

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

**JEFFERY  
DEAVER**

**SCHEME**

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

**JEFFERY  
DEAVER**

**SCHEME**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2022 Gunner Publications LLC  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Amazon Original Stories are trademarks of [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), Inc., or its affiliates.

eISBN: 9781542029704

Cover design by Shasti O'Leary Soudant

# 1

*October 7*

**P**rofessional IEDs do not have visible timers attached to them. No glowing numbers, much less clockfaces and ominous tick, tick, ticking . . .

If they're to be remotely detonated, the device is triggered by a cell phone—an untraceable burner, appropriately nicknamed. But a timed IED is controlled by a tiny silicon chip that counts down to the devastation without a hint of visual clue and in complete silence.

So if you are, say, a twenty-seven-year-old officer with Middleton PD, splitting duties between Patrol and Bomb Squad, you have no goddamn idea if the improvised explosive device two feet from your face is set to blow in three hours. Or five seconds.

Lean, mustachioed Tony Kleppe, presently lying on his belly on the edge of Spenser Court in downtown, had learned ordnance disposal and render-safe procedures in the army. His chops were pretty much up to date, even though he rarely got the chance to use them in Middleton. He'd had four IED calls since he'd been on the force. The first was a suspicious package in front of a women's health clinic (the "bomb" was a sheaf of Christian literature and an alarm clock). Then there were the two incidents over the past couple of years involving unstable, abusing husbands who had taken their families hostage and rigged their double-wives to explode—a mostly harmless contraption of gunpowder in one case and butane in the other. Kleppe had truly enjoyed participating in the energetic arrest of those reprehensible felons.

Then, there was the big one: made of no-nonsense RDX and a military-style timer and placed outside of the county courthouse. It was

courtesy of some foolish but lethal militia movement whose target was the “evil tentacles of government,” according to an online post.

In each of those situations, Kleppe or one of his fellow cops had rendered safe using the robot that even the lower-middle-income city of Middleton had been able to afford.

The IED the young officer was presently addressing, though, was not accessible to the unit, so he would have to defuse it by hand. Letting it blow or destroying it with a controlled explosion was not an option here, it had been decided. The damn thing nestled deep in a drainage trough against a wall of Middleton General Hospital, an ancient redbrick building whose wall would crumble like kids’ blocks under the force of a blast. Patients—about two hundred—were being evacuated, but it would take another hour to get them all out, given that some were on critical care systems. There was a risk, too, that an explosion here might become an explosion elsewhere; hospitals, as every Bomb Squad officer knew, were IEDs in themselves, filled with flammable gases and oxygen, running through the walls and stored in tanks that, if ignited, could take out the entire block.

Kleppe was in a bomb suit, a ghastly outfit that weighed nearly a hundred pounds. It protected his head, his chest, torso, legs and arms. But not hands. Officers on this detail knew that if the thing went off they might survive, but their hands would be appendages of the past. Disability payments were now electronic, so one wouldn’t have to worry about signing the checks.

The device had been assembled by someone who knew what they were doing. The bang stuff was a beige rectangle of material that resembled the clay his grade-school daughter wadded into dinosaurs and Hello Kitties. Duct taped to the top were the brains and battery, contained in a black box four by five inches. Beneath it, pushed into the wad, would be the detonator.

“I make it a ki of C-4 or RDX,” he radioed. “Anderson Products timed detonator.” He was wired and speaking to the command post, a safe block away, where the head of Emergency Incidents was stationed, along with Kleppe’s captain and a dozen other officers.

“A full ki?” came through his earbuds.

“Affirmative.” This was a significant amount of explosives. A pro load, it was called, like the courthouse bomb.

“Control box is big enough, could have secondary, tertiary, circuits . . . can’t tell.”

Bomb makers, anticipating smart cops, sometimes built additional triggers into their devices, like rocker switches that set the thing off if you picked it up and tilted it. The more sophisticated had shielded circuits that were impervious to electromagnetic pulses. Bomb makers were, in their own way, artists.

And where was the countdown?

Don't think.

Render safe.

From his toolbox he took a small electric screwdriver and leaned close, delicately unscrewing the top.

So far . . .

