

Steve Jones

'Sensational. I loved it. An absolute thrill ride'

JOHN NIVEN

TERMINALLY KILL

**'Spectacular... like
Richard Osman with
a lot more blood'**

TONY PARSONS



Side effects may include murder...

Terminally Kill

By the same author

Call Time

Copyrighted Material

Terminally Kill

STEVE JONES



Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN MICHAEL JOSEPH

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Michael Joseph is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2024

001

Copyright © Steve Jones, 2024

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 13.5/16pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-65974-8
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-65975-5

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

For our Ray. We knew you'd beat it.

Prologue

Mac and Fish dragged the injured insurgent to cover. Dowe provided fire support as the four of them entered a nearby blown-out compound.

‘Thought you’d try a sneak attack, did you?’ growled Mac at the thrashing Taliban fighter. He wailed something in Pashto as they slung his body onto a pile of rocks in the corner. Landing with a grunt, a grenade fell out of his jacket. It came to rest with a precarious spin amongst the rubble on the floor.

They froze for a millisecond until the sight of the pin still engaged brought sighs of relief.

‘Get that, Fish, before he does himself a mischief,’ said Mac.

The wounded man, his face twisted in agony, looked down at the grenade and made a weak grab for it with bloodied fingers. But Fish quickly batted away his hand and scooped it up.

Dowe stood watch at the blasted hole that formed the room’s makeshift entrance, his rifle primed in the direction of the sound of gunfire.

‘You don’t look too good, pal,’ said Mac to the squirming man who grasped at the gunshot wound at the top of his inner thigh. ‘Sorry about that,’ he added with a smile and a nod at the bloody mess, before he put his boot on it.

The man screamed.

‘Corporal . . .’ said Fish, placing a firm hand on Mac’s shoulder.

Mac ignored him. ‘It’s an early shower for you. Go on. Fade to black, you wee fucker.’

‘*Mac!*’

‘What?’

‘We should patch him up.’

Mac removed his boot and turned to Fish. ‘We look like the fucking St John Ambulance to you? This isn’t some honourable adversary. He’s Taliban shite. This is a man who’ll use kids as shields. Who’d hang our blown-off limbs from trees.’ Blood was now pumping from the Taliban soldier’s leg. ‘You wanna fucking kiss it better, Fish?!’

‘You cannot let him –’

‘Can’t we? This is what winning looks like – one less of them.’

‘Stripey inbound!’ announced Dowe, giving Mac and Fish the heads up.

A man entered the scene and paused to observe the dimly lit stand-off between Mac and Fish. ‘What’s going on here?’ he asked.

‘Injured insurgent, Sergeant,’ said Fish.

Their commander pushed past the two and looked down at the now silent man. The blood flow from his leg had slowed significantly and the agony that had creased his bearded face was gone, replaced by a near-death calm.

‘Help him. *Now.*’

Fish removed his field dressing kit and went to work as the Multiple Commander, Mac and Dowe looked on. After a while, Fish stopped. ‘I’m afraid he’s gone,’ he said, dragging a hand over his face in frustration.

Their commander followed the blood trail from the wounded soldier's leg to the blood-spattered boot of Lance Corporal Neil 'Mac' McGrindle. 'You know what you've done here?' he asked, meeting the much bigger man's defiant gaze. 'You've broken the Geneva Convention. You let that man die.'

I

‘Do you mind me asking where you got the scar?’ the pale man opposite asked.

‘Do you mind me not telling you?’ replied Ray, holding the younger man’s gaze until he decided his lap was a better direction to look in.

Ray immediately felt bad. He knew the man didn’t mean anything by it. He was just trying, albeit clumsily, to make conversation and alleviate the awkwardness of their dire situation. There were four of them sitting in oversized white leather armchairs in a small room. The chairs were set up in two pairs, so that the members of the unfortunate group faced one another like the host and contestant of the last game show on earth anyone would want to be part of.

