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# **What You Don't Know**

Written by Joann Chaney

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# WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

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For Mom and Dad,  
who always said  
I should write

THE  
CRAWL  
SPACE

## HOSKINS

December 19, 2008

If this were a movie, it would start with this shot: two men climbing out of an older-model brown car, dressed in cheap suits and cheaper shoes. One of them is wearing a hat, a black panama, and it makes him look a little like a time traveler from the 1920s. But this isn't Prohibition and this isn't Miami; this is Denver in the year 2008, and it's cold outside, so the man in the panama looks foolish, although you wouldn't tell him that, not if you want to keep your asshole firmly intact, because this man might look foolish but he's also one mean motherfucker, you can tell that if you manage to get a good look at his eyes. You might think it was a woman who gave him the hat, who teased him into wearing it, telling him he'd look so handsome in it, so debonair, but you'd be wrong. This man's name is Ralph Loren, a name that sounds like a bad joke but isn't, because nobody teases Detective Loren, *nobody*, even if they're pretty and young with tits out to *there*. Loren doesn't have a sense of humor—it's not that he has a weird one, or a mean one; he just doesn't have one at all. He was born missing that part of his insides, and life is a hard row to hoe without a few laughs along the way, but you don't miss what you never had. At least that's how the saying goes.

But it's the second man you should watch, the one climbing out the passenger side, the tall man with the big shoulders and the beginning shadows of a beard. This man comes around the front of the car, not bothering to avoid the dirty snow piled up at the curb but plowing right through it. He'll regret this later, when he's back at his desk, his socks wet and cold and frozen between his toes. Paul Hoskins is that kind of man who doesn't think too hard about what he does and regrets these decisions later. He's always been that kind of man and he always will be, until the end of time, amen.

"We're finally doing it, huh?" Hoskins says, looking up at the house they've come to visit. It's large and brick, a house taller than it is wide, with a big bay window over the front yard. It's traditional, not the kind

of house you'd normally find in Denver, but this housing addition was built back in the '80s, thrown up quickly for the crowds rushing in from all over—California, mostly, if you listen to the locals, all those jerks and their terrible driving skills—and it doesn't look cheap, not like some of the other houses on the street. There are trees and shrubs planted in tasteful clusters around the property, although the foliage is faded and brown now, with nets of colored Christmas lights wound through the branches. There's a man-made pond out back too, with a slat-wood dock and a rowboat made for two. There are fish in that pond, and frogs, but the water's covered over with a thin sheet of ice now, and Hoskins wonders if all that has to be replaced every spring, if a delivery truck swings by with foam coolers full of wildlife. "Time to get the bad guy?"

Loren sighs, pushes back the flap of his jacket, and flips away the strap keeping the gun secured at his waist so he can get to it fast if he needs. These two are cops, detectives and partners; they've been together a long time and they'll be stuck that way awhile longer, although neither one is overly fond of the other. But they're kept together because they work well, they *click*, and that doesn't happen as often as anyone would like. A good partnership is a lot like a good marriage, and as anyone can confirm, a good marriage is hard to find.

But even in the best marriage, things can go very wrong.

"It's about damn time," Loren says. "If I never see this dipshit again, I'll die a happy man."

They walk up the long driveway, which has been neatly cleared of snow by the kid next door for ten bucks, and up to the front door. It's big and solid, oak, and the opaque sidelight is dark. It's early, not quite seven in the morning, and everything is quiet. Inside the house looks dark, lifeless, but Hoskins catches a faint whiff of brewing coffee and his stomach growls.

"Ready?" Loren asks.

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" Loren says, mocking. "When's your ball sac gonna drop? That high-pitched voice you got makes me want to punch you in the face."

Hoskins doesn't respond to this. He's been taking this kind of shit from Loren for the last ten years, and he's learned that it's best not to respond. Safer. Loren can shovel it out to anyone who'll listen, but he certainly can't take it. The last time they had it out was three years be-

fore, when Hoskins made a smartass remark about Loren's mother—that's what you do, if you want to piss a guy off, you go right for his mom, even if you don't know her, even if she's dead—and Loren broke his nose. There'd been an investigation, and a reprimand. A few visits to the department psychologist. But they'd still been forced to work together. If Hoskins had learned one thing about his partner, it was this: Keeping quiet is better. It wasn't that he was afraid of Loren, and he'd be able to hold his own in a fight, but if it came down to it, if you really got down to the brass knuckles (which is how Hoskins had thought the saying went since he was nine years old), he thought it was better not to speak if there wasn't anything to say. His father used to tell him to keep his pie hole shut more often, and the old man was right: Silence often made things easier, kept it simple.

