen. While St. Joe, as the locals called it, had made national news during the COVID-19 crisis for the huge numbers of workers taken sick at its pork processing plant—one of the largest in the country—the fame had also led to interest from parties seeking to take advantage of new opportunities in a post-COVID-19 world, and that had inspired a boom of industries both tech and industrial. With one boom came another for houses, schools, and so forth—all the support needed for new residents. Clinton and Penred and their partners were seizing the opportunity as developers to make investors rich, they claimed.

To healthy retired people with disposable income seeking opportunities to make the most of the sunset of life like Jeff and O.C. Hicks, the promised profits were irresistible. Thus, Jeff had put aside any reservations he'd had about the two men and signed up. And everything had seemed on the up-and-up for a while, exciting and promising.

The first "speed bump," as Clinton and Penred called it, happened the fourth month. The ground breaking had already been delayed two months due to permit issues and red tape, but now the investors were being asked for additional funds to help the developers push past the problems and get things rolling. As Clinton and Penred explained, the underground gas-tanks from the old station had contaminated the soil, so they needed more money for abatement. Jeff and O.C. had each invested a quarter million initially. Now they each found themselves ponying up another one hundred thousand, and while the developers described the

problems as routine—“it happens sometimes”—both men were starting to get nervous and ask more questions. The result was Penred and Clinton became less and less quick about returning emails and phone calls, which, in turn, only fed the two men’s worries.

As they had time to think, Jeff and O.C. became nervous about the fact the money they’d contributed had been sent by wire transfer to a bank out of state. If the men were so involved locally, why wouldn’t they want the money here, nearby where they could more easily access it? Certainly it wasn’t uncommon for large developers to have corporations that operated in multiple states, but these two men were the only people involved with River Eagle Enterprises the investors had ever met, and no other names had been mentioned in any of the literature. Clinton frequently made comments like “I’ll get my people on it” and “We’ve made the decision” as if he and Penred were in charge of everything. And although they had a number to

call, it was answered by a receptionist who promised "Mister Clinton will call you back soon."

The final straw was when the investors were informed the development was in trouble. The ground breaking was on indefinite hold because archeologists surveying the site had uncovered an Indian burial ground for the Pawnee tribe. The tribe was protesting. They might have to fight it out in court.

After that, Clinton and Penred became scarce and harder than ever to contact, so O.C. and Jeff's old worries began festering again and they started looking into the developers, River Eagle Enterprises, and anything they could find associated with it.

"There's no such bank," Jeff found himself saying a week later.

"What?" O.C. asked, flabbergasted.

"I tried Google and everything else, finally gave up and called the Chamber of Commerce," Jeff explained. "First State Bank of Nevada doesn't exist.

They suggested Nevada State Bank but there's no accounts there for River Eagle Enterprises, Clinton, or Penred."

"Jesus," O.C. said.

"I think we've been had," Jeff continued.

"Call those bastards! We want our money back!"

"I tried," Jeff said. "The number is disconnected. No receptionist anymore either."

"Oh my God," O.C. said as he sank into a chair, face in his hands.

That was when they'd decided to call the police and set things in motion. To this day, Jeff still couldn't believe Clinton had actually been caught. Penred had disappeared into the wind. At least one of the bastards would get what was coming to them. But he knew he'd never see a dime, and poor O.C. had died of a heart attack a month after they filed a complaint with the police—dead of stress and a broken heart.

Jeff had awoken in a surprisingly chipper mood the morning of court. He'd expected he'd be bitter but life had gone on and he still had money and, most of all, his health. Poor O.C. If nothing else, he'd nail the bastard for his friend.

But then the shooting started and Jeff thought for sure he was going to die.



SIMON SHOOK OFF the paramedic and looked around. His yard was a madhouse. Police both from KCPD, Fairway, and surrounding areas had responded en masse as they always did to "Officers need assistance" calls and the gunmen, whose number remained a mystery, had quickly fled, but not without doing plenty of damage to his house.

As soon as the shooting stopped, Simon had sprung to his feet and raced to Emma's room, where he found his sobbing daughter lying on her stomach under her bed. Fortunately, his room and the bathroom had mostly insulated her room from

any bullet streams, but she was terrified, and he hugged her tighter than he had in months.

Two minutes later, they made their way out front to find Lucas unscathed as well, and other than a few minor cuts from flying glass, Browning was fine. Fairway police officers met them at the door.

“Are you all right?” an officer whose nameplate read “Watkins” asked.

Simon nodded. “Yeah, did anyone see them?”

“They were gone when we pulled up,” Watkins said, “We’re canvassing neighbors now. Any idea why they’re after you this time? Apparently we’ve been here before.” She was right. His house had been shot up a couple years before during an investigation into the kidnapping of Simon’s previous partner.

Simon shook his head as he noticed traces of sulfuric from the gunfire filling the air. “I’ve pissed a few people off over the years, but no.” Simon

glanced over to see Lucas watching over Browning as the paramedics treated him.

Just then an official KCPD car pulled up and Delmater and Deputy Chief Greg Melson, who ran the detective divisions and was an old friend of Simon's got out. They hurried across the lawn to join him.