All things considered, Ray wasn’t in a talkative mood. Frankly, he was feeling sorry for himself. Lamenting his luck. He mused that there are only two kinds of luck in the world – good and bad. A slight limp and a deep, jagged scar that cut a vivid crescent from the corner of his left eye to his jawline, reminded Ray every day what good luck looked like. Right now he needed that, because all he had known recently was luck of the bad variety. He wasn’t about to share his sad story with a man he had met only moments earlier just because cruel fate had decided to place them opposite one another.

Ray glanced across at the pale man who now stared forlornly down, and relented. 'I cut myself shaving. Just a nick. So I popped a square of tissue on it and as you can see – good as new.'

The man looked up to meet Ray's lopsided grin. 'Really?' he replied with a laugh. 'Maybe we're wasting our time here. Maybe we should all go home and wrap ourselves in toilet paper?'

'All that whining,' said the painfully frail elderly lady sitting in the chair to Ray's right. 'You're a proper pair of *mummy's* boys.'

'Oh, very good, Rose! Such wit. A pier somewhere is missing its comedian.' The pale man rolled his eyes, before bringing his attention back to Ray. 'I'm Luke Kellner. You've just met Rose and the big man here is Gog.' He tapped the shoulder of a huge man to his left who managed to fill his oversized white leather chair with awkward ease. He gave Ray a glance and a nod of his shaved bowling-ball head before looking back down at a spot on the carpet that had held his attention until now.

'Gog? That's an unusual name,' said Ray.

'It's a nickname,' the big man replied in a gentle Welsh brogue. 'It's short for Gogmagog – the last of the Welsh giants. My real name is Paul.'

'Do you prefer Paul or Gog?' Ray asked.

He broke into a wide smile revealing a missing incisor. 'I like Gog.'

'Then Gog it is,' said Ray, returning the smile.

'So that's us, Earth, Wind and Fire. How about you?' asked Luke.

'Ray Leonard,' he said, extending his hand before

coming to an abrupt stop as he realized the tether wouldn't permit the distance required for a handshake. An embarrassed wave to all would have to suffice.

'Oh wow! That's funny. Just like the boxer,' said Luke, lighting up at the notion.

'Yes. Like the boxer,' said Ray, with the air of a man who had said that a lot over the years since 1979, when Sugar Ray Leonard had come to prominence after fighting and beating Wilfred Benitez for the WBC Welterweight title.

'I bet you get called Sugar quite a bit?'

'Sometimes.'

'May I?'

'As we are in this getting-to-know-you period . . . I'd prefer Ray.'

'Roger that,' said Luke, with a no-hard-feelings shrug. 'What a boxer, though. Speed. Footwork. Punching power. And an absolute master of ring strategy.'

'I'm surprised you know him. How old are you?'

'Thirty-four,' Luke replied, rubbing at his designer stubble. 'I like the fights. I've taken a lot of clients over the years.' Ray nodded and thought – *investment banker?* 'Pound for pound one of the greats, old Sugar Ray.'

'If you say so.'

'You don't like boxing?'

'I don't mind it. I just wouldn't put it on TV.'

'Where would you put it?' asked Luke with an incredulous chuckle.

'In a barn? A clearing in the woods?' said Ray after a moment's thought, in his practical way.

'A clearing in the . . . *Why?*'

'If a couple of men want to hit seven bells out of each

other than be my guest. But do it away from prying eyes. Let's not call it entertainment. There's enough pain and suffering in the world.'

'The world!?' laughed Luke. 'There's enough pain and suffering in this room.'

A solemn hush came over the group as they considered the truth of his words. For several long moments the only sound that could be heard was the ceaseless din of the twenty-four-hour news cycle coming from a small, wall-mounted television in the corner of the airless room.

Ending the group's reverie, Luke said, 'What are you in for, Ray?'

'You make it sound like we're in prison.'

'We are in a way, don't you think? We've all been given life sentences. For some reason or another we've pissed off the guy upstairs. What's the verdict from the bearded sadist?' At this, Gog shook his head and gave an irked grunt but Luke didn't seem to notice, and continued. 'Hanging? Lethal injection? Firing squad?' Ray gave Luke a long unappreciative look. 'No dice?' said Luke. 'Surely this is the one room we can all cut through the bullshit? No need for tippy toes in here. Life's too short – pun intended.'

