

RAZING STAKES by TG Wolff

EXCERPT

Ten minutes dead. The sun shined brightly, no clouds on this first day of summer, the last day of John Doe's life. Cleveland police Detective Jesus De La Cruz squatted next to the broken body. The warmth beneath his hand testified to the newness of death.

Two EMTs had worked to sustain the man's life. One was at the ambulance now, tending to the tools of his trade. The other stood over the body, shaking his head at the victim. "He was dead before we arrived, Detective. He just didn't know it." The EMT peeled off his gloves, finality in a simple act. "Damn it if we didn't fight for him. In the end, he was just too crushed."

Cruz rose looking east and west, north and south. The crime scene was on the side of a road halfway between East 9th Street and East 55th Street. North Marginal was a two-way street carved between Lake Erie and a spur off I-90 called the Shoreway. Properties cut off by the Shoreway—the Coast Guard station, Burke Lakefront Airport, a private marina, a condominium complex—were accessed from North Marginal. Even at the busiest times of day, vehicular traffic here was scant. Middle of a workday, a steady stream of runners arced around the first responders.

"Popular place," Cruz said, meeting the eyes of a curious runner rubbernecking as he slowed to a jog.

"It is," the EMT said. "Few better places downtown for running. A solid two and a half miles with no cross streets. Whoever hit him came from the east. Blew him up."

The body spoke for itself. No way it could be where it was being hit from the west. Cruz straddled the curb, which was a generous term for the inch separating the driving surface from the running path. A bicycle wouldn't call it an obstacle. John Doe either never saw it coming or was unable to get out of the way. The impact had launched him into the airport's tall security fence. The fence bounced him back, the one-hundred-eighty-pound body a pinball rebounding off bumpers.

John Doe had been moved, necessary and appropriate as he'd been alive when he was found.

"Medical Examiner is en route," the EMT said. "He's yours now."

“I’ll take care of him.” Cruz studied the victim. The man was mostly skin. He had taken off his shirt on the warm day, one of the first to be hot. A shirt lay on the edge of the path, marked by an evidence tag. Two other shirts lay close to the body; one black, one yellow and stained with blood.

The running shorts covered hip to mid-thigh. He wore socks, shoes, and a fitness device on his wrist. Skin was scraped off his arms, legs, chest, and face, the asphalt unforgiving. An AirPods was in his left ear, the right one missing.

Squatting again, Cruz felt the side seams of the shorts, finding zippered pockets. Inside the right one was a slim, card-size piece of plastic, a security badge for a building on East 9th Street. The dead man smiled out of a poor-quality image. Beneath was the name Colin McHenry.

“Detective, we found his phone,” one of the officers securing the scene called out. “It’s in good shape. Thumb print pass coded.”

“Open it before the ME takes him. Who found him?”

“A pair of runners. I parked them under the big tree.” The officer pointed across North Marginal to a small grove on a manmade hill. The two men waited anxiously under the tree, watching the activity. Both were runners. Both were shirtless. Both came to attention as Cruz approached and introduced himself.

“I’m Landon Chartres, this is Denny Bradford. We saw him as soon as we came around the bend. He was half in the street.” The otherwise straight line of North Marginal had a large curve bumping out to make space for an exit from the Shoreway. McHenry’s body would have been screened by the fence and shrubs separating the public from the airport’s private property.

“We knew someone was ahead of us,” Bradford said. “When you turn onto the Marginal, you can you see all the way to the curve.”

Chartres nodded like a bobblehead. “We saw the vehicle that must have hit him. It was the only one that passed us before we got to him. Black SUV. Part of the license plate was LDC. Those are my initials, so it caught my attention. I didn’t catch the make or model.”

Bradford looked behind him, to East 9th Street. He repeatedly shifted his weight from foot to foot. “He was only out of our sight to a few minutes. Would you say he had a five-minute lead, Landon?”

“At most. Probably more like three or four. We called 9-1-1 and pulled him out of the road. Anyone coming around the curve would have hit him. We used our shirts to try to stop the bleeding.”

As a pair of witnesses went, these two were easy, answering questions before he could ask them. They wanted to talk, maybe even needed to talk. “Did anyone pass you from behind, coming from East 9th going east?”

The pair looked at each other, huddled like they were on a pitcher’s mound deciding on a call. It was Chartres who answered. “We don’t think so, Detective, but we couldn’t swear to it. We weren’t paying that much attention. But the one that came toward us, the one with my initials, it was flying.”

“Is he going to make it?” Bradford asked, hope in his voice. “The ambulance got here fast. We kept pressure on his wounds, like they tell you to.”

“I’m sorry, he didn’t.” As if on cue, an engine started. The ambulance pulled away without a passenger.