

JD Ward focused his gaze on the shreds of white silk, waving at one another from opposing oaks. The spider's web had been torn in half by a prey much too large for the silk trap to hold.

As JD stepped between the trees the ghostly remnants brushed over the shoulders of his blue sports coat. The chunk of web, missing from the center, was the size of a man. A fleeing felon to be exact. Just the size prey he'd been searching for.

And the web-builder being an Orchard Spider—a species that spun a new web each morning—ensured the shredded silk was a recent sign left by the suspect.

*This dirtbag is somewhere close.*

JD glanced over his shoulder for the hundredth time and pursed his lips. The longer a hunt lasted the more desperate and dangerous a suspect could become, and this chase had been going on for a while. Which made it a lousy time to be alone in a woods.

It would've been nice to have backup for a change. But here he was again—alone.

*I should forget it. Let him get away. Nobody else seems to care.*

JD massaged the back of his neck, upset at himself for even considering the idea. He'd taken a solemn oath, making it his duty to bring the man to justice—regardless of fear, consequence, or danger to himself.

Like it or not, that was policing. The profession he had chosen and was passionate about. Even if it did suck at times. Like now.

He huffed and ran a hand over his short reddish-brown hair as a light wind pushed through the woods. With it came the sweet aroma of pine. He

forged a few steps ahead to where the suspect had spun in wild circles. An entire patch of stinging nettles lay trampled. And they were littered with small branches that had been hacked by the man's flailing arms from the surrounding trees.

The chaotic scene brought a sideways smile to his face. Being a former combat tracker, JD could read the signs left by the man like a story. And this one told of how the suspect reacted to a face full of sticky web.

He panicked—the same way everyone else does.

And while JD knew the long-legged Orchard Spider was harmless to humans, he was sure the fleeing suspect didn't share in that knowledge. Otherwise, the man wouldn't have taken the time to flatten an area large enough for an entire scout troop to set up camp.

But the trail vanished a dozen feet later into ground that was a dry hard-pan, taking JD's smirk with it. He scanned the woods and tucked the blue hem of his coat behind the holster on his right hip. A cursory check of the Glock 22 helped to calm his jitters, but he couldn't shake them completely. With no sign to read he was blind.

The man might be hiding behind the next tree, ready to ambush him. And with JD's white skin—tan as it may be—he was an easy target among the dark-green foliage. He pulled at the suffocating body armor under his white shirt, separating it from his chest. Ohio's unbearable humidity made the vest feel like he'd went swimming in a cardigan.

*Not as bad as a flak vest in the desert.*

JD's gaze intuitively settled on a pile of nearby pine needles. There was an unnatural pair of straight lines—maybe five inches long—chopped into the pile of browned-tines. And nature wasn't big on straight lines.

The sign had been left by the suspect.

The track led him to a quaint meadow. Its tall grasses swayed in waves of green, other than a lifeless path of broken stalks the suspect had left in his wake. JD followed the man's trail another fifty feet until it intersected with a road and ended abruptly. His ears took the lead as the quiet of the woods gave way to the frantic drumbeat of shoes as they pounded against pavement. The suspect, more than a block away, sprinted toward the dead-end of Broerman Avenue.

As JD gave chase, he was jarred by the sudden change of scenery around him. Both sides of the narrow street were lined with shotgun-style houses squeezed a foot apart. He'd all but forgotten that the four-acre woods was part of Ross Park, a rare green spot in St. Jude, Ohio. He was tracking a suspect through an inner-city neighborhood. It wasn't a deer in the woods back home, or an enemy combatant in the forests of the Hindu Kush.

JD worked to lengthen his stride, but he wasn't gaining any ground in the foot race. He was on the tall side of average and fit, but farm work and soldiering had designed him for strength and endurance. Not speed. While the dark-skinned suspect was a tall, wiry man. And the fear of going to jail had him running like a pronghorn with a hungry cheetah on its tail.