In the soft dim of the spotlights above (dimmed, Ray supposed, in an attempt to create a soothing environment for those going through a challenging time) Ray looked down at the tape under which an unseen needle pierced his skin and entered his vein. His eyes followed the line of the rubber tube connecting the needle to a liquid sack, full of a combination of drugs designed to extend his life, which hung from a stand beside his chair. It was a set-up mirrored for the room's other three occupants. Ray mused

upon the irony that the slow drip of the IV brought a serenity to the clinical space, which was otherwise stark but for a low table full of magazines and a small window without a view.

‘All right, I’ll go first,’ said Luke. ‘GBM. Glioblastoma. I’m told it’s the most dangerous and aggressive form of brain cancer. I don’t do things by halves.’ He tapped his temple. ‘It’s way in the centre of my noggin so they can’t operate. Hence my second chemo cycle and laser beams blasted into my skull to try and shrink the little beastie. The rest of me –’ he held his arms aloft and struck a Herculean pose, showcasing what Ray suspected would once have been an impressive physique but was now thin verging on gaunt – ‘pure beefcake.’

‘Eurgh,’ said Rose.

‘What?’

‘A cake made of beef? Sounds disgusting,’ she said through a grimace.

‘You’re in a jolly mood today, aren’t you, Rose? Did you see a child drop their ice cream on the way in?’

‘Luke,’ said Ray, recapturing his attention. ‘You seem . . . unperturbed.’

‘“Perturbed”, *me*? Why would I be? What have I got to live for? It’s not like I’m young, good-looking, rich and successful,’ he said with bitter sarcasm. ‘I eat right. I exercise constantly. I look after myself. What was the point? Fucking brain cancer. *Brain cancer!*’

‘Maybe you should have exercised your brain more?’ Rose said with a cackle.

After a long sigh, Luke asked, ‘Why don’t you tell us what will rob the world of your wonderful presence?’

‘None of your bloody business,’ she fired back, running a hand through the few wisps of hair that remained on her head.

‘Charming,’ said Luke. ‘Gog?’

‘Pancreas,’ he replied, rubbing his stomach. ‘It’s my first cycle. The doctors said chemo might be the best bet. If it doesn’t work the hope is that my cancer shrinks so it’s easier to do surgery on. They’re nice people, the doctors, I do trust them.’

‘Oh, yeah. They’re good here. They could do that surgery blindfolded . . . if it’s even needed after this, buddy.’

Gog made an appreciative smile.

The eyes of the group turned to Ray. He took a moment to consider whether to deploy the Rose-defence but thought better of it.

‘Prostate,’ he said quickly.

‘Excellent mortality rate,’ said Luke.

‘Stage three.’

‘OK.’ Luke’s voice took on a serious edge. ‘First time in chemo?’

‘Yeah. I had surgery . . . but, ahhh, here I am.’

‘That’s shitty. How long is your cycle?’

‘First stint is six weeks.’

‘Tough. But stage three is still beatable.’

‘That’s why I’m here,’ said Ray with a shrug.

‘That’s why we’re all here. Trying to beat the clock,’ Rose said, squinting distractedly at the TV.

‘What do you do for work, Ray?’ Luke asked.

‘I’m retired. You?’

‘Private equity investor.’

Close enough, thought Ray. ‘How about you, Gog?’

'I work in security. I like to make people feel safe.'

'Good of you.' *Yup, bouncer if I ever saw one*, thought Ray. 'Rose?'

'Retired,' was all she offered, still staring at the TV.

'Well, look at you two in the same business,' Luke said with a grin. 'You've got people to help you through this, Ray?'

'Yeah,' he replied.

'That's good. No one should go through it alone.'

'You?'

'Yeah. Got a good family. It's everything, isn't it . . . family.' Luke considered his words. 'But if I'm completely honest, when I'm with them, most of my time is spent trying to comfort them because they're all so upset I might die . . . and that's bloody exhausting,' he said, to unanimous grumbles of agreement from the rest of the group. 'Even my nephew understands Uncle Luke needs his brain if he wants him to help build Lego for a few years yet.'

