



JAMES SLATER

BISHOP

TAKES

NIGHT

A Ray Bishop Mystery

EVERYTHING WAS FINE until the fat dude sat down at the bar. Truth be told, she had nothing against fat dudes, but she could smell this one's intentions sandwiched between cigarette smoke, cheap whiskey and bad teeth. There were some people in this world who probably shouldn't smile and others who shouldn't breathe. He was both of these. She shuddered at his smile. His greasy hair was slicked back over his head, bunching at the back, like it, too, was trying to get away. He produced a green, palm-size notebook with a pen clipped to it from the inside pocket of his Members Only jacket, a jacket she judged to be a couple decades too old and a couple sizes too small. He'd held on to it long enough, she realized, that it was now back in style.

"Wassyur name?" he slurred.

She answered with a question of her own, nodding to the notebook. "What's that?"

"Smy bucket list," he said, spitting a little as he said the word, *bucket*.

She realized exactly what he had in mind, but offered a puzzled face.

"Its things I gotta do before I die."

She'd left her hat on the stand at the bar's entrance, but still wore her raincoat. It worked fine as a raincoat, but was a bit too tight for what she needed it for tonight.

Mental note. Something to work on later.

It was after midnight, now, and not really the time to shop for a raincoat.

She leaned in closer to the fat dude, braving the scent and quelling her disgust.

His eyes were wide with surprise and anticipation as he felt the pressure inside his upper thigh. But only for a moment.

The musical two-tone sound of her 9mm Beretta's cocking hammer was unmistakable in the bar. She knew it from hours on the shooting range. It was the preparatory call. Things got really dicey after that sound.

He recognized it, too. Not likely from the shooting range, she figured. But the effect was immediate.

The light went out of his smile, and the lust drained from his eyes, replaced now with a fearful gaze.

She put more pressure on the Beretta and figured a close shot like that would take out his femoral artery. What a mess that would be.

"What's number one?" she asked

Now he wore the confused expression.

"What is at the top of your bucket list? What is the one thing you gotta do

before you die?"

The fat dude shifted back and away, his lips moving, trying to form words, his hands out in front of him as if he might bat away any speeding bullets that came his way as he backed toward the red exit sign over the door.

She was pretty sure he was lying when he was finally able to enunciate it, and that *Crazy bitch* was not the number one entry on his list.

She smiled and placed the Beretta back in its holster beneath the raincoat. It wasn't loaded, but she instinctively reached back and felt the solid bulk of the clip attached to her belt. Last thing she wanted was this guy's greasy thoughts on her as he went about his disgusting daily chores. Mission accomplished. When this guy saw her face in his mind and in his dreams, his thoughts wouldn't be lecherous ones. They'd be brush-with-death-thoughts. With a little luck, there wouldn't be too many of them, and maybe he'd think twice about new additions to his list.

She turned back to the bar and her bourbon.

"Now," she said, addressing the glass. "Where were we?"

Ray Bishop didn't shave. At least not in the winter. She didn't see a real need for it. She wore slacks or sweats when folks were around, and when they weren't, it didn't much matter anyway.

"Ray, you've just got to let it go," Paco her therapist would say.

That's what he would say, of course, if she had a therapist. What she had was a rabbit. It was almost the same. She would sit on her couch, and Paco would listen. He didn't give a lot of advice, but that was good, too. Because who in their right mind would take advice from a rabbit? She knew plenty of folks who paid thousands of dollars to psychics who couldn't even predict their birthdays. At least Paco didn't charge by the hour.

But she couldn't let it go. If something wasn't right, you didn't just let it go. And something was definitely not right.

She must have dozed off. It was 3:45 in the morning now. Her iPad was on the coffee table in front of her, and it was surrounded by an army of Chinese take-out containers standing guard. The TV was 32 hours into an episode of 48 hours, and it didn't look good for justice. Problem was, she hadn't ordered Chinese food. She didn't even like it. Last thing she remembered was watching *Game of Thrones*. It must have been just part of an episode, with her dozing off midway through, as she couldn't remember the ending at all. She was dead tired and needed to get up for work in just a couple hours. She clicked off the TV and stumbled her way toward bed. Yes, she thought, something was certainly off. In the bathroom, she got a glimpse of her own wild appearance as she splashed water on her face, a tangled mess of hair and hairspray and something else. It was tangled in her hair and came away in her hand as she brought her hands down from her face. It said "Way" in green letters, and a bolt of fright shot through her. It made her shake uncontrollably. She grabbed at her phone from her back pocket and promptly dropped it on the bathroom floor. She swore a string of profanity that would have embarrassed a Norfolk sailor as she retrieved

the now-cracked handset. There was only one person in the world who might understand. Gabe. She scanned the directory with her fingers, looking for his contact info and began texting furiously.

She stopped suddenly. The pounding. The rhythmic thump-thump that had been in the background finally made its way through her addled senses. It wasn't inside her head. It was outside. She ran to the laundry room and threw open the dryer door as it issued a final thump. It was her raincoat. And something else. Something heavy that made it thump. She pulled the coat from the dryer, and it swung out, its weighty passenger smashing into the wall beside her. She didn't even have to look. She knew. It was her gun.