Instead of trying to outrun the suspect, JD grabbed the portable radio from his belt and keyed the mike. "Seven Robert thirty-two to dispatch... Back in foot pursuit... Heading—"

He could barely breathe, let alone talk, with the white Oxford noose cinching tighter around his neck. He yanked the shirt's collar. The black clip-on tie and a button fell to the pavement as the rush of oxygen ignited a fire deep down in his lungs. He was gulping down air when the police radio crackled to life.

"Seven Robert thirty-two," the dispatcher called, his voice hurried. "Your transmission broke off. Are you still in Ross Park?"

"Negative, dispatch," JD said. "North on Broerman... Nearing the dead-end." He took a deep breath and rattled off the suspect's description. "Thin black male, early twenties, red muscle shirt, dark jeans, white high tops... And fast."

"Dispatch is clear 32. All units be advised, suspect is running north on Broerman."

The man reached the dead-end and darted for a faded white house that backed up to the park. Someone had left the windows and doors open, probably hoping a breeze would steal away the record-setting June heat.

The suspect jumped the front steps, crossed the porch in one stride, crashed through the flimsy screen door, and careened into the home.

JD's chest tightened as the pop and crack of splintering wood transitioned to breaking glass. Then an angry man's voice—thick with a

Romanian accent—bellowed over the destruction. JD didn't need to study the language to understand the homeowner wasn't inviting the intruder to stay for dinner.

Some officers would hesitate before rushing into a house after an unknown suspect, but JD had hesitated once before. And it had cost someone close to him their life. He raised his Glock in a two-handed grip as he approached the steps.

The semi-auto was ugly, but he liked everything else about the boxy handgun. It held fifteen forty-caliber rounds in the magazine, one more in the chamber, and had no pesky safety to fumble with. Just aim and squeeze the trigger.

He crossed the porch as a screen door smacked at the rear of the house. The smack came a second time and the Romanian's shouting moved to the backyard. JD swept the Glock left and right as he rushed through the house. He slowed to hop over a shattered vase when deep guttural barks came from out back.

Along with the barks came a shrill scream from the suspect. It was followed by the rattle of chain-link fencing and a thud from a hard landing. By the time JD swung the rear door open the man had disappeared back into the woods.

Two irate Dobermans barked over the back fence as JD charged into the back yard. The dogs were oblivious to his presence until the screen door smacked closed. The barking stopped as the black and tan balls of muscle turned their heads together. They lowered their ears together. They even curled their noses back and growled together.

The duo reminded JD of the creepy twins from *The Shining*, but with bigger teeth. He holstered the Glock as he quickly closed the distance between them, wanting both hands free to protect himself from what was coming.

The Dobermans mobbed him, wagging their nubs and licking wildly.

"Zeus and Apollo are good boys," JD said in a squeaky voice. He scratched at their pointed ears as he struggled to push past the two dogs, each weighing in at over a hundred pounds.

Mr. Yoska, the mad Romanian, shook his head and gave a grunt. He held an aluminum softball bat in one hand and a tight grip on his son with the other. JD didn't have time to stop and talk, even knowing how the actions of the suspect would have a horrible impact on the family for some time to come.

He had met Mr. Yoska a year earlier after a sexual predator had taken the five-year-old boy from a park in town. JD managed to find Luca and his abductor before the unthinkable could happen. But the slimeball had skipped out on bail and left Mr. Yoska a nervous wreck ever since.

JD squeezed past the dogs, gave Luca a wink, gripped the top rail, and hopped the fence.

Luca cheered, "Take him down, Officer Ward," as JD rushed into the woods. The Dobermans whimpered after him. Together. Still creepy, but in a cute way.

JD moved faster than he normally would through the thick underbrush, but a blind man could've followed the trail the suspect had blazed. "Seven Robert thirty-two to dispatch," he called in on the radio. "Suspect is west bound, headed for the train overpass."

"Dispatch is clear thirty-two."

"Seven Robert thirty to dispatch." The coarse voice on the radio belonged to Tank Maynard, a veteran cop with thirty-odd years of service. JD half expected a grunt, moan, or groan to follow. The man spent most of his time complaining about something. Or someone. And that someone was usually JD.

"Dispatch to 30, go ahead."

"Notify Cincinnati of our foot pursuit. Request their highway units to keep an eye out for the suspect. He may be headed that way."