Loren rings the doorbell, pressing his thumb down on the glowing button so hard his finger goes white above the first knuckle, and then immediately starts knocking. Loren is not a patient man. He's a pot of water ready to boil over on the stovetop, a balloon pumped too full of air. His fists make a heavy, dull sound on the door that makes Hoskins's head hurt, but he doesn't say anything.

It takes a bit—thirty seconds, maybe a few minutes, Hoskins doesn't know—before the door is pulled open. Hoskins had thought Jacky Seever might be in a bathrobe at this time of day, or a pair of tighty-whities, stained yellow at the crotch, but instead he's in a suit, same as always. Seever's the kind of guy who'd mow his lawn in a suit; he probably sleeps in the damn things. Three-piece suits, all the same unvarying shades of slate gray or dark blue, slacks and a coat, a vest with a silver watch peeking from a pocket. The suits are all well tailored and pricey; they make Seever look like a man-about-town, and those suits may be the reason why Hoskins hates Seever so much, because he'd never be able to afford anything like that, not on a cop's salary, but it's not the only reason. It's Seever's suits, and it's his fingernails, which he keeps neatly trimmed and buffed, and it's his hair, parted on the right and sprayed until it's as hard as concrete. And the glasses—Jesus Christ, it's those glasses, wire-rimmed transition lenses that get darker in brighter light, that's what Hoskins first hated about Seever—those fucking glasses. Anyone who wore those glasses of their own free will was an asshole. Hoskins grew up poor; he's got a natural distaste for guys who strut around, flashing their bankrolls and Seever's one of those guys, but he's also worse, because he's got money, but he's also a



snake in the grass. A *phony-baloney*, like his old man always says. Or in Latin, *phonus-balonus*.

“Officers?” Seever says. He asks everyone to call him Jacky, but Hoskins has never been able to do it. For him, this lousy fuck will never be anything other than Seever. “Early, isn’t it? Is there something I can do for you?”

“Oh, you fat bastard,” Loren says mildly, taking a step forward so Seever is forced back, has to make room to let them in. Seever’s a small man; he wouldn’t be able to keep them out if he tried. So he doesn’t. “You know why we’re here.”

There’s powdered sugar dusted across the front of Seever’s vest, strawberry jelly smeared between his knuckles. Sloppy. He’s been eating more these days, and with greater frequency. They’ve watched Seever duck into restaurants and gas stations, come out with plastic carry-outs of steaming food, cases of Diet Coke. Seever eats when he’s under stress, and when he realized the police were constantly watching him, trying to nail his ass to the wall, he amped it up. Even in the last week he’s gained. His belly is softly ballooning over the waistband of his slacks, straining the buttons on his tweed vest. The whole getup would fit someone in better shape, it might’ve fit him before but it doesn’t now, and now the shirt doesn’t quite conceal the underside of his gut, which is covered in wiry black hair and purple stretch marks. Reverse cleavage.

Hoskins follows his partner into the house, pausing long enough to shove a slip of paper into Seever’s hands. A search warrant. It says they’re looking for marijuana, but they don’t give a shit about drugs. It wouldn’t matter to them if the kitchen wall were built with bricks of Mary Jane. But they needed a way to get into Seever’s house, they’d been spinning their wheels for weeks, trying to catch Seever at more than cramming food in his face and scratching his ass, and it’s the best Judge Vasquez could give them. The best any judge *would* give them, because none of them liked Loren, not that Loren gave a flying fuck, but it sometimes made things difficult, so it was Hoskins who’d petitioned for the warrant, who’d had to put on his smiley face and explain the situation, Hoskins who’d had to beg for help. But that’s how it was with Loren, how it’d always been. Loren wanted what he wanted, and someone else had to get it for him.

“Weed?” Seever says, the warrant pinched between his pointer finger and thumb. By the looks of it, he might’ve been holding a square of

used toilet paper. He reads it, laughing, a sound that's like glass breaking. "You're not going to find any of that here."

"That's all right," Loren says. He's smiling, or at least pulling his lips back from his teeth, although it makes him look more like a rabid dog than a man. "I have a feeling we'll find what we're looking for."

Seever closes the front door, shutting out the cold morning light, and Hoskins is blind for a moment. This isn't good. The blinds are all drawn, the interior of the house is dark. His eyes haven't had time to adjust. He wonders if Seever knows this, if he'll take this particular moment to lose his shit, to try to kill the two cops who've come to put him away for the rest of his life. But Seever doesn't move, only stands inside the door, his hands hanging down at his sides, because really, no matter how he acts or what he says, Seever is a coward.