Her back to the wall, she slid slowly to the floor, tears starting to form, her fingers working the phone unsteadily.

OMG!!!!, she texted Gabe, "I just pulled a Milky Way wrapper out of my hair. I've been dumpster diving. I can't believe it's happening. AGAIN!!!!"

Ray worked downtown in a tall building. It was pretty much like the other tall buildings in the city, which in turn, was pretty much like tall buildings in cities around the country. She had a computer and a cubicle. She read spreadsheets and attended meetings and got bored out of her mind. She had a boss and her boss had a boss. She had co-workers, and they did co-worker things, and she found it hard to believe after all the excitement and fuss about going to school to get a job that this is what all that hard work went for. That this was her life. She came to work and sat here just about every day. Once in a while there was a party or a company event, but usually it was a lot of sitting. She wondered if this is what prison might be like. A lot of sitting around, just without the going home part. On the weekend she went shopping to get nicer things to sit around in, and maybe did some laundry while she pretended she lived in a world of dire wolves and dragons. She wondered how grown human beings could put up with this existence for decades of their lives. The boys in the office were creepy, and the men were married. Her girlfriends dragged her out now and again for drinks, but she yearned for something more.

Then she got her wish.

It was scary and exciting, and as she thought about it at work some days, she yearned for it all to come back. Other days, like today, she was certain it would come back, and that terrified her. There was nothing wrong with having a boring job and living in a boring apartment where nothing even remotely dangerous would ever happen. She talked to her mother now and again. Her mother was happy enough with her own life, at least that's what she said, although she could never be quite sure if she was happy because her daughter was living on her own, or because she'd moved out of the house and left her to live her own life. Her mother was full of advice all the time; especially it seemed, on things she knew nothing about. Ray rarely followed much of it, and in her own opinion, that seemed to be working out well.

The incident, as she called it, had been more than a year before, but it played out in her mind as clearly as if it were yesterday. It was the end of a long

work week, and she'd been watching TV in her apartment like she usually did on Friday evenings. She wasn't really sleepy, but she'd closed her eyes for a moment, remembering something she'd forgotten to do at work. She had no idea what it was now, but clearly it hadn't been a crisis. What became the crisis was clear when she opened her eyes and found she was no longer in her apartment.

She was lying on a curb with her feet in the street, and she was crying uncontrollably. It was dark and raining a little bit, and as she sat up, she looked down at herself in shock to find she was back in her work outfit, at least she still wore some of her work clothes. She'd lost her jacket, her blouse was torn at the shoulder, her buttons all ripped down the front, revealing the V of her bra beneath. She'd lost her shoes, and she'd felt a stinging on her face. Touching it gingerly with her finger, she watched in shock as it came away sticky, the blood coloring a broken nail. Her crying was as much about confusion as it was about pain as she lay back down on the sidewalk, unable to process in her mind what had just happened.

Thank God for Gabe. She'd met him that night. Rather, he'd happened by where she sat, disheveled and paralyzed, unable to do much more than cry. Even though she'd known Gabe now for more than a year, and she still knew nothing about him. He lived on a boat in the marina and was pretty handy in the kitchen. That's about all she knew. Oh, and he liked tequila, she remembered. Gabe had taken her back to the boat, got her cleaned up and made her some hot tea. In turn, she'd told him her story, although it wasn't much of one. She'd been in her apartment relaxing and thinking about the work-week now behind her, and BAM, here she was.

Friday? He'd asked. Was she sure it was Friday?

Of course it was, she'd replied, a rare crossness in her retort. What other day could it be?

Sunday, he'd offered.

She was even more confused, if that was possible. Sunday? No way.

He'd reached back and picked up the newspaper that sat on the boat's navstation, opening it to its front page and displaying it for the both of them.

She'd stared at it mutely for what seemed like forever. When she looked up, it was the clock that caught her attention. It was just after 3 a.m. And if it were Sunday, then she had to be getting up for work in a couple hours.

Gabe said she'd been assaulted and insisted they make a police report. She argued and ultimately relented, calling in sick that day, with Gabe holding her hand through the whole process. She figured her statement, which amounted to little more than, *I can't remember anything*, had been useless, but apparently she'd caught tiny pieces of whoever had messed her up under her fingernails. She had no idea where she'd come up with the guts to do something like that.

Gabe assured her that in cases of violent incidents, memory loss was not an uncommon side effect. It was all so confusing, and she hadn't slept the whole following week. Gabe said it was forensic evidence. The DNA found under her fingernails was what sealed the case. It was a guy the Police had been watching

for a while, and for whatever reason, in a move that surprised them, he'd turned himself in a couple days after her attack and made a full confession. She had been the key. His final accuser. Apparently he'd done it to a number of women who were either too weak or too scared to fight back. That weekend had disappeared, too, but at home in her own bed, catching up on sleep. She didn't wake up in any weird places and no one tried to assault her.

