

FROM THE FILES OF

Gray #1
Gaynes

GRAY TONES

THE CASE OF THE
ELEVATOR SLAYING

A NOVELLA BY

RLAKERS



Copyright © 2015-2017 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including the use of information storage and retrieval systems, without express written permission from the copyright owner.

Certain stock imagery © iStockphoto.

Cover design and internal design © 2015-2017 The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

The Orbital Defense Corps™ and the ODC Roundel circle/star design are trademarks and service marks of The Orbital Defense Corps, LLC.

The handwriting font “James Tan Dinawanao” (used in chapter 7) is the intellectual property of its respective author and is protected by copyright laws in many parts of the world.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, institutions, establishments, places, events, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination and/or are used fictitiously. Events or situations described in this book with reference to real locations, institutions, establishments, and/or actual living persons are historical, merely coincidental, and/or fictionalized with the intent to provide the reader with a sense of reality and authenticity.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid, without knowledge of the author or publisher. The author and publisher claim no rights in, and expressly disclaim any liability potentially arising from, the accessing and/or use of any referenced websites. Neither the author nor the publisher guarantees, approves, or endorses the information, products, and/or services available on such websites, nor does any reference to any website indicate any association with, or endorsement by, the author or publisher.

First Printing, April 2017

ISBN-13: 978-1545310809

ISBN-10: 1545310807

THE AUTHOR HAS RATED THIS NARRATIVE

RL-13

INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 13

For the depiction of a grisly murder scene,
the disturbing portrayal of an individual
suffering from mental illness,
and mild language.

For those brave individuals
who serve and protect

... though I dare say they're probably
sick of murder mysteries by now,
and wishing 90% of cop stories weren't
set in New York City

Monday, May 11th
New York City



The blood spatter glinted colorlessly on the faux wood paneling, distinguishable only by the way it reflected the elevator's flickering fluorescent light.

Grayson Gaynes, NYPD detective third grade, hiked up the legs of his suit pants and sat carefully on his heels. He stared at the grisly scene, trying in vain to picture how it should look, how it *would* have looked to him just one short month before. Blood was supposed to be red, dammit! The most vibrant stripe of the rainbow, the color of life and death. But these days, he couldn't see red even in his mind's eye, much less splattered all over this elevator car in which he crouched. The crime scene was devoid of all color. It was... drab.

4 • GRAY TONES

Everything had been drab since that day in the park. The day that—

A figure appeared in the hallway outside, and Gray shook off the too-fresh emotional avalanche; now was not the time. “Mack,” he acknowledged, not looking up. The two men had been partners for more than a year, and Patrick McMurphy’s casual gait and baggy suit were familiar to Gray, even out of the corner of his eye.

Mack released a sound of queasy distress from deep within, the noise equal parts emotional and gastrointestinal. “Helluva thing to see right after breakfast.” He shifted his gaze to Gray, lowering his voice slightly. “Not to mention your first day back on the job. Didn’t expect you to beat me here.”

Gray shrugged, eyes never wavering from his inspection of the elevator. The sergeant on duty had called him well before dawn this morning, which Gray chose to feel amused about. Today was to be his first day back after a month-long absence—combination medical leave and bereavement—and the sergeant was obviously as ready for Gray to come back as Gray himself was. Fortunately, as a result of the timing, he’d been able to make the entire trip to

the crime scene in predawn light, arriving about ten minutes before Mack.

“You okay?” his partner asked quietly.

Gray nodded, eyes tracing the pattern of spatter back down the wall to its source... or rather, sources—two bodies, a man and a woman. Judging by what was visible of their hands, they were older, possibly elderly. Judging anything from their *faces* was impossible; those faces had been so badly beaten they were no longer recognizable as human.

It was indeed a horrific scene, yet... drab as it was, Gray felt almost disconnected, like this was a scene out of some old movie, not real. He certainly didn't find himself as affected as Mack clearly did.

