

# CHAPTER 1

“Turn left! Left!” Training Officer Gilbert Lenz shouted from the passenger seat of the 2025 Ford Explorer Interceptor his trainee, Lucas George, was driving.

A dark-skinned Filipino, short but stocky and mostly muscle, Lenz was an eighteen year veteran of the KCPD with the look of one not to be messed with. His crew cut hair and tattoos testified to his past as a military mercenary and sniper in the Middle East, amongst other places. Lucas, on the other hand, was tall, thin, black, with bright blue eyes, and his uniform, haircut and everything about him was neatly coiffed, pressed, and shiny like the rookie he was. He was also an android, the first android graduate of the Kansas City Police Academy. In fact, the first android student. Gil had been assigned to train him because of his experience, but right now he was wondering how the android had ever made it through training.

“I know that. I can see them right in front of us,” Lucas replied, almost matter-of-fact, and spun the

## THE SIDEMAN

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wheel, tires squealing as he cut off a box truck and two SUVs, making the sharp turn from 18th onto Main.

Gil winced as the seatbelt bit sharply into his shoulder and grabbed the handle overhead to steady himself. This android might just be crazy. "We're supposed to protect people, not kill them, George!" he said through gritted teeth.

The Explorer bounced as it landed back on all four wheels hard and straightened, but Lucas showed no reaction. He just nodded. "We're police officers! We're not trained to handle this kind of violence!" Lucas quipped, quoting some movie Gil couldn't remember.

The T.O. just glared. Lucas was known for quoting cop movies, not always at the best times. But he'd graduated from the Academy first in his class, and was assigned the fast track to partner up with a veteran Property Detective at Kansas City Central Patrol Division named John Simon. Real cops didn't quote cop movies...much. So Gil had warned him to cut that out, but sometimes the quotes just popped out from habit.

Gil keyed the radio clipped to his shoulder. "146."

"Go ahead, 146," the dispatcher replied.

"146 continuing chase south on Main at 18th," Gil said over the radio.

"146 acknowledged. 144, 133, did you copy 146?" the dispatcher replied.

"144, copy," a voice acknowledged.

"133, copied also," another said.

Gil was happy working patrol. He felt he'd been born to it. He had no desire to move up or jockey for detective like many other officers, but that didn't make him any less irritated at Lucas being the first cop he knew to jump straight from Academy to detective. All that had happened because of a case nine months before that Lucas helped Simon solve, involving the death of Simon's previous partner, the forging of art works, stolen nanochips carrying top secret data, and both a prominent local business man and Deputy Chief. The business man, Benjamin Ashman, had turned out to be innocent and got murdered for it by a trusted associate. The Deputy Chief had gone down in an embarrassing case that the KCPD had been very glad to have overshadowed by both the solving of the case itself and the android's role in it.

"If this guy doesn't want to be caught," Lucas muttered as he made another sharp left and then followed the speeding, beat up 80s Mercury Capri into an alley, "he should have upgraded his ride. He's not even in this century." The perp's car looked like it was barely holding together.

Gil shook his head. "Just focus on your driving, Officer."

"I'm a professional. Don't try this at home," Lucas cracked and slammed the brakes as the Capri tore out of the alley and narrowly missed colliding with an SUV. The SUV skidded to a stop then started off again just as Lucas burst from the alley. The angry driver flipped

## THE SIDEMAN

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him off and shouted obscenities after them both.

“Bad language makes for bad feelings,” Lucas said, quoting one of his favorites: *Robocop*.

“Stop it,” Gil warned.

Lucas just grinned. “All this over some graffiti,” he added.

“The guy’s been on our list for two years,” Gil said. “First time I ever caught him red handed. He escaped three times just before I arrived. He knows he’ll do time and heavy fines. Probably has a record, too.”

“Maybe you just scare people.”

Gil held back a grin. He liked that idea. “That, too.” *If only I could scare you*, he thought.

He held on again as Lucas followed the Capri through another red light and narrow miss. Then just as the Metro train approached, the Capri shot across and headed the wrong way down the left side of the road. The train barely missed and Gil saw the frightened engineer’s wide eyes and pale face as Lucas narrowed his eyes and sped up on the right side, motioning to the train.

“You keep an eye on him, in case he turns off,” Lucas said.

“I’ll call it in. One of the others will get him,” Gil said. The android did have mad driving skills but that was pushing it. “We need to be safe. You know the regs.”

Lucas nodded. "I live my life a quarter mile at a time, bro." *Fast and Furious*. The android continued speeding up as best he could, honking his horn at any driver who got in his way. They cleared the train, just as the Capri turned left onto 22nd Street and raced up hill.

Lucas slammed on the brakes, his body tensing involuntarily even as he struggled to maneuver the steering wheel. The car skidded into an arc, passenger-side first, then Simon accelerated again and tore up the hill after the Capri. "I got my own skillz, bro," he snapped.

Gil considered for the first time whether he should be wearing Depends diapers during training.

The Capri turned right on Oak and headed south again toward Crown Center.

"146, south on Oak toward Crown Center at Pershing," Gil reported over the radio.

"146, acknowledged. 144, 133, did you copy?"

Even as the units' replies came over the radio, Gil saw the flashing lights of two squad cars up ahead coming toward them. So apparently did Golden Boy, the graffiti king, as the Capri started weaving as he pondered what to do, then he shot up onto the sidewalk and skidded to a stop near the front of Crown Center, pedestrians screaming and rushing clear.