She heard from Gabe now and again, but had no real clue as to what he did. When she did visit, they talked about her and not about him. She'd texted him hours before, but it wasn't until mid-morning that her now-cracked cell phone chimed its response. She didn't do a lot of texting, so she knew it was him instantly.

"Are you hurt?" the text queried.

That was sweet of him, she thought.

"Not physically, no. At work now."

"Stop by?"

"After work."

Her work today was so mundane that she no longer needed to even focus on getting the job done. A monkey could do it. A pigeon, even. As soon as they invented the proper sorting interface, she'd be replaced by lower life forms. At least that was something to look forward to.

Her co-workers were usually under the same spell of monotony that cursed her, and today was no different. She finished out the longest Monday she could remember, unable to concentrate on anything but her own confusion and fear. And no one said anything. Maybe it was time to look for a new job, she thought to herself.

The damn monkeys can screw up the spreadsheets as well as I can.

The gentle movement of the boat and the enchanting scent of something on the stove turned her state of mind on its end. What it was, she had no idea, but it was better therapy than Paco ever was. She kicked herself for even thinking about demeaning her helpless bunny companion, even if it was the truth. Gabe had picked her up after work and was again treating her like a princess. She'd only been on the boat a few times, but when she visited, she felt safe. She was ensconced in a waterborne security blanket. If heaven was better than this, she couldn't imagine how.

"So, let me try it this time," he said from his station by the stove. "You remember how it goes. Each time we do this, we'll tease out a bit more detail. And this thing is all in the details."

She nodded.

"So, you're on the couch watching Game of Thrones on Showtime."

She had closed her eyes and was following along, her head nodding as she processed his narrative.

"New season, right?" he asked. "Started at nine?"

"I think so."

"And you're pretty sure you didn't watch the whole thing."

She said nothing but continued to nod.

"You nod off, then you wake up, and things are out of place. The TV is on a channel you don't watch, Chinese take-out is on the coffee table, and your raincoat is in the dryer. You freak out and your phone gets cracked. What am I missing?"

"Milky Way," she said absently, still lost in her own mind and sitting on her couch at home.

"Right. What else? You cleaned up before you went to work, right?"

She thought about it. *There was something else.* "The newspaper," she said suddenly.

"What about it?"

"There was a newspaper on my dining table in the morning. I mean seriously, who reads a newspaper these days?" She looked down at the newspaper on the boat's table in front of her, realizing the exception. "I mean, besides you, who reads the newspaper?"

His eyes brightened. "That's good! That would have been Friday's Tribune?"

She shook her head, "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure it was Saturday's."

"Really? I think their press runs finish up around midnight for the weekend papers, but it probably wouldn't be to your neighborhood until—"

He paused, to think about it. "Probably not, anyway."

"Here," he said, "Let's try this." He rummaged around in his recycle bin and found the Saturday paper, offering her the front page. Was this it?

She looked at it for a moment before nodding her confirmation. "Yes. That's it."

He cleared the table in front of her. She imagined it was time to eat, but he had something else in mind.

"I want you to go back in your mind to Monday morning. Early, before you went to work. Was the paper all in one neat stack, or were some sections discarded, pulled out? What was on top, maybe?"

She squinted, trying to think how they had been arranged. At first, nothing came to her. Then she stood up and looked at the sections. "No, you're right. There was a pile on one side, and something else. One of the sections was folded up, you know, like it was the size of a magazine, not a full page of the paper."

He nodded. "Yes, it's coming back isn't it? Just have a careful look at each of these sections. See if you can figure out which one was the folded one."

She closed her eyes again and thought. This was harder. He was folding the various sections in quarters.

"Was it this size?" he asked, holding up one of the folded sections.

"Yes, that's exactly the size, but I can't be sure which one was folded. They all look pretty much the same."

"Anything written on the page? Notation or something?"

She hadn't even thought of that. She shook her head. "No, pretty sure not. I think I would remember something like that."

She looked up at him and lifted her arms with a helpless shrug. "Sorry."

"Let's do this. The goulash is ready, and I have a great companion wine in mind, so why don't you be my sampling chef, and I'll move some of these pages around for you. You call out if you see something familiar."

The food tasted even better than its scent let on, and the Merlot he'd selected was perfect, in her untrained opinion, at least. Having someone with talent cook for her was not something that happened every day, so at least this evening, her definition of perfect was a loose one. She sipped and ate. He folded and moved the various sections about in front of her. They immediately eliminated the colored flyer inserts as she clearly remembered the folded section being black and white. She felt relaxed and sleepy and was thinking thoughts she probably shouldn't, when a page caught her eye.

"That's it!" she cried.

His continual smirk broadened into a smile, and he held up the paper's Metro section. He carried the remainder of the paper back to his recycle container, and skimmed the section.

"But how does that help us?"

He shrugged. "Hard to tell, but taken together, each little piece will tell a story. OK, so we've got the Metro section, the take-out and the Milky Way." He stopped for a minute. "Was there anything in the raincoat pocket? Besides the gun, I mean."

She looked at him curiously.

"You went dumpster diving, Ray. Did you find anything?"