His partner was speaking again. “Landlord here says the victims are Ellis and Kathryn Howell—age 89 and 83 according to the DMV. They lived in unit 603.” He jerked his head in the direction of the apartment door just behind him, though Gray's eyes were still focused on the bodies.

Gray nodded again. “And we have a suspect?” He had always preferred to inspect the scene of a murder for himself before hearing theories as to who was responsible; preconceived

6 • GRAY TONES

notions inevitably colored one's viewing of the evidence.

Mack flipped a page in his pocket notebook. "Suspect's name is Barton Chan, age 55—he's the tenant in 602. Witness saw him exit the elevator on this floor, covered in blood. She discovered the bodies, pushed the alarm button and made the 911 call. Uniforms found Chan on the floor of his unit, fetal position." Mack released another uneasy sound. "Sounds like a class-A nut job to me. Open and shut case, yeah?"

Lips pursed in dissatisfaction, Gray rose finally and backed out of the claustrophobic space. "Maybe."

"Maybe?" Mack repeated.

Gray sighed. "Okay, probably." Glancing past his partner, Gray saw a civilian pushing forward to peer into the elevator, eyes widening in horror; from Mack's mention of the landlord just now, Gray assumed this was the man. Beyond the landlord, three more men crowded into the narrow hallway: one of the uniformed cops who'd been first on the scene, then a medical examiner and a forensics tech, both waiting their turn to squeeze out of the hallway and into the elevator.

“*Probably?*” Mack repeated with a familiar groan. “Gray, we caught this guy red-handed.” The older detective stopped abruptly, a wolfish smile crossing his face. “Literally. We *literally* caught him with the victims’ blood all over his hands.”

“That doesn’t mean he killed them. We don’t know *what* happened here, not yet,” Gray persisted doggedly, though even he doubted this Barton Chan was innocent. The victims had clearly been bludgeoned to death, and the suspect was covered in blood; in this case, the obvious, simplest explanation was probably the correct one.

Still, best to wait on forensics—or a confession—before passing judgment. On the chance Barton Chan was not the killer, it was important that the detectives get statements from everyone else in the building while memories were still fresh. Other tenants might have seen something unusual without realizing its import, something that suggested an alternate theory as to how the Howells met their end.

Mack threw his hands up—characteristically overplaying his frustration for effect—but Gray ignored him, focusing his attention on the pale-faced man staring into the

8 • GRAY TONES

elevator. “You’re the landlord?” Gray asked the man.

Tearing his eyes away from the bodies, the balding man met Gray’s gaze. “Um, yes.”

“Name?”

“Robert—Robert Saunders.” The man swallowed, took a deep breath. “I bought the Harkley Building... I don’t know, ten or eleven years ago?”

Gray nodded, now scribbling in his own notebook. “Any idea why Mr. Chan might have attacked the Howells?” He put just the slightest emphasis on the word “might,” punctuating it with a glance at Mack, who rolled his eyes, though he was turned such that the landlord wouldn’t see it.

The landlord—Saunders—shook his head slowly, at a momentary loss for words. “I... no. Not really.” He shrugged, then seemed to find his tongue. “They often rode the elevator together, and they’d been neighbors for years. As far as I know, they were always friendly.” He shrugged again.

“And you know of no benefit which Chan might gain as a result of the Howells’ death?”

The other shook his head helplessly.

“What about anyone else? Do you know of *anyone* who might have motive to kill the Howells?”

“No.”

The hitch in Saunders’ response was so minute that Gray wondered if he’d imagined it. He glanced at Mack, but the older detective had gone distant, mind clearly elsewhere. Gray sighed, considering how he might phrase his next question to the landlord. Though Mack was technically the senior detective here, he wasn’t exactly renowned for taking initiative, and he obviously didn’t feel motivated to do so in this case.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” the landlord spoke up suddenly. “There’s a security camera in the elevator. Would it help to see the video?”