Golden Boy bailed out of his Capri and ran straight for the shopping center, as Lucas and the squad cars pulled up onto the sidewalk nearby, slower and safe. The five cops and Lucas climbed out and headed off in

## THE SIDEMAN

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pursuit.

Gil knew he was getting old because his skin was already glistening with sweat after climbing out of the Interceptor and starting the chase. Forty felt older than he wanted to admit. Lucas, of course, quickly outran them, making good headway on Golden Boy, despite the oblivious shopping crowd.

"144," Gil heard over the radio as one of the uniforms running down the stairs behind him called in to dispatch.

"144, go ahead," the dispatcher replied. Two dispatchers usually covered calls for all of Central at one time. Gil couldn't tell by voice which one this was, but she sounded new.

"Pursuit continuing on foot into Crown Center," the uniform said as they ran past Einstein's Bagels and Fritz's with its large train engine out front. "Suspect is Hispanic with bleached blond hair, medium height, tattoos covering the length of both arms and his chest, wearing jeans, a Royals sweatshirt and a black bandanna wrapped around his head. 133 and 146 also in pursuit."

"144, acknowledged. Do you need further assistance?"

"Only if you can make us faster," Gil cracked, each word between breaths as he ran, feeling his age.

"146, sounds like you need youth first," the dispatcher replied.

"146 reminds dispatch of his past record in races at Choir picnics," Gil said. "Ten years running," he added.

"And you sound every minute of it now," one of the uniforms cracked.

Shoppers parted before them, chattering and pointing, a few clearly filming with cell phones, as the officers ran past pursuing the graffiti artist. Gil could see Lucas running closing on their target now. Golden Boy was just a yard ahead of him. He motioned to the four uniforms, "Let's split up and see if we can get around him."

The uniforms nodded, kept running, and split off in pairs, two heading for the far side of the present aisle while Gil took the left side and the others turning right for the garage stairs, hoping to get in front of the suspect and cut him off. Of course, that would only work if they could move faster on the next floor up. Gil had doubts.

As expected, Golden Boy took the escalator up outside the Coterie Theatre—there was nowhere else for him to go. Lucas was right behind and Gil and the uniforms a few minutes after.

They came up to the wonderful, tantalizing smell of Chip's Chocolate Factory and could see shoppers crowded around, watching a candy-making demonstration even as they hurried past. Lucas followed Golden Boy right and through a narrow passage beside Chip's. Gil and the uniforms went left toward Kid Oh! And the wider passage and saw the

## THE SIDEMAN

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other uniforms running up the hall from the garage in the opposite direction, toward them.

Golden Boy was stuck between, jostling the crowd and pushing people aside in an attempt to get through and escape.

"Police, Golden Boy, it's over!" Gil shouted.

"Hey, that's my daughter, you ass!" a man said as Golden Boy pushed a teenage brunette into the wall she was facing and plowed on. The man whirled and grabbed Golden Boy by the arm, lightning fast, pulling at him, as the girl spun and scowled. But Golden Boy yanked free and wrapped his arm around the girl, pulling her to him and backing toward a stone wall, a knife appearing in his hand and moving toward her neck.

Gil and the uniforms arrived, looking down at them, sidearms locked on Golden Boy as the teenage girl struggled to free herself, yelling, "Get off me! Stop!"

Lucas narrowed his eyes, honing his aim, and Gil knew the android was using his special abilities to target the suspect. "Hold your fire," Gil ordered, then locked eyes with the suspect. "Let the girl go."

Golden Boy shook his head, eyes darting around. "I'm getting out of here, man."

"Only in cuffs," one of the uniforms snapped.

"Drop the knife," Lucas said coldly.

"Fuck you, man," Golden Boy said and spat at



Lucas's feet.

Lucas' Glock 19C snapped downward and fired, and Golden Boy screamed as he let go of the girl and fell to his knees, his thigh bleeding. "You shot me, you fuck!"

"No spitting. No cursing in front of ladies," Lucas said as the girl ran and hugged her father. Lucas yanked Golden Boy to his feet, the perp cursing and wincing from pain. The android shoved Golden Boy at the uniforms, who cuffed and mirandized him.

"Shall we take him in our car?" Lucas asked.

Gil shook his head and looked at the uniforms. "Take him back to holding at Central please."

"Police brutality!" Golden Boy yelled as shoppers around them watched the scene.

"Spitting is assault, be glad you missed," Lucas snapped and turned back to his T.O. as the uniforms dragged a wrestling Golden Boy back onto the escalator.

Gil grabbed Lucas by the arm and dragged him toward the wall nearby. "What the fuck was that?! I ordered you to hold fire."

"A civilian was in danger," Lucas said, offering his trainer a puzzled look.

"As much from you as the suspect!" Gil snapped.

Lucas shook his head, frowning. "My weapon was never aimed directly at her. My aim is quite good. I would never have hit her."

## THE SIDEMAN

---

Gil knew the trainee was right. He was not human, not a normal cop. Still, it was an unnecessary risk, and not one he felt comfortable with a trainee taking on his watch. Even experienced cops would have hesitated longer. "What if you had missed?"

Lucas scoffed. "I never miss, sir."

"You never follow orders either," Gil muttered.