Now it was her turn to shrug. "I don't know. I don't think I checked. I don't think so. Nothing big, anyway."

"Doesn't have to be big. The key to the puzzle might be held in the smallest of clues."

She nodded. That was probably true. But doing a meticulous search of her own raincoat wasn't something someone did in a freaked-out state after recovering from a lost-time episode.

"It doesn't matter," he said, as he poured his own glass of Merlot. "You said the food was from the Golden Dragon, and there's only one Golden Dragon that I know about in this city. That gives us a location. Then dumpsters and the Metro section. It's slim, but it's a start. I'll ask some questions this week, and see what I can dig up."

She still had no idea what Gabe did for a living, and didn't want to risk offending him by asking the question. He was so gracious and so—

She caught herself imagining the wrong thoughts again. She was pretty sure he'd read her mind.

"You need to get home," he told her. "You've not slept, and you need to get to work tomorrow. Leave this to me."

He was right, and she knew the disappointment showed in her eyes.

He shook his head with a wry smile. "If I were 20 years younger, and you weren't, I'm certain I'd be your boyfriend. Or your stalker," he said with a wink. "You think of anything else you think might be helpful, you call me, OK?"

She nodded. He was going to be the gentleman, and she was going to be

lonely. Boyfriend or stalker? She didn't give a horse's patoot about the 20 years. If it were Gabe, either would be fine for her.

Then a random thought struck her. "Actually, I think I do have something else. I think I had a drink. Whiskey, maybe? I don't know. Whatever it was, it was some pretty nasty stuff."

The bomb went off sometime after 3 p.m. She didn't hear the explosion, but she heard its aftermath. She kept her phone on silent, which was the policy at work, but apparently she was one of the few who actually followed it. First it was a chorus of chimes. Not one or two, but an office full of them, all singing their own phone songs at the top of their phone lungs. Then it was silent for a few seconds before the din of human voices took over. Quiet at first, then louder as the word circulated.

She caught the gist of it and joined the crowd streaming toward the break room to watch the news coverage on TV. She crowded with her co-workers to get a better look at the screen when she realized she had to leave and leave quickly. A bomb meant the possibility of a terrorist attack, and if that were so, the company bosses might put the whole organization on lockdown, and that was something she knew she wouldn't be able to put up with. She edged quickly backward. Thank God, for once, she'd grabbed her purse from her desk. She used the fire exit stairwell to make it to the street below, leaving her co-workers to gawk at whatever damage was visible and at whatever the so-called TV experts would guess at to offer a plausible explanation. She believed little of what they said, and in the end, it had little impact on her. Outside on the sidewalk, the air was a bit brisker than she liked, with a chilling breeze nipping at her nose with the city scents of traffic and sewage. While she'd remembered her purse, she'd abandoned her coat in favor of a timely escape. She didn't mind, though. It gave her a solid incentive to keep moving.

She tagged an Uber ride, which was likely a 5-minute wait, and she guessed she could make it south to the public library in that time. Her timing was perfect. The gray-haired driver listened intently for the address, then said nothing for the duration of the trip to her place, which was actually more than she'd hoped for.

Gabe's car was parked on the street outside her apartment complex, and she felt a spring of recognition at seeing him. They'd had no contact for a few days now, and she was curious. Like the Uber driver, he made a wordless gesture, motioning her to join him in the car. She did the same, as if to say, Come on in, I'll make some tea and maybe break out some tequila.

His eyes killed the invitation, and she detected a tinge of sadness in his gaze. She hesitated, momentarily uncertain of what to do next until a chilly gust reminded her, then made for the passenger door. The car was warm, and she held her hands over the heater vent as if it were a campfire.

"You did the right thing," Gabe said, concern evident in his voice. "Crowds tend to transform hysteria into a contagion."

She shook her head. "I don't know about that, but I do know I couldn't stay

at work. I don't know why. I just couldn't."

"You still have your meds?"

She looked at him steadily. Meds were a touchy subject for her. She knew he only asked out of concern, but he knew the story. After the first incident last year, she'd gone directly to see a doctor through her work health plan and had been misdiagnosed. Actually, she thought, she'd been mis-prescribed, if that was even a word. The doctor had prescribed Xyrem, which she found out later was used to treat narcoleptics who couldn't stay awake during the day. What she also found out, with a little help from Paco and her iPad, was that its active ingredient was GHB, the date-rape drug that had tossed her unknowingly into what might as well have been a coma. She'd missed work that next day, too and swore off ever ingesting it again. She'd seen another doctor who'd diagnosed her with what he called an "odd manifestation of a bi-polar affliction" in his weird doctor way of talking. He was cautious, but upbeat about it. He'd prescribed Lithium and Cymbalta and a couple others she couldn't remember. But by the time she'd gotten the medication, the symptoms had disappeared and hadn't come back. Until a few days ago, that is.

She looked at Gabe evenly. "Sure. I have some pills."

"You haven't taken any have you?"

"No—"

"Good," he said quickly, cutting her off in mid-explanation. "Meds will dull your senses, and I'm sorry to say this, but you're going to need all of your senses for the next few days."

Now she was concerned. "Why? What happened?"

"I checked out the neighborhood around the Golden Dragon. North side of downtown. It's the business district. Dumpsters didn't really pay off as there's plenty of them, one pretty much like the other."

"So you didn't check them all for the other half of my Milky Way wrapper?"

He smirked at her sarcasm, but his tone remained strained. "I did find a newsstand and a couple bars nearby." He lowered his voice and continued, like he couldn't believe that what he was saying was true. "One of them gave me a description of you as one of their newest customers. Said you come in late. Really late. And that you wear a raincoat and a hat."

She stared at him blankly, and began to protest. "No way," she said, shaking her head. "I'd never go near a place like that."

"Said you drink bourbon. A good bit of it, too."

She was stunned. "You mean the other me likes to run around at night drinking and waving my gun around?"

This was impossible, she thought. There's absolutely no reason for it. No explanation.

"Here's what I think," Gabe offered, "Based on what happened last time, I think two things have to happen. I think you allow this other half of you to emerge, but only when conditions are just so. First, you have to be bored out of your mind. You know, at work."

"Which is pretty much every day I go to work."

“And then there’s some disturbance in the community. Last time it was the rapist. This time it must have something to do with the bombing. I don’t know what it is. Yet. But there is one thing you do need to know.”

She was still processing the concept in her mind and almost didn’t hear him as he said it.

“The bomb that went off today destroyed a dry cleaners just down the street from that bar.”

Ray didn’t usually watch the news, but this week she couldn’t stop. And even though she made a point of ignoring the news pundits, she was now second-guessing herself every time another one opened his mouth. The city was locked down and initial talk was certain it was a terrorist attack, even though none of the known groups had claimed responsibility. Not even ISIS. Then Friday evening, the news carried a new theory. The laundromat owners had been shot to death some time before the explosion. She wasn’t sure that it was wise to share that information with the public, but when the media work closely with the police, sometimes they turned out to be more of a liability than an asset.

Jesus, she scolded herself, you even think now in spreadsheet terms.

The north side of the city had been torn apart last year by gang conflicts. Might this be a resurgence of that? speculated the newscaster.

She did most of what needed doing at the office remotely for the next couple of days as did most of her co-workers. She wasn’t close with many, but she chatted online with a few of them. She dreaded going back to work after a break like this as the spreadsheets would be stacked to the ceiling. They never stopped coming. It would be a pain in the ass to catch up with herself. In the meantime, she felt safe in her little place. Not that it was impenetrable, but the front gate to the complex was cypher-coded, and the front door had a 24-hour watchman. It used to be a watch-woman, but she got offered some sit-down security job and snapped it up right away. The day man, Butch, was a big, burly ex-Marine. He kept his hair in Marine style, but his form, not so much. He was a smartass with a soft spot for the hard butterscotch candies that kept him company when no one else would. She had a supply in a candy dish by the door, and she usually slipped a couple into her pocket on her way out of the building. There was a night guy, too, but she didn’t know what his name was. She didn’t go out much at night, and he wasn’t much of a talker or a greeter. Usually, if she got anything from him, it was a silent nod or a grunt of acknowledgement.

The TV seemed to buzz in a circular pattern, talking and then reviewing the same old information in a different way. Kind of like work, she thought. Finally, late in the afternoon, she’d had enough. She switched off the TV, scored a pair of butterscotches from the dish and headed downstairs to check her mail. In the lobby, she dialed the gun-metal combination on the steel door and pulled out the regular collection of junk mail, bills and offers. Normally she was annoyed at the percentage of mail that was a pure waste of her time, but today she was looking forward to opening it. Another excuse to not think about the world outside. She pulled out the full bundle, and as she did, a yellow slip, a package

notification advisory, fluttered to the tiled lobby floor. It was always a pain in the ass to get one of these as the building manager who watched over the package repository was always out when she needed him to be in. She smiled as she read the card. It didn't have the expected standard text. Instead, scrawled on it was a personal, two-word note.

"See Butch," it read, followed by a penciled smiley face.

She smiled back at it. "Thanks Butch," she said to the card as she rounded the corner to Butch's standard security post.

Outside, the city was rolling up its business sidewalks and rolling out its entertainment ones, crisis or not. Business went on. Life went on. It was already dark, but the lobby fluorescents illuminated the security guard's profile. Butch wore the standard security uniform, and it made him look kind of cop-like. His hulking bear form and friendly face served as a marked relief from the rest of her obsessive day. When he saw her, he raised his hand in greeting, the broad smile igniting one of her own.

"Hi Ray," he said, "What up with you?"

"I brought you something."

"Now what in world could that be?" he asked with a knowing wink.

She held out her hand in front of her, clenching the butterscotch. "It's gold, Butch. I tell you. It's pure gold." And she dropped the candies into his open palms.

He shook his head, "What did I ever do to deserve this? I swear I'm forever in your debt. Oh, wait a minute," he said, feigning forgetfulness. "There was something for you."

"Really?"

He nodded with a more serious tone that came with a scornful edge to it. "I took it from that jack-wagon manager and promised to put it directly into your hands."