Gray blinked in surprise, leaning back into the elevator. Sure enough, there it was, tucked unobtrusively in the corner of the ceiling. He felt instantly stupid for missing it, though of course his inspection had been focused on the bodies.

“Well, do you want to see it?” Saunders prompted.

Mack was now staring at the landlord in disbelief. “Um, yeah. What do you think?”

2

The elevator security cam footage indeed proved helpful... though the defense attorney who ultimately took Barton Chan's case would probably feel differently.

Gray, Mack, and Saunders stood in the landlord's second floor office—Harkley 201—which appeared to be laid out like a residential unit. While Saunders tried to find the appropriate point in the security footage to watch the murder play out a second time, Mack asked, “You live here?”

“No,” Saunders replied, finding the spot and pausing the video, then turning to face him. He seemed somewhat relieved to have his attention momentarily diverted from this morning's grisly event. “I use this unit as both my office and a storage space for supplies—the building doesn't have much in the way of utility

12 • GRAY TONES

closets. It also serves as a nice model unit for prospective tenants.”

“It *is* nice,” Mack said genuinely. “Are all the units hardwood?”

“It’s actually laminate flooring, not real wood. Looks real, though, doesn’t it?” The landlord smiled. “All the units were carpet when I bought the place. As folks move out, I take the opportunity to update—you know, fresh paint, new flooring, new fixtures and appliances. Probably half the units have been updated.”

Mack sidled up to a window for a view outside. “What do they rent for?”

“Depends on the unit, obviously. Usually around \$2,500.”

“I’ve actually been looking for a new place,” Mack said. “Do you...” He trailed off as he caught Gray’s look.

Gray cleared his throat to capture the landlord’s attention, then nodded at the computer screen. With a grimace, the landlord clicked play and then stepped away, unwilling to watch it a second time himself.

Onscreen, the elevator was currently empty, but judging by the way the picture shuddered, the car seemed to be moving. Then

the doors opened and a man entered, stepping into the opposite corner from the door. The security cam perspective was top-down, but it had a distorted, fish-eye view that ensured the man's face was mostly visible. Both the landlord and Mack had confirmed on the first viewing that this was Barton Chan. Even if Gray had seen Chan's DMV photo for himself, he still would have needed to take their word for it.

To say that Chan was relaxed as he rode would have been a stretch, but his stance suggested this was nevertheless routine. Then the doors opened again, and an elderly couple stepped in to join him. Chan reacted as though the newcomers had pulled a gun on him—his whole body tensing, his fingers finding and clasping the handrail as if it were a lifeline.

Gray paused playback. “Mr. Saunders,” he asked musingly, “under what scenario would the Howells be getting on the elevator on a different floor from Chan? They lived on the same floor... wouldn't both the Howells and Chan usually be traveling between the ground and sixth floors?”

The landlord turned from the window. “Usually, yes. But there's a small laundry room in the basement.” He shrugged. “Maybe Barton

had just dropped off his laundry and was coming back up, then Ellis and Kathy got on at the first floor.”

Gray nodded; that made sense. He resumed playback.

Onscreen, it seemed clear that Chan wanted desperately to escape the elevator, but that would require brushing past the Howells, who clustered near the door of the small conveyance. After a moment, the door closed and he missed his chance.

“So strange, his behavior towards them,” Gray said. “He’s obviously terrified of them.” He called over his shoulder to the landlord. “And you have no idea why?”

“No. I really thought they were friendly.”

The Howells were talking now—Gray could see their mouths moving, though there was no sound. It was like watching a silent black-and-white movie; he felt a small jolt as it occurred to him... Mack saw the same thing on this screen that Gray saw: a drab, colorless presentation of this morning’s murder.

With no warning, Chan suddenly launched himself at the Howells.