Lucas frowned and started to respond but Gil raised a hand. "Just shut up and give me the keys. I'm driving the rest of the shift."

Lucas shrugged and handed Gil the keys then stepped toward the escalator. "Yes, sir."

"Where you going?" Gil asked.

Lucas stopped and whirled back to face him. "The car?"

Gil shook his head and pressed a palm into Lucas' chest. "We're not going anywhere until the Shooting Team's done with us. Just wait here and don't say or do anything." Gil hurried over to where a shopping center janitor pulling a bucket and mop was eyeing the blood stain.



The cubicle farm that served as the Central Division Property Detectives' squad room was at its busiest in the early morning when detectives were arriving,

starting paperwork, and making their flurry of early phone calls, and then again in late afternoon when everyone came in to wrap up before heading for home.

At 4 p.m., when Master Detective John Simon arrived back from the latest scene of what he was sure was a connected string of burglaries, the place was hopping. He glanced down the row of cubicles to where his former partner, Blanca Santorios's old desk was buzzing with activity as Detectives Art Maberry and Jose Correia borrowed it to sort through a stack of files. In between, Detectives Anna Dolby and Martin Oglesby occupied their own cubes, busily typing on keyboards, catching up on the days' paperwork.

As he made his way toward his own cubicle, Simon glanced in the Sergeant's office to see JoAnn Becker sitting at her desk, working the phone. Except for Santorios's desk, it was a routine scene, and as he reached his own cube, Simon stopped to glare over the wall at Maberry and Correia. Slickly dressed, late twenties, and tan, the Brazilian Casanova Correia paid him no mind, but Correia's partner, Maberry, an overweight nerd with too many Hawaiian shirts and penchant for letting his facial hair go untrimmed too long, glanced up and shot Simon a puzzled look.

"Hey!" Maberry said, elbowing his partner.

Correia looked up at the annoyed Simon and rolled his eyes. "Boss said as long as we clear it off in time for your new partner's first day, we can use it as long as we want." And he went back to work on the stacked files again as Maberry shrugged at Simon.

## THE SIDEMAN

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Simon scrunched his face, mimicking Correia's whine, "Boss said we could! What is this—third grade? Shut the fuck up and clear out."

Correia looked sheepish. "Well, she did."

"It's been ten months, John. Time to move on," Maberry said, respectful but firm enough to let Simon know they weren't going to bow to his wishes on the matter anymore. "This case is paper heavy. We needed somewhere to work. Sorry." And then Maberry went back to work, too.

Simon shot them another glare and growled, "I'm sure Santorios would be touched by your sense of loss." Without waiting for a reaction, he slid into his chair and pushed the button to click on his own computer's flat screen LED. They were probably right. It couldn't stay empty forever. And Simon had been a dick about it long enough, out of mourning, respect, and just missing his old partner. But Santorios was dead, and the squad room was close quarters with little space to spare. He let it go and started typing.

"John! What you got?" Becker's voice called from down the row, moments later.

Simon looked up to see the face of his old friend—forties with the face of a retired model, though she wasn't—a woman who could give any man in there a run for his money in an ass kicking contest. He grunted and rose from his chair, plodding toward her as the Sergeant turned and retreated back into her office.

Despite the constant piles of paperwork and files covering every available surface, Becker's office smelled pleasant, like the cleanest place in the building. Stacks aside, she kept it dust free and had strategically placed air fresheners plugged into sockets or sitting atop file cabinets or shelves around the room. The scent they gave off wasn't particularly feminine but more of a warm, cozy kitchen essence he couldn't exactly describe.

As Simon took the seat opposite her oak desk, she looked up at him, waiting.

"Another break-in with a hole cut through the wall," Simon confirmed what they'd both suspected when he'd taken the call early that morning. "They took a laptop and a few files, but nothing like the last three. Seems random again, except for the cutting thing. This time they cut a hole in a different spot where the owner couldn't see it from outside."

Becker shook her head. "Imminently adaptable crooks."

Simon sighed. "Yeah, I fucking hate that."

"Certainly seem smarter than the usual burglars," Becker observed.

"Why can't they all just be idiots?" he cracked, but he agreed. These were certainly more sophisticated crimes than many burglaries. Burglars were often clever but rarely smart. They knew their craft well and were skilled at it, but they made mistakes that got them caught. These scenes were the cleanest Simon had ever

## THE SIDEMAN

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seen. Even the holes cut in walls and doors to let them in were left concealed and covered over on the exterior—almost professionally done to conceal the crimes until the victims entered the buildings or rooms burgled. It was unique to his years of handling property crimes for sure. None of the other detectives recalled anything like it either.

“What the hell are they after? Seems a lot of effort and thought for random burglaries,” Becker said as she leaned back in her chair.

Simon had no answer. He’d been running over and over the list of stolen items for several hours, trying to find a connection. Even the types of locales differed: two businesses, a lumberyard, and now two apartments. The first theft had involved taking some power tools and empty steel drums, the second some wiring and electrical tape and related items. They were fairly certain the same thieves stole a box truck and a bunch of lumber and screws from the lumberyard—the kind of stuff that made them wonder about bombs. But afterwards they’d only hit apartments and taken the kind of stuff burglars always seemed to take—items of convenience: home electronics, files, credit cards, computers, cell phones, bills. It made no sense so far.