'Don't do yourself a disservice, Luke. You've got this far without one.'

'You know what, Rose, I actually feel sorry for whatever your cancer is,' snarled Luke. 'I can't imagine what it's like having to live inside your bitter, rotting, lizard-witch carcass.'

Rose slowly turned from the TV and looked to the young man with unbridled venom.

'All right, why don't we all calm —' began Ray, only to be silenced by the eruption of laughter between Rose and Luke.

'That's a good one,' said Rose, cackling.

‘I’ve been sitting on that one for a while,’ Luke replied, with a wink.

‘So you’re a double-act. That’s . . . great,’ said Ray, stone-faced. ‘I had no idea chemo would be this fun.’

‘So how was day one?’

‘It was fine.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘Fine.’

‘You want to give me a bit more, Ray?’ Chaynnie asked, not taking her eyes off the road as she navigated the busy city streets in the old Vauxhall Corsa Ray had bought her for her eighteenth birthday.

‘I don’t feel as bad as I was expecting. Little drained. But not bad.’

‘And the people in there? Were they nice to you?’

‘I’m a little uncomfortable with this reverse parent–child dynamic, Chay,’ said Ray, in jest.

‘Sure,’ she said, rolling her eyes. ‘There’s a *child* driving this car.’

Ray wasn’t related to Chaynnie by biology but where his heart was concerned she was his daughter. When he had met Odette, her mother, eleven years earlier, she was a divorcee with a harrowing past. Ray was initially reticent to get involved with a divorcee (he had always tried to keep a healthy distance between himself and drama of that variety), and then even more so when he discovered that there was a ten-year-old girl in play.

That trepidation, on some level, had been justified. Bringing Odette and Chaynnie into his life had brought

him gut-wrenching pain. Moments that haunted him and would continue to haunt him for the rest of what could be his rather short life.

But they had also given him happiness and meaning beyond anything he had ever hoped for. There was no contest – to have Odette and Chay in his life he would do it all again without hesitation.

‘Well? Good people in there?’

‘Yeah.’ He nodded. ‘They seemed like good people.’

From the corner of his eye he watched Chaynnie’s intense scowl in profile. Odette had worn that exact same look when she drove. Chaynnie’s mixed heritage meant she didn’t have her mother’s sable skin but nevertheless Ray couldn’t help but see his dead wife, living and breathing in her daughter’s youthful face, every time their eyes met. That tore his heart from his chest, not just because it reminded him of what he had lost too soon, but because Chaynnie would have to see her mother too every time she looked in the mirror.

Sadly, Chaynnie had experienced more heartache than most. A childhood trauma that he feared would dictate the rest of her life was at the route of her underlying issues. And then, compounding that, two years ago she had lost her mother. Inevitably, she had been robbed of the carefree demeanour that she should have been entitled to as a now twenty-one-year-old student in the prime of her life.

‘How’s school?’

‘University,’ she corrected.

‘Sorry. How’s university?’

‘Good.’

Ray watched her expectantly as the silence stretched out between them.

‘What?’ she said, eventually.

‘Would you like to give me a bit more, Chay?’ he asked, smiling.

‘You always do this, Ray.’

‘What do I do?’

‘You’re deflecting. You’ve just had day one of what is arguably the most important period of your life, and you’re asking me about university? Who gives a shit about university!?’

She kept her eyes on the road. But Ray could tell by her voice that there were tears there. He looked out of the passenger window and watched the high street go by, full of people living their unworried lives.

‘The room is approximately twelve feet by eight feet,’ he began, ‘with one small window looking out onto other windows. The buildings are clustered around a shaded courtyard below. The decor is plain white walls and a brownish carpet that hides stains well. There is a small wall-mounted television poorly positioned at the room’s exit/entrance. Every time the door opens it blocks the TV.’ He turned to Chay and was instantly gratified to see a smile on her face.

‘OK. Got it,’ she said, nodding to continue.

‘There are four chemo stations within the open-plan space. Each of the stations consists of a large white leather chair with meds hanging next to them, ready to be administered intravenously by a very pleasant nurse called Donna, who is approximately fifty years old. One of these stations is mine, the other three are occupied by the

following. Luke Kellner: a thirty-four-year-old private equity investor with brain cancer who looks a bit like a young Pierce Brosnan.'

'That's quite a look,' said Chay, blowing out her cheeks.

'Rose – surname unknown, cancer unknown – is a very old woman with a sharp tongue who looks like a Disney witch. And Paul – surname unknown – is a Welshman with pancreatic cancer who I estimate to be in his mid to late-forties. Paul prefers to go by the nickname Gog.'

'Gog?' she repeated.

'Yup, Gog. It's a contraction of Gogmagog.'

'Gogmagog!' Chay laughed. 'You're making that up.'

'I'm not. Apparently, he was a Welsh giant. Which makes perfect sense because Gog is the size of the QE2 and looks like every bouncer I've ever seen outside of a nightclub. Which, again, makes a lot of sense, because he is a bouncer. How's that?'

'It's like I'm in the room with you,' she replied, smiling but sad at the same time.

'It's a strange room, Chay.' He saw it recreated in his mind's eye. He wasn't sure if it was the dread the space represented or the drugs coursing through his body that triggered a sudden sickly feeling in his stomach.

'I'm so sorry you have to go through this, Ray.'

'We'll get through it.'

'I wish Mum was here.'

'Me too, kiddo.'

A week later and Ray had started to settle into the draining, nauseating, repetition of chemotherapy. The experience would have been much more bearable if he were allowed to quietly sit and pretend to read one of the room's stack of trashy magazines. But, like a bored taxi driver, Luke Kellner seemed to be wholly unaware or uninterested in other people's boundaries.

'It's a minefield out there, Ray,' he said. 'Since the Me Too movement women are just floating heads to me. I don't look below the neckline.'

'Well, that's progress,' said Donna, with a roll of her eyes, as she inserted Ray's IV.

Ray felt the 'scratch' of the needle entering his vein. Why did they call it a scratch? It felt nothing like a scratch: unpleasant, yes, but not a scratch. Maybe 'pinch' would be a better description?

'You know what I mean, D. I'm merely attempting to illustrate that I am not a creep like those countless shitbags before me.'

'Women like to be looked at, Luke. We like dressing up and looking good. It's nice to be noticed. You wouldn't make a film, put it in the cinema, and then complain when people go to see it, would you? But there's a country mile between getting leered at and catching someone's eye with

a smile.' The nurse's point registered on Luke's face in a smiling epiphany. 'That OK?' she asked Ray.

'I didn't even know you'd put it in,' he replied.

'That's what she said,' said Luke, beaming.

'Inappropriate,' said Donna, but her chuckle suggested otherwise. 'Okey-cokey, campers. You know where I'll be. Just buzz me if you need me.'

'Who do I buzz for mercy killing?' asked Rose.

'Very funny. Don't forget to stay hydrated,' she said, closing the door behind her.

'What did I say that was so funny?' asked Rose, fidgeting with the placement of the purple bandana she had decided to wear that day.

'I'd be up for the job. I can't guarantee any mercy, though,' Luke said with a grin.

'What are you going to do? Bore me to death?' Rose replied, to a snort of laughter from Gog.

'What's the deal, big man?' said Luke with faux hurt. 'I thought you were on my side?'

'It was funny,' said Gog, smiling apologetically. 'I'm on the side of funny.' He turned to Rose. 'I like your bandana.'

'It's a head scarf,' she snapped, before mellowing somewhat. 'But thank you. It's made in Bangladesh.'

'Lovely,' said Gog, impressed.

'Yeah, lucky me. Of course the woman loses her hair. Typical.'

'God, I wish I was at the races now,' Luke said longingly, pointing a finger at an advert for an up-and-coming horse racing meeting on the room's small TV. 'There's nothing more exciting than a day at the races. The baying crowd.'

