

People Shooter

“Damn. Never seen you guys coming,” McShuster said.

He tried to twist his torso but couldn't. The pain knocked the wind out of him. He'd been what one of the cops called “planted” on the sidewalk, and his ears were ringing from the gun blast. He wiggled his fingers handcuffed behind him. They hurt. He imagined they were probably turning purple. His side was numb. “Not sure here. I mean, who's counting, but I feel like the entire cop nation landed on me out there. Way I got it figured everything worked out good. Could've been a whole lot worse, right?”

Officer Tracy was in the driver's seat. “Did you hear me read you your Miranda Warning? If so, I suggest you remain silent.” She slid her hand down to check the strap on her Glock. “What is this world coming to?” She checked the strap again. A lot of officers develop nervous habits; checking her firearm was hers.

He looked out the window at all kinds of people running to and from the school. It was mayhem. Some were screaming. “Can you do something about my hands? They hurt. I won't escape on ya. I'll answer whatever you ask. Just loosen up my cuffs, please. I mean ... Why I gotta have these things on in the first place?”

The squad was parked on the concourse in front of the school next to a flag pole. Its lights were trained on a body lying on the ground. A man, not in uniform, was waving at the approaching ambulance which jumped the curb and pulled up next to the body. Two emergency technicians sprang from the ambulance. McShuster had to get to work at Shorty's Bar and Grill. He already had seventeen thousand in the bank and he wanted to add to it. He glanced at his school. He already had half his senior year over with.

“Ma'am, my hands really hurt. Officer Tracy ... isn't that your name?” McShuster asked.

“Handcuffs are necessary when someone brings a gun to school.” Officer Tracy held her hand, palm up, over the steering wheel. Then she leaned toward the passenger seat and picked up the wallet she had taken off him. “James McShuster. Is that *you*?”

“Yes.” He nodded his head, then lowered his voice. “Is that there Noah hurt? Did he get planted harder than me?” He started to lean forward before pain jolted him in a straight-up position.

“I don't get,” Officer Tracy said shaking her head. “Why ... more shootings? Can't even send kids to a basketball game no more. Used to be unarmed people—men, women and children—were off limits,” Officer Tracy mumbled.

McShuster spoke up. “Violence and guns is what it's about. Shooters on a mission to go viral or something. Be badass and blast their way onto the news. The whole deal. Pictures with names ... in the news, ruined parents. You know that? This stuff here tonight was planned for a bad ending. You know. It was like a secret mission. The same as they do in the army. I mean we

had code words. We put together target practice. It got serious in short order. I mean homemade targets with names on them of dicks from school. It was funny until it wasn't. We make the gun deal with our hand and pulled an imaginary trigger with our pointer finger. That meant target practice after school. I mean no harm no crime. Don't get me wrong here. I ain't sayin' guns is right or wrong. I'm just saying—"

"Please shut it!" Officer Tracy glared at him in the rearview mirror shaking her head. "I'm going to read you your rights and tape what you have to say. Okay, McShuster?"

Someone pounded on the window. They both jumped. "Godammit. You just as well kill someone than scare them half to death," Tracy growled while sliding open the window. An officer stood by the squad while glancing around the area.

"Sorry. Sorry," the officer said while still surveying the scene. Did he say anything about anyone helping him here? He a lone gunman or what?" Several other officers crowded in around the squad dressed up like soldiers, assault weapons held across their chests, the word "Police" printed on their black outfits.

"If I say something, can you loosen these?" McShuster leaned forward, exposing his cuffed hands.

"You good with that, Jill?" The officer asked.

She got out of the squad and started working a little key in the hole on the cuff. The handcuffs had worked a deep imprint into his wrist, she noticed, suppressing a grin. *Yes sir ... the little bastard got what he had coming.*

"Yes, I'm here doing what I had to do. I'm what you'd call a lone gunman. Wait a minute, I don't have a gun. I'm just here, I mean alone. How bad hurt is he?" McShuster nodded toward Noah. Everyone ignored him.

The SWAT officer lowered his voice. "Jill, is your daughter alright? Is she at the game?" Tracy told him Megan was okay; that she had ran her friend to the hospital with a broken arm.

"Good to hear. Hang in there, Jill. We got to clear the school." The group spun from the squad and trotted into the north entrance.

After reading McShuster his rights and double checking her device, she exhaled. She didn't want to hear it; when it got personal things got harder. Megan had been at the basketball game. She was okay but was crying after spotting her mom getting out of her squad, Megan had run up assuring Tracy she was okay but her friend was hurt. Not shot. Just hurt. She had fallen off a bleacher and a bone was sticking out of her arm. Megan was going to drive her but promised to drive carefully since ambulances were waiting to only transport gunshot victims. Courtney was not going to die. She needed a doctor though because it looked like it hurt. Bad.

"Where do I start here? This is Officer Tracy. I'm with James McShuster," she continued with what sounded like legal gibberish to McShuster: times and dates and locations.

He quit listening and watched them slide Noah into the ambulance. It hurt to have everything end up like this. Noah shot? Shit happens, but really ... Noah? Unreal. Was it all because Noah hated dogs? Maybe he got bit once or something. He had beaten on Courtney's dog with a stick. Not like he had to. It was one of those obnoxious poodles. A little one. What they called a miniature. Truth was Noah was always thumpin' on dogs. Maybe he hated 'em for a reason. But no way this gave Courtney the right to toss shade on Noah, telling him he reeked and then smearing dog shit on his locker. Tonight she had something to worry about besides a mutt.

News Center 3 showed up and parked on the street in front of the school. McShuster watched his favorite news reporter, Robert Macaday, step out and adjust his tie. A girl was setting up a camera. McShuster would have loved all the excitement in a prior life, but not tonight; people getting shot changes things.

Everyone knew Noah could lose it in no time flat. Messing with him was mostly just supposed to be fun. But no, sometimes a guy reaches his boiling point. Who wants to look stupid? He made like being stupid was worse than no girlfriend. Everyone knew it. He picked up a nick name he didn't know about. Or, at least Noah never let on about knowing. *No-Ah girl for loser Noah.*

The reporter waved and approached the squad. "Our team called the tip in. Shooting was going to ... start during the game. Can I get a few words on record—" The reporter went mum after making eye contact with McShuster. "Reporters get shot. Is that the only shooter around here?" He spun and trotted to the van hollering to the camera lady. She grabbed a mic and raced Robert to the van before they spun off.

"I was on my way to work and it dawned on me. It's like 'I'd shoot up the school in a second,' but you think saying that stuff is a big joke. Sometimes a storm blows in and you drenched because you didn't see it in time." McShuster looked at the growing crowd across the street. "Can we leave—"

"Ten four, three-fourteen. I have the perp in custody. Is the school cleared?" Officer Tracy asked.

"Can you check see how Noah's doing?" McShuster asked. He couldn't believe it. Noah was his shooting buddy. *Why'd I shoot him?* he wondered.

Officer Tracy put the mic up near her mouth but then lowered it. "You act alone here?"

"I what?" McShuster looked up.

She then put the mic back up near her mouth. "I have one in custody. Male. White. Five-six or seven. Black hoodie and jeans. He's uncooperative."

His face burned where it had slammed into the cement. What really hurt was his body: the left side of his chest up near his shoulder on the frontside. His hands felt a whole lot better. But every time he breathed it stung bigtime. It was like the air was full of ammonia or something. Then he felt sweat or something working down his stomach.

“You Megan Tracy’s mom?”

“Let’s leave her out of it, please. I’ll ask the questions.”

“This is something all you kids want to do? Make a damn name for yourself? That’s why the media about beat us here, isn’t it? You called ‘em to show off. Christ ... this infuriates me!”

McShuster moved carefully, working his way out of a slouch. When the cops took him into custody—that’s what Officer Tracy called it—it left him feeling like he’d gotten trampled by Clydesdales. “They ain’t all angels in there. Some of ‘em no better than singing little shit birds. I know ... I know you not wanting to hear it. But that place is full of no good. That the long and short of it.” He shuttered. “Worst place on earth is in a classroom.”

“Did you come here tonight for a reason? To make it right or something?” Officer Tracy asked.

“I sure did. Guns and knives make everything nice. Me and Noah used to holler that target practicing. Somehow, I went from being a shooter to being the stopper. He’d say ‘I’m bigtime badass ... only way to kill me is to cut my head off and hide it.’ I’d tell ‘em to chill. Think before ya hate. I know this; people shooters kill because of everybody. Not because of just one dude poking fun. Guns change things. Levels the playing field. Makes beggars out of pricks. You got a gun ... you the most important person in the universe. Yes ma’am ... the rules change in this here deal called the game of life. Ya know, life is full of a shit ton a wrongs. I had to do something. Had to try.”

“I’m trying to understand. Please continue.” Officer Tracy watched him in the rearview mirror.

After slowing for the curb, the ambulance turned left, accelerating with its lights and siren on. A silhouette was leaning over the gun on the sidewalk. Then it gestured for someone else to stand near it. The silhouette joined four shadows with guns drawn as they all ran towards the front door of the school. They were hollering toward a couple that had stepped out of the building. The two held their hands up and hollered, “Parents!”

“This is real, pal. Guns build respect, one bloody little hole at a time. I’ll gun ‘em down. Let’s see how they sound dead. You apt to not forget that.” A tear surprised him and made him set up and clear his throat. “Where was I?”

“Shooting people—”

Three officers were walking toward them. Officer Tracy got out and stepped in front of them. One walked around her and pulled the door open; and grabbed McShuster. “See them people.” He pointed at the large crowd across the street. He gripped McShuster’s collar and pulled him halfway out of the squad and glared at him, inches from his face. “They’d just as soon kill ya — punk—than look at you.”

McShuster grimaced from stabs of sharp pain. He couldn’t answer nor did he see what the cop was pointing towards. His broken rib, if that’s what it was, made it feel like someone was

pushing a long hot screw driver into his chest. It hurt so badly that he could only manage birdlike chirps.

“You think that’s funny?” The cop slammed McShuster back into the seat. The cop said something about wanting to kick some ass, and stomped off to where the gun was lying. A man was taking pictures of it. It was some kind of assault gun. That’s what his neighbor, the owner, called it. Now it was lying on the ground getting photographed. A skinny guy about his height approached the first picture taker and pointed at the gun. Obviously, he was from the paper and also wanted a shot.

“Three-fourteen station headed to L.E.C. with one,” crackled the radio. McShuster looked up and saw Officer Tracy pushing her face to her shoulder mic. Voices were talking over each other but one did say, “We’re getting surveillance video. Four injured.” Then another one piped up that she thought it was six shooting victims. McShuster wondered how six got shot. *Did I miss something here?*

Officer Tracy got back in the squad and slammed the door. She drove off the curb, one tire at a time, before heading toward Second where a right turn would take them to the Police Station.

A lady in a bathrobe pushed herself out of the crowd and onto the street. As she bent down and hollered into the squad, McShuster looked down. “Is that you, Jimmy? Look at me. You’re gonna pay for this. If I had’da gun—” A man stepped in front of her and gently corralled her back to the crowd, but she spun and screamed, “I always knew you was a killer!”

McShuster’s head felt like it was under water, like it was floating away from him. He suddenly got dizzy and wanted to puke. “Offizzer Lazy, you seed that lady? Seed not good. I got no grillfriend to laugh whiff? Alone all-time ‘cause you don’t wears Patagonzia? To waltz in thirsty below wind chill? The rich have car and stop for ya. They hitz it, when your frozen fingauzes reach for the dough?” Blood trickled from his nose.

“You on something back there?” She studied his face. He looked like he was falling asleep. Fentanyl? She didn’t know.

Now what? Hospital? Going to be busy there tonight. How in the hell could she take him to the hospital? That would just get him killed. His victims must have already started arriving and their families would be showing up.

“I’m good.” He pulled himself up. “Thanks for loosenin’ up the cuffs. They were killin’ me. I never knew them things hurt so much.”

“I can turn this recorder off if your done talking,” Officer Tracy said.

“You know, they always let on they know my ma drinks too much or sleeps around. That gets old. I don’t like thinking about it all the time. In school I think about it because they give me the business.” McShuster was relieved to be away from the school. “I mean, I can’t even walk down the hall without a girl rolling her eyes or hoofing it around me. Ain’t official bullying, I

suppose, but it still ain't right in my book." His voice cracked. "How I stop my ma from doing stuff?"

"I'm still recording. I read you your rights and you are free to remain silent. Is your mother the reason for tonight?"

"Well, I don't for sure know why I did it tonight. I mean, I get it. School hurts everyone sometimes. Guess just maybe sometimes even if you're hurting you got to do something. That's why I did it. I mean, I wasn't sure so I went to Mister Jerry Timm's. He the one where the gun was. They in a safe but everyone knows the com."

"Okay, for the record now. You were teased and it hurt so you went to a Timm's house. You knew the combination to the safe. Is that right?"

"Yes. I think you know most of it, right? Can I get a phone call now?"

"Are you calling a lawyer? I can stop this tape any time you want."

"I need to call work because Dosh is a good boss. He owns Shorty's by the old train depot. I gotta call so someone can cover tonight. I don't think I'm going in tonight. My side's killing me."

"I am sorry but the last thing you need to worry about is going to work."

"Look I am trying to do it right. I get hammered by a bunch of cops and feel like they broke my back. I get tossed in a squad car and so why do I have to also get fired now? Answer me that, Officer Dickless Tracey?" He immediately wished he hadn't said it; the anger had overtaken him; but he knew he should have never said it.

"Look, I've been plenty good to you. *My* Megan—my *daughter*—was at that damn basketball game tonight. If she had gotten hurt, I'd made damn sure your back was broken. You wouldn't be walking, let alone flipping burgers!" She too immediately regretted saying it.

After so much hollering and the gun shot ringing in his ears silence reined. The entire evening was too much. Guns had once been fun, but now they were scary. He knew one thing for sure: Once a trigger is pulled, there is no going back. Not like on a computer game. Real life didn't come with a reset button.