“And no evidence any of the items they took were used in the later break ins?” Becker wondered aloud.

Simon snorted. “Power tools? Shit yeah. Likely, but what they took doesn’t match the MOs so far as we can tell. Different kinds of tools. So, no. It’s weird. Like they

started down one path then switched to another.”

“They could be stealing extra stuff at the apartments to throw us off,” Becker said.

Simon nodded. “Yeah, the electronics would work as triggers for sure. I’ve got a call in to the bomb squad to consult. See if any bombs have turned up with related components, but they haven’t called back yet.”

Becker shifted in her chair, stretching a bit. “Well, you’re on top of it as expected. Just wondered if you had anything new. Let me know when they return your call, okay?”

“Of course,” Simon said as he stood and ambled for the door.

“Maybe Lucas can help,” Becker said, smiling. “Use his special skills.”

For the time in his career, Simon was actually looking forward to a new partner. He’d always dreaded it, even though he’d gotten lucky a few times over his nineteen years with KCPD. Santorios was one example. Although Property Detectives often worked in pairs, they ‘weren’t assigned partners per se. But Simon had been the exception, and because of Lucas’ special rushed promotion and circumstances, the department had insisted he be partnered with a veteran, so it was natural the guy who’d just lost a partner pair up with him. If they hadn’t insisted, Simon would have. Android or not, the guy had saved his life. He was smart, adaptable, and had great skills and instincts. Plus, they’d worked a case months back when Santorios

## THE SIDEMAN

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was killed and become friends, despite Simon's dislike of new technology. Even Emma, Simon's fourteen-year-old daughter adored the guy. And he'd been joining them once a week for meals and movies since.

In fact, despite his earlier resistance, even the android's annoying habit of quoting movies had won Simon over. Now he was remembering quotes and lyrics just to share them with his new partner—making notes so he'd remember them—in anticipation of their sarcastic back and forth. He'd never done that with any partner before for sure.

"John?" Becker's questioning voice shook him out of his thoughts.

Simon realized he'd just frozen there in her office doorway. He cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah, Sarge. Sorry. I'm sure he can. Look forward to it."

So awkward.

He quickly whirled and strode back toward his cube as Becker's laughter followed him down the short aisle.

Simon had been working less than five minutes on his paperwork when Oglesby called his name. "Hey, Simon!"

"Yeah?" he asked, looking up to where Oglesby was glancing across from the cube next to his.

Chubbier and taller than Simon, Oglesby was a sixteen year vet whose slipped disk led him to spend a lot of time standing in his cube rather than sitting. A



fellow divorcee with kids who were older, he was Simon's closest pal in the squad. "Just got a call from Sergeant El-Ashkar down at the front desk," Oglesby said. "Guess who just arrested Golden Boy and shot him in the thigh?"

Simon raised a brow and went back to typing. "Got me. But hell, I've been wanting to talk to him about these burglaries." In addition to his various criminal enterprises, Golden Boy was a fount of information on everything nefarious going on in Kansas City at any time. All the cops who'd been around long enough to have a rapport with him always did what they could to pry such information out of him when they got a chance.

"Lucas George," Oglesby said.

Simon stopped mid-keystroke and stared over at Oglesby. "No shit? Lucas shot someone? Is he okay?"

Oglesby laughed. "Our metal friend is fine. Golden Boy is crying 'police brutality' and whining obnoxiously about his thigh, though."

Simon smiled as he stood, more relieved than he'd ever admit to hear Lucas was fine. He still felt pangs from the time he'd almost lost him after a shootout. Android or not, Lucas was like family. He mattered. "Yeah, Golden Boy whining. That's a fucking surprise."

They both guffawed again as Simon headed for the door.

"Lucas is still with the shooting team and his T.O., she said," Oglesby added, referring to the female Desk

## THE SIDEMAN

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Sergeant.

Simon sighed. "Okay, I'll get the details, I'm sure. Thanks for the heads-up." Moments later, he was out the door headed down the hall toward booking. It was just ten yards away, past the tinted glass double doors leading to the lobby and civilian side of the front desk and right down another short hallway past the desk sergeants who checked out vehicles and radios to the station's small holding cell area.

Simon immediately spotted Golden Boy lying on a bench in one cell, moaning and pressing his hand against the bandaged wound on his left thigh and smiled.

"Buzz me in, will you, Leo?" he called to the Sergeant manning the cell block desk. The rest of the cells were empty at the moment.

The Sergeant smiled and nodded. "Have at him, Detective." He pressed a button on the desk in front of him, and there was an electronic buzz as a light above the cell Golden Boy occupied switched from red to green.

Simon pulled on the door and went inside, hurrying to Golden Boy before the crook could react and patting him on the thigh right atop the bandage. "Golden Boy! Long time, eh? How's the street treating you?"

Golden Boy cried out in pain. "Shit! You asshole!"

Simon grinned. "Sit up and let's chat."

BRYAN THOMAS SCHMIDT

"Fuck you!" Golden Boy said through gritted teeth as glanced down at his injured thigh.

"Or I can pat it again and inspect your pain threshold some more," Simon added.

Golden Boy spat, whined, and sat up. "I hate you, Simon."

Simon grinned. "You say the sweetest things." He straddled the end of the bench beside Golden Boy, a couple feet between them and sighed. "What do you know about the people burgling these days?"

