



THE END GAME

A DS Gabrieli Mystery

THE END GAME EXTRACT

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Chapter 1

Rocky swiped a gloved hand across his forehead. One-thirty in the morning and balls-on-brass-monkeys-cold at this altitude, yet he was sweating like he was in a sauna. Not because he worried about the explosives. The Forcite was new and dry. Primo. If you want to steal something he always said, snatch the best.

No, what made Rocky's nerves jump was the gasoline. Explosives he could control. Gasoline—not so much. Ignition equaled instant flame. Plus, timing was vital. He couldn't risk someone investigating an explosion before the fire did its job, so the shack had to burn long and hot before he could set off the Forcite. Which meant he had to hang around, upping the risk he'd be seen.

He gulped air and told himself to calm down. Freaking out would only make him screw up. Again.

Following the Doc's master plan, Rocky tied several bundles of Forcite. He lowered some into drill holes on the exploration property and attached others to the drill tower. Then he unspooled thirty feet of fuse. Once he lit the fuse he'd have five minutes, more or less, to get the hell away before the exploration rig became pricey scrap metal.

He grabbed his two gas canisters, the glass bottle of gasoline and its wick, and hurried to the small wood building. Some core shacks were glorified carports, intended only to shelter mining samples from weather. Others, like this one, were sheds—walls, a door, windows—allowing the miner to catalog samples in comfort. Maybe have a sleep over.

Inside the shack, Rocky uncapped a gas can and poured its contents slowly, saturating the dead guy's clothing and body. Unfortunate it had come to this. For a brainiac, the guy was okay. But too smart for his own good.

The fumes made Rocky's eyes water and his breath catch. Coughing, he ran outside. He filled his lungs with clean mountain air, held his breath, and entered the shack again. He sloshed gasoline over the wood racks, walls, and concrete slab before backing out, his lungs screaming. Outside, Rocky sucked in fresh air. When his chest stopped aching, he closed the door and poured the second canister of gasoline over the shed's exterior.

Finally, with the glass bottle in hand, he took up a spot several yards away, facing the shack's door. Here goes nothing, he thought, and lit the wick. It flared nicely. Imagining himself thirty years younger and back on the mound, Rocky wound up and fired the bottle at the door. Center of the strike zone. The bottle hit, the glass shattered, the gasoline ignited, and flames leaped and danced up the door and siding.

He grabbed the empty gas canisters, ran to the end of the fuse line and sat, staring at the fire. Nothing left to do but wait. Make sure everything burned nicely and Brainiac became a crispy critter. Then he could light the fuse to the Forcite and leave.

The flames roared, devouring the shack's dry wood.

Chapter 2

Butt-sore and bleary-eyed, Gabe pulled into Cheakamus, British Columbia midway through a sunny October morning. He needed coffee and breakfast. He angled his F-150 into a shady spot in front of a café called Tiffany's, one block past the traffic light on Main Street, and sat there. Not yet willing to shut off the engine.

Thinking.

It wasn't too late to turn tail, head home to the foothills and wide skies of Alberta.

Of all the places Gabe wanted to spend time, Cheakamus ranked lower than courtrooms. Lower than a salad bar. Barely above a church social. He had nothing against small towns, even when, like Cheakamus, they were clutched in a fist of mountains and had a wacko sabotaging nearby gold exploration sites. Gabe would even admit the place had a couple draws—his best friend Harris was the town's mayor, and recently Gabe's kid brother Jack had moved here. Two years ago, those positives would have been enough to convince Gabe that Cheakamus was worth checking out.

But not today.

Because Cheakamus was also where his horse Tornado Callie now lived. And she brought memories of his darkest year raging to the surface.

He blew out a breath and rubbed his neck to ease the lengthy trip's accumulation of cricks. At the sound of rustling overhead, he raised his eyes to the open sunroof. Three feet above, give or take, a magpie perched on a branch, head cocked and one black eye peering down. Gabe knew The Frikkin Comedian, the *bête noire* who loved to mess with him, would seize the opportunity. He hit the sunroof button and the glass slid closed, a nanosecond before the bird shit splatted.

