

“Hey! Can you give me a hand?”

Ryan stopped and squinted. The street lights reflected off the wet street and side walk. He could just make out a guy kneeling down next to a bicycle just inside the alley.

Ryan glanced up and down the street. There was no one out at this time of night. He slipped put his hand inside his coat pocket and gripped the pepper spray his mom had made him promise to buy.

He knew he should go over and help. His dad wouldn't have hesitated. He was the guy in the neighborhood that always stopped and helped when somebody needed something.

But Atlanta wasn't exactly the hickville he'd grown up in. It's not the safest city to be walking the streets at night after all.

“Sir? Please? It'll take just a minute.”

Ryan took a deep breath, checked the empty streets again, and jogged across to the man. The man stepped out of the alley onto the sidewalk.

*At least he's a white guy,* he thought.

Ryan hated himself for that one.

*What an asshole, racist thing to think.*

“Hey,” Ryan said as he stepped onto the sidewalk, “what's up?”

“Thanks man,” the man said, “I appreciate the help. My

name's Rob."

Ryan shook his hand. Up close, he could now see the deep scar running from the man's left eye down to the corner of his mouth. It caused his mouth to turn up a bit to keep his face in a constant half grin.

"Ryan," he said, "Ryan Black. What can I do for you?"

"My bicycle got a flat on the way home. I've got the tube change out but can't get the tire back on the rim. Could use another set of hands."

Rob turned and stepped back into the alley and knelt beside the back tire of the bicycle. Ryan hesitated again. He glanced at the street.

Still empty.

"You ok?" Rob said.

Ryan played with the thought of just turning and sprinting the rest of the way to the bus stop. The guy would probably just think he was crazy and let him go.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He stepped into the alley, next to Rob and the bike.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Just kneel down here and grab each of these tire levers. Yeah, just like that. Let me grab my other tool."

Ryan held the tire levers exactly where Rob said. That was weird though. It'd been years since his cycling days, but as far as he could remember tire levers were for taking

the tire off. If he'd already switched out the flat tire, why would Rob be using them now?

He started to turn and ask when there was a sharp pain in his back.

“Ah!” Ryan said. He let go of one of the levers and reached back to the place on his back. There was something stuck there.

Suddenly, an arm wrapped around his throat and yanked him up to his feet. He tried to scream but nothing came out but a gargle.

Ryan felt something yanked out of his back. He felt a short bit of relief. Maybe something had accidentally hit him. Maybe Rob was just helping him out.

Ryan tried to reach back to the spot on his back, but Rob pulled him tight against him. This time the sharp pain hit his stomach. Ryan looked down in time to see Rob's hand pulling a long blade out of his stomach.

It finally hit Ryan that he was being attacked. He had just been stabbed twice and he couldn't breathe.

Ryan lurched forward trying to break the man's hold, but Rob held fast and squeezed harder against his wind pipe. Time seemed to stretch. It seemed like slow motion as Rob slammed the knife back in Ryan's stomach. This time there was no hesitation. Rob pulled the knife out and then stabbed him again. He did it over and over in quick

succession. Ryan kept trying to struggle, but with each stab his strength seemed to melt away.

Rob finally let go of Ryan. He tried to take a step towards the street, but instead crashed to his knees and fell, slamming his face into the ground. Ryan heard his cheekbone crack at the impact.

He rolled to his side and feebly pressed hands to his stomach, thinking he should stop the bleeding somehow.

“Help!”

He had tried to scream, but it barely came out more than a whisper.

“Yeah, I don’t think anyone is going to hear you.” Rob said.

Rob leaned over Ryan and flipped him over onto his back. Ryan tried to focus on the man’s face.

“Why?”

Rob shrugged.

“I have no idea. I’m just doing a job.” he said, “Normally this isn’t my thing, but he’s not exactly someone you say no to, right? Not sure what you did to get on his shit list, but I have no interest in joining you there.”

A noise came from the street. A heavy truck was getting closer.

“That’s my cue.”

Rob grabbed Ryan’s arms and started dragging him

deeper into the alley. Ryan moaned. The pain was unbearable and spots started filling his vision.

“I was getting nervous there for a minute. You were running later than normal.”

Rob dropped Ryan.

“But it worked out fine. The street was empty and I’ve got just enough time to get you where you need to be.”

Rob flipped Ryan back onto his stomach. He put his arms under Ryan’s armpits and heaved him up and slammed him against something hard and metal. Ryan tried to focus, but couldn’t make out what it was.

Rob grabbed Ryan’s belt and yanked up hard.

*What the hell? Is he giving me a wedgie?*

Ryan’s feet left the ground and he flopped over the metal object. Wherever he was, it reeked of garbage. Suddenly, his feet were thrown over him and he slapped down amongst a bunch of trash bags.

It smelled like garbage because it was a garbage can.

“Sorry bud,” Rob said. “No hard feelings though? It was either you or me, right?”

The sound of the truck was getting louder. Rob disappeared.

Ryan laid still, again trying to press against his stomach. But he knew it didn’t matter. He’d been stabbed at least a half dozen times in the gut. He was bleeding badly. There

was no coming back from this.

The trash can lurched. There was a pause, then it started lifting off the ground and flipping over. Ryan tumbled out of the can with the rest of the trash and slammed into something hard in the back of the garbage truck.

He looked up and watched as the trash can left his vision and was set back down.

Ryan tried to yell for help again, but this time it was just gurgles instead of a whisper.

A loud creak came from the truck. Ryan watched in horror as the truck's compactor started falling towards him. He put all the strength he had left into flipping back onto his stomach. He reached towards the back of the truck and just got his fingers on the lip. He pulled with all of his fleeting strength. His body began to move towards the edge. He pulled again and was just getting his chest to the edge when he felt the hard metal press into his body.

Ryan opened his mouth to scream, but all that came out was a spray of blood. He tried to pull again when he felt the compactor crush against him. Pain exploded as he felt his femur snap and flatten, then the pain move to his back as the metal crushed his spine.

His fingers slipped from the edge of truck and, even though he was sure his eyes were open, he could see nothing but black.

He laid his head against the cold metal.

*This is what he gets for helping somebody.*

He took in a shallow breath, let it out, then let the black wash over him as the truck rumbled down the dark city street.