Peering into the guts, a collection of wires and chips, Kleppe said, "Better run a reverse circuit."

This involved making the main board think the battery was still wired to the detonator, when, in fact, that portion of the cable had been cut, and no trigger—the timer or rocker switch or anything else—would set off the explosive. This *usually* worked, though occasionally a master bomb maker wrote an algorithm that sensed that the new current was slightly higher or lower than the original and set off the detonator anyway.

Kleppe backed away slightly and reached into his bag again, removing a small box with wires ending in alligator clips. One he attached to the timer box lead and the other to the battery wire. He gripped pliers and turned back to face his enemy.

He thought of all the bad movies where the hero was thinking, Do I cut the red wire or the yellow wire? That was stupid. Every disposal expert knew which one to cut. That was never an issue. The question was, Would cutting equal detonation?

He eased closer to the rectangle, reflecting on the fact that one difference between the Hello Kitty clay and the IED was that this material exploded at thirty thousand feet a second.

Thinking of his wife, his daughter.

Thinking of putting in for a transfer. DUI stops weren't so bad.

Kleppe fitted the sharp teeth of the pliers around the battery wire. And began to squeeze—gently, of course, so that he didn't risk waking the device as it slept silent and slept blind, inches from his hands.

## 2

The Pen in Middleton PD, up a flight of unnecessarily steep stairs, had recently been dolled up: *some* new furniture, a misplaced ceiling fan (in the literal sense—the corner of the room), a paint job, four new doorknobs, new carpet on 60 percent of the floor.

On the whole, Sloan thought, he could've lived with the old, given that the paint used last week contained something that burned your throat and made your eyes sting and water. He'd joked it was CS gas lite.

Sloan, forty-one, was a blunt man. A face that was fit and handsome in the way of a former football player, though one who'd been targeted with some frequency. Broad shoulders, crew-cut hair, trim hips, thick thighs. On weekends, when he wasn't in the bleachers, he was on some park field himself, amateur gridiron. The games were flag or touch. Usually around the third quarter, they turned into tackle.

A scar crescented his cheek. This had not come from the line of scrimmage.

He was a senior gold shield, and his cubicle was close to the windows, affording a view of anemic Tudor Park. He was hot—the October day was unseasonal—and he walked to a pane now and tried to open it but the frame was still painted shut.

He'd complained to Maintenance twice.

And it wasn't even a new color, just the same hospital police department funeral parlor morgue recruiting station beige.

He pulled off his dark-gray sports coat and draped it over his chair. His slacks were tan, his shirt white, and he wore no tie. They could be used as lassos by the bad guys. His Glock 17 and holster went into a drawer.

"Who's it gonna be, Sloan?" This was from Leon Williams, who worked Narcotics. His cubicle was at the far end of the Pen, and he'd shouted. Several heads turned to hear Sloan's response.

"Kansas City. By twelve."

“You going?”

Sloan scoffed. He hadn’t missed a game this year.

“Ain’t going to be very popular.”

Sloan said, “So, you tell people in the stands who *you’re* betting on?”

He sat down at his file-covered desk. Made notes on the Fanelli case and stuffed them in a folder. Scanning others that awaited: three burglaries, a homicide, an attempted homicide, a suspected arson . . .

Typical grist.

Situated in the heart of the Midwest, the town of Middleton, of fading industry, shared DNA with cities like New Haven and Providence. Each of that pair had a golden hub in the center—Yale and Brown—and spokes growing progressively rustier—and more dangerous—as they radiated outward. Middleton had Mercer College, a beautiful tree- and garden-filled campus. It was a world away from the shabby one- and two-story commercial and residential structures in the rest of the downtown area.

There were pockets of redevelopment—Sloan himself lived in one—but they were outnumbered by those of the inner city, where sex trade, meth, coke, H and guns were bigger draws for entrepreneurs than the shops where you could get fast greasy food, hair extensions, colorful nails and minutes cards for your prepaid. Some of the crime was even organized, though only a few of the crews would make Tony Soprano proud.

As he was opening the homicide file, a loud voice intruded.

“Sloan, Pérez, come on in.”

The captain stood in the doorway of his glass-walled office. The fifty-year-old’s dark skin was in stark contrast to his crisp white shirt. Every article of clothing he wore was always pressed to a flat plane. Sloan wondered if his wife or he did the ironing. He suspected it was the captain himself, as his wife was a partner in a CPA firm and she worked all hours. Sloan owned an iron but had never plugged it in.

His sometimes partner, narrow and wiry, his head shaved, rose from his cubicle behind Sloan’s. The man’s eyes were, like Sloan’s, deep green. Other gold shields in the Pen wanted to joke about this, it seemed, but pulled back, maybe smelling political incorrectness. Or maybe just not being able to think up anything funny you could do with eye color.

The detectives entered the captain’s office and sat in chairs that were renowned for making your butt sore in record time.

“What do you have going on?”

Sloan offered, “Just dropped off the Reigning Asshole at the safe house. The state’s babysitting now.” He’d headed up the task force that had collared the obnoxious, whiny (and psychotic) mob enforcer Joseph Fanelli a few days ago. “Half dozen opens. Nothing time critical.”

“You?”

Danny Pérez said, “Got one of Hack Waylon’s meth stashes. That old gas station out on 87? Hiding in plain sight.”

The station was across the street from a state police barracks.

“Yeah? How much?”

Pérez seemed proud. “A half mil of crystal.”

“Well, well, well . . .”

“We’ve got the product downstairs, but I’m going to have a DEA truck move it to one of their facilities.”

“And the bad boy himself?”

“He wasn’t in attendance. We’re still looking.”

“So you’re clear for now?”

Pérez pursed his lips. “Subject to we’re still looking.”

The captain said, “I’ll give that to Williams. I need you on something else. You know Tony Kleppe?”

Sloan thought. “Patrol?”

“And Bomb Squad,” Pérez added.

The captain was fiddling with his keyboard. In the corner a printer unspooled noisily. It fell silent but he didn’t rise to get whatever had eased into the tray.

“You heard about it?”

“What?” Sloan asked.

“The IED?”

“Something, yeah. No details.”

“Couple hours ago, 911 call from somebody on Spenser Court? General Hospital? Sees a suspicious package. Patrol checks it out and finds an IED. Robot can’t get it out. Kleppe goes in to cut its balls off—by hand.”

The detectives shared a green-eyed glance.

Sloan: “And?”

“Snip, snip. All good.”

Sloan had seen the damage a bomb could do. It turned flesh and bone into very different substances.

“Who left it?” he asked.

“Nobody’s taking credit yet. Could be that group from a year or so ago. The courthouse bomb. Similar profile.”

The Patriot Militia Twelve had been behind that incident. It was a loosely affiliated band of supremacists. Nobody knew what the number in the name meant. Somebody in the Pen had commented that that was probably as high as they could count.

“The hospital’s city run,” Danny Pérez pointed out. “And PM12’s got that bullshit antigovernment agenda.”

“Whoever,” the captain said, tugging a wrinkle-free cuff down. “Now here’s where it gets interesting. Tech Services gets a warrant for cell providers. They find an email from a burner phone near Spenser Court about a half hour before the bomb’s spotted. Email says, ‘It’s in position.’”

“And the account?” Sloan asked.

A shake of the man’s head. “All that anonymous proxy crap. But what’s in-ter-esting”—he dragged the word out—“is the email that the bomber got the night before. The go-ahead. It gives the date of the bombing—this morning—and where he’s supposed to plant the IED. Only, here’s the thing. The location’s in code. So if it’s intercepted beforehand, nobody’ll know where to look for it.”

Sloan asked, “They crack it?”

“No. TS is trying. The Bureau, too—it’s gone to Quantico.”

Where the FBI’s crypto experts and supercomputers work day and night, unraveling ELINT.

But it turned out the email *wasn’t* encrypted electronic intelligence. It was an old-fashioned code—a WWII-era kind of secret message. The captain collected the printout and handed it to Sloan, who held it out for his partner to read as well.

The go-ahead message was a poem.

*Date: 10/7*

*Location:*

*Silence Is Most Silent*

*Silence is most silent in the early face of night.*

*Returning home, you climb the steps and open wide the door*