"How did you know I'd be down?"

He tapped the side of his head with a knowing smirk. "Marine training. Never really goes away. Smart girl like you, cramped up in her apartment for days? I figured you'd get antsy sooner or later. Turns out, I was right."

Antsy she was, but her antsy took on a new dimension as he produced a gift-wrapped box from behind his security station.

"There you go," he said, "looks like you got some kind of secret admirer."

She knew the confused look on her face betrayed her surprise as she scanned her consciousness in an effort to divine what might be in the package.

"Look," he said in a low voice as he leaned toward her, "I didn't unwrap it or anything, and it didn't come in any of the regular deliveries. You know, mail, FedEx, UPS. Nothing like that. Bike messenger dropped it off just as Two Bones was coming through the lobby here."

Ray smiled to herself. Two Bones was his pet name for the property manager. Butch said the guy had two bones in his whole body, his ass-bone and his jaw-bone, and only one of those ever saw any movement.

"Anyway, I seen him heading for the lock-up and figured it might be days

before you actually saw the thing, so I grabbed it off him before he waddled off.”

“Thank you, kind sir,” she said, her composure recovered as she mimed a curtsy of gratitude.

He smiled as he waved her off. “Out of here now, young lady. I’ve got some heavy-duty guarding to do, but that’s a pretty hefty little package you’ve got there. If there turns out to be gold in there, I’d be happy to share in the spoils.”

“If it’s gold you seek, it’s gold you’ll have, sir knight,” she quipped over her shoulder as she headed back to the elevator.

She felt the weight of the package. He was right. The package was hefty. She shook it back and forth a bit, but nothing shook around inside.

Was it something special from Gabe?

He’d been off her screen for a couple days now. She tried to think of some other possibilities, but by the time she set the package down on the dining room table in her apartment, she hadn’t come up with anything. She was still stumped. Mystified.

It was a white package with a thick green bow embroidered with silver highlights. Real high-end stuff, she judged. She undid the bow carefully as if she might destroy its beauty by ripping or tearing it. Someone had gone to a lot of effort to impress her.

Well done, secret admirer, she thought. It worked.

She lifted the top off of the white box, revealing a texture of Styrofoam peanuts. Still no clue. She reached into the peanuts, spilling a few onto the tabletop as her fingers touched what she sought.

What she pulled out surprised and delighted her. It was a 9mm Beretta. Just like hers. It must be Gabe. She was sure of it. It was the spitting image of the one she had in her safe. She skipped into the bedroom to open the case and compare the two side-by-side.

A selfie with side-by-side Berettas drawn? That would be badass.

As she slipped the case out of its hiding place, she had another thought. A terrible thought. A sinking feeling engulfed her. What if there weren’t two guns? A growing sense of dread made her shiver, and her worst fears were confirmed as she lifted the black polymer case cover. There was an empty space in the bumpy foam padding where her gun and magazine should be. She felt the pang of fear rip through her again and again. She was in some real trouble now. Not like work trouble. This was go-to-jail trouble. Maybe worse.

Her hands were shaking, and it took her minutes to compose a message to Gabe on her cracked screen. She was crying again and couldn’t make her fingers talk like they were supposed to. In the end, she erased everything she’d written and sent a single word to him.

“HELP!”

As she sat back on the bedroom carpet, wondering what to do next, her brain wouldn’t sit still, the worry and fear clouding her thoughts. Mechanically she raised the gun to her nose, and she realized her situation was crumbling by the moment. It wasn’t the chemical smell of gun oil she was used to. It was the sharp stench of nitroglycerin and graphite. The damn thing had been fired.

The fat guy wasn't around, but she figured it wouldn't take him long. She ordered bar fries and a pair of Wild Turkeys. Sure enough, by the time the food and bourbon had come, and she'd made it through her second fry, there he was, the heart of her deepest annoyance, plopped down on the stool next to her with that same disgusting grin.

He wore a brown leather jacket, and she noticed to her satisfaction that as he put his arms on the bar, it pulled the sleeves back enough to reveal the edge of a tattooed swastika above his wrist. She'd been right. It all fit.

She looked at him with her dead, pissed-off eyes. "What?"

He seemed genuinely cheerful. He shrugged like she'd know what he was talking about. "I got you."

Her facade dissolved, and with a quickness that seem to surprise him, she had the Beretta out again and pressed to what she figured would be a fatal shot.

He rolled his eyes. "Really? I think you drink too much of that crap," he said, nodding to the shot glasses on the bar. "I know it's empty. I took this away from you once. Why in the hell do you think it would be any different this time?" he said, grabbing the 9mm in one hand, and her arm in the other.

She was powerless to stop him and watched as he manhandled the gun into his own hands. He was right. It wasn't loaded. She reached for the empty bourbon glass and rapped twice on the top of the bar like she usually did for another matching pair.

She felt him reach a hand inside her raincoat and relieve her of the clip. He actually did have her, and she made no move to resist. The Turkeys hit the bar and she heard the magazine click home a moment later. In spite of her efforts and good intentions, things didn't always work out as she planned. She bit into another fry.

"It's not crap, you know. This is the good stuff. Wild Turkey," she told him. She picked up one of the shot glasses and held it up against the hopelessness of the bar lighting. "It's gold. Pure gold."

She set it down in front of him. "So, you got me. I get it." She shrugged. "At least let me have this."

She picked up the other shot glass and raised it as if in a toast. "To the good stuff," she said "to the turkeys."

The nasty glint was back in his eyes, but he was impressed enough to take the shot. He breathed in and smiled, then stopped suddenly, his face scrunching into an odd expression.

"Salt?" she said, realizing what the face was about. "Must have been on the edge of the glass."

She ate another fry and took a hard look at him. "Why'd you do it?"

"How could I not do it?" He replied. "You offered it up so nicely. It was like a gift from heaven."

"But they're dead."

"Everybody dies, honey. I don't care how where they die. I just care where they live. Just too polluted around here these days. And according to the cops,

it's gonna look like you feel the very same way. Welcome to the Brotherhood, sister."

She shook her head in silence.

"So what do you want?"

He tapped his chest where she knew his little book was stashed. "You know exactly what I want."

She did know. She stared straight ahead and said nothing for the next few minutes as she slowly finished the remaining fries. He was content to watch and anticipate.

When she was done she said nothing, continuing to stare in silence.

He leaned toward her and whispered, "OK, that's enough. Pay the bill and walk out of here. I have your gun. Try any stupid moves, and I'll kill everyone in the place."

She did as he asked. She walked out of the bar nonchalantly, grabbing her hat, and then raised her hands as she hit the sidewalk.

"Knock that off," he said sharply and backhanded her with the gun, a powerful swing that knocked her to the ground. He hoisted her up and pushed her out in front of him. "I said no tricks. Don't make it worse."

She smiled to herself sardonically as she walked in front of him. He planned to rape and shoot her, she thought. Could it actually be worse?

He actually made it three blocks before she sensed a slowing of his steps and heard a slight moan escape his lips behind her. Another half block and he stumbled to his knees. She turned and pushed him onto his back with her foot.

"Good," she told him, "You're having about the same reaction as I did. Unless you have narcolepsy, Xyrem will mess you up. Tasted a little like salt, didn't it?"

He struggled to get up, but she put her foot directly on top of his swastika, the wrist of his gun hand, pinning it to the sidewalk. After a minute, he just gave up and lay there.

She hadn't really thought about her plan beyond this point. She'd only half expected to make it this far. She heard a voice from across the street.

"Ray? Ray? Are you OK?" came a man's voice as he hurried toward her.

She looked up. "Is that his name? Ray?"

He looked confused. "No, you're Ray," he said.

She shook her head in confusion. "I don't know what you're talking about, man. I'm Bishop."

"Well...Bishop," he said as if it were hard for him to pronounce, "Need any help?"

She was suddenly suspicious. "Who are you?"

"I'm Gabe. I—

"Gabe, eh?" she interrupted. She looked at the guy who called himself Gabe. A bit older, well-groomed with an expression that seemed to exude a quiet cool about him. She doubted this was one of the fat guy's cohorts. His eyes were curious, but somehow comforting. "Yes, Gabe, I actually do need some help. The police will be here soon. They'll be asking a lot of questions, and this gun?

They'll be interested in this gun. Very interested. You see anything? You see him marching me down the street ahead of his gun?

He nodded, "Yes. I did see that. Wondered what that was about."

"If you don't mind stickin' around a few and repeatin' that to them, It would help me out. See, I've been drinkin' a bit, and I'm not sure they'd swallow the story I'm gonna tell."

She could see her breath in the wintry air as she spoke, and as she watched it disappear, she saw her eyewitness was smiling now. She had no idea why. Nothing funny happened. She shivered as she pulled the raincoat more tightly around herself. She heard sirens approaching as the cops wound their way through the city's labyrinth toward her. She pulled the candy bar, her favorite, out of her pocket and took a bite.

Last thing Ray remembered was staring at her empty gun case, her butt on the carpet in her bedroom, her mind spinning off its assigned tracks. Then she blinked.

She wasn't on some abandoned street corner when she opened her eyes this time. This was worse. Cinderblocks and metal bars greeted her. Her mouth was a desert and her head was marching band. The cell was colder than it should have been and smelled of the same commercial disinfectant they used at work. She shivered and hugged herself. There was something else. It was her right cheek. She reached up to touch it and realized her face was bandaged.

She quickly searched her pockets for her phone, her lifeline, but came away empty. What had she done to deserve winding up here? She never even been to a jail before, and now she was locked up?

"Hey," she called. It wasn't really a yell. She didn't have the strength for a yell. But it didn't matter as is brought someone anyway. A guard popped his head around the corner, and then retreated just as quickly.

"She's awake," she heard him say to someone she couldn't see. Footsteps followed and then Gabe appeared.

Thank God.

"Gabe, somebody took my gun. And then brought it back, and now I'm here. And—"

Her words were all jumbled together, and while they made perfect sense to her in her mind, she was certain anyone else listening would have a hard time understanding. What if she did deserve to be here? With her mind playing tricks on her, she found it hard to tell truth from fiction.