"Which people?" Golden Boy asked, wincing as he stretched out his wounded leg and looked at Simon.

"I'm so glad you asked," Simon said and told him.

# CHAPTER 2

Karl Ramon was a sax player. Not that he'd made much money at it. That was just how he thought of himself, no matter what he did for money. He'd been in a lot of bands over the years, too, since he'd taken up the instrument in middle school, back in Salina, Kansas where he'd grown up. Roosevelt-Lincoln Junior High, two early twentieth century brick buildings joined in the 1950s which served the northern population of the small city until it closed after the 2002-2003 school year, when Karl finished eighth grade.

"We closed down the joint," he and his classmates had loved to brag, but in truth, many students were sad to see it go—the place had a lot of memories. And then it was rehabilitated into senior apartments as a new middle school, built across town, replaced it and new generations of students had no memory of Roosevelt-Lincoln.

Mister McMillan, Karl's band teacher, had infected all of his students with his love of music, using an easygoing sense of humor and hearty laugh to soften his dedication to hard work and discipline. Despite the challenges of marching band—practices, extra time, mockable uniforms—McMillan made it fun and his students adored him for it. Many had gone on to lifelong relationships with music, some even professional. Karl had tried to be one of them, but then he'd married and had kids, and though his wife's career as a lawyer provided for a time, she came down with ALS-Lou Gehrig's disease—a neurodegenerative condition effecting nourishment of nerves in the brain and spinal cord, which killed her in five years and left Karl as the sole provider. Although some like famous scientist Stephen Hawking might survive for years with it, Julia had literally wasted away in front of her family's eyes.

Little known to most residents, more than ten percent of the industrial space in greater Kansas City was located "down under," covering about twenty-five million square feet—an area bigger than the downtown business district. With mining limestone for roadways continuing, more space opened up all the time. 5 million square feet of leased warehouse, light-industry, and office space, and a network of more than two miles of rail lines and six miles of roads, made UnderCity the world's largest underground business complex—and one of eight or so in the area. It was a budding industry, one growing in several other states as well, but Kansas City was at the vanguard, with more and more business

## THE SIDEMAN

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clients trading architectural advantages like windows and above ground signage for cheaper energy bills and consistent year round temperatures in what appeared like a mix between an over-sized parking garage and a mall. With ten thousand limestone support columns laid out forty feet apart in a grid, pillars replaced corner offices as the most desirable real estate—or so tenants joked—and a whole new subculture and way of doing business had developed there. With that came more jobs, perfect for a guy like Karl looking for flexible hours paired with decent benefits.

And so the family had relocated to Kansas City when Julia got sick, for better healthcare, and a better job market for Karl. And there they'd stayed, living in a blue collar neighborhood north of Truman Road in Independence, Missouri. Karl commuting every day to his job at UnderCity, an underground office and storage complex—Subtropolis. He was involved in security and it suited his mood. He worked nights, after his scattered gigs, allowing him to be home during the day to care for Julia and see the kids off to school. And it had worked well. So much so that even after she'd died, he'd kept the position and hours. He was used to it by then.

Karl liked his job, liked his employers, and enjoyed the tenants, many of whom were interesting and innovative people—as anyone had to be to choose such unusual surroundings—and it had become a second home, almost a family for him. Seniority allowed him a few benefits as well, like seven hour days that let him

do gigs at clubs before starting work at midnight, great health benefits, three paid weeks off, and more. It had been a godsend he'd stumbled into almost by accident—friend of a friend helping in a desperate hour—and now he'd been there fifteen years.

But still, in his mind, Karl was a musician, and tonight he played the role well, joining his friends in a jazz trio they dubbed the "Blues City Notes"—sax, drums, and piano. Tips were good, the crowd was respectful and appreciative despite also being heavy consumers of alcohol from the well-stocked bar, and life was good. They played two Thursdays a month—six to eleven at a club called The Waterfront, inside a downtown hotel. It was twenty-five minutes from work and home, so fairly convenient, and in the city's hopping Crossroads Art District, so they always had a decent crowd, too.

The piano player, Jimmy, usually took the lead but tonight they'd come in early to play warm-up and cover part of the dinner crowd, so by special request they played a lot of Stan Getz classics and that put Karl up front. They opened with "Desafinado," a bossa nova classic from the famed Getz/Gilberto album and then "Bim Bom" from that album's sequel, Cole Porter's "Night and Day," and eventually closed with an instrumental of "[The Girl from Ipanema](#)" with various other standards and a few originals mixed in throughout the night. Altogether, they'd planned three sets, and each song would be played twice. And Karl was on fire the first set, one of his best performances in ages. When he left the stage to head for the dressing

## THE SIDEMAN

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rooms, he was flying on adrenaline and sheer joy—the ultimate feeling for a musician who’s done well. That all came crashing down when he closed the door to find himself facing a dark stranger with a gun.

Seated in a chair behind the door where Karl came in, the man was tall and bulky—but all muscle—like some kind of warrior, Karl supposed. The intensity of the green eyes cut through him like a blade, and the Marine-style cut hinted at military connections. The gun was a semi-automatic pistol of some sort, black and sleek. Karl didn’t know much about guns. His job required him to carry mace and a club but he’d used neither in fifteen years and had neither on him now. Muffled music and chatter echoed through the walls from the dining area and club as Karl caught his breath.