Gray rewound the recording a few seconds, carefully inspecting the picture, trying to see what might have triggered the reaction. Right before Chan moved, Mr. Howell had raised a hand to his chest; it looked like he was fumbling with the top button of his trench coat. As provocations went, it was weak. More likely, something the Howells *said* had triggered Chan's reaction, and Gray found himself wishing the security footage included audio.

What followed was truly one of the most disturbing things Gray had ever seen, and it was no easier to watch a second time. The poor couple, so advanced in years, stood no chance of defending themselves from the younger man. Chan beat them mercilessly with his bare hands—the rickety old elevator giving him more than enough time to finish his grim task—and the beating continued long after the victims had fallen and stopped moving.

At long last, the elevator door opened, and Chan stumbled over the bodies and out into the hall. Eventually the door closed again, only to reopen a moment later, admitting a young woman who threw her hands to her mouth and screamed silently.

Gray paused playback once more and minimized that window on the landlord's computer. In its place, he now saw what appeared to be a composite of more security feeds—a three-by-three grid of live pictures from throughout the building, most of them showing empty hallways, though a few people moved about here and there. Gray beckoned the landlord back over as Mack's phone began ringing; Mack answered, stepping out into the hallway.

“I see you have quite a few cameras in the building,” Gray said.

Saunders nodded. “The Harkley Building boasts a camera covering the hallway on each floor, including the basement, plus one each in the elevator and the first floor lobby.”

“That seems... a little excessive.”

The landlord shrugged. “Cameras are cheap. I bought the whole kit for under a thousand dollars.”

“And your tenants don't mind the surveillance?”

The other man blinked. “Are you kidding? It makes them feel safer. The cameras are only in public areas, after all.”

“How long since you installed them?”

Saunders pursed his lips thoughtfully. “It’s been less than a year. I was having an issue with some kids spraying graffiti in the lobby. Turned out it was one of my own tenants’ kids.”

Gray cracked a smile. “I assume you got rid of them?”

The other shook his head. “Nah. Kids are kids. His mom and I put the fear of God in him, and that was the last of it. They’re good tenants.”

Gray looked at the landlord with a smidgeon of newfound respect. “So how much footage do you keep?” he asked, moving on.

“Just 24 hours. It takes up a lot of hard drive space, 24 hours times ten cameras. The software that came with the kit saves the footage in one hour increments, deleting old files automatically unless I say otherwise.”

“And do you review it frequently?”

“No, actually—I almost never look at it unless there’s a problem. You know, vandalism obviously, or a reported break-in...” He trailed off, suddenly looking stricken.

“Or a murder,” Gray said quietly. “I know, you never expected to capture footage of something like that.”

“No,” Saunders agreed, his voice equally quiet.

Something occurred to Gray. “How exactly did you go about installing a camera in the elevator?”

Saunders looked at him in confusion for a moment before his expression cleared. “Oh. You realize these cameras are entirely wireless, right? Battery-powered. They stream footage to this computer via the building’s wi-fi network.”

Gray nodded. “Ah, that makes sense.”

“Yeah, these cameras really aren’t anything special. I bought them all online. They actually come with a peel-and-stick adhesive, though I mounted them with screws and drywall anchors.”

The detective checked his watch, then fished in his pocket, withdrawing the USB thumb drive he always kept on his keychain. “Tell you what. If you don’t mind, compress your security footage and copy as much of it onto this drive as you can. It’s 128 gig, so hopefully you can get most of it, but if not, make sure I get all 24 hours of the elevator.”

The landlord stared at him. “I don’t understand. Other than the file which shows the... what Barton did... why do you need the rest of it?”

“Just being thorough,” Gray reassured him. “We probably won’t even look at it all, but as you said, footage gets deleted from your history every hour; this way we have it later if we need it.”

“But... Barton obviously... you know... He killed them.”