"Give us a couple of minutes," Gabe told the guard who unlocked the cell.

The steel door slid open, and he sat down beside her. She immediately felt better, his arm around her shoulders, her face against his.

"I'm so confused. None of this makes any sense to me."

"An anonymous tipster ID'd you as the shooter in the Laundromat killings. It was bogus of course, but when they pulled your name and saw you owned a 9mm, it was enough for a search warrant."

She looked at him. "How did they get into my apartment to steal it anyway?"

That's like three levels of security."

"They didn't. You took it out."

"No, I didn't."

"I mean, the other you took it out. She goes by Bishop. She didn't recognize the name Ray, and she had no idea who I was when I showed up."

"You followed her?"

"I followed you."

Forget niceties. She'd tried to be polite before, but now she was over that. "Look, I'm sorry to ask, but what is it that you do? I mean for work. Are you some kind of cop?"

"Just call me a consultant. Cops call me in when they get a tough case. I help out where I can. When I heard about them getting an arrest warrant, I got my butt over to your place as quickly as I could. That was about the time I got your text, too. You know what I see?"

She didn't.

"I see you sneaking out of the back of the building and heading north. You hoof it up to Grover Cleveland Ave. and hail a cab."

She was doubtful. "Doesn't sound like me."

"You're right. It doesn't, but I know it's you. You get dropped off in the north end. Bombing neighborhood. Plenty of cops and security still around, but you're just nosy. Ear to the ground. Eavesdropping. You check out a few businesses and a few empty buildings. Ultimately you wind up at the same bar I told you about. I didn't follow you in, just sat on the place. Maybe a half-hour later you come out, hands in the air, at the tip of some fat guy's gun."

"My gun," she whispered.

He nodded.

"My gun with my fingerprints, and then an anonymous tip." She was putting it together.

"Ballistics would have matched it as your gun."

Now it was starting to make sense. "I offered him. I mean, Bishop offered him the perfect weapon. And he took it. And framed me for it."

"Tried to frame you for it," he corrected. "Bishop needed to get the gun back into his hands. She needed his fingerprints on the murder weapon, not hers. Yours. Anyway, I figured your hands in the air was a play for the video surveillance cameras. He marched you west on Simpson Ave., but only made it a few blocks before he collapsed."

Again, she was confused.

"You never threw out that bad prescription you got, did you?" he asked.

Her spirits sank. "Oh, no. Am I in trouble for that? I don't even know. I probably threw it in the medicine cabinet with everything else."

She felt the warmth flow from Gabe as he laughed. "Let me see your fingers," he said.

She held them out before her, all but one of the blood red nails still intact.

"No, turn them over."

She placed them, palms up, in his, as he had a closer look. "There," he said,

"look at that," as he brought her left hand up to her face.

"What is it, some kind of powder?"

"Apparently you crushed up a bunch of pills into your raincoat pocket, then somehow slipped the stuff into his drink. GHB. You know what that is, don't you?"

"I date-raped him?"

"Well, Bishop did."

"Right. Bishop. But why? I still don't understand why."

"He's in the other room now and won't say a thing, but we got a pretty good idea. He'll crack soon enough. Racist son-of-a-bitch thought he could kill some of the dry cleaner folk and have it blamed on the gangs. There's a couple business across the street. He figured he'd start a gang war, then walk away. Write-up about the gang issue and their impact on local businesses was in that Metro section you picked out."

"Why in the world would he do something like that? With all the hate in this world, why would he pile more on top?"

"Apparently the business owners had settled their differences and figured a way to operate side-by-side. It didn't sit right with him." He shrugged. "We're human. If we don't have enemies, we invent our own."

"What will happen to him?" she asked, curious.

He sighed. "Hard to tell. In a perfect world, he be shot and burned to death. Our justice system? Anybody's guess. But that's out of our hands now. What does matter is you stopped him dead in his tracks and prevented a lot more pain and death."

He paused for a moment looking her up and down, and she wondered what he thought of her.

"Look, you're not under arrest," he continued. "Once Bishop had it settled, it was like she went into a coma. We couldn't wake her up for anything. I was there, so I figured you needed the sleep, and this place was safe and quiet."

She smiled and winced, a shooting pain searing her face.

"Oh, that was caught on camera, too. Something you probably don't want to see again. Anyway, you need your rest, and I'm looking forward to a bit of tequila, so let's agree that for now that's the best medicine for the both of us."

She stood and gratefully followed him out of the cell.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said, turning to her. "You were out for nearly 18 hours, so I had plenty time to do this for you. The city and its citizens owe you...and Bishop," he added, "a great debt of gratitude. I expensed it. The city will pick of the tab. It's the least they could do."

It was her life. He was giving her back her life. Its cracked screen had been replaced, and the colorful icons smiled at her through the new, crystal-clear faceplate. She smiled and hugged him with one arm while she slipped her life into her rear pocket. She smiled. He was right. Sleep and Gabe. That was the best medicine for her.

