



FAST

AS YOU

CAN

A
Ray Bishop
MYSTERY

JAMES SLATER

RAY WOKE UP with a drum in her head and a stress ball in her hand. She blinked at the ceiling as her consciousness surfaced, willing herself to breath in some spark of energy into the new day. She was sure she'd been dreaming, but for the life of her, couldn't remember a damn thing. Memories weren't hiding in any corner of her mind, at least not in the usual places, she thought.

Sunlight meandered its way into her bedroom through her tan curtains, the light making her wince. She had a sudden thought.

Crap. Had it happened again?

Her useless excuse for a brain brain gave her vacations from herself now and again, although it hadn't happened for months now, the odd haze she felt this morning made her suspect as much. She grabbed at her phone on the nightstand, maybe out of a desire to focus on something to ground her, to clear her foggy mind, or maybe it was just muscle memory, the same repetitive reach morning after morning. Day after day. Monotony. But the monotony of her grown-up life was interrupted occasionally by bouts of unintended fear and excitement. Maybe this was one of them. She couldn't tell.

Maybe Gabe could.

Ray texted him.

I'm feeling off. Anything strange happen last night?

She hadn't heard from Gabe in days, which wasn't that unusual. Gabe had an odd, wonderful life full of mysterious and interesting people. He had a cool head and a smart mouth, and a way of looking at things that most people couldn't fathom.

She had no boyfriend. Wouldn't be fair to torture a guy with the her personal demons. Hell, she didn't even know what it was she had, in spite of what the doctors had surmised. For now she had Gabe, her light in the darkness who always knew what to say and do. She'd told herself again and again that she'd be happy to hand over her heart and soul to him, and, were it not for their significant age difference, she figured he'd be OK with it, too. But she could never really tell if their desire was mutual or if her personal fantasies were just that. Gabe was always the gentleman.

Ray knew Gabe was there not only for her, but for a lot of other people, too. Cops, for instance. They all kept him busy, and sometimes it took him a while to return her text, their agreed upon communication channel. Not this morning, though. His return text brought with it a mixed sense of dread and excitement.

Funny u should ask

She put her feet on the bedroom carpet as she read the message, her suddenly energized toes searching for her slippers. She lifted her bathrobe off its hook on the back of her bedroom door on her way to the kitchen to forage for coffee. Her apartment was in that springtime no-man's land of changing seasons where the shift in temperatures seemed to outsmart the thermostat on a regular basis. But the chill helped clear her head, and she offered a greeting to her philosopher rabbit, Paco.

She couldn't swear he was a philosopher, but his rare ability to listen had prompted her to answer a lot of her own asked and unasked questions and had convinced her that it wasn't possible to swear, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he wasn't one either.

She pulled the robe more tightly around herself, realizing she still held the phone in one hand and the stress ball in the other. She wondered off-handedly where she'd picked up the ball when the phone went off buying her hand, Gabe's face staring up at her from her right hand.

Gabe? That's weird.

It wasn't that Gabe didn't call her. But when he did, it was usually something immediate. Or dangerous.

"Gabe?" she asked the phone, "Everything OK?"

"I'm good." She heard him pause and knew immediately what he wanted to ask. She answered before he could.

"I think Bishop went out last night. But I can't be sure. I just had the feeling when I woke up. And God." she said, squeezing her eyes and shaking her head, "I have such a headache."

She pressed the phone to her forehead and listened for his response.

"They found a body in Garfield Park last night. Odd scene. Guy in a clown suit. Way too small for him. Throat slit. Pants down."

Ray shivered, partly from the chill in the apartment and partly from Gabe's creepy description.

"Ray, can you check your raincoat?"

For whatever reason, Bishop, which was her last name, was also the name adopted by the half of her personality that took off at night. Bishop had a thing for her raincoat, whether it was raining or not. She'd found her gun in it before. A sudden thought of a bloody knife protruding from a pocket sent a chill down her spine, as she made her way toward her front closet.

Oh my God, please tell me I haven't killed a clown.

There it was, hanging there as normally as any raincoat might be expected to hang. It didn't appear to have any new stains or marks. No mud. No blood. No knife sticking out of the pocket. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Ray, are you there?" asked the tinny sound of Gabe's voice in her hand.

"Gabe, It's here, and I don't see any marks or anything," she said taking the hangar off its bar and turning it, inspecting it front and back.

"Check the pockets."