Gray nodded slowly. “It appears that way, yes, but video footage is often inadmissible in court—we still need to collect physical evidence to prove Chan’s guilt, and if need be, analysis of your footage may suggest places to look for that evidence.” He studied the landlord for a moment, then shrugged. “Mr. Saunders, let me make this clear: You are not required to share your security footage with the NYPD, not unless I have a warrant, which I don’t. But you’re not a suspect, so I don’t see any reason why you’d want to withhold it.” He paused, smiling slyly. “Unless there’s something else on one of these recordings you don’t want us to see?”

Saunders smiled back at him. “No, that’s fine. Here—” He took the USB drive from Gray and seated himself at the computer.

The landlord was finished copying files and had just returned Gray’s thumb drive when Mack reentered the unit. “I think we’re done here,” the older detective announced. “That was the precinct—Barton Chan confessed to the murder of Ellis and Kathryn Howell.”

Gray nodded, not really surprised. Though... “It took them fifteen minutes to tell you that?”

Mack looked slightly abashed. “Well, no. I got a personal call right after I hung up with them.”

It was Gray’s turn to shake his head in amusement. He turned to the landlord. “Mr. Saunders, thank you for your time and assistance today.” He checked his watch. “Our people should be done with your elevator by now, so you’ll need to get it cleaned up before unlocking it for use again.” Gray began ripping a blank sheet from his pocket notebook.

Saunders’ eyes widened. “You mean... *I* have to clean the elevator?”

Gray smiled. “You certainly can, but I recommend hiring a company that specializes in

crime scene cleaning. Here—” He scribbled a name and number on the piece of paper, handing it over. “That’s a biohazard cleaning company. You can find others in the yellow pages.”

“Um, thanks,” the landlord said weakly.

3

The two NYPD detectives exited the stairwell into the first floor hallway, down which they walked, passing three apartment doors and then turning a corner to enter the lobby.

At least, that's what the Harkley Building's landlord had called it. "Lobby" was a bit generous, in Gray's opinion, as was bestowing such an impressive-sounding name upon an aging low-rise apartment building like this one. But at least Saunders was trying. The small "lobby" had enough room for a minimalist sofa and end tables with potted plants, and judging by what Gray had seen of the landlord's model apartment/office, Harkley *was* nicer than average for buildings its age in this area of the city.

He and Mack stepped to the side, leaning over the sofa to make room for a mother and child coming through the front door. When the woman pressed the elevator call button, Gray

cleared his throat helpfully. “Uh, sorry, ma’am. Elevator’s out at the moment.” The woman acknowledged this with a sigh, then dragged her son around the corner towards the stairwell.

Gray turned back towards Mack and froze.

Mack had the front door open, was politely *holding* it open for him. At least, Gray assumed it was Mack; so blinding was the light streaming in from outside, he could barely distinguish his partner.

Gray cursed himself inwardly. Of course it would be bright out by now—it was well after ten in the morning!

“Come on, man, let’s go,” Mack called.

Gray remained rooted in place, unsure what to say. All he knew was that he couldn’t step out that door. He didn’t have what he needed in order to do so safely, certainly not in the company of another NYPD detective.

Mack came back through the door, and once it closed behind him, Gray could make out an exasperated look on his partner’s face. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost, man.” Mack cocked his head. “Actually, you look a bit like a ghost yourself—when was the last time you got some sun, anyway? Did you step outside your apartment even once in the last month?”

Gray's eyes narrowed, and he felt a surge of anger. "You mean other than going to my wife's funeral?"

His partner blanched. "I—right. Um..."

Gray sighed in frustration, feeling his anger swing just as swiftly back onto himself. "Sorry, Mack. You don't deserve that." He seated himself on the edge of the small sofa and took a deep breath, let it out. "No, I've not gotten out much."

The other detective settled onto the sofa beside him. "Are you sure you're ready to come back?" he asked in a soft voice.

"Yes," Gray replied hurriedly. "I need to be on the job." He thought quickly. "It keeps my mind off... what happened." That was at least partly true; working this case today had indeed kept him distracted from the deep ache in his chest. The larger truth was that he needed this job if he was ever to make sense of the tragedy that had befallen him—that catastrophic moment when Rose was ripped away from him.