Everybody wearing their finest. The smell of grass and money in the air. Nothing like it,' he concluded, looking down at the needle in his vein. 'But here I am.'

'What's so special about horse racing? Horses are just thin, fast cows,' said Rose. 'The Swedes have got it right. They're dumb, and we should be eating them.'

'Who? The Swedes?' asked Gog.

'No! Bloody horses!' she barked back at him.

'Are you hearing this, Ray? We're doing chemo with the anti-Christ. Now she wants to eat horses.'

'I'm hearing it, Luke,' Ray replied flatly.

'You OK? How are you feeling? Nausea? Metallic taste in your mouth? Any strange food cravings? I remember my first time I couldn't stop eating cheese.'

'Nausea,' he nodded.

'Yup. It's a constant battle. Fatigue? Irritability?'

'Now you mention it,' said Ray, glancing from Rose to Gog to Luke, 'I do feel a bit irritable.'

'Yeah. That's probably the human hemorrhoid here,' said Luke, with a thumb in Rose's direction. That got a big laugh from Rose and Gog. Even Ray cracked a smile. 'In all seriousness, though, Ray. There are some great forums on Facebook that can give you some support specific to you. It's sad but with cancer there's always some poor bastard out there going through the same thing. That person could give you some invaluable advice.'

'I don't think so, Luke. I've got this far without Facebook.'

'I know. Facebook in general is the devil's notice board. But it can be a useful tool.'

'Oh, I have no doubt. Question is – for who?'

‘You’ve lost me,’ said Luke, his forehead lined in confusion.

‘The Government employ agencies to gather information on people. But now there’s hardly a need to because we do it for them. If you’d like to know where I am? What I do? Who I know? Which god I pray to? What my ideological beliefs are? Just take a look at my Facebook page, because I’ve handily gathered all that information for you.’

‘Hmmm . . . never thought of it like that. Yeah, you’re spot on,’ Luke replied, rubbing the underside of his stubbled chin. ‘What did you say you do for a living again?’

‘I’m retired.’

‘Oh yeah. A man of leisure.’ Luke smiled, before his forehead creased in thought again. ‘But saying that, if you’ve got nothing to hide, what’s the big whoop if someone does look at your Facebook?’

‘Does your home have walls and doors?’

‘Well, yeah . . . of course.’

‘It’s nice to have privacy, isn’t it?’

‘Touché,’ he said, returning Ray’s lopsided grin. ‘Well played.’

‘There’s only one God!’ said Gog, with unusual force.

‘Come again, big man?’ Luke asked, turning to the seemingly irritated Welsh giant.

‘Ray said Facebook knows which god I pray to. There’s only one God – our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’

After a moment’s scrutiny, Luke said, ‘I can’t tell if you’re joking or not?’

‘Oh Christ! He’s not. He’s one of them,’ said Rose, putting her face in her hand.

‘You shouldn’t take his name in vain, Rose,’ Gog said.

‘Why? What’s he going to do – give me some kind of horrific form of cancer? I think at this point I can say and do anything I fucking well please.’

Ray stood in the sunlight outside the clinic and breathed in the familiar smog-infused air of his city. It was a vast improvement on the chilling sanitized odour of the clinic. Chay had messaged him to say she was running late. Checking his watch, he saw that she would arrive in fifteen minutes. Yes, he could have driven himself, but the opportunity to see Chay was a welcome boost to his day he was not willing to pass up. A coffee shop a few minutes away that he had started to frequent would bridge the gap before her arrival. He started to walk, favouring his right leg as he had every day for the last twenty years.

Around halfway to his destination the sensation to urinate hit Ray like a tsunami in his bladder. It was a horrible side effect of his condition and something he was getting used to. He had managed it well . . . until now. It was too far back to the clinic's facilities, and the same distance again to the coffee shop.

He realized with horror that at fifty-seven years of age, on the high street in broad daylight, he had arrived at the point in his life where he would wet himself in public (and his grey jeans would highlight his shame with devastating effect). Just as all hope seemed to be lost, Ray's peripheral vision spotted a lifeline on the other side of the road. Barely checking for cars he darted across the street and into the shady alleyway.

Unzipping his flies, he desperately relieved himself between two industrial-sized recycling bins, noticing with disdain the bright orange colour of his urine; an unfortunate side effect of the chemo. Finishing, with as much dignity as he could muster, Ray began to zip himself back up.

‘Gimme your phone and wallet,’ demanded a voice from behind him. Ray turned. A tall thin man stood around six feet from him, holding a knife with a blade Ray estimated to be six inches in length. ‘What the fuck are you waiting for? Give ’em to me!’

‘Take it easy,’ said Ray, holding one hand up in a placating manner. He unzipped his jacket and reached into his inside pocket for his phone and wallet. ‘Here,’ he said, offering them. ‘My name’s Ray. What’s yours?’

‘Dick Turpin.’

Unless this guy is three hundred years old, that’s a fake name, thought Ray.

‘Dick’ snatched the items and caught the hint of a gleam from beneath Ray’s jacket cuff.

‘And the watch.’

‘Can’t do that.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I can’t give you my watch.’

‘Do you see this knife I’m holding? Do you want a scar to match on the other side of your face? Give me the watch or I’ll cut you, old man.’

‘You’ve got my wallet. I bet you could buy yourself a nice watch with the money that’s in there. Why don’t you walk away?’

‘You think this is a fucking negotiation? *Give it to me!*’ he

spat, grey teeth revealed behind an ugly sneer. Not that Ray noticed – his unblinking eyes hadn't left the blade clutched in the man's hand since the moment he first saw it. The steadfast way he held the knife loosely against his hip suggested this was not his first time holding one.

A bus idled on the high street at the end of the alley and its red bulk cast further shadow onto Ray and Dick's impasse. When the bus moved off, meagre light returned to the alley, illuminating Dick's dirty thin face. With a quick glance up from the knife, Ray caught the desperation and uncertainty that lived there.

'OK. You can have it,' said Ray.

Ray knew that the safest practice in a mugging was to immediately hand over any items on your person. A wallet, or a phone, was not worth dying for. The problem he currently had was that he was willing to defend the watch that his dead wife had given him with his life.

To Dick's eyes, Ray would have been perceived as some old geezer (average height, not much meat on him, nice jacket, good jeans) hurriedly hobbling his way into a dead-end alley. He was an opportunity not to be sniffed at. A rube. A crippled gift now trapped between two bins.

Expected to cow to Dick's will and hand over the watch, Ray realized that doing the opposite would be to his advantage.

He pulled up his sleeve and brought his fingers to the clasp of the watch . . . and then surged with astonishing speed towards the knife, closing the gap between them in the blink of an eye.

Taken by surprise, Ray expected Dick to instinctually use the knife to defend himself. And that is exactly what

happened. He swung the knife as hard and as fast as he could in Ray's direction. At least that was his intention. What actually happened was – nothing.

Ray's hand gripped Dick's clenched fist that held the knife. Pinning it to his hip with a strength that no 'old geezer' should have had any right to.

Ray saw the look of confusion in Dick's eyes, which he turned to his advantage by quickly bringing the top of his head into the underside of his mugger's jaw. Grey teeth came together with a sickeningly sharp crack.

Before Dick could even register the damage to his mouth, Ray rammed the point of his elbow, with brutal force, into the centre of Dick's chest plate.

An explosion of pain drove him staggering with a high-pitched scream into the brick wall behind him, adding insult to more injury.

Bent double against the wall, clutching his chest and jaw, Dick looked up to see the old man, who wasn't even out of breath, standing over him.

'Fucker . . .' he gasped.

'Now that didn't go the way you were expecting,' said Ray, matter-of-factly.

'You broke my teeth,' said Dick. His diagnosis was confirmed when he spat a mouth full of blood and teeth to the ground.

'I did. But they really shouldn't come out that easily.'

'Bastard,' he wheezed.

'In my defence, you were trying to stab me. Get them fixed with the money in the wallet and let's call it quits.'

'You broke my fucking teeth,' Dick hissed, gradually