She did, finding nothing in the left pocket. The right pocket, however, mystified her.

"Gabe, there's something here. I don't know what it is, a bunch of little—I don't know—pieces of wood. Tree bark, maybe?"

The phone was silent.

"Gabe?"

"Ray, I need to have a look. Is it OK if we meet at the church?"

She replied without thinking, her brain still a muddle of incoherence. "Jesus, It's not Sunday is it?" realizing at once that her phone had already told her it was Saturday.

The Church was a bar and grill that had been converted from a church into an eclectic hangout a couple of years back. It had a calming, creative effect on her, but she didn't like to go on Sunday. She was raised Catholic, and while she wasn't a faithful, practicing Catholic like her grandmother had been, it felt wrong to be in a church on Sunday and not do church things.

She heard his smile through the phone. "Nope. Still Saturday. Bring the raincoat, won't you?"

She nodded to herself. It was a nice, comfortable relationship. There were no unrealistic expectations and no disappointments. She lay the raincoat on the table by the door, stretching her arms above her head, saying a grateful thank you to God and

anyone else involved in the creation of Saturdays. As she relaxed her stretch, she focused momentarily on the stress ball still in her left hand, and a sudden bolt of realization flashed through her. It wasn't a stress ball at all. It was rubber and it was red and it belonged on the face of a clown.

"Gabe," she whispered into the phone, almost unable to speak, "There's something else. I've got your nose."

THE CHURCH WAS EMPTY. Ray was surprised as she assumed Gabe would already be here. She'd showered and Ubered and hadn't taken any hasty shortcuts. It was Saturday, after all. She'd worn a sweater under her raincoat and now draped the coat over the back of the chair next to her, slung her purse over her chair and had a seat. She checked her phone, more out of habit than anything else, but it didn't, as she knew it wouldn't, give her any practical updates.

Above her, the church's cathedral architecture reflected the filtered light of the stained glass designs. It warmed the chilled interior of the brick building and gave her a sense of peace and grace. She breathed it in deeply, looking for a few moments of absolutely nothing. It was a rare occasion in her modern life where there wasn't something blasting in her ears or something tugging at her mind. Some task to complete or some crisis to address. The peace and harmony of nothing to do but sit and rest washed over her. Maybe grandmother had something after all, she thought.

By the time Gabe broke the silence, she felt like a different person. She'd pulled the nose and the bark chips out of the raincoat as he approached and laid them out of the table as he sat down across from her.

"Good Morning, sunshine," he said with a grin.

She smiled, but said nothing, nodding to the objects on the table between them.

He sat down, then picked up each object in turn, giving it a thorough examination.

"Are there any more of these?" he asked, pushing forward one of the bark chips.

She dug into the raincoat just to make sure she'd grabbed all of them, her fingers exploring the folds of the pocket, and retrieved two more.

"There, that's all of them. She watched him push the pieces around on the table, then one-by-one, line them up. He'd found their unique, unifying aspect. She saw it, too. He'd pushed the clown nose off to the side and lined up the little pieces of bark in front of him like a military formation. The pieces were of different sizes, but they all shared a common trait. They were each unnaturally flat on one side, like they'd each been laid out on a chopping board and cut in half. He swapped places with a few of the pieces, and in a couple of cases, she could see where two pieces fit together, like pieces from a jigsaw puzzle.

"That's interesting," she said under her breath. "What does it mean?"

"Cedar. Port Orchard Cedar."

"Cedar? What's that? Like a cedar chest?"

"Yes, It's a tree. Evergreen. You know, like a Christmas tree. But it doesn't grow around here."

She nodded, understanding the tree genus, but not its significance.

He sat back in his chair, then picked up a menu from the end of the table.

"Hungry? What do you feel like this morning?"

She thought a minute, mulling it over. "Eggs," she said, simply.

He shook his head as he continued to scan the menu. "I don't think they serve breakfast here."

She looked at him sideways with a rare bit of animosity sneaking into her voice. "I didn't say breakfast. I said eggs, Gabe. It's not like I'd ask for monkey brains or jackfruit or something exotic. It's eggs. Comes from a chicken. The most populous bird on the planet. They have a kitchen here. I'm sure they have eggs. If not he can hop his jolly little butt around the corner to Jacks and get some. Or I'll do it my damn self."

His face showed amusement and surprise. "I don't know if that's true or not," he said with a grin.

"What?"

"That the chicken is the most populous bird on the planet."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"Hey folks, good morning," came the greeting from behind them that echoed back majestically from the church walls. He set two glasses of ice water on the table paired with their obligatory straws. "What can I get you?"

Ray put on her sweetest face for him and asked, "Hi Jeb. I really have a taste for eggs this morning. Could you help me out with that? Two eggs?"

Jeb was the kind of cook you weren't supposed to trust. Skin and bones with a crewcut wrapped in a white apron. His name came from another era, and she wondered if in those days of the westward movement he might have been nicknamed Cookie. Today cookie had another meaning, but it wasn't cookies she was interested in. It was eggs.

He had a wide smile that he flashed, like he had too many teeth. "Sure," he said, "I'll fix you right up. Over easy OK?"

"Perfect."

"Anything else?"

"Fries." Then she thought about it, "No, no fries. Another egg."

He looked at her curiously. "So, three eggs?"

She nodded.

"Sure," he said in an uncertain tone that sounded like he was still explaining it to himself. "What about you, sir?" he said to Gabe.

"Coffee."

"Cream and sugar?"

"Black."

He nodded. "Black it is. Anything else?"

"Coffee," repeated Gabe.

Jeb nodded. "Coffee," he said, "Black. Three eggs," retreating to the kitchen and shaking his head.

Ray looked across the table at him. "You can't live on just coffee, you know."

"How do you know? Have you tried?"

She didn't have an answer.

"Woman out in Seattle said she can live on sunshine and good thoughts."

She shot him a narrow glance. "What happened to her?"

"I think she's dead."

"Starvation?" she asked, then had another thought. "Stupidity?"

He smiled. "I don't think you can die of stupidity."

Now it was her turn to smile. "You didn't think I could get eggs here, either, did you?"

He was laughing to himself. "What's with you this morning?"

"I'm sorry," she said, realizing she'd just taken on the role of a queen bitch. "It's just that—"

She paused, uncertain whether to share with him or not. "I've been feeling off the last few days. My friend Maria from work asked me to go out with her last Friday. I wanted to, and I was looking forward to it at work, but when I got home, I just couldn't.

Sometimes I just get that way. Anyway, it turns out, Maria went out with this other friend from work, who then posted a selfie of them on Facebook.”

Gabe was watching and following. He shrugged. “So?”

“So, nothing. It was fine. Then next morning I texted her and called her a two-timing whore, you know, girls joking with other girls. Sometimes we do that.”

His grin was back. “And...?”

“And as it turns out, my grandmother got a smart phone a few weeks ago.”

“Don’t tell me,” he said, his grin wider now.

“Yes,” she said, shaking her head in shame. “I texted the wrong person. I called my grandmother a two-timing whore.”

“Did she think it was funny?”

“She was mortified, but not as much as I was. I’m her sweet innocent granddaughter who does nice things. You know, like petting kittens and picking flowers.”

“And farting rainbows,” added Gabe.

She shot him a look that flattened his smile in an instant. “Honestly, sometimes I don’t know why I tell you these things. The guilt has been haunting me all week. I can’t shake it. When I forget about it, it like there’s this invisible wire connected to my brain that reminds me again. I’m not dealing with it well. I keep asking myself, what kind of a person am I? I mean really.”

Gabe was staring at her now. He wasn’t going to answer her question, Which was OK, as she’d intended it as rhetorical. She neither expected nor desired an answer. But his mind, apparently, had already moved on.

He spoke slowly, as if thinking of something else entirely. “What did you say?”

“I said, What kind of a person am I?”

He shook his head. “No, not that.” he picked up the clown nose that was sitting on the table beside the line of bark chips, their odd-shaped edges pointing toward him and their uniformly flat edges toward her.

He now wore a grim smile as he took a closer look at the nose. “Ray, I know what killed the clown. Apparently you do, too.”

She shook her head, “I don’t,” she protested.

“Bishop does.”

How on Earth could he know that? she wondered. “Is this a joke, Gabe?”

He said nothing.

“OK, I’ll bite. What killed the clown?”

“Fear, I think. And an invisible wire.”

SHE WAS PRETTY, and in spite of her youth, had a worn look to her face. Not uncommon for freshly minted widows, Ray supposed.

Normally, Gabe wouldn't enter the picture of a homicide investigation until after the police had completed their inquiry and become stumped. Or the family became dissatisfied with either their progress or focus—or, of course, their lack of focus.

But this was different. Gabe knew the girl—the woman, Ray corrected herself—who looked like she'd slept in her clothes. Tears mussed her makeup. Her hair was a jungle, and her otherwise elegant features were red and puffy. Like her face, her name was pretty. Janelle. It was like a song. In spite of her distressed appearance, she carried herself with a certain grace. From the polish of her nails to the designer cut of her dress, she radiated refinement. Ray drank in that essence, making a mental note that she herself could use some work refining her own distressed look. She hadn't realized she was staring until the woman met her gaze. Ray averted her eyes, embarrassed, and listened as Gabe asked his questions.

They were routine. Ray wasn't a cop, but she listened and was impressed with their simple effectiveness. When had Janelle she last see him? Was he having any trouble at work? What was her first instinct? Did she kill her husband? What were her first thoughts when she hear the news? He slipped that next-to-last one in there as if it were nothing. Even when they weren't, he had a way of maintaining his professional veneer after "nothing" questions. He'd shrug and apologize. "Sorry," he'd say, as he did now. "They're just routine questions."

Ray had a few more questions in her own mind—a good portion of what she wanted to hear was missing. Then she remembered that Gabe was likely filling in the holes. Apparently he knew the victim well enough to think that murder might be within the realm of possibility.

She'd reflected a look of horror when she understood the sleeper question, and he seemed satisfied.

He knew Janelle and probably understood a good piece of her background as well as that of her now-ex husband.

Gabe scribbled in a notebook he'd pulled from one of his pockets. Some cop habits die hard, and for Gabe, that was one of them. He was forever writing what she assessed as small, insignificant facts. Once she'd been curious enough and asked to look at what he'd written. She'd been right. Random scribblings. They meant nothing to her. It was just his method, he said. No conclusions; just facts and data. Later, aboard the trawler *Commissario*, his floating apartment, he'd review and re-read them. They talk to me, he'd said. While she found it hard to imagine, she didn't disbelieve him. Whatever insanity he injected into his method worked. Gabe got results.

He flipped the notebook's pages, verifying he had the information he needed when something caught his eye. "Wait a minute" he said. "David *Ignacio* King? Is that correct?" His voice sounded incredulous.

Ray snapped her attention back to Gabe's comment. She knew the David King story. Everyone did. You couldn't drive six blocks in the city without passing a David King Chevrolet or a David King BMW dealership. David King, the self-made man. It was quite a story. But this couldn't be *that* David King. This had to be David King, junior, his son. Things started to make more sense now to Ray. Maybe a motive.

She confirmed with a miserable nod. "His mother was beautiful and ridiculously

Catholic. A Jesuit.”

“Ignacio?”

She nodded again.

Sometimes Gabe couldn't help himself. This was one of those times. “So, his father made him a man, and his mother made him a dick?”

She shrugged and made a half-hearted attempt at a smile. “Sounds bad when you put it that way. But she loved her son. Worshipped him. I think the whole sounding out your initials concept was lost on her. She was his mom and his dad. His Dad left with...I don't know...a much younger woman when David was a boy.”

She paused and looked away for a second. “He wasn't the only one who got slighted in the initials department.”

Ray watched as Gabe raised his eyebrows.

“I was Janelle Steele. Janelle Rachel Steele.”

JRS? That doesn't spell anything bad, thought Ray, before she realized that marriage changed that. She heard Gabe whisper it as the significance dawned on her. “Jerk?” Ray could tell he was trying to keep a straight face.

Janelle shook her head. “It's OK, I'm so over that by now. But it's true. I'm the jerk who married the dick.

“Do you think it affected him?” asked Gabe.

“My initials?”

“His.”

“She nodded her head in confirmation and closed her eyes for a moment. “Without a doubt.” She opened them and looked at Gabe, squinting to remember. “It probably started in middle school. Kids are cruel. They called him Dick King. I think he might have been embarrassed at first, but then he owned it. You know, richest kid in the school. He'd have this smirk on his face, and he say, *It's good to be the dick King*. And, of course, everyone would laugh.

“Did he live up to his name?”

Again, she nodded in confirmation.

“Anyone in particular?”

Janelle looked past him and stared into space, her voice emotionless. “I thought all that energy he had would be good for us. I thought it would make an interesting, exciting marriage.”

Ray watched as the truth spilled from the woman.

Gabe tilted his head, questioning. “Did he hurt you?”

“God no,” she said, her eyes still unfocused on some point in the past. “With him it was always about winning and losing. We got married? He won. So he had to find a new game to win. It was always with his fancy cars and his trips to the races.” She shook her head, and Ray detected a sadness to it. “He never wanted kids.”

“Women?”

She shrugged. “I presumed so. But I didn't care. I figured it served them both right. Once he stopped wanting me, I realized what I'd done and who I'd become. I lost my way, I guess. And my self-respect.”

Ray watched as Gabe put away his notebook and hugged her tightly. “You should have come to me.”

Janelle looked up at him, tears in her eyes. She nodded. “I know...but it was—” she

cleared her throat. "It was complicated," she rasped. "But you're here now." She hugged him back. "So, thank you for coming."

Ray realized she was staring and averted her gaze from the embrace. Around her, the home's furnishings complimented the designer clothing Janelle wore. It looked more like the inside of one of the model homes she'd seen in the new developments on the city's east side. This is what money bought. An interior designer. A gardner. A maid, and a sterile home that looked as if no one lived here. She felt a pang of momentary pity. Who was she kidding? She had her own problems, she thought.

If Janelle had to guess, who might have the biggest grudge against David, Gabe was asking. He had his notebook out again. Janelle thought about it for a good long time.

"He used to beat kids up in high school," she said. "Sometimes pretty badly."

"Do you remember any names?"

In spite of being more than a decade before, she did.

"Anything else?"

She shook her head. "No, sorry.

Gabe was only partway through his farewell sentence when she interrupted him.

"Wait. There was one. Funny kid."

"Funny looking?"

"No, you know, like make-you-laugh funny. David pantsed him at Senior Night."

"What, like pulled his pants down?"

"Poor kid, she said. "It wasn't funny; it was embarrassing. Never saw him again."

Gabe made a couple more notes before they left Janelle alone with her puffy face and her sterile house.

"Do you really think it might have been someone from high school?" asked Ray as they climbed back into Gabe's ride.

Gabe gave her a long look before he responded. "We don't guess at conclusions, do we, Ray?"

It wasn't the first time he'd said that. She smiled at him. "I do."

"Yes, you do, don't you?" He couldn't contain his smile. "So, what *do* we do?"

It was Saturday afternoon and she was dragging. She hadn't slept well, and she was pretty sure she knew why. "We go to your boat and have coffee?"

He was still smiling. "Damn right we do. That's *exactly* what we do.

GABE KNOCKED, BUT NO ONE ANSWERED. He tried again. "Anyone home?" A second lock had been installed on the closed door inches from his face. It sat above worn handle, its brightness all but rubbed off. The lock probably cost more than the door itself, Ray judged, but served its purpose, an obligatory safety accessory in this part of the city.

They stood and waited in silence, listening for a response, but only the muffled sound of traffic four floors down and a pair talkative crows replied.

Ray was tense. Gone were the yawns and the urge to sleep she'd felt as they'd driven across town to the marina. Gabe always surprised her. How, she wondered, might a man be so out-of-touch with her culture and so sophisticated with his investigative techniques. A half hour on the *Commissario* and a cup and a half of Gabe's magical coffee had done two things. First, it gave him the time to punch the names Janelle had suggested into the app on his phone. That was the surprising part. That wasn't old-school detective work. That was new school. Cheating, almost. Second, it had restarted her energy source. That and the brisk air combined to put a spring in her step and a nervous tension in her bones. She shivered thinking about it. One of the names, Gabe found, was deceased. One lived on the south side of the city, and a third had been released from prison the month before and had no current address. Ray's money was on number three. Gabe wanted to hit the dealerships tomorrow, which she figured she'd skip. A lot of investigative work was mundane. She didn't have plans, but she would certainly make some. She thought about skipping this one, as well, but the coffee and her own curiosity convinced her to ride along with Gabe's plan to visit with name number two.

Gabe knocked again and again waited for the response that didn't come. He shrugged. "Looks like we missed him, Ray."

She nodded in silence, and they turned to retrace their steps to the stairwell they'd come up. The sound of a familiar bell stopped them in their tracks.

Ray eyebrows raised in surprise. "An elevator?"

"Seems a little out of place in this neighborhood, doesn't it?"

Maybe not, Ray thought. With the minimum wage population as transient as it was, the thing probably got a lot of use. "Freight elevator, probably," said Ray. "Bet it's a code requirement."

Gabe laughed. "Funny, Ray. But only partly right. I'm sure an elevator is a city code requirement, but a working elevator?" He shook his head. "A rare and pricey option."

Ray said nothing. She knew Gabe was right, but she could think of at least one reason a working elevator would be a practical investment. Her boss would call it CYA. Her boss was good at that. He did little more than cover his ass and usually at the expense of her time and her schedule. Ray Bishop. Ass cover. She gritted her teeth at the thought. Here? In this layer of society, it would be called minimizing exposure. Manually moving belongings in and out of a building was an obstacle course for personal injuries, and she was sure she'd seen a crowd of street lawyers lined up outside, spoiling for a settlement. Maybe the tenants might even get something, too, although she wouldn't swear to it. No rent money? You're out, she thought. But in this case, it looked like the landlord wanted to make sure the door didn't hit the departing tenant ass on the way out. Because that would be their lottery ticket. Their early retirement. Landlords have money. Street lawyers have their own techniques of parting the two of them. It was simple math.

Ray heard a whirring whine and was unprepared for the sight that emerged from the recessed hallway that housed the elevator. A balding, wisp of a man rode a motorized wheelchair and was accompanied by one of the biggest dogs she'd ever seen, all muscle, teeth and slobber.

She and Gabe froze. Not out of fear, but of shock. This was not a sight she saw everyday.

With his hand controller, the man brought the chair to a stop. The dog immediately sat, then dropped to the floor as if weary of dragging his significant bulk around. The man had sad eyes that he raised in a questioning gaze. "Help you find someone?"

Gabe nodded. "We're looking for Cory Cazzino, the tenant in apartment 4P."

The thin face brightened. "Really?" He slipped his hand over the side of the wheelchair and patted the dog's back. "Hear that, Bruto? We've got company."

Ray exchanged a quick glance with Gabe. "Wait," she said slowly, "You're Cory Cazzino?" This was not the image she'd drawn in her mind, based on Janelle's story.

He shrugged. "And I live in apartment 4P. Pretty sure I'm the only one who lives there." He patted the dog again. "Oh, except for my best friend here. No offense, Bruto." The dog's ears perked, and he sat up, ready to resume their walk. Were it possible for dogs, Ray was pretty sure Bruto was smiling. "Well, come on then," he continued, rolling his whirring chair forward. "We don't get a lot of visitors here, but you're welcome to come in."

Ray pressed her back against the wall next to Gabe and allowed Cory to pass. An unleashed Bruto followed directly as a practiced hand unlocked first one, then the other lock. "Can never be too careful in this neighborhood," he called over his shoulder as the door swung open. "Come on, Bruto. Maybe a nice cup of tea would hit the spot."

They following him inside, and Bruto padded off, not presumably to make tea, Ray thought, and the sound of lapping water evaporated her vision of Bruto on his hind legs reaching for the Earl Gray and the teapot.

"But that's what best friends are for. To make you feel safe in this neighborhood." Without pause, he gestured with a sweep of his arm to the small apartment. "This is it. Sorry for the mess," he apologized. "Like I said, we don't get many visitors here."

The place was tiny, Ray acknowledged, but hardly a mess. His was the voice of the mother-in-law who had spent the last 48 hours cleaning and then apologized offhandedly about the lack of tidiness. Furnishings were spartan, and it even smelled like Pine Sol and mother-in-law. Maybe he had a maid. Cory rolled to the kitchen which was actually just a different part of the main living room and turned a dial on the stove.

Ray mused as Gabe spoke. "We're sorry to bother you, Mr. Cazzino.

"Call me Cory."

Gabe nodded "David King had his throat slit sometime last night. We're just trying to piece together the why of it by talking to folks who knew him."

Cory looked genuinely distressed. He swallowed a couple of times then bowed his head, his eyes closed. "Throat slit?" he whispered.

Gabe didn't say anything but nodded, not contradicting the whisper.

Ray caught her breath as Cory looked up. The face that had looked down was not the face she saw now, eyes narrow and lips drawn tightly against his teeth. "You're right. I know David. I mean—"

He paused and looked up at Gabe, changing his tense. "I mean I knew David. I *hated*

David. I don't think he deserved to live in a civilized society, always taking what he wanted when he wanted it." He shook his head in disgust.

Next to her, Gabe's eyebrows raised in curiosity, urging him to continue.

He did. "I know what you're thinking," he said, shrugging his shoulders from his wheelchair. "But you're wrong. I didn't kill him. You walk around like that your whole life, and one day it's gonna catch up with you. No, he killed himself."

Based on what Gabe had shared, Ray wasn't sure it was possible that David King had slit his own throat. Also, she wasn't sure if Cory's accusation was meant to be literal or figurative. What she did realize was there was a lot more to this story than he was admitting. She kept her mouth shut and was glad she did.

Gabe was much better at this than her. "We're not here to accuse you, sir."

Cory cocked his head and eyed him.

"Sorry, we're not here to accuse you, Cory. We're just trying to get some information."

Brutus had finished having a go at his water dish and now wandered back, his dripping tongue decorating the linoleum floor, and plopped down next to Cory.

Cory nodded. "As long as I've known him, he's been a dick. Spoiled mama's boy, if you ask me. He never treated anyone decent, far as I know. Not his friends; not his teammates; not even his wife."

"Janelle?" asked Ray.

Cory closed his eyes as if he could picture her standing before him. "Oh my God, yes," he said. "Janelle was so out of his league. So out of *all* our leagues," he clarified. "At first she wouldn't have anything to do with him. He was a jerk, and she knew it. But he was so persistent that, in the end, she didn't have much choice."

"In high school?" Gabe prompted.

Cory nodded. "We were all classmates, and he bullied anyone who even looked at her. At first, I think she felt flattered, but after a while, no one would talk to her. He became her last man standing. It was hard for her. I think after a while, she just gave up. He really *is*—sorry, was—an indecent person."

"He bullied you, too, didn't he?" asked Gabe.

Cory didn't react. He just stared forward into space.

Gabe had said it before, Ray remembered. Each case was different, but almost without exception, he said the guilty always wanted to tell their stories. She didn't think he was the guilty one, but it turned out, he wanted to tell his story. Gabe said the trigger was anybody's guess. And it hadn't taken long at all. The last remark was Corey's trigger.

"It wasn't even my idea," he started. "It was the guidance counselor."

He looked at the ceiling in his cardboard box of an apartment, recreating memories from the past.

"In high school, I couldn't talk normally. More than two people in the room? I'd get an immediate case of the stupids. Still do." He shook his head slowly. "It's my curse. It was like I wouldn't know what to say. My mind would go blank and I'd sweat and stutter. I'd get this devastating fear, and it would engulf me. I'd be paralyzed. It was terrible."

He shook his head. "Until the one-man show," he said, his smile transforming his face, his eyes suddenly bright.

Gabe cocked his head in curiosity. "One man show?"

My counselor, Mr. Foote, was a wanna-be comedian. He was all about open-mike night and did a lot of stand-up.

“Foote-stomps?” asked Ray, her voice tentative.

A surprised smile engulfed Cory’s face. “Yes!” he said, then with a puzzled look, “How did you know?”

“YouTube,” Ray said simply. “There just aren’t that many comics who are smart and clever rather than—

What was the right word? she wondered. She chose one.

“Disgusting.”

“Exactly!” said Corey. “He was always under-appreciated.” He paused, relishing the memories. “But he saw something special in me that no one else could. Not even me. He’d stay after school, and we’d work on material. It was hard. Impossible, some days, but once in a while we’d have an inspiration, and something brilliant would pop out. I didn’t understand it at first. You know, how it would benefit me, but as it turns out, if I knew what words were coming next, my stutter would disappear. Somehow, he knew that. It was incredibly liberating. The best stuff? I’d practice and practice. He got me a couple gigs at open mike night. I couldn’t believe how much they liked me. So I set my sights on Senior Night. The school talent show.”

“You were a clown weren’t you?”

He looked up at Gabe. “Did Janelle tell you that?”

Ray was suddenly confused. She remembered the nose. She could feel it in her hand again. It wasn’t even there and she could feel it.

“I killed that night. It was our best stuff, and they were screaming. For more! It was funny as hell. I was in heaven.” His face suddenly darkened. “Until—”

Gabe filled in the pause. “He pantsed you, didn’t he?”

Corey closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. “Clown pants and clown underwear down around clown shoes. My dong on display for everyone to laugh at. That asshole,” he snarled. “He was the asshole hero, and I was the idiot without pants. I couldn’t face any of them. Not a one.”

In an instant, the apartment was silent as death. Ray dared not speak. But she understood the motive.

“It changed your life, didn’t it?”