He reached to turn off the engine but hesitated, once more considering bailing out. Unbelievably, this upcoming commitment spooked him more than his worst case ever had. Until today only three things had ever terrified him: confined spaces, dealing with nutjobs, and the worry his marriage might really be over. And now, Gabe admitted as he stewed in his truck, perhaps a fourth: the thought of being some kid's godfather.

That was the trouble with a promise, especially one made to your oldest friend over a few double Scotches the night before his wedding. You'd likely regret it if called on to deliver. And when the friend was Harris Lancaster Chilton III, you'd definitely get that call. Gabe flicked the small silver spur on his key fob. Who'da thought Harris's wife Kate would go along with it?

He studied the bird-crap Rorschach on his sunroof. It looked exactly like a rubber chicken. "Sticks and stones," he said aloud.

A promise was a promise.

He shut off the engine and hauled his sore body from the truck. He was here. The christening was tomorrow. Hanging around Cheakamus for a couple days wouldn't kill him. And not even The Frikkin Comedian would mess with a baby's christening.

On the sidewalk, Gabe flexed his bum knee and watched a fire engine roar by, siren wailing. Then he opened the door to Tiffany's Café, releasing a blast of energetic voices and steamy air, laden with the aromas of bacon and real maple syrup. He pushed his way through the customers bunched by a commercial espresso machine, all of them watching a teenaged version of Katy Perry pull their shots. A sign inside Tiffany's entry directed: "Seat Yourself. No Fighting or Whining." Gabe cricked the right side of his lips upward and mentally filed the café under "Attitude, awesome."

He claimed the only empty stool at the counter, scanned the menu, and spotted an egg-sausage-pepper-cheese scramble named Ain't No Dude Ranch Special. After a nine-hour drive from Alberta,

Gabe was heartened by the menu's guarantee the Special would kick-start his day.

While he waited for service, he placed a call to Jack. An automated voice informed him, "This mailbox is full. Please try again." Gabe sent a text: "Call me. I'm here and looking to see if I'm still taller than you."

A fortyish woman, who resembled the barista but was shorter and rounder at the edges, deposited cutlery on the counter. When Gabe glanced up at her, she studied him for a beat, her eyes lingering on his. "Welcome to Tiffany's," she said over the clacking espresso dispenser. "Famous for more than breakfast."

Gabe put his phone down and smiled. "Are you Tiffany?"

She guffawed. Throaty, joyful, and loud, momentarily quieting nearby conversations. "Kee-ryste. Do I look like a Tiffany? Nope."

He had to agree with her.

"I'm Rhonda Zalesko," she said.

"D. S. Gabrieli. Call me Gabe. Everyone does. I'll have your Dude Ranch Special. Hot sauce. Coffee, black."

"One Special coming up." She pointed to a rack of thermoses by the entrance. "Self-serve coffee over there."

He heaved himself from his stool and limped to the rack. While he studied the list of "Today's Oso Negro Beans" inked on the antique mirror above the thermoses, Gabe shifted his weight off his aching knee and fingered the small bandage on his forehead. The sutures were a week old and beginning to itch. His shiner, the same age as the stitches, formed a tasteful lime-green pouch beneath his right eye. Compared to last week, he looked refined and felt fit. Relativity was a brilliant concept.

He poured a large mug of Mudshark, advertised on the mirror as "swift, efficient, and deep," and reclaimed his stool. He'd barely sat down when his phone rang, the display flashing "H. Chilton."

"What's your ETA?" Harris said without preamble when Gabe answered the call.

"I'm here. Tiffany's Café. Apparently famous for more than breakfast."

"Pick you up outside in two minutes." Harris clicked off.

Gabe's stomach rumbled. He hit the call return button and sipped his coffee. The Mudshark was as complex as touted and

more. When Harris answered, Gabe said, “Hang tight. I just ordered breakfast.”

“Un-order it. There’s been another explosion at an exploration site. This makes three. We gotta check it out. Now.”