He fixed his gaze on the mountains.

As the squad slowed for a red light, both of its occupants were lost in their own thoughts and not talking. McShuster's mom waited until noon before her first barley pop. She liked to point out her house was clean as if it meant she could drink all she wanted. Then she'd remind him there was always tomato soup in the cupboard before she disappeared out the door. She always said food would mess up a good drunk and then laugh. A boyfriend who ended up in the house was usually introduced to him if he wasn't sleeping, so before long McShuster made sure he appeared sound asleep. He didn't want to risk it. He had gotten elbowed in the face once when things heated up and it scared him. If his mother was an angel, she was a drunken one for sure. His mom liked to say heaven was nothin' but a bar serving free drinks all the time.

“I’m sorry.” Tears flowed but McShuster couldn’t wipe them away so he had to tolerate them. “It’s a good deal that you love Megan. She a nice girl in that there school. You treated me good ... even if you’re a cop.”

McShuster pressed the side of his face against the window and just wanted to fly away like a prairie falcon. Fast and sure. He had watched them plenty on the Front Range. He’d soar above the mess he was in.

McShuster carefully exhaled and leaned forward. “Sometimes folks have enough bad days they turn into bad lives. I hate being alone, even around people. I need’da friend, you know, who can laugh at my messed-up jokes, not at me. I want to look at my mom and see somebody else. Officer Tracy, you hearing me? I want to go places where dyin’ don’t offer no relief. The worst of it is I always feel like I just can’t figure it out. How to make the good things happen. My money, in the bank, is my escape.” He shrugged his shoulders. “That’s why I gotta work. I’ll do what I have’ta do for you, officer. I tried though. Please. Can ya know that? I really did—*try*.”

“Okay ... I don’t know now. Are you suicidal? Is that what you mean now?”

“First time you didn’t use your ten-four cop lingo.” He smiled despite the pain or because of it. “You could’ve liked me in another time. Who knows? I’m glad Megan didn’t go and get hurt none. She could’ve. You wanna know sumtin? Seed got me to understanding algebra. Seed going to teach. You know that?” The light changed but Officer Tracy forgot to go on the green. She was frozen in place behind the wheel. Then the phone rang.

“Yes, this is Officer Tracy ... Hang on, I’m going to put you on speaker phone. Yes, go ahead.” She started for the station once the light turned green again.

“Tracy, listen up. That Godamn kid we nabbed ain’t our shooter.”

“Ahh ... okay. I don’t—” Officer Tracy froze.

“Tracy. Our shooter is in the E.R. Noah whatever. They got into it and the gun went off. That’s when we nabbed the kid you’re with. He stopped everything from going down.”

“He didn’t shoot?—”

“We got the surveillance tape. Um, your boy jumped the bad guy. He grabbed the gun and it went off and they both went down. Your kid made it back to his feet till we planted him.” There was a long pause. “He grabbed Noah Williams. They got into it over the TEC-9. That firepower in a crowded gym is not good. You hearing me?”

Officer Tracy pulled to the curb and spun toward her passenger in the back seat. “Did you or did you not shoot Noah whoever?”

“I did. Accident. It just went off. I mean I couldn’t let him go in that there school. He all the time talkin’ tough. Megan was in there. Everybody was watching that game ‘cept me. I had to work.” His voice rose. “I didn’t mean it for that gun to go off and shoot Noah. It started as a joke. He’d tried to give blood but had high blood pressure so they asked him to leave. Well,

everybody know you walk out on blood donating it's because of AIDS or something, everybody got on his case. Then it all stopped being a joke. The gun wasn't fun no more."

"Oh Christ. Why didn't you tell me this until now?" She spang out of the squad to take off the cuffs. Then she noticed blood on McShuster's pants. *Why didn't I see this before?* She unzipped his jacket and saw the gun violence: McShuster had a hole ripped into his chest. Dark blood was bubbling out of it, getting pulled down by gravity: little rivulets of wrong.

His head rolled onto his shoulder. "Worked-up good—can't *think*. Got me no thoughts ... to share. I'm'ma last pedal on a last rose, in front of bullets. Evil stuff don't surprise me none. Seems we all got more meanness in us than good. My feet too heavy to pick-up. Exhausted. Why was I born and why I have'ta die? It happened and it's going to happen. I am nothing but an ice cube on red hot pavement. I'll just melt, then blow away. No one'll remember how hard I truly tried. People forget ice cubes. The tar always wins."

Jill Tracy held his head in her hands and rocked him gently. Each tear held a collective meaning. She wept bitterly. Her anguish pronounced.

"I'm haunted by a mirage," he mumbled before his eyes saw the world no more.

Officer Tracy grabbed her gun and dropped it at his feet. Touching it hurt.