“Goddam right it did.”

“So how did you do it? How did you kill the man who wasn’t afraid of anything.”

Corey looked up with sad eyes. “When I look back now, I realize that it wasn’t him. It was me. I’m the one who made my fear debilitating. He was just some jerk who amused himself at my expense. And a lot of others, too.”

Cory stared at the floor. “You’re wrong though. He wasn’t fearless. He was afraid of things just like me.” He reached down and patted Bruto’s head. “Dogs for one. He hated them. I don’t know why, he just did.”

Gabe was curious. “What else?”

“Death. I think he considered himself the king of life. The proof for him was in his name. I disabused him of that notion.”

“You threatened him, didn’t you?”

“He thought everyone saw the world the same way he did. Guy with the gun beats a guy without a gun. Yeah, I threatened him. I wanted him to feel the same thing I did.

The stupid thing wasn't even loaded, but with everything he'd done, especially to me, he knew I had it in me. If he were in my shoes, he do the same. He didn't question it when I held it to his head. I made him put clown pants on. Then the clown shoes. He was scared. He started crying. I put ham in his pocket and told him to run or I was going to shoot him between he eyes."

"The dog," Ray whispered.

"Bruto chased him. In truth, Bruto chased the ham."

"Was it piano wire?" asked Gabe.

"It was supposed to get him in the forehead. Leave a mark for a while. Make him feel me. My pain. My anger." said Cory. "But he jumped at just the wrong moment. I couldn't have planned it that way if I wanted to. The universe works in strange ways. Divine intervention, I guess. Boom, his head snaps back, and that was it. Bruto got his ham and we came home."

But Ray didn't believe it. "You did all that from a wheelchair? No one would believe that confession for an instant."

The tea kettle on the stovetop that had threatened its readiness, rumbling its boiling warning for the last part of his confession now let loose its scream.

Cory reversed his chair toward the stove, then stood up, flipping the stovetop off and opening a cupboard that revealed a neat stack of teacups and saucers. He placed three on the countertop.

"You can walk?" gasped Ray.

Cory opened a drawer, pulled out a tin, and set it on the counter next to the teacups. "The truth is, I didn't do it for me. Chemo has delayed my cancer somewhat, but it still makes me terribly weak. The chair helps. The truth is I did it for her. I'll be dead in a month, my doctor tells me. I don't know if I believe him or not, but I know one thing."

He carefully poured hot water into each cup. "I know Janelle will be free of him for the rest of her life." He reached for the tea bags. "So I need one thing from the both of you. Call it a dying man's last request. She can never know." He deposited a bag in each of the cups. "Leave the mystery a mystery. Leave it to the cops. They'll close it and leave her in peace."

Ray looked at Gabe who, judging by his expression, had solved the case and was considering Cory's request. No way he was going to agree. He was just too principled. Then she remembered. Gabe knew Janelle. She watched him nod an affirmative. "If I were on retainer to the police, I couldn't," said Gabe. "Nothing personal, you understand. That's just who I am. But Janelle was a friend of mine, and while I can't shield her from our justice system, I can't curse her either. Consider it done."

They drank their tea in silence.

A bitter wind slapped Ray's face as they made their way back to the relative warmth of Gabe's car. "One thing I don't understand," she said as she slipped onto the icy leather seat.

Gabe started the engine and turned to her with raised eyebrows.

"You said they found the body with his pants down, didn't you? Was Cory really telling the truth? Maybe it was a lot more of a revenge streak than he let on."

Gabe pursed his lips. "Could be. Forensics will eventually get to the truth, I guess. But they weren't blue jeans or khakis. They were clown pants. Polyester or rayon. Elastic band. I don't think Cory pantsed him, but I'd bet Bruto did. He wanted meat, and he

certainly doesn't have opposable thumbs."

It was a sad, gruesome scene Ray pictured in her mind, blood streaming from his neck, the dog biting and tugging for the ham and him scrambling to get away. She shivered.

"Cory was right about one, thing Ray."

She shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself, mentally urging the last vestiges of warmth from the tea into her shaking bones. "What's that?"

"The universe does seem to have a way of dispensing its own karmic justice."

Ray couldn't argue with that. No one could. She closed her eyes and said a prayer for them all as Gabe signaled and pulled into traffic.



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We hope you enjoyed this short story. For more information about James and to stay abreast of new material, visit: www.jamesslaterbooks.com