"Dispatch is clear 30. Notifying them now."

The tinge of guilt made it hard for JD to swallow. Maybe Tank was being helpful for a change. The old cop did know St. Jude, and its ten thousand residents, better than anyone. And notifying the other agency for help made sense. Cincinnati was a metropolis compared to St. Jude, and surrounded the small city, making it an island. Calling the community an *inner-city* seemed an understatement.

“Also check to see if they have an interpreter available,” Tank continued. “Someone who can translate farm-boy gibberish. Or do they call that plow jockey English?” He chuckled as he stopped transmitting.

JD rolled his eyes. *Should’ve known better...*

That was the offensive jerk he’d become accustomed to. At first, he had wondered if the older black officer didn’t like him because he was a white farm-boy from the country. But it turned out that Tank hated anyone with a pulse. But country people did seem to hold a special place at the top of the man’s list.

JD focused back on the suspect who was thrashing his way up the steep embankment with all the stealth of a Bush Hog. The man soon reached the top of the overpass and disappeared behind the rusty steel wall of the railroad bridge. At least he was making it easy to track him.

But according to Staff Sergeant Clark—one of JD’s combat tracker instructors in the Army—it should be easy. Clark had said, “Your prey is the clumsiest, most ignorant animal in the entire woods. And the only one wearing shoes.” Clark curled his upper lip into a snarl when he preached on terrorists. Or civilians. “Most of our worthless species can’t even find a seat in a movie theatre without a string of tiny lights showing them the way.”

JD charged up the embankment. The loose footing and thorn bushes made for a torturous climb. But he neared the top a minute later and reached for the stability of the railroad bridge. He gripped the steel wall as he looked over the drop-off to his left. His knuckles whitened and his stomach churned.

Just below, rush hour traffic sped by on the eight-lane highway. Heights were not his friend, but a more rational fear took over when JD sensed movement above him. The suspect had jumped out from behind the steel wall of the bridge.

“Screw you pig!” the man shouted, as he stomped down with a white high top.

JD’s forearm took the brunt of the kick as he barely kept himself from tumbling back down the hill. He fought the urge to reach for his Glock. It

would be justified, but lowering his arm would mean taking a kick to the head. And he couldn't imagine that ending well.

"Shoulda stopped chasing me," the suspect said as he stomped again. And again.

JD didn't have a choice. He let go of the bridge and latched onto the shoe with both hands. A sharp twist forced the man's toe outward. His heel followed close behind.

The suspect yelped as he spun around and face-planted into a railroad tie.

"Not stomping anyone now, are—" JD's smirk disappeared as the loose soil crumbled below his feet, cutting the victory dance short.

And JD Ward tumbled backward like a giant Plinko chip.

Being smacked, slashed, and stabbed as he went.

Tancred “Tank” Maynard leaned against a birch tree at the south end of Ross Park. Three decades of policing had given the caramel-skinned veteran a silver canopy of hair, a healthy portion of wrinkles, and deep furrows that bracketed his mouth. He wasn’t Denzel Washington, but his wife swore he was a close second. He loved that woman for lying.

His old bones appreciated the smoothness of the tree’s bark, and the gray was a near match for his uniform shirt. And if he blended in well enough then maybe people would leave him alone for a change.

Tank glanced up from his book and scanned the northern horizon again, looking for the annoying rookie. Everything was a blur. He lowered his squared chin and gazed over his brown-framed reading glasses.

*Eyes like a far-sighted eagle.*

The park was three hundred yards long and a third as wide. The southern half was home to the lone baseball diamond in the city. And Tank’s new favorite tree stood foul of first base. The northern half was covered with the faint outlines of a football field.

Thick woodlands crossed the northern end zone and ran along the eastern sideline. It formed a natural barrier between the park and Broerman Avenue. The woods were the last place Tank had seen the chief’s golden boy, Officer JD Ward, who at the time was hunting a suspect like a deer. The rookie was some kind of snake-eating grunt the Army trained to track humans instead of animals. A talent that gave Tank the creeps.

Tank’s gaze traveled over the football field to the eight lanes of Interstate 75. The deafening western boundary was bumper-to-bumper idiots at this time of day. But he hadn’t spotted anyone in the park, other

than the middle-aged woman making another lap around the jogging path. Her pink outfit was a bedazzled eyesore, three sizes too small for her plus-sized figure. And for some unknown reason, she found it necessary to give Tank a wink each time she completed a lap.

He wanted to tell the frizzy-haired woman to grab a cheap pair of sweats that fit, a much stronger brassiere, and a place to exercise indoors. But one more complaint from a whiny civilian and the chief was giving him time off, so he turned back to his book instead.

Tank read another page before he sensed someone sneaking up behind him. He didn't bother turning. It was too late for that.

"Why aren't you with Officer Ward?" Mike Snyder asked. The tall, slender sergeant's brow lowered as his dark mustache, streaked with gray, bushed out like walrus whiskers. His angry face.

"Nobody can keep up with your golden boy in the woods. Thinks he's Tarzan. But keep in mind, I did tell dispatch to have Cincinnati keep an eye out for the suspect." Tank looked up from his book. "And tell me again, why did you *dumb dumbs* hire that backwoods rube in the first place? Not an ounce of city cop in him. Or was it because a freckled farmer counts as a special minority hire, or something? That I could understand."

Snyder's pale complexion turned pink. "Isn't it obvious? We needed him to chase your suspect so you can keep this tree company."

"He's assigned to investigations this rotation. He shouldn't be sticking his nose in my—"

"Are you kidding me?" Snyder's teeth ground together. "The only cop I know who can track a perp through grass, woods, and probably down a sidewalk..." He motioned toward the trees. "That's the guy I should reprimand for being proactive? I don't think so."

"I'm glad you brought that tracking thing up," Tank said. He folded the page's corner and closed the book. "Don't you find it creepy working with a guy that hunts people better than a serial killer? Ever wonder how many bodies he has buried on that farm of his?"

The sergeant's neck tensed. "Do you have any idea what a combat tracker's mission is? When I did Ward's background check I spoke with his former NCO. The staff sergeant said that when enemy combatants

attacked American military units and fled, the tracker teams went into enemy territory and hunted them down to keep our troops safe. Just imagine being part of a small team, deep in enemy—”

“I heard he got kicked out early.”

“Ward was *not* kicked out. He was honorably discharged.” Snyder looked away and gave his head a slight shake. “But something did happen that caused him to leave early. He had nothing but excellent references, especially from his captain. Said he was the most decorated soldier under his command. But when I asked the captain about what happened, all I got was ‘that’s classified.’”

Tank raised his brow. “Wonder if he ever ate any of his victims? Maybe that’s why they booted him out. Started seeing everyone as cows.”

Snyder’s jaw clenched. “Why don’t you just retire? You can read as much as you want then. This agency needs people who want to be police officers, not read fairy tales.”

“For your information, this is police work.” Tank held the thick novel up, an image of rippling water on the cover. “This book is filled with training scenarios.”

Snyder pointed to the small print on the cover. “It’s A Jack Reacher Novel. Put it away. Find Officer Ward and *your* suspect.”

“You know, sometimes—” Tank squinted as he stepped forward. He pointed north to the overpass. “I found *my* suspect.”

They both watched as the distant figure of a man ran west over the railroad bridge. Tank grabbed binoculars hung on a nearby branch. He’d come prepared. As he focused, the suspect lunged for the last car on a passing train. But the nitwit stumbled and plowed headlong into the cinder rocks instead.

Tank grinned, lowering the binoculars. “That’s our bad guy, but I don’t see your cowpoke. Must not be as good as Captain Crunch thought.”

Snyder took a step toward the distant overpass and keyed his shoulder mike. “Seven Robert seventy-two, to thirty-two. What’s your location?”

The radio was silent.

The sergeant looked back to Tank, the blood draining from his face. He called again. “Seven Robert seventy-two, to Officer Ward. What is your status?”

Tank shuffled a few feet past Snyder. It had only been ten minutes since Ward went plowing into the woods like he was Jack Hanna on safari. He couldn't have gotten into too much trouble.

"Come on, rube," Tank said, the image of one more flag-draped coffin entered his mind's eye. "Get the manure out of your ears." *I should've been there for the kid. What if he's—*

"Seven Robert thirty-two." JD's tired voice crackled over the radio. "Sorry, I was... tied up. Back on the suspect's track."

Tank and Snyder spotted JD a few minutes later in his white shirt, as he reached the top of the overpass.

"What happened to his blue jacket?" Tank asked.

Snyder shrugged, relief washing over his features. "Let's get to the other side of the interstate. The tracks will lead this guy right to us."

### Interstate 75 - Near Mile Marker 7

JD grimaced as he pulled a thorn from his arm while jogging across the overpass. Just one of the many razor sharp barbs inherited from a bush he'd landed in after tumbling down the hill. The thorned-octopus forced him to abandon his sports coat and left the white Oxford with dozens of paper-cut-sized red streaks. And sweat turned venomous as it rolled over his tiny lacerations.

But he would never give up the chase. Not when he possessed the two traits required of every member of a combat tracker team—aggressiveness and tenacity. His adversary would have to do more than kick JD Ward down a hill to escape a trip to jail.

He crossed the overpass and found the suspect's red muscle shirt tossed in some tall grass on the north side of the tracks. JD grabbed the evidence but easily spotted the man's real trail heading down the south embankment.

*Nice try buddy, but I'm no rookie when it comes to tracking a felon.*

Before he could take another step, a dozen car horns belched out, like an orchestra tuning their instruments. A performance of *road rage*. A common melody during rush hour in Cincinnati. But these drivers weren't mad at each other, for a change. A shirtless man zigzagged his way through four lanes of bumper-to-bumper chaos. Southbound traffic had screeched to a halt.

The suspect climbed over the center divider and darted across the northbound lanes in the same deadly fashion and slowed to a fast walk when he reached the berm. Comfortable with his half mile lead, the man raised a hand to his ear.

*Crap! He's calling for a ride.*

JD slid down the embankment and hurried into the deafening roar of traffic. He yelled an update into his radio but couldn't hear the reply. He scaled the outer barrier wall as minivans, SUV's, delivery trucks, and eighteen wheelers sped by in a blur. Each driver too busy with their own life to concern themselves with a plainclothes officer out for an afternoon stroll.

Even one insane enough to chase a bad guy down one of America's deadliest highways.



Gridlocked traffic had Sergeant Snyder and Tank trapped at Mitchell Avenue and Vine Street. Snyder blew the black and white's air horn and then tried Officer Ward on the radio again.

"Seven Robert seventy-two, to thirty-two... Did you copy my last? I repeat, stay off the highway."

"He can't hear you," Tank said. "We barely made out what he said with the traffic noise. The kid's on his own until we can get around this bunch of—"

Tank rolled his window down and yelled, "Hey jackass! Can't you see the red and blue lights? Get out of the way." A man in a black BMW crouched down in his seat.

"Roll up the window." Snyder hit the steering wheel. "There's nowhere for him to go. We'd need a helicopter to get around this mess."

"Ward is psycho to set foot on seventy-five at this hour. Might as well jump into a cage of rabid dogs, wearing meat scented cologne." Tank shrugged. "Who cares if some street urchin lifted a guy's wallet? It's not the crime of the century."

Snyder glared from the corner of his eye. "If that suspect had taken your credit cards and cash, you'd be out there chasing him yourself."

"I would've already had the guy if your rube didn't get in my way." Tank gave a subtle nod. "And did you know he moved his furniture here in a cow trailer? Might as well have worn a big neon sign that said, *I don't belong here.*" He sneered at a motorcyclist who immediately turned away. "Trailer probably still had cow crap inside."

“You made that up.” Snyder yanked the steering wheel right, punched the gas, and drove up on the sidewalk. “And what in the world is a rube?”

Tank looked down his nose at the sergeant. “Country bumpkin. Hick. Redneck. Trailer trash.” He shook his head. “And I had thought you to be an educated man.”

Snyder gave a pinched expression. “Want to know what’s a sign? When your insults are so old that it takes a Mayan codex to look up their meaning. That’s a sign.”



## Mile Marker 6.8

JD said, “Sorry about this, sir,” as he slid into the passenger seat of a red Jeep Cherokee. He buckled his seatbelt and glanced at the name embroidered on the shaken driver’s green shirt. “Mr. Patel, I need to commandeer your vehicle to capture a suspect. And I’d appreciate the chance to catch my breath if you don’t mind driving?”

“Are you serious?” Patel asked. “I’m in a real life pursuit.” The man’s numb expression morphed into a sinister smile as he stomped on the accelerator. “This is so awesome! I’ll run the scum sucker down.”

“No running anyone down,” JD said with a chuckle. “Drive safely and I’ll let you know where to drop me off.”

“No problem, officer. Should I hold your badge out the window so everyone gets out of our way?”

“City drivers ignore our lights and sirens half the time, let alone a badge.” JD pointed to a towering building on the east side of the highway. St. Bernard Catholic Church stood several stories above the surrounding structures and served as the best navigational landmark in town. “The suspect should be about even with that steeple up ahead.”

“I see him, I see him.” Patel bounced like a boy who just entered the gates of Disney World. “I hope this bust ends up on COPS.”

JD nodded. “I’m sure it will. Here is good. Pull close.” He wiggled over the console to the back seat, scurried through a rear window, and straddled

the concrete divider wall. Patel had climbed half way out his own window before JD put a hand on the man's shoulder. "Thanks for the help but I best take things from here."

The look on Patel's face said Disney World had closed for the day. But he managed a flurry of air punches. "Okay, I'll swing around in case you need backup."

JD didn't have time to argue as he keyed his radio. "Seven Robert thirty-two to dispatch," he shouted, hoping the afternoon grind wasn't too loud. "Chasing suspect on 75. Hundred yards north of Mitchell Avenue."

With that, he slid down the wall and cautiously weaved his way across the four lanes of northbound traffic. Once on the opposite shoulder, JD traded caution for a sprint.

And rapidly closed on his unsuspecting prey.



Sergeant Snyder gave the police radio a confused gaze. "What did Ward say?"

"That doesn't make sense," Tank said. "How could the rube catch up to the guy so quickly?"

"He couldn't have," Snyder said. "He'd need a vehicle to..."

"You don't think he commandeered some poor schmuck's car and tossed the driver out on the highway, do you?" Tank laughed. "I've changed my mind. We should hire more farmers. They're more entertaining than—"

"Shut it," Snyder said, his jaw clenched. "Just... shut it."



## Mile Marker 6

The suspect gave a cocky glance over his shoulder a split second before JD Ward was about to pounce. The man's expression warped into a frozen mask of terror as if Freddy Krueger just crashed into his dream of going free.

JD buried a shoulder in the suspect's lower back and drove the man right out of his white high tops. Still bare-chested, the suspect hit the asphalt with a thud before he skidded to a stop. He sucked in a mouthful of air and howled like a pig about to be made into bacon.

JD proudly sat up on the suspect's back, certain his tackle was worthy of a SportsCenter Top Ten pick. "You're under arrest," he said. "Don't move unless I—"

The suspect jabbed back with a wild elbow in reply.

JD blocked the strike and seized the man's wrist and elbow. He transitioned the strike into an armlock nicknamed *The Chicken Wing* and torqued it until the man yelped. "Stop resisting and you won't get hurt."

"I'm already hurt!" The suspect turned his head away and muttered to the pavement. "My chest feels like a piece of hamburger and this redneck is talking about not getting hurt. Whole Five-0 is full of crazies."

JD cuffed the suspect and began the search for evidence. The first pants pocket he checked held seven baggies, each one small enough to fit inside Tweety Bird's lunch box.

*Blue Rapture...*

That was the name printed on the shiny blue labels stuck to each baggie. The drug's name wasn't a familiar one to JD, but the crystals inside appeared to be meth. Blue-tinted meth. Probably something new.

"This product is packaged and ready to sell," JD said. "That's a drug trafficking charge in Ohio."

"Never saw that stuff before. I borrowed these pants."

"Partner, I wouldn't believe that story if you were a nun and didn't own a pair of pants." JD unclipped a pay-as-you-go cell phone from the suspect's belt. The last number called flashed on the green display. He sat it aside and pulled not one, but two wallets from another pants pocket. One black, one brown.

*Now you're mine.*

From the black wallet, he pulled an Ohio identification card.

The suspect's name was Rod Macon.

But it was in the brown wallet that JD found what he'd been looking for. He rolled the moaning suspect onto his left side and waved the driver's

license in the man's face. "Mr. Kioshi wants his wallet back, *Rod*. It takes a complete lowlife to steal from an old man."

"I found that ragged thing in a dumpster. I thought it was trash."

"Really? Well, some ragged wallets carry memories we can never get back." JD yanked Rod to his feet and growled at him. Rage built as his painful past came rushing in. Another thief and another wallet. A long time ago. "But that doesn't matter to a bottom-feeder like you, does it?"

A sudden blast of music caused JD to turn around. It was the song's lyrics that garnered his attention. "Cop Killer! Whaddyou wanna be when you grow up? Cop Killer! Good Choice. Cop Killer!"

*Not my favorite tune.*

The music came from a red Cadillac Escalade that bounced along at a crawl. The SUV had dark windows, giant chrome wheels, and translucent orange flames trailing down the sides. Four black males in their early twenties eyed JD from the vehicle. The muscle head in the front seat had flashed a gang sign before he pointed a finger at JD. The man's thumb dropped to his index finger a second later, like a kid pretending to shoot a gun.

*Not my favorite gesture either.*

JD said, "I'm your huckleberry, gentlemen." He narrowed his gaze, squeezed the grip on his Glock 22, unsnapped the holster, and tilted his head to the side. "Do something or get lost!"

The Escalade's tires squealed as it sped off, the aroma of burned rubber left hanging in the air.

JD turned to face Rod with a renewed interest. "How long have you been in a gang? I know those are the bangers you called for a ride, right?" He gave the man a shake. "Answer me."

"It's none of your business, cop."

"Just answer my questions and... and... I won't charge you for resisting arrest. Help me find the man I've been searching for and I'll drop everything but the theft." Sirens rang out in the distance as JD gave him a hurried nod. "Do you understand how much time you'll get for assaulting a cop? This offer is for a limited time, so talk."

Rod's lip curled back and exposed a gold tooth. "Been in and out of gangs and lockup most my life. Satisfied, Oprah?"

“Ever heard about a pair of gangbangers who carjacked people on Vine Street? They liked pickup trucks and got pretty violent.”

“I know a few dudes, who—”

“This would’ve been around fifteen years ago, down by the zoo. Any of those *dudes* you know in their thirties?” JD couldn’t help but hold his breath. Could this guy finally lead him to the man?

“What the...” Rod gave a confused grimace. “Only been in the Queen City a couple years. And the Posse ain’t no geriatric gang. Oldest dude we got is Gat, and he’s around your age—maybe twenty-five. Have to search prisons and graveyards for anyone older. Know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah,” JD said. Red and blue lights strobed on top of a black and white as it sped up the ramp from Mitchell Avenue. “I’ll keep my word on the resisting arrest. The other charges are on you.”

“That’s *bull!* So does all you rednecks join the Five-0 to rescue lost wallets? Or just to harass innocent black folks like me?” Rod jerked away as the last word left his lips and lunged toward freedom.

JD hooked Rod’s arm and spun him around, slamming the man’s back into the outer barrier wall.

Toe to toe with the man, JD said, “I became a police officer so I could hunt a man down.” His gaze narrowed as he pressed his forehead against the suspect’s. “And then I’m going to...”

Rod turned his head away and cowered down the wall. “P-Please don’t. I’m sorry for kicking you.” His terror-filled eyes darted to the approaching police car.

JD stepped back and took a deep breath. His old sergeant would have been impressed how easily he tracked his quarry through the city. But his mother would have been ashamed of how easily he thought about spilling more blood.

“You don’t have to worry,” JD said, voice trailing to a whisper. “You’re not the man I’m looking for.”