"I..." Mack paused, obviously searching for words. "I guess that means you don't want to talk about it?"

"No."

“Okay.” Gray’s partner seemed relieved to hear that. He glanced at his watch. “Let’s get back to the office. Did you drive here?”

Gray had opened his mouth to protest, but he stopped. “Took the subway, then walked.”

“Okay, you can ride with me. Let’s wrap up the paperwork and go out for lunch. My treat. Kinduva welcome back, ya know?”

Gray smiled. He glanced toward the window set in the front door, but averted his eyes immediately when the glare sent a shooting pain through his head. “Thanks, but... I’d like to stick around here, go ahead and canvass the other tenants.”

Mack looked at him with confusion. “Um... why? We have a confession. We saw the murder happen.”

“Yes, but...” Gray cast around for something, *anything*—a plausible reason for staying in this building and out of that blinding light. “Tapes can be faked.”

The husky detective measured Gray for a long moment, obviously trying to decide whether he was joking.

“There’s a reason this kind of thing is inadmissible in court, you know that,” Gray tried.

“Yes, thank you, I *do* know that,” Mack said caustically. “Gray, the guy *confessed*. The camera footage is irrelevant.”

Gray fished out his USB thumb drive and threaded it off the key ring, then handed it to Mack. “Have Bobbi take a look at that. See if there’s any evidence of tampering.” He managed to say it with a straight face, but inside, Gray felt terrible. He was, in essence, lying to his partner, not to mention wasting department resources—both his own time and that of Bobbi Falmer, one of the precinct’s resident geeks. The truth was that Gray had no more doubt about Chan’s guilt than Mack did. He wouldn’t have even asked the landlord for the security footage if he’d known Chan already confessed.

“Don’t do this, man,” Mack said quietly.

Gray’s forehead crinkled. “Don’t do what?”

“You’re a good detective, Gray. You’re careful, methodical... but there’s such a thing as too careful.” Mack shook his head. “I hate to say this yet again, and on your first day back of all days, but... Gray, you and I have the worst

case closure rate in the precinct. I managed to catch up some while you were out, but..." He trailed off, then concluded bluntly: "Some cases deserve more digging, but this isn't one of them."

"Don't you at least want to know *why* this guy up and killed his neighbors?" Gray asked, finally hitting upon a reason for further investigation that sounded plausible in his own head. "Saunders told me Chan and the Howells lived next door to each another since before he owned the building, and he insists they were always friendly. What changed?"

"The guy had a psychotic break. What more do you want? If there *is* a reason, I'm sure it's all in the confession."

"Just give me 'til the end of the day," Gray pressed. "If I don't turn up anything, that's that."

Mack threw his hands up. "Whatever," he said, standing abruptly.

"And if you don't mind..." Gray added, as the thought occurred to him, "could you call in a search warrant for me? On Chan's apartment?" The older detective stared at Gray. "You know," Gray kept talking, "just in case I want to search for anything the uniforms might have missed."

Mack pursed his lips in obvious dissatisfaction, shaking his head. “Whatever,” he repeated finally, turning and pushing out the front door without another word.



R.L. Akers loves stories. He loves hearing them, loves telling them, loves embellishing them, and loves forging them from raw materials. He is convinced that every person who ever lived has an interesting story, and he's only met one person in his life who came close to proving otherwise.

Holder of an undergraduate degree in computer science and a master's degree in business administration, Akers has worked in software development as well as non-profit fundraising and publicity. His love for children has led him in the past to be a foster parent and a coordinator of the K-5 ministry at his church, and he currently invests time each week in the lives of local high schoolers. His interests include graphic design, orchestral movie soundtracks, and anything remotely creative.

Akers lives in West Virginia with his wife Sarah and the four children he loves most in this world. Visit him online at RLAkers.com.