The man just stared, saying nothing, so Karl swallowed and asked, “What do you want?”

That brought a grin, but not a friendly one. This one was cold as ice, an implied threat. “Nice set, Karl. I’m impressed.”

“Uh, thanks,” Karl said. “You know you’re not supposed to be back here. I go out front for a bit after.”

“I’m not here as a fan,” the man replied, monotone.

“I gathered that from the gun,” Karl said as he nonchalantly set his sax down on the sofa and turned back, forcing his body to relax despite the fear charging through it and tensing every limb. “Do we know each other?” Karl searched the face but kept coming up with nothing.

The man grunted. “No, but we’re going to become



great friends I think.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re going to help me change the world, Karl.”

“Change the world, huh? Ambitious guy. How will we do that?”

“That, we will discuss in time,” the man said. “But first, let’s just say you have information we need. And when I’m ready, I’ll be in touch. And you’ll be ready to provide it.”

“I guess that depends what it is.”

The man laughed. “And I guess the survival of Julie and Matt depends on your full cooperation.” His eyes cut into Karl again, and Karl winced with imagined pain.

“You leave my kids alone,” he said, his voice shaking with a mix of anger and fear.

“That all depends on you, Karl,” the man said. “You just wait until we contact you.”

“When will that be?”

“Soon,” the man said, with another cold grin as he stood. “Tell no one or your kids will be getting a visit at Nowlin.” The Middle School in Independence Karl’s kids both attended. The man moved toward the door and turned to lock eyes again with Karl. “We’ll know if you do. You’re being watched.”

Karl gulped, telling himself it was all a bluff and yet somehow he found it hard to even breathe. He simply nodded.

The man grunted again. “Good. I’m glad we understand each other. Have a good night, Karl.”

## THE SIDEMAN

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And then he whirled and was gone, the door shutting behind him so quietly, Karl had to blink to believe it was real. On instinct, he raced and opened it, peering down the short hallway one direction then the other. The guy was gone. Like the wind.

Karl took a deep breath and stepped back into the dressing room. What kind of information could anyone want from him, a widowed amateur musician and security guard? It made no sense. Yet they knew his kid's names and their school, too. Who was the guy? Karl felt a sudden urge to race home, but he had two more sets and work at UnderCity after that. Instead, he'd call them and check. Julie would still be up texting with friends. Working quickly, he laid the sax in its case and sealed it carefully, then grabbed that and his coat and headed for the alley to find a quieter place to make a call.



By the time Simon finished his paperwork and follow up, it was almost eight—a late night for him—but with his daughter Emma at her mother's he had nowhere to be, so he took a stroll down to the locker room to look for Lucas or Gil Lenz. He was almost past the lunch area to the locker room when the taunts started.

“Hey, Robocop, don't shoot me, I'm not running!”

“Hey, George, did Sarge write you a ticket for street racing yet?”

“I hear you made the T.O. crap his pants! They

should give you a citation.”

Simon entered and looked around at the smiling cops—several in clean, pressed uniforms, preparing to start their shifts, and others in various stages of civvies—all smiling and looking at Lucas George, who was sitting on the end of a bench in silence, looking dejected. The room was warm with humidity from the showers and smelled of sweat, aftershave, deodorant, foot odor, and hairspray.

“You guys are very funny,” Lucas said.

“Hell, you should be popular as a partner—for anyone wanting early retirement,” another cop pitched in from around the corner then Simon heard more chuckling as several smiling faces peered around the edge of the painted cinder block wall.

Simon stopped beside his friend and future partner, ignoring the others. “You okay?” Forties, former star running back at K-State, divorced, a fifteen year veteran of the department, he was older than the rest of those taunting his friend and more experienced with the bullshit, too.

Lucas looked up at him and offered a weak smile. “Lenz is considering failing me.”

Simon frowned. “That bastard. You let me talk to him.”

“I was doing my best,” Lucas said.

Simon grinned. “Of course, you were. It’s just your best is intimidating—in a scary way, pal.”

That brought a smile. Lucas nodded. “I guess I can understand that.”

“Just ignore these assholes,” Simon said, then raised

## THE SIDEMAN

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his voice, "It's all petty jealousy anyway. They wish they had half your skills."

The comment brought scoffs, shaking heads, and laughter from the other cops, but Simon saw in their eyes he wasn't that far off. He stepped back as Lucas got to his feet.

"They took my gun, too," Lucas said.

"Standard procedure in a shooting," Simon said with a nod. "For ballistic tests. You'll get it back."

"Hey, Simon, you got a real winner there!" one uniform said and slapped Simon on the back as he and his giggling partner moved past and out the door.

"Shit, Swanson, out drive and out shoot you any day. At least, my ass is covered!" Simon called after them. "Good luck with Bays there!" Swanson's partner was widely known as the worst shot in the station, having barely passed his last qualification.

Lucas stood beside Simon, the other cops still jittering around them. Simon patted him on the shoulder.

"Let's go find Lenz or a drink, whichever is easier," Simon said.

"You know alcohol has no effect on me," Lucas reminded him.

"It makes me feel great though," Simon said and laughed. "What else could I ask?"

Lucas laughed and followed Simon out the door.

"You gotta learn to give it right back to 'em, like you do with me," Simon said as they walked down the corridor the way he'd come. "Quote movies or

something.”

