

Cassie Clark: Outlaw

by Brian Falkner

BOOK ONE

The very word 'secrecy' is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings.

John F Kennedy, April 27, 1961

The Accident

Night-time in the ward brings swarms of evil chemical eyes.

Floating like spittle on a madman's breath.

Swirling.

Burning.

But the morning brings peace and the pain is less. When Nurse Birdy asks me to rate it out of ten I say six. It is probably closer to eight, but I prefer the problem to the solution.

As the drugs wear off, memories of the accident start to return, vividly.

The green paint of the bicycle lane shimmering wetly. My front wheel spraying water in a fine sculpted mist. The lane narrowing suddenly as the idiot driver in the large SUV drifts towards me. My wheel hitting the curb. My helmet hitting the footpath. My brain hitting the inside of my skull.

I don't really remember that last bit. But in my mind, it is as real and as vivid as the rest. I cry out in terror as – in my memory – I fall. My bodyguard, Cam, is instantly in the room, his eyes scanning for threats, one hand instinctively reaching under his jacket where I know he keeps his gun.

He sees that I am alone and in no danger, and the tension in his body eases. It is a shame. I like the tension in his body. It shows he worries about me. He cares.

Nurse Birdy brushes past him.

"What's the problem, Cassie?" she asks. She restrains herself from saying '*this time*'.

She has the voice of a long-time smoker and her smock reeks of cigarettes. A nurse who smokes. How stupid. And it's a stupid question. My head is bandaged, my shoulder is heavily strapped and I feel I have lost half of my skin. Of course, I'm not all right. But I nod.

"Just a nightmare," I say. "Would you mind opening the window?"

She huffs and rolls her eyes but moves to the window, opening it wide. A rush of warm June air rolls in, but I don't mind that. It brings with it earthy smells from the garden outside, an antidote to the sterile smell and colours of the hospital room, and the stale smoke of Birdy's smock.

What parent would call their child 'Birdy'? The name is engraved in bold white calibri on the authoritarian dark blue plastic badge on her left breast. She

fusses around for a while, writing some notes on the chart on the clipboard in the holder by the door. I wonder what she's writing. I doubt it's something nice.

Some of the nurses give the impression that they genuinely care about me. I like that. Others make me feel they are in awe of me because of who my dad is. I can deal with that. Nurse Birdy seems to go out of her way to make sure I don't get any special treatment because of my father, to the point where she treats me with open disdain.

When she leaves, I wave goodbye behind her back. It only requires one finger.

"Are you really okay?" Cam asks with a smile and a glance at the retreating nurse.

He asks the question with sincere warmth and concern.

I nod.

I know it is his job to look after me, but he feels more than that. I am sure of it. I can tell the difference between the professional smiles of those who are paid to like me, and those who actually care. It is a shame he is too old for me.

He straightens his jacket. He does this often, unconsciously. It helps hide the outline of the holster under his arm. He moves to the door and glances around the room one last time as if checking for moustachioed villains hiding behind the curtains. I like the way he does it. He is strong, suave, a man of action.

His phone rings in a jacket pocket. He glances at me for permission and I nod. He reaches in for the phone but fumbles and drops it. In a clumsy effort to catch it with his foot, he drop-kicks it out of the open window into the garden.

I laugh, and with a goofy grin, he disappears to find it.

It is Cam, four hours later, who will tell me the bad news.

Bad Karma

The accident that put me here was a hit and run. Nobody got the license plate, not even Cam, following behind me. The driver didn't stop. But I don't think it was deliberate. Stupid cars do things like this to cyclists all the time. It was just bad luck.

I wonder what I did to deserve it.

I am sure that all the bad things that happen to me (and there have been a lot) are some kind of weird cosmic Karma. Like the Universe's revenge for bad things I have done.

I have stolen.

Nothing major, just small stuff, and only when I was little, but it was still stealing.

I have lied.

Lots of times. Some little white lies and some big black lies. And I have lied about lying when I've been caught out and too embarrassed to admit it.

I have killed.

Mainly bugs and cockroaches, but there was a bird with a broken wing once. I wrung its neck and hid it in the trash under a pile of old orange peel so nobody would see what I had done. I think I was being kind, but it was still killing.

I am sure I have broken all of the Ten Commandments at least a couple of times.

Except the ones about coveting thy neighbour's wife and stealing his ox.

Not yet anyway.

I stare at the ceiling for a while, counting the dots in the ceiling panels. I keep losing count and starting again.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I hear a voice.

"Howdy."

It is Jackson, an arts student who lives on my floor and pants after me like a puppy after a treat, even though he knows that I am not interested. He's smart, funny and good-enough looking, and he has a cool southern accent, but I just don't feel any spark. He's securely in the friend-zone.

He pops his head around the corner of the door but stays outside as if waiting for permission to enter. He has had a haircut. Again. He changes hairstyles like the

weather. Today he has a kind of US Marine Jarhead style, but narrow on the top like a Mohawk. It's a *Jarhawk*, I decide.

"Do I know you?" I ask.

He hesitates. "Cassie?"

"I know that name," I say vacantly. "Cassie? Is that my name? I don't really remember anything, since..."

"You're a dickhead," Jackson says, grinning.

"And you're a weirdo," I say. "But I love your hair. Come in."

He does. Cam remains outside on his chair in the corridor. I am not sure if it is because he doesn't like Jackson, or because he trusts Jackson not to brutally murder me in my hospital bed. Maybe both.

"You really like the hair?" he asks.

I nod.

"It's called a *high and tight recon*," he says.

Ah, so it already has a name. I think I prefer *Jarhawk* but don't say so because I don't want to sound ignorant.

Jackson walks over to the bed and puts his hand on mine. It's his way of expressing concern and sympathy. I let him. It's my gift to him for taking the time to come and see me.

"How y'all feeling?" he asks. "That accident sounded horrible!"

I don't know why he says "y'all". There's only one of me. I think he likes to play up that whole southern thing. He's from Jackson, Mississippi and he wants everyone to know it.

Jackson from Jackson. It sounds like a cruel parents' joke but Jackson assures me they moved there after he was born. He's a performing arts major. Wants to be an actor. Wants to be the next Morgan Freeman, who was also from Mississippi, or Samuel L Jackson, because they're name buddies.

Someone needs to tell Jackson that he isn't black.

"I got some advice for y'all," Jackson says, sitting on the visitor's chair by the bed.

"I'm sure y'all do," I say.

"Car big. Cycle small," he says. "Next time pick on someone your own size."

I laugh, which hurts a bit. "I almost had him," I say. "He got lucky."

He drops the grin for a moment. "We're going to get him," he says.

"Get who?"

"The dude in the SUV," he says.

I am a little confused. "So who's 'we'?"

"Me and D'Tox," he says. D'Tox is Jackson's friend. He's a computer science student. I don't think that is his real name.

"The police are looking for the guy," I say. "They said something about security camera footage, but it wasn't clear enough to see the license plate because of the rain."

"We're using social media," he says. "I bet you we catch him before the cops do."

"How do you use social media to catch a hit-and-runner?" I ask.

"You'll see," Jackson says, attempting to be enigmatic and succeeding in being a little annoying. I let it go.

"What's the hospital like?" Jackson asks. "Are they treating you well? What's this thing on your arm?"

Typical Jackson. Three questions at once.

I don't even get to answer them because he is distracted by a box of chocolates that Cam brought me. I think Jackson's a little ADHD.

"Who brought you the choccies?" he asks, running his fingers across the stubble on the sides of his head then looking at his fingers as if he expected to find something on them.

"Cam did. Would you like one?" I ask.

"Ah," he says. I know what is going through his mind. Cam brought me chocolates. Jackson didn't. Jackson didn't bring anything. But I wasn't expecting him to. Cam is on a salary. Jackson is a poor college student. I guess that doesn't stop him from feeling bad. Or cheap. Or thoughtless. Something.

He glances at the door where Cam's large, black, properly shined shoes, are just visible around the edge of the door frame.

"You really need the incredible hulk hanging around outside the door frightening animals and small children?" he asks.

"I don't have a choice," I say. "And I don't mind. He makes me feel important."

"Oh really?" Jackson says. "Important huh. Now I feel like a loser because I haven't got one."

"You can share mine," I say.

"No thanks, I'm trying to cut down," he says.

"Well at least share my chocolates," I say.

"Seeing you insist," he says. He opens the box, pulls out the little menu and tosses it to the side without looking at it.

“Don’t want to know what you’re getting?” I ask.

“I like surprises,” he says.

I could never do that.

He stays for a while. He eats half of my chocolates. He takes a couple of selfies with me, despite my protests that I look like a psycho killer. We chat about nothing: stuff on television; end-of-year exams; how he nearly got kicked out of the dorm for getting drunk and urinating into a potted plant in one of the corridors. Just the usual Jackson stuff.

Mid-morning, Nurse Birdy comes in with some pills in a small paper cup. She waits quietly while I take them, then marks something off on my chart.

“Time for your sponge bath,” she says and smiles.

Jackson stands. “I’ll see y’all tomorrow,” he says.

“No, stay, you can watch,” I say because I know it will embarrass him with his Bible-Belt-Baptist upbringing.

He laughs but blushes at the same time.

“He has to go,” Nurse Birdy says sternly. “He hasn’t bought a ticket.”

Ha! Seems Nurse Birdy has a sense of humour after all.

“I’ll post an advertisement on Facebook,” Jackson says. “Tomorrow’s show will be a sell-out.”

“Thanks for coming,” I say. “Come again when you can’t stay quite so long.”

He waves goodbye the same way I did.

He’s a good friend, Jackson. And a talented actor. He really knows how to play a part.

Cam comes in just after lunch, which is a soggy mess of an omelette that I eat anyway, mainly out of boredom. It comes with a putrid custard and jelly dessert that I will not put in my body, no matter how bored I am. Anyway, a girl has to watch her weight.

“Finnish,” I say as Cam pokes his head around the corner.

He makes a small attempt at a smile. “Terve,” he says.

He claims to know how to say hello in every language in the world. Every now and then I think of a new language to test him with. I haven’t stumped him yet.

He stands behind the visitors’ chair. His face seems drained of colour. Like the walls, like the furniture, like the curtains, like every goddamned thing in this goddamned room.

“What is it?” I ask, trying not to sound anxious. But there’s a problem. I can read people and I know.

“Nothing,” he lies.

“That’s good then,” I say casually. Whatever it is, I can wait. Dad is coming to visit me today. He’ll tell me.

Almost as if reading my mind Cam volunteers, “Your mother will be here this afternoon.”

Now I know something is wrong. Not that my mother doesn’t love me. I am sure she does, in her way. And not that she wouldn’t visit me in hospital, she already did. But because she flew home yesterday afternoon. To fly back, unplanned, today means there has been some kind of disaster. I wonder if it is so serious that Mum and Dad want to tell me together.

Maybe it is about me. Maybe when the doctors did all the tests after the accident they discovered something nasty. Maybe I have cancer or motor-neurone disease. This scares me so much that when I eventually do learn the news I am actually relieved. Which makes me feel even worse.

Nurse Birdy passes the door. She glances in and her usual supercilious expression has been replaced by a look of compassion. This frightens me more than anything.

“Cam? What’s wrong?” I ask and can tell from the look on his face that he really does not want to tell me. “Why is Mom coming back so soon?”

“She wants to talk to you,” he says, and immediately realizes he has said too much.

“About what?”

“I don’t know,” he lies.

“Yes you do,” I say, and he almost blushes. It would be cute if not for the circumstances.

“I have been instructed not to say anything,” he says, and now I can’t wait. I really want to know.

“Well, I am instructing you to tell me,” I say. I smile so it doesn’t come off as Little Miss Rich Bitch stamping her feet to get what she wants. I am not like that.

He shakes his head.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll tell my mom you did, and you’ll be in trouble anyway,” I say, still smiling. “But if you do, then I’ll act surprised when Mom tells me.”

“That’s not how these things work,” he says. Clearly, adults are privy to some deeper understanding of the universe than people my age.

“Just freaking tell me!” I snap, only I don’t say ‘freaking’ I use the other F word.

He looks startled. It is the first time I have sworn at him. I hope he is putting it down to the medication. The sad thing is, now I do feel like Little Miss Rich Bitch, and I don’t like myself very much. Maybe I too will just put it down to the medication.

He stares at me for a long time. I stare back, too worried to notice his baby blue eyes or the sexy cleft in his chin. I don’t even notice the way his eyebrows are creeping towards each other like two love-struck caterpillars and if they don’t settle down he’s going to end up with a monobrow. I don’t notice any of those cheap romance novel clichés. My mind is otherwise occupied.

“Your father won’t be visiting this afternoon,” he says finally.

Somehow I am not entirely surprised. Not that my dad doesn’t care. He does. He loves me. But he has the kind of job you can’t just walk away from. Things can blow up out of nowhere and he has to be there.

“Some new international crisis?” I ask.

Cam shakes his head. “Your... father... is... missing,” he says with a great deal of reluctance, tearing each word out of his mouth like shucking oysters out of their shells.

I gasp out loud.

“Missing how? Missing where? Missing when?”

My father is Paul Clark, congressman, and not just any congressman, he is the Speaker of the House. The Speaker of the House does not just go missing. That is something that doesn’t happen. It can’t happen.

“I don’t know,” Cam says. “Your mother will have more details.”

On this, I think he is telling the truth.

I grab at the TV remote. In my haste, I knock it off the side cabinet to the floor.

Cam picks it up and hesitates. Maybe he wasn’t telling the truth about what he knows. Our hands brush against each other when he finally hands it to me. Despite everything, I feel the tingle and wonder if he feels it too.

The midday news is on. It is a special bulletin. We arrive in the middle of it but a scrolling red text bar at the bottom of the screen tells us the breaking news: *Congressman Paul Clark has disappeared while on a personal trip to Los Angeles to visit family.*

There is little information and a lot of speculation from the talking heads they have dragged in to discuss the situation. Some think it is a kidnapping and there

will be a ransom demand. Others think it is terrorism. One moron thinks my father committed suicide.

I think we don't have any family in Los Angeles.

There is so little hard information that eventually they run out of things to say. We leave the TV on and just sit in a shocked silence. The next story is about the hijacking of a truckload of explosives from the McAlester Army Ammunitions Plant in Oklahoma. I barely listen. It doesn't seem important.