"What happened?" Delmater asked, looking worried.

"The house is gonna need a remodeling," Simon said.

"What were you doing here? I thought you were on the way to court," Melson asked.

Simon sighed. "It's my grandmother's house. I got sprayed by water at a gas station on the way and came by to change suits."

"Was your grandmother here?" Melson asked, concerned.

"No, but Emma was," Simon replied. "We're all okay."

“Do you think this had anything to do with one of your cases?” Delmater asked.

Simon shrugged. “I have no idea. No one’s made threats. It came out of nowhere.”

“What about your witness?” Delmater asked next.

They glanced over at Browning who was walking away from the ambulance with Lucas.

“It’s a cut and dry fraud case,” Simon said. “I can’t imagine it would have anything to do with him.”

“Well, just in case, you take him to a hotel tonight,” Melson said. “And we’ll assign a team to keep watch.”

“I notified the D.A. and explained the circumstances,” Delmater said.

“Yeah, we’re gonna be very late,” Simon cracked.

“They’ll either get a continuance or hold his testimony for tomorrow,” Melson said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Very glad everyone is okay,” Delmater said.

“Yeah,” Simon and Melson agreed.

“Why don’t you get him back to headquarters,” Melson said. “They can take statements there. Give us time to locate a safehouse.”

“All right,” Simon agreed then examined his Charger which was surprisingly untouched.

“We’ll get you a ride,” Delmater added. “In case they followed and know the car.”

As Delmater walked away, Simon turned and bumped into a glowing beauty who threw her arms around him.

“Are you all right?” Holly Sanders, Simon’s girlfriend asked. Medium height with long reddish brunette tresses and seductive curves, she was dressed to the hilt as usual for her profession: a news report for the local Fox tv station. She was 38 and gorgeous and he took a moment to savor the seductive aroma of her perfume. “I heard about it on the scanner.”

"We're fine, I promise," Simon said as she gave him a quick kiss. He shifted uncomfortably, extracting himself from her embrace. He wasn't embarrassed about their relationship but he hadn't exactly made it common knowledge at the KCPD yet and wasn't sure he wanted to.

"How many gunmen? Who were they?" she asked.

"Are you asking as my girlfriend or a reporter?" he replied, only half-kidding and keeping his voice down.

"Both," she said. "You know I can't turn it off."

"We never saw them," he said. "We're headed back to headquarters to give statements. We have a witness to secure. Make sure no one puts his photo out there."

"The guy with Lucas?" Holly asked.

"Yeah," Simon said. "I'll call you later."

She blew him a kiss. "Be safe."

A few minutes later, Simon and Lucas sat in the back of another Interceptor with Browning between

them and Emma riding up front beside a uniform named Doss as she drove them back to headquarters. Internally, Lucas was searching KCPD databases for a suitable hotel safehouse, while Simon questioned Browning.

“Why did they shoot at us?” Browning asked, still frightened.

“We don’t know,” Simon said.

“But it’s someone with a vendetta against you, right? It couldn’t be related to—” Browning saw Simon’s face and stopped. “My God! They could be after me?”

“Well, millions of dollars make a hell of a motive,” Simon said.

“What are we going to do?”

“Check into a safehouse—basically a hotel—and get you to court tomorrow, then we’ll take it from there,” Simon said.

“Will I have to go in protective custody? Change my name?”

Simon's eyes met Browning's, his voice steady. "Calm down, Mister Browning. We're not even sure they were after you. Cops do make enemies. It's a precaution. We want to keep you safe."

Browning sighed. "I'm sorry about your house."

Simon grunted. "Luckily, I'm friends with a contractor. Houses can be repaired. I'm just glad we're all relatively unscathed."

"Yes, the good Lord was watching over us," Browning agreed.

And then Lucas and Simon began discussing hotels.



"HOW'D IT GO?" Simon asked when Lucas returned to the Squad Room at headquarters from the interview rooms.

Simon and Lucas had each given statements to a team from the Gun Squad then Simon sat in as Emma gave her own statement while Lucas sat in with Browning. There would be more statements

for the two detectives later once a Shooting Team got involved, but Delmater wanted initial impressions while they were fresh and untainted, so Simon and Lucas went from cops to victims, at least for a little while.

Simon had wanted to sit in with Browning but Emma was visibly upset, on the verge of tears, and he couldn't bear to abandon his daughter under such circumstances after the ordeal they'd all been through.

"Fine. How is Emma?" Lucas said, pulling out his chair and sitting down in his cube beside Simon's.

On the third floor of KCPD headquarters at 1125 Locust in downtown Kansas City, the Generalist squad's squad room was like any other: a maze of soft-walled cubicles interspersed with file cabinets and tables holding printers, a copy machine, and various binders and books. Its outer walls were government-issue plain off-white over thin, gray carpet and bulletin boards and white boards filled

any wall space besides that occupied by doors and windows. The whole place smelled of stale paper, toner, highlighter markers and dust. Simon's and Lucas' cubes were on the west side near the windows just outside a conference room and Delmater's office.

"She's scared," Simon said, "but she's tough. She'll be fine. Did we find a safehouse?"

"The Holiday Inn up off Randolph near Worlds of Fun," Lucas said.

Simon grunted. It was a good choice. With the amusement parks still closed for winter, traffic would be light and pedestrians few. And it was far enough from court, they could spot any tails. The chance of being found was slim. "You set it up?"

"Delmater made the call," Lucas replied.

"What did Browning have to say?" Simon asked.

"Nothing we didn't know already," Lucas said. "He seems convinced he caused all this, but there is

nothing that definitively links the shooters to him verses any other possibility.”

“So we’re right where we started,” Simon said. “Okay.” He glanced toward Delmater’s office. “I hope the Sarge gets us a suite. With Emma along, we’re going to need the space.”

“He said adjoining rooms,” Lucas replied. “And Becker is loaning us Maberry and Dolby to handle days. The Generalist team will rotate on nights.”

“I hope we won’t be there long,” Simon said.

“Yes, but we are covered for whatever we need.”

Protective custody was nowhere near as glamorous as many TV shows and movies made it out to be. There were no four star hotels and room service. Especially not on a department budget. The hotels tended to be small, simple and out of the way, easy to guard, with plenty of escape routes. They’d order in a lot of junk food like pizza and burgers, or one of the cops would run out for carry out. Adjoining rooms or small suites were the

fanciest it got, and after several days together in close quarters for many hours a day, usually tempers flared. Cops and witnesses got sick of each other and best behavior tended to fade after a day or two. It was a necessary evil as far as most cops were concerned, and one they hoped would pass quickly and uneventfully. Nobody liked having to relocate over and over. They liked being shot at even less. Having people you liked to work with tended to make it easier, and Maberry and Dolby were from Simon's and Lucas' prior unit and old friends. Their Generalist squad mates were all right but with far less mutual history.

"Is Browning still in the room?" Simon asked, meaning the interrogation room down the hall.

"Yeah, I asked him to wait, in case you wanted to talk to him," Lucas said.

"No, let's get to the hotel and settle in," Simon said. "Delmater had uniforms pack some clothes from the house for me and Emma. He'll bring them by later."

“Okay, I will ask Maberry and Dolby to meet us there,” Lucas said.

Simon chuckled. “You’ve never been on one of these before, have you?”

Lucas shook his head.

“Maberry is a character,” Simon said.

“Is that a good thing?” Lucas asked.

Simon grunted as he stood and turned toward the door. “He’ll keep us entertained.” Lucas followed him out.

As they stepped into the corridor, they ran into two female officers, an odd pairing everyone in the department called “the two BBs”—tough as nail Shooting Team investigators who seemed to take as much pleasure in policing cops as some cops did with the public. The older, Marge Bahm, 60s, was grandmotherly with a school marm look, while Lena Beebe, 50s, had brunette hair cut military-style and was half a foot taller, her green eyes piercing. Both wore suits that were a year or two out of style.

“Just the men we’re looking for,” Bahm said with surprising warmth.

“I didn’t think Lena was looking for men at all,” Simon cracked and Beebe’s cold stare cut through him like an ice pick.

“You’re not funny,” Beebe snapped. “Interrogation 6. You go first.”

“Sorry, DC’s orders,” Simon said. “We have to get a witness to a safehouse ASAP. It’ll have to wait.”

Bahm checked her watch. “We were told to be here at eleven.”

“Plans change,” Simon said with a shrug.

“You were in an officer involved shooting,” Beebe said. “You’ll be talking to us eventually.”

“We’ve been through enough today,” Simon said and grinned as he pushed past and hurried for the interrogation rooms.

Lucas followed, offering a shrug. “The DC insisted.”

Simon looked back as he reached to open the door of the interrogation room marked '1' to see the women scowling after them, watching them go and fought the urge to laugh as he disappeared inside.



SIMON HAD ONE hesitation about using the Holiday Inn off Randolph— Emma and her best friend Julie had been briefly held there by terrorists a couple years before and he worried about the memories, or nightmares, it might evoke for her. The hotel dated back to the 1980s, though it had gone through new a few coats of paint since then and at least one remodeling. The room Emma and her friend Julie had been held in had been only partially remodeled, the bathroom and area just outside having a cement floor quickly painted in an attempt to heighten its appearance before the room was rushed into service for the summer, amusement park season rush. Since Julie and Emma had spent a good deal of time being held

tied up on a chair against the unfinished wall, she was quite surprised to see the condition of the freshly remodeled and greatly beautified room Delmater had acquired for them.

Simon watched her reaction carefully, prepared to insist on a change of venue if she showed the slightest sign of stress, but she quickly relaxed, plopping onto one of the room's two beds and bouncing around. "Nice!" she said. "Much improved from the last time I was here. Good thing, too, since you owe me."

Simon shot her a look.

"For almost getting me killed," she added, "again." He wasn't sure if she meant the time she had been with them before when they'd been shot at or the kidnapping, then he reminded himself he needed to stop putting his daughter in danger.

"Yeah, no chemical smell either," Simon noted, recalling the condition of that old room. This room had new carpet, curtains, ceiling tiles, and wallpaper and looked brand new. All of the furniture

had been replaced with modern, nice looking pieces—a desk and two executive chairs, two more chairs around a small table, dressers, an entertainment center, bedside stands and a love seat. The room was comfortable if slightly crowded. It even smelled fresh.

“Heh, and my hosts are nicer,” she joked, then narrowed her eyes at him. “So far, but they still have guns.” Then she laughed.

Simon sat their bags on the other bed and motioned. “You okay here for a bit? I gotta go help Lucas get Browning settled in.”

Emma grabbed the remote and flicked on the TV with one hand while waving dismissively at her father with the other. “Ooo, free Netflix, nice!”

“Be right back,” he said then slipped out and headed for the attached room next door.

He found Lucas sitting on a chair in the corner as Browning carefully transferred the neatly folded contents of his immaculately packed suitcase into

the dresser. The room was almost a twin of the one where Simon had left Emma.

"Everything good here?" Simon asked.

"Sure. What's for lunch?" Browning joked.

"Well, we'll have to see what's around with delivery and carry out," Simon said. "Once we've finished settling in. We'll take good care of you."

"Guess this is me getting back a little refund on my taxes, huh?" Browning said and laughed.

"That is one way to think of it," Lucas agreed.

"Maberry and Dolby?" Simon asked.

"Checking the building," Lucas said. "They have chairs outside."

"Ah, no strip poker this time?" Simon grinned.

"Perhaps your daughter and I should sit that one out," Browning said.

"Maberry cheats," Lucas added with a chuckle.

"She's got free Netflix," Simon said. "She won't even notice we're gone."

Browning laughed again, shaking his head. "I'm getting to see a whole different side of you detectives."

"Not the good side," Lucas replied and this time Simon chortled. His partner was really getting the hang of the snappy comebacks. Made him proud.

"What's the plan?" Browning asked, turning serious again.

"We kill time here until morning, then get you safely to court," Simon said. "If required, we come back and do it again."

"Or relocate," Lucas added.

"We try not to do that a lot," Simon said.

"Only if we're discovered?" Browning asked.

"If we suspect that, yes," Lucas said.

"How do you know?" Browning asked.

"The bullets are a pretty good give away," Simon snapped.

"Hotels must love having you guys," Browning replied.

“Maberry and Dolby or someone else will be outside at all times,” Simon turned serious again. “Either Lucas or I will be in here with you. If we need sleep, I’ll go with my daughter, Lucas with you.”

“I don’t sleep,” Lucas added.

“How do we kill time?” Browning asked.

“We’ll get you a book,” Simon said.

“We can play some games or talk,” Lucas offered. “We’ll figure it out.”

“But court can be stressful so you should feel free to rest as much as you need,” Simon added.

“I’ll be fine,” Browning said. “I’m not that much of an old man.” He opened a drawer, searching, then another.

“What are you looking for?” Lucas asked.

“Phone book or a menu,” Browning said and smiled. “I’m hungry.”

“Lucas can google restaurants in his head,” Simon said.

“There are fifteen within a one mile radius,” Lucas said, then added, “all have drive-thrus and carry out. Ten deliver.”

“Hey, he’s handy,” Browning joked. “One thing’s for sure, food’s gotta be better than the center’s cafeteria.”

They all laughed then Lucas began reciting the restaurants.

CHAPTER 3

SIMON AWOKE TO a knock on the door and the sound of Emma groaning as she pulled a pillow over her head to block out the sound. “Go away!” she called.

Simon looked at the clock on the night stand. It was 7:15. They had to be in court by nine. He threw back the covers and hurried toward the door, shirtless in sweatpants. Lucas’ smiling face greeted him when he opened the door.

“Good morning,” Lucas said sing-song.

“We’re up,” Simon said, frowning at to a sour taste in the back of his throat. “Have whoever’s on duty outside round up some Egg McMuffins and coffee, will you? I’ll be over in fifteen.”

“I will ask,” Lucas said as Simon closed the door again.

“It’s too early. I’m not getting up,” Emma whined.

“You don’t have a choice,” Simon said as he turned to the duffel bag Delmater had delivered and found a paper of boxers and black dress socks to match his suit. “We have to be in court. I need to take you somewhere safe.”

“Why can’t I stay here with Netflix?”

“Because we may or may not be back,” Simon said as he turned and grabbed a towel off the metal shelf outside the bathroom.

“I hate you,” she said in a tone that was totally insincere and all teenager.

“You always say the sweetest things to me in the morning,” Simon said before disappearing into the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later he was greeting Maberry, who sat yawning in a chair between the two rooms as Simon knocked on Lucas’ door.

Lucas opened the door and nodded. Simon stepped past him into the room where Browning was standing in front of a mirror putting on his tie. The room smelled of wet towels and Old Spice—a

classic Simon found hard to believe was still around amongst retired people. Hadn't they learned by now?

"You sleep well?" Simon asked.

"Never, when I'm not in my own bed," Browning replied. "It's the thing I always hated about hotels, but I'll be fine with some coffee."

"It should be on the way with Egg McMuffins, maybe even hash browns," Simon replied.

"Wow, you guys are big spenders," Browning teased. "Spoiling me."

"We do it all for you," Lucas deadpanned, imitating the old McDonald's commercial.

Browning chuckled as he finished straightening his tie and turned to face them. "Ready when you are."

"We need to drop Emma off with a friend, then we'll head to court," Simon said.

"Sounds good," Browning said. "So sorry she got pulled into all this."

"It is not the first time," Lucas said.

Browning frowned, shooting the android a sad look. "She's been shot at before?"

"Once," Simon said. "I'm sorry she got pulled in, too."

"Poor thing," Browning said.

"I'll check on the car and be right back," Simon said as he turned and opened the door, stepping outside again.

Detective Art Maberry handed him a McDonald's bag and a cardboard coffee holder with four plastic-lidded cups. "Breakfast." Late thirties, overweight, and a nerd, Maberry had an endless collection of Hawaiian shirts and tended to let his hair grow too long between trims but he was good people, a member of Simon's former team at Central Property.

"Thanks," Simon said. Maberry and Dolby had been replaced at nine the night before by Detectives Benny Jiminez and Yanni Rankin from the Generalist squad, then returned early this morning. "The car ready?"

“Yep,” Anna Dolby said with a nod. A former track star, Dolby was still looking as good in her late thirties as she had in college. Dark skinned with long, dark hair and long, muscular legs, she was thin and had a golden smile, and like Simon, she and Maberry had lost their previous partners on the job and were now paired up.

“Get her started,” Simon said. “We’ll be heading down. You want a McMuffin first?”

Dolby raised another McDonalds bag. “We’ve got ours. We’ll meet you down there.”

“Okey doke,” Simon said and turned back toward Lucas’ room as Maberry called after him, “One of those is a hot chocolate for Emma.”

Then he and Dolby had disappeared down the stairs and Lucas opened the door.

“Coffee!” Browning said cheerfully and reached for one of the cups.

“Check that, one is hot chocolate for the kid,” Simon warned.

Browning lifted the lid revealing dark liquid as Simon held up the food bag. "I'll eat in the car," Browning said as he grabbed creamer and two sweetener packets off the tray.

"I'll get Emma then we're headed out," Simon said and headed for the hall again.

When he opened the door to his room, Emma was still lying face down, tangled in the covers on her bed.

"Shit," he said under his breath then raised his voice, "Get up! We have to go!"

"Daaaaaaaaaad!" she whined.

"You can sleep at Sarah's, okay? Hurry!" Simon said, setting the coffee and food on the night stand and reaching over to pull his daughter by the shoulder, rolling her over. They'd arrange the night before for Emma to spend the day with a school friend who was with her dad for the weekend in North Kansas City.

"Too fuckin' early," Emma groaned as she looked up at him, squinting against the light.

“You have thirty seconds ‘til I dump the ice bucket on you,” Simon said, motioned toward the dresser. The ice they’d filled it with the night before was no doubt mostly melted but it would still be cold.

“You suck,” Emma said and sat up, plopping her feet on the floor and yawning as she looked around for her bag.

“They’re waiting on us,” Simon urged.

Emma scrambled, bitching the whole time, and they were down at the waiting KCPD Interceptor in three minutes, where Lucas was sitting on the passenger side with Dolby behind the wheel. Simon glanced over to see Maberry behind the wheel of another Interceptor two spots over.

Simon helped Browning and Emma into the back then went around to the driver’s side door.

Dolby opened it and stepped out. “All yours. You want us to lead or follow?”

“Follow,” Simon said. “Keep your eyes out for a tail.” Having another car behind them ensured if

they did get a tail, the other car could block and slow while Simon made an escape.

“Always,” Dolby agreed.

With that, she hurried off to join Maberry as Simon climbed in, buckled his seatbelt, and shut the door, slipping the Interceptor into drive.



THE TWO MEN circled the city in a Bell 412, a civilian version of the famous Huey helicopters that dominated military action in places like Vietnam. Designed to hold a crew of two and up to thirteen passengers, the choppers had four-blade rotors, which were currently whop-whopping overhead as the signature smell of exhaust filled their noses.

The pilot concentrated on the controls, while his companion monitored a GPS and cell phone tracker. Their prey had escaped for now, but they would find them quickly and easily thanks to a hack the South American’s people had done overnight on both KCPD computers and two cell

phone companies. The targets would have no idea their cells were being traced, of course. So it was just the advantage he and his companion needed to find them and take them out. Although the primary target was Jeff Browning, the witness whose testimony threatened important people helping fund the movement, these particular cops had been a thorn in the organization's side for several years now. It would be good to be rid of them at last.

"Anything?" the pilot asked through the headset microphone both wore over their heads to allow communication despite the noise of the machine.

"Yes!" came his companion's excited reply. "They just turned south on I-435 north, up by Worlds of Fun, headed toward the bridges. Get us over there!"

"Two minutes or less," the pilot replied as he steered the chopper and headed for their target.

His companion grinned in triumph.



SIMON HEADED SOUTH down Randolph to NE Parvin Road then continued onto the on-ramp to I-435 south, merging into traffic at highway speeds.

As he settled into the fast lane, Simon glanced in the rearview mirror, confirming Maberry and Dolby were close behind.

"I'll be glad when this is all over," Browning mumbled.

"In a few hours it will," Lucas said.

"What these bastards did was wrong—taking advantage of trusting seniors and preying upon our trust. If they're after me, though, what's to stop them from seeking revenge?" Browning asked and Simon saw through the rearview mirror the worry in his eyes.

"If we confirm that's what's going on, we'll do what we can to keep you safe," Simon said.

"Including relocation and so on, if necessary," Lucas added.

“God, I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Browning said.

“Me, too,” Simon muttered as he slowed behind a semi doing about ten miles per hour slower and signaled a lane change.

“Clear,” Emma called, used to being her parents’ navigator.

Simon confirmed it with a quick glance over his shoulder then slid over into the middle lane and went around the truck.

Then he heard the unmistakable sound of a helicopter overhead and glanced up, wondering if it was KCPD or a new station crew. That’s when the windshield shattered and Emma screamed as Simon swerved and fought to regain control of the vehicle, even as his eyes scanned ahead for the nearest exit and the best evasive tact he could take to get them there.

“Get down!” he yelled at his fellow occupants even as Lucas was lowering the passenger side

window with one hand and holding his service weapon in the other.

The Interceptor's rear window exploded from gunfire, and seconds later, Lucas was leaning out and firing up at the chopper with rapid bursts from his Glock. Emma screamed and covered her ears with her hands to muffle Lucas' shooting.

Simon began maneuvering the Interceptor in a weaving pattern between lanes, while at the same time trying to avoid a collision. Tires squealed and horns honked as other drivers around them reacted. Then bullets struck the semi and another car beside it, causing them to swerve and brake suddenly.

Simon swerved around the distracted driver of a Ford pickup who slowed as he glanced back in his rearview mirror and angled across two lanes toward the exit, cutting off two cars, whose drivers braked and honked. A stream of automatic fire tore into the asphalt right behind the Interceptor as it

cleared the far lane and turned onto the offramp onto Highway 210, also known as Armour Road.

Tires squealed as Simon took a sharp right onto Armour headed West and then heard the Chopper swooping down over them as Lucas continued firing at it.

Simon grabbed the mic and called in. "Dispatch, 706 taking fire on Armour Road West from 435. There's a sniper in a Chopper overhead."

Moments later, the dispatcher responded, "Copy 706. All available TACTICAL AIR and ground units respond, officers need assistance."

"182 backing up 706," Dolby reported over the radio immediately and Simon checked his rearview to see Maberry's and Dolby's Interceptor quickly slipping back into place on his tail.

"We've got to find some cover, 182," Simon replied.

"Copy that," Dolby said.

"According to Google maps, there are some remote houses North on Drury," Lucas reported,

once again using his android capabilities to multitask like no human could.

“Sure, if we can get there in time,” Simon said swerving to avoid another stream of gunfire as the Chopper lowered down close above the opposite lane of traffic so it’s gunman could fire straight into the side of them. Simon cursed as Lucas managed to fire a couple shots that hit the fuselage near the gunman, forcing the Chopper up again.

Simon looked over his shoulder at Browning and Emma, “You two keep your eyes out for Drury. We’re kinda distracted.”

“I’ll pull it up on my phone,” Emma promised and set to work.

“692, en route to your position, 706,” came the voice of Jason Brock, a helicopter pilot and friend Simon and Lucas had worked with before.

“408, en route to your position, 706,” reported another unit and the calls continued one after another.

“510, on our way!” came another.

“At least help is on the way,” Browning said.

“Yeah, let’s hope they get here in time,” Emma said.

“None of it will matter if we can’t get under cover out of this chopper’s line of sight,” Simon said as bullets raked the side of the Interceptor and he swerved again. Metal crackled and crunched with the impacts and the steering wheel vibrated in his hands. “Jesus!”

“That was too close,” Browning muttered.

Simon was now doing seventy in a forty-five, zipping back and forth around other traffic. He glanced in his driver’s side mirror as Lucas fired again and saw both Dolby and Lucas scoring hits on the chopper’s underbelly. The Chopper pilot pulled back on the yoke, backing off a moment and Simon hit the accelerator.

“Take Searcy Creek coming up on the right, Dad!” Emma called.

Simon keyed the radio even as he startled to slow, “706 turning north on Searcy Creek, headed

for cover on North Drury Ave.” He turned a bit sharply on Searcy but managed to keep control, though not without knocking his passengers about.

“Now, right on 33rd!” Emma instructed.

Simon took the right then saw Drury to the left. Simon took a sharp left on North Drury Avenue, a bit slower this time, and immediately hit the accelerator even as he heard the Chopper drawing closer again overhead.

“706 turning left on North Drury Avenue off 33rd,” Simon reported into the mic.

“Copy, 706, left on North Drury Avenue north.” the dispatcher returned.

“692, reaching your position now, we’ll try and slow the bird,” Brock replied.

“510, we’re heading south on Drury, will scout location with 506 and 512,” replied another unit.

North Drury was lined with trees on either side, leaving the Chopper no room to lower down for a side shot again. Maberry stayed on Simon’s tail as he made the turn and they sped up the street doing

sixty-five in a thirty-five mile per hour zone. Given the density of the trees, Simon figured the houses should be both spread out and well concealed. Finding a place to provide better cover should be possible. If he could get there in time.

“706, 510, take your first right,” another unit reported. “We’re securing a clearing here. Side road is under total cover, stop before you’re too near the house.”

“Copy, 510,” Simon replied.

Having backup units who patrolled the area regularly was always a godsend. Simon continued up Drury pushing seventy as the Choppers jostled about overhead, the sniper continuing to fire at them at every opportunity but missing due to movement and tall trees on either side, no doubt.

Then Simon saw an opening on the right—a side road.

“Hang on!” he warned then turned sharply into it, tires spinning on loose rock and dirt as he slowed, diving under a canopy of trees and pulling

up to where three black and white KCPD units were waiting. He spotted the officers standing with rifles raised and aimed upward in the surrounding trees and as soon as the Bell 412 with the sniper showed, they all began firing up at it, as Brock's spotter took aim from beside it.

The Bell's fuselage was quickly pocked with bullet holes and the pilot dove and spun, swinging into retreat and flying off to the east, Brock hot in pursuit in 692, one of KCPD's fleet of MD500Es.

"Thank God," Browning sighed from the back.

Residents appeared running from the house armed with rifles and a shotgun. Simon could hear more sirens approaching from all around—the KCPD responding with all units to support their own.

Uniforms turned, and pointed to badges. "Stop right there! Police business!"

"What the fuck is going on?! This is my property!" a man yelled as he and the woman beside him slowed. "Sounds like a war out here."

"Just about," the uniform replied. "But it's over now."

"Thank God," the wife said, echoing Browning.

And Simon climbed out, opening the back to examine Emma and Browning. "Either of you get hit?"

"We're fine, Dad," Emma said, sounding annoyed so Simon started tickling her a bit.

She giggled. "Stop, asshole." And he pulled her into a hug.

"I love you, and I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear. She hugged him back and swallowed loudly. Her way of returning the words when she was feeling overcome. It was good enough for him.

He let go and looked at Browning.

"I'm good too, fortunately," Browning reported.

"That was too close," Lucas observed.

"You hit?" Simon asked as more KCPD units pulled onto the road and stopped, lights flashing, officers dashing out and hurrying toward them.

"Nope," Lucas said.

Simon glanced over at Dolby and Maberry who were leaning against their own Interceptor looking themselves over.

“We’re good,” Maberry called.

“What now?” Browning asked.

Simon called in and spoke with Delmater over the cell. It was a few minutes before he had an answer. “You’ve got to be kidding!” he shouted into the phone. “These people have resources. What if they come at us again?!”

He listened a moment as Delmater yelled back then hung up. “Fuck! The judge still wants us in court.”

“That’s crazy!” Maberry said.

“How the hell are we gonna get there?” Emma wondered.

“This time we get the Presidential motorcade treatment,” Simon said.

“What’s that mean?” Browning asked.

“You’re about to feel like the most important man in the world,” Simon said. He motioned to the

cops around him who moved in to surround them. “We’re shutting down everything between here and the court. AIR TAC sending escorts. Just like when the big boys from DC are here.”

“Fucking lovely,” one of the uniforms said.

“Call it a dress rehearsal,” Dolby said.

“I have never seen a presidential motorcade,” Lucas remarked.

“Yeah, well, pray you never do,” Maberry said. “They’re a pain in the ass.”



WITHIN TWENTY MINUTES, every highway and major street between the house on North Drury Avenue and the Jackson County Courthouse at 415 East 12th Street in downtown Kansas City was shut down—blocked off by black and whites and unmarked units to clear a path for a heavily escorted convoy taking Simon, Lucas, Browning, and Emma to the courthouse. No doubt the media and others would call it overkill later, but the department

wasn't taking any chances after the attacks that had already unfolded.

Built in 1931, the Jackson County Courthouse stood fifteen floors high, and featured breathtaking Art Deco architecture and a statue of General Andrew Jackson, the seventh President, outside the north entrance, created by Charles L. Keck. Like all older courthouses, it smelled of a combination of industrial cleaners, dust, wood polish, and floor wax mixed with old files, papers, and the usual odors crowds of humans tended to emit. They made the trip at speeds well above the limit in fifteen minutes, and then armored men lined up on either side of them to walk the quartet through the doors into the courthouse. So it was a complete surprise to Simon that the escort had ended too soon. The gunshots rang out the minute they stepped off the elevator on the third floor outside the courtroom.

"Gun!" someone yelled as shots rang out and bullets tore into the doorframe of the old elevator.

Simon and Lucas immediately reacted, pushing Emma and Browning back inside the elevator and tapping the buttons to close the door and start it descending again while hearing shots exchanged between police, court security, and whoever had fired the shots out in the third floor corridor.

By the time they reached the first floor, the armored cops, Delmater, and DC's Melson and Cara Atwell were there waiting to escort them to a secure room nearby.

"What the fuck is going on?" Atwell demanded. Short and chubby with medium-long brown hair and hazel eyes, her reputation was as tough but fair, though Simon and Lucas had not had such an experience of her. She seemed to have the chip on her shoulder of someone still trying to prove herself, and though they'd gotten along on a case they'd helped her with involving her granddaughter, they still had a shaky relationship.

"Someone tried to shoot at us," Lucas said.

"Who?" Melson asked.

"We weren't there long enough to identify who," Simon said. "Too busy saving these two."

Atwell paused a moment, listening in her earpiece as Simon picked up the chatter in his own. They had the shooters down—two of them. Civilians. How they'd snuck guns into the courthouse would be the focus of a serious investigation that would bring a lot of wrath down on court security and their procedures.

"Well, they got them," Atwell said.

"Enough all ready," Browning said angrily. "It's not worth all this. I am not getting you people killed for me."

"Sir, your testimony is important and you have the right—" Atwell started scolding.

"No! He's right!" Simon snapped. "Fuck this shit! Everywhere we go, someone shoots at us! I'm getting him and Emma outta here until we can find these fuckers and shut them down! Period!"

"Where are you gonna go?!" Atwell demanded.

"I know a place," Simon said. "I just need a non-department vehicle to get us there."

"The Charger?" Lucas asked.

Simon shook his head sharply. "No. They've seen it."

"Well, good luck finding one," Atwell snapped.

"It's definitely gotten out of hand," Melson agreed.

"We'll find you something," Delmater said.

"What about Lucas' Outlander? They haven't seen that yet," Emma suggested.

Simon looked at his daughter with new eyes. Sometimes that girl was filled with surprises. So smart he wondered how she ever got it from her parents. He turned to Lucas. "Give Brian your keys," he instructed.

Lucas pulled his car keys from his pocket and offered them to Delmater. "Sergeant."

"Where are you parked?" Simon asked.

"The lot at HQ across Cherry," Lucas said.

“Meet me at the loading dock in fifteen,” Delmater instructed and hurried off.

“We’ll escort you,” Melson ordered. “Stay put until he confirms he’s arrived.” The room they were in was a room used for private meetings between lawyers and clients or as a jury holding room. It was unmarked and its location not publicly known. Still, Simon knew there were armored cops lined up outside to provide a barrier against anyone who tried to enter.

Emma and Browning sank into chairs and Lucas leaned against the wall. Simon paced. Browning looked totally defeated, his hair disheveled. Emma looked exhausted and scared. Lucas was worried and Simon was flat out pissed.

“How the fuck are they finding us so fast?” Simon wondered aloud.

“Well, coming to the courthouse wasn’t exactly a surprise,” Atwell said.

“Yeah, but in the middle of nowhere on 435?!”

“That one puzzles me, too,” Melson agreed.

“They are clearly tracking us somehow,” Lucas said.

“However that is, we’d damn well better figure it out and soon,” Simon said.

“Where are you taking them?” Atwell demanded.

“A place I’ll reveal once we’re safe and secure,” Simon said. “Who knows if these walls have ears.”

“Now you’re just being paranoid,” Atwell said, shaking her head with disgust.

“You’ll just have to trust me,” Simon snapped. “All bets are off when my daughter’s life is at risk.”

“It’s fine,” Melson said. “He’ll keep us informed. And you’re taking a team with you.”

“Two,” Atwell said.

“Maberry and Dolby to start,” Simon said. “When we’re sure we’re safe and call in, you can send another.”

“Done,” Melson said before Atwell could reply. He shot her a look and added, “Let’s all relax now, and try to remember we’re on the same side here.”

Simon sighed. "Sorry. I'm getting a little paranoid after the last twenty-four hours."

"No one blames you," Melson said.

After that, everyone grew silent, lost in their thoughts until Delmater called Simon's cell six minutes later to confirm he was pulling up to the loading dock in Lucas' car.

"Get Maberry and Dolby a nondescript vehicle, then we'll meet them at Lucas'," Simon said.

"Why are you going there?" Atwell asked.

"We'll need a few supplies, and we can start with what he keeps on hand for human visitors," Simon said.

"We can always buy more once we are safely on our way," Lucas added with a nod.

"Exactly," Simon agreed.

Melson motioned to Atwell. "Go find Maberry and Dolby please, Cara, and fill them in. I'll see that these four get safely to the loading dock."

"Copy," Atwell said and hurried out the door.

Melson faced them and nodded. "Whenever you're ready."

"Get us vests," Simon said.

"On it," Melson said and disappeared outside.

Five minutes later, they were in Lucas' chrome Outlander headed toward his apartment in the Riverfront area.