"Where do you want to start?" Seever asks. He's pleasant, unconcerned. "Upstairs? Gloria's at her mother's place for the weekend, so you can—"

"The crawl space," Loren says. "I want to see that."

But the crawl space is flooded, filled with rank water and unidentifiable bits, floating clouds of grease. Standing over the cutout in the laundry-room floor, Hoskins watches their three reflections in the black water, waves his hand so his twin down below does the same.

"Sump pump's broken," Seever says. He's smiling. Slyly, Hoskins thinks. Like he's managed to fool everyone. "I've been meaning to get a plumber out here, but I haven't found the time."

Loren coughs wetly into his fist. He has a cold that won't let go, not this time of year, and not after all the time he's been spending outside, sitting in his car, watching Seever and waiting for this moment. Hoskins and Seever stand patiently as he coughs and wipes his mouth with the old tissue he's pulled from his pocket.

"Think you're pretty smart, don't you?" Loren says. "You think you got everybody fooled, but I got your number."

"What's that?" Seever says, but there's something in his eyes, creeping in around the corners. He's starting to look like a cornered dog, wide-eyed and scared, and this is just the beginning.

"That plug needs to be replaced," Loren says. He takes off his hat, hands it to Hoskins. Then his coat, and hooks his fingers under the noose of his tie, yanks it loose. "Bully for you, I know how to do it. My old man was a plumber, used to take me out on calls with him."

“I’ll get someone—”

“Nah, I can drain this puppy right now,” Loren says, because he knows what’s down there, under those floorboards and the standing water. They all do. “It’ll save you some cash, not having to call someone out. Besides, I’m not in a hurry. How ’bout you, Paulie? You got somewhere to be?”

“Nope.”

“And you, Seever?” There’s a black speck on Loren’s teeth, right at the front. A single grain of coffee, or a fleck of pepper. “You got a hot date?”

Seever shakes his head. That sly smile is long gone.

“Great,” Loren says. He bends at the waist, unties his shoes and pulls them off. There’s a hole in his left sock, and his big toe peeks through. He tosses the shoes away, and one bangs against the side of the washing machine. Then he sits, dangles his legs over the square hole in the floor, and slowly lowers himself into the standing water. “I’ll have this fixed up in no time, then we can wait for it to drain. Maybe you could get me some of that coffee, Seever. That’d be nice.”

The house gives Hoskins the willies, although at first he can’t decide exactly why. It might be the strange, dank smell that occasionally finds its way to his nose, lurking under the smell of the pine from the Christmas tree or the vanilla-scented candles, or it might be the mountain of glass flower vases in the garage, stacked nearly to the ceiling in one corner, dusty and smeared. In the end, Hoskins thinks it’s probably the photos that bother him the most. There are photos everywhere, framed and nicely matted, mostly of Seever. His wife isn’t in many of them—she’s the one behind the camera, squinting into the black box and clicking, capturing her husband’s image a thousand times. If they’d had children, or even dogs, it might’ve been different. Instead, here’s Seever in sunglasses, holding a glistening trout in two hands. Seever at Disney World, standing awkwardly in the shadow of the huge silver golf ball. Seever at the Grand Canyon, at the Golden Gate Bridge. Always standing close to something important, monuments right over his shoulder. It makes Hoskins nervous, seeing Seever’s face plastered all over the house, his piggy eyes watching everyone who passes.

It’s in the bathroom, when Hoskins is drying his fingers on the stu-

pid little tea towel, trying to avoid the rough patches of embroidered roses, that he notices the photo propped up on the toilet tank. Why anyone would want a photo staring at them while they're relieving themselves is beyond him, but what does he know? Nothing.

It's Seever in the toilet photo, of course. Posed in front of his own house this time, the brick walls and big bay window behind him, the house numbers nailed up beside the door clearly visible. He's smiling, his arms thrown wide, a bouquet of red carnations clutched in one white-gloved hand.

He's dressed up, like a clown.

"I love visiting those kids in the hospital," Seever had told them, weeks ago, before he got nervous, when he still thought the two cops following him everywhere was nothing more than a good joke. He'd seen them parked, watching him, and he'd saunter up for a chat, shoot the shit about the weather or how the Broncos might do in the next season. This time, they'd followed him to one of the restaurants he owned and he'd invited them in, sprung for lunch. They sat in a booth, Hoskins and Loren on one side, Seever on the other, and had meatloaf and buttered peas, apple pie and coffee. "Making those kids smile—that makes me feel good."

They knew all about his volunteer work; they'd watched him at the hospