

The Nowhere to Hide Affair

A Sean Kruger Short Story

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A cold north wind bit hard at his exposed skin, stinging the eyes but not distracting his concentration on the vacant field diagonally across the intersection.

The man standing next to him said, “The trajectory of the bullet places the shooter’s location toward the middle of that field.” He pointed in the direction of FBI Agent Sean Kruger’s stare. “Plus there was a slight downward angle to the bullet.”

Kruger blinked several times, frowned and said, “Was the victim leaning forward?”

Fellow FBI Agent Thomas Shark shook his head. “No, the guy had just finished filling his tank. Surveillance video shows him walking upright toward the driver side door of his SUV when he was shot.” Three inches taller than Kruger's six-foot frame, Shark, a recent graduate of the FBI academy, was high school skinny with an Ivy League haircut on top of an angular face.

Looking down, Kruger saw the spot next to the gas pump where the body had fallen. The chalk outline was still faintly visible amongst the numerous oil stains on the concrete. “If the shooter was hiding in the grass, there would be an upward trajectory to the bullet. There’s nowhere to hide over there that gives a shooter an elevation.”

Shark smiled grimly, “The local police chief is ex-FBI, he asked my boss to have you brought in. He said you’re the best profiler the bureau has, you’d figure it out.”

Kruger ignored the compliment, “The report I read declared all four victims were random. The only connection is the chain of convenience stores. Correct?”

Shark nodded, “All four victims had just completed filling their vehicles with gas and were walking back to the driver’s seat. Each victim was upright and shot center mass. The bullet paths angled high to low. Three males and one female, their ages varied. None of the victims were acquitted with each other, according to their families.”

Kruger nodded, looking back at the convenience store entrance, he said, “Who owns these stores?”

“A corporation located in Tulsa, Oklahoma.”

“Any disgruntled employees?”

Sharked chuckled, “Lot’s, they have a high turnover.”

“Figures. Okay, I want a look at the surveillance videos.”

It took several hours for Kruger to review the disks at the local FBI office. When finished, he sat in front of the computer and rubbed his eyes. He stood to get a refill of his now ice cold coffee. As he was pouring, Shark walked into the break room and said, “Find anything?”

Shaking his head, Kruger said, “No.” He stood there staring at the steaming dark liquid. “Are there any surveillance videos from surrounding businesses?”

“What are you looking for?”

“The camera angles at each of the convenience stores only show the pumps. We need a shot of the street or in the case of the last victim, the intersection.”

“That could be a problem.”

“Why’s that?”

Scowling, Shark said, “All of the shooting locations are in residential areas. We couldn’t find any surveillance cameras around, except for the convenience stores. The last location we

visited had a possibility, the church across the street to the east has security cameras, but they're all trained on the parking lot, not the street.”

“Did anybody bother to look at those videos?”

Shark was quiet for a long time, then slowly shook his head.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Kruger grinned and said, “Well, I think I'll go look at them.”

The church cameras revealed nothing out of the ordinary. One showed the south parking lot and very little of the street next to it. The other viewed the east lot, but it had a clear view of the road north of the church. Kruger looked closer at the east camera angle. The west parking lot of an elementary school was visible in the top left corner of the grainy, black and white video. He concentrated on the video recording for the hour prior to the four P.M. shooting and for an hour afterward.

Normal traffic was visible prior to the shot being fired, just cars and school buses picking up students. After the time stamp indicated the shot had been fired, Kruger observed nothing out of the ordinary until police cars entered the picture speeding down the road. Frustrated with not seeing anything unusual on the video, he asked the churches secretary to make a copy of the disk.

It was late afternoon when he was sitting at a stoplight a mile north of the church. A school bus approached the intersection from the east and turned right. Kruger watched the bus and noticed the window directly behind the driver was open. It was opened at the top. The red light in his lane turned green and he accelerated his Ford Mustang to catch the bus. The road going north had two lanes so he pulled up to next the bus and looked closer at the windows. He grinned, slowed the Mustang and let the bus pass. Pulling the car in behind, he followed.

Ten minutes later, he was parked in front of the bus barn's office. He entered and found a couple of drivers checking a schedule. One of them turned toward him, frowned and said, "Can I help you?"

Kruger produced his FBI credentials and said, "I need to speak to a supervisor."

The driver, who had spoken, stared at his badge. "Uh..."

The other driver, a middle-aged woman said, "I'll get her. What's this about?"

"I have a few questions for her, that's all."

The woman nodded and left the room while the other driver continued to stare. Kruger turned toward him and said, "Nice day."

The other driver, an older, gray-haired gentleman, never took his gaze off of Kruger, until a middle-aged woman came out of a back office. She tapped the older man on the shoulder and said, "You can stop staring, Jerry." The older man changed his attention to the woman and walked off. She stuck her hand out and said, "I'm Margie Stewart. I was told you're with the FBI?"

He showed her his ID. "Yes, Agent Sean Kruger, I have some questions. Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

"Follow me." She led him back to an office in the rear of the building and motioned him to a chair in front of her desk while she sat behind it. "What's this about?"

"School bus windows open from the top down, correct?"

She nodded.

"How high off the ground is the top window?"

She jerked her head back and stared at him. "Uh, I don't know. Why?"

"I just need to know."

“Well, Agent Kruger, let’s go measure one.”

Ten minutes later, Kruger was looking out the window behind the driver’s seat on one of the thirty buses in the lot. Margie Stewart was outside with a tape measure. She yelled up to him, “Exactly nine and a half feet to the middle of the window.” With a crisp nod, he walked down the three steps to exit the bus. She was standing with her hands on her hips and said, “Okay, what’s this about?”

“Have you heard about the four individuals shot and killed at local convenience stores?”

“Of course, who hasn’t?”

“I think they were shot from inside one of your busses.”

The following morning found the school district's students with an unexpected day off. Kruger had made three phone calls the previous afternoon: the first to agent Tom Shark, the second to the superintendent of the local school district, and the third to Teri Monroe, head of the forensic division at FBI headquarters. Agent Shark locked down the center city bus barn and Kruger isolated the south side one. Teri Monroe and eight forensic technicians arrived later that night.

Monroe stood next to Kruger and said, “You think the shots were fired from inside one of these buses?”

“I do.” He watched the four forensic technicians organize their search. “Last night the supervisor isolated the buses which run routes close to the shooting locations. You can start there, if you don’t find anything, you can broaden the number we check.”

Monroe nodded, “If a rifle was fired inside one of those busses, we’ll find it.”

Chuckling, Kruger said, "I know, that's why I called you." She smiled broadly at the compliment and walked toward the search teams.

An hour later, Kruger was working with Margie Stewart reviewing personnel records when Monroe entered the office, she said, "I believe you'd better come with me. They found something."

Looking up from the computer, Kruger stood and followed her out.

As they approached a bus, yellow crime scene tape was already stretched around it and a local uniformed police officer guarding the door. Monroe and Kruger passed under the tape and climbed the three steps to the seat platform. Two technicians were already there, one Kruger knew, the other he didn't. Charlie Craft was a young apprentice of Monroe's. Kruger had met him on a previous case and was impressed with the young man's work. As they entered, Charlie turned and said, "We have gunshot residue on the inside of a window, second row, driver side."

Kruger said, "What type of a pattern?"

Charlie grinned and said, "Like someone fired a rifle through the open window." He pointed to a chalk circle drawn around the window. "Inside the circle is residue, outside none."

Kruger looked at Monroe, who was beaming with pride for her young apprentice, he said, "Call the center city location and see if they're finding the same results."

Monroe turned and left the bus. Kruger grinned at Craft and said, "Nice work Charlie."

The young man's face turned red, he looked at the floor, nodded and, said, "Thanks, Agent Kruger."

Kruger was about to say something else, when Monroe stuck her head back in the door and said, "The other team just found residue in another bus and one of the teams downtown found one."

By noon a total of five buses were located; three in the south side location and two in the center city facility. Kruger had a list of drivers who had driven those particular buses for the past year. He looked at Margie Stewart and said, “Why so many?”

She shrugged, “We don’t have a lot of turnover, but we have substitute drivers who work at both facilities.”

Nodding, Kruger said, “I’m not finding a common name on any of the lists. Who else would have access to drive one of these buses?”

Stewart shook her head, “No one...” She paused and bumped her forehead with the palm of her hand. “I should have thought of it before, maybe one of the mechanics or safety inspectors.”

Kruger and Agent Shark sat in an agency Chevy Malibu and watched as a SWAT team from the local police department surrounded the mechanics small, rundown house on the city’s north side.

Shark said, “Doesn’t look like anyone’s at home.”

Kruger concentrated on the house and said nothing.

As the team of officers, in full protective gear, got into position to storm the house, Kruger said, “Drive around to the back alley.”

Shark looked at him, started the car and said, “What’s wrong?”

Kruger shook his head, “Just a feeling—probably nothing.”

As the car eased away from the curb, Shark navigated it to a cross street and turned toward the small alley that ran behind the houses in this section of town. As they approached, a

middle-aged man, dressed in sweat pants and a dirty tee shirt walked rapidly across the street in front of them. Shark pointed to the picture taken from a school district ID taped to the dashboard, "That's him, the mechanic," as he accelerated.

As the car reeled toward him, the man stared at it wide eyed. Now at a full run, he quickly crossed the road. Shark slammed on the brakes. Before the car came to a screeching halt, Kruger was out running after the fleeing man.

Now in his late forties, Kruger was still in top shape, he caught the slower man within fifty yards and tackled him to the ground. After restraining the man's arms behind him with handcuffs, Kruger yanked him to his feet and pushed him back toward the agency car. Shark was now standing next to the Malibu. Kruger frowned at him, pushed the suspect past and in a low voice growled, "Thanks for the backup." Shark opened his mouth to say something but quickly thought better of it.

Kruger led the man back to the small house, now occupied by the SWAT team. As he entered through the back door, he yelled "FBI. I have the suspect." The stench of sour milk and overflowing ashtrays assaulted Kruger's nostrils. Two SWAT team members appeared in the kitchen just as Kruger sat the man down at a small table. The chair creaked with the added weight. Floyd Vaughn was read his Maranda rights and placed under arrest.

Beads of sweat glistened on top of the suspect's bald head, running down into the ring of gray hair just above his ears. Thick glasses adorned a bulbous, blue-veined nose and his glazed eyes stared at the table.

One of the SWAT members walked up to Kruger and said, "We found a rifle, suppressor, and a tripod in his closet. They're processing it now. I think we're good on this one."

Kruger nodded, stood over the man and said, "Why did you shoot those people?"

Vaughn's slumped shoulders shrugged, "I got my reasons."

"Two of them were fathers with small kids. Those kids are going to grow up now without a dad."

Brown eyes flashed anger as Vaughn looked up, he yelled, "They took everything from me... Everything!"

Kruger knelt down until he was eye level with Vaughn. In a calm voice, he said, "Tell me Floyd, who took what from you?"

Tears formed in the corners of the man's eyes. "Everything. I had plans, big plans see..." He looked away, "But those convenience stores..." He looked back at Kruger, "They stole all my money."

Kruger was curious; he pulled a chair closer, sat, leaned forward, stared at Vaughn, and said, "How did they steal your money, Floyd?"

Vaughn returned the stare, his eyes grew dark and narrow, "That damn lottery. Those people never let me win the big prize. They just took my money. Then—when it was all gone—they laughed at me."

"Why did they laugh at you, Floyd?"

Looking at the floor Vaughn sighed and said, "Because I lost."

Kruger sat back in the chair. His eyes narrowed, he shook his head, stood, and walked out of the room.