“Lenz ordered me not to do that,” Lucas said.

Simon groaned. “Bastard’s never had a sense of humor. Ignore him.”

“I did. It just made him mad.”

Simon grinned. “So? I got over it.”

“I want these guys to like me.”

“Your being a smart ass won me over,” Simon said, totally serious.

Lucas shrugged. “You threatened to shoot me twice.”

Simon grunted. “Yeah, almost did, too.”

“I can outshoot you now, you know?” Lucas joked, a skill he seemed to be picking up on more skillfully by the day.

Simon shot him a look. “Don’t push it, pal. Partners can be changed.”

“I’m not worried. The Force is strong with us,” Lucas said and grinned.

“Shut the fuck up,” Simon teased and they headed up the stairs.

At the booking counter, Simon nodded to Sergeant El-Ashkar’s replacement, Sergeant Thomas. “Anyone seen Lenz around?”

“He raced out of here once the shooting team finished with his crazy trainee,” Thomas said, then noticed Lucas and cleared his throat. “Uh...sorry.”

“Shit, Bob, you really want anyone reviewing your driving record from back in the day?” Simon fired back. Thomas had developed a rep as a rookie for going through the most black and whites in a month.

## THE SIDEMAN

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“Damn, John, that’s cold,” Thomas said, shaking his head.

Balding Sergeant Wallace chuckled from a chair behind Thomas. “Wrecking Ball Thomas, wasn’t it?”

Thomas screwed his face up and blushed as Wallace nodded to Lucas.

“You got the bad guy and the car’s fine,” Wallace said. “You’re still ahead of Thomas, George.”

Lucas smiled. “Well, I’ll do my best to keep it that way.”

Wallace and Simon laughed. Thomas, white, short, bulky, was the opposite to Wallace’s tall, thin, bald, black presence and about ten years his junior, too. He glared at them both then nodded to Lucas. “Better day tomorrow, Officer George.”

“I hope so, sir,” Lucas agreed.

Simon patted Lucas on the back and headed for the door. “Time for some alcohol, gentlemen.”

Wallace grunted. “Have fun now!”

As they headed for Simon’s classic 1985 Dodge Charger, Lucas looked worried. “Don’t worry, we’ll catch him tomorrow,” Simon said, back to the topic of Lenz. “If it was a righteous shoot, nothing to worry about.”

“If it was?” Lucas said.

Simon smiled. “Relax. I believe in you, but not everyone knows what you can do. Give them time.”

Lucas nodded. “Where are we going?”

“Out for some fun,” Simon said. “You need to get your mind off of this.”

"If you want, I can drive," Lucas offered as he stopped beside the Charger while Simon continued around to the driver's side.

Simon shot him a look. "I already said I believe in you. Doesn't mean I want to die."

"Those two statements seem contradictory," Lucas said.

Simon raised an eyebrow. "I'm an enigma, pal. Now get in and relax."

Just to taunt his future partner further, Simon let off a rebel yell as he peeled out of the lot, tires screeching, and turned sharply right onto Linwood, headed downtown.

"Where are we actually going?" Lucas asked as the car straightened and he rocked back hard in the passenger seat.

"Golden Boy gave me a tip I want to check out on the case, but it's a bar, so I figure we can kill two birds," Simon said.

"Killing birds is how you relax?"

"Still haven't learned that one, eh? Remind me to work on your knowledge of colloquialisms, See Threepio."

"I prefer Artoo-Detoo," Lucas said.

"Artoo couldn't talk," Simon said.

"Yeah, but he was cooler. Less annoying."

Simon laughed. "Why do you think I picked Threepio?"

After that, Lucas fell into silence and within ten minutes they'd pulled up in a small lot outside a corner bar that bore the name "Jimmy's" flashing in blue neon,

## THE SIDEMAN

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smaller signs advertising “Bud Light” and “Corona” below it on the brick wall beside the plain entrance. Simon parked and led the way as they got out and approached the building.

“Have you been here before?” Lucas asked.

Simon shook his head. “Not a cop bar. Supposedly a rough place sometimes, though it’s early. Just watch my back and let me do the talking.”

“Is there karaoke?” Lucas asked, naming a favorite pastime he’d discovered on their last case and pursued since.

Simon stiffened, raising a palm in objection. “Don’t even think about it. This is not the kind of place we want to stand out. Blend. Like I do.”

Lucas smiled. “And I was going to ask you to dance.”

Simon shot him a warning look. “So very much *not* that kind of place.”

As soon as they walked into the dimly lit, smoky room filled with cracked leather booths and faux marble plastic tables, a long Oak bar taking up the entire north wall, Simon hoped Lucas got the point. The place dripped blue collar machismo. A few regulars and the bartender stared up at them as they came in, but the rest couldn’t be bothered. Oldies blared from a jukebox in the corner, loud enough to drown out any eavesdropping on conversations without going right up next to the locations where they were being held. Instead, Simon headed for the bar and Lucas followed.

Sliding onto a red, cracked leather stool, Simon



nodded to the bartender. "Corona, bottle, please."

The bartender grunted and leaned down under the counter to open a short cooler and retrieve the requested item. Simon dipped his hand in a bowl of salty peanuts on the bar and shoved half a fistful in his mouth, chewing.

"I don't know you," the bartender said, sliding him the beer.

Simon caught it and nodded. "First time."

"What brings you here?" the bartender's growl was almost pirate-like, his face scrunched up with his displeasure at dealing with strangers. Fifties, bald, medium height, with an ever-expanding beer belly, he looked like he enjoyed his own fare as much as his customers. His upper arms bore tattoos of an anchor, crossed swords, and an Uzi. Although he radiated unfriendliness, Simon found his attempt to appear intimidating almost laughable.

Simon tipped back his head and took a long sip of the Corona. "Looking for someone," he said with a sigh when he lowered the bottle again.

"Ain't we all," the bartender said. "Your friend want something?" He motioned to Lucas who had leaned his elbows and back against the bar and was taking in the room.

"Him? Nah, he doesn't drink," Simon said. "You wouldn't want to see him drunk."

The bartender issued a cocky laugh. "I'll bet I've seen worse."

Simon laughed back. "You might be surprised."

"Your types never surprise me," the bartender said,

## THE SIDEMAN

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his face returning to an unfriendly glare. "What makes you think I'll know the person you're after?"

"Can't hurt to ask," Simon said nonchalantly, as he took another sip from the beer then wiped the foam casually off his mouth with the back of his arm. Golden Boy had given him a name, an odd one, but someone who fenced lots of stolen goods and usually knew everyone active in burglary in the town. A player Simon surprisingly hadn't encountered before which meant he'd either changed his name or was new. Didn't matter. Golden Boy's info was almost always worth checking out, so Simon said the name, "Guy named Weasel."

"Weasel?" the bartender scoffed. "That's an animal, not a person."

Simon shrugged. "Takes all kinds, you know?"

"Don't know him," the bartender replied quickly. Too quickly but he kept his eyes locked on Simon's and offered no clue if the guy might be in the room. The guy was good.

Simon sighed and took another sip, finishing the bottle, then set it back on the counter with a bit of a pop. "Okay then. We'll just ask someone else."

"My customers don't like other people in their business," the bartender said. It was a warning.

"I can understand that. Not too fond of it myself," Simon said, in a way that made it clear the bartender getting in his business wasn't welcome either.

The bartender raised both palms in surrender and turned, walking away down the bar.

Simon nodded his head to one side at Lucas and turned, finding himself face to face with the roughhouse version of Mr. Clean. The guy was bald, in a white shirt and spiked leather jacket with torn jeans and steel-toed boots beneath.

"You want Weasel?" the man demanded, his voice a deep growl.

"Friend of a friend," Simon said innocently. "Might have a job for him."

"Weasel don't like friend's fucking friends," Mr. Clean said, crossing his arms over his puffed chest and blocking Simon's way.

Simon stepped right and tried to go around him but saw three other tall, bulky types approaching from behind him. Lucas slipped into ready mode beside him.

"I'm not looking for trouble," Simon said. "Just a referral."

"Weasel don't take fucking referrals," Mr. Clean insisted.

"You have quite the vocabulary, friend," Simon said and grinned.

This time the answer was a fist flying at his face, a dagger glinting in the dim light.

Simon ducked and rushed, headbutting Mr. Clean in the mid-chest as Lucas reacted beside him.

"KCPD Officers, everyone step back!" Lucas demanded, and Simon wished he'd warned him. It was the exact wrong move.

Chairs scooted back loudly and more toughies closed in.

"We hate cops," Mr. Clean said as he grabbed Simon

## THE SIDEMAN

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by the shoulders and threw him into several more toughies, who were more than ready to join the battle.

“Wrong thing to say, pal,” Simon said, looking at Lucas, who was also grabbed by three men and being shoved toward the door. “Look, we didn’t come for trouble,” Simon continued, turning to make eye contact with the toughies again.

“We did!” one of them said, and grinned—his teeth all steel.

The next few minutes, try as he might, Simon felt like a pin-the-tail donkey at a child’s birthday party. Lucas’ android strength stood him in better stead, but despite some groans, screams, and cursing, they were outnumbered and soon Simon found himself propelled out the door to land painfully hard on his knees in front of the bar on the sidewalk. Lucas landed beside him moments later and they turned back to see Mr. Clean and four others, arms crossed over their huge chests, blocking the door.

“Don’t fucking come back!” Mr. Clean ordered.

Simon groaned, his body aching, but waved Lucas off as his friend tried to help him to his feet. Instead, they stood and faced the men, Simon raising his palms in surrender.

“All right, so no one’s seen Weasel. You could have just said that,” Simon cracked.

“Fuck you!” steel-teeth replied, glaring.

Simon winced, clenching and unclenching his fists, then rubbing his arms which ached as he stumbled after Lucas and headed for the parking lot.

BRYAN THOMAS SCHMIDT

"You call that relaxing?" Lucas said.

Simon snorted. "I feel fucking great, don't you?" He stumbled and Lucas caught him, leaning him against the Charger.

"Maybe I should drive," Lucas said.

Simon handed him the keys. "Just remember, this isn't city owned. Treat her with respect."

Lucas grinned. "I just follow my instincts."

Simon opened the door and slid into the passenger side, fumbling for the seatbelt.

"Gil Lenz always does that first thing, too," Lucas said as he settled behind the wheel.

"Shut the fuck up and drive," Simon said. "My house."

Without further word, Lucas did just that, driving at a relaxed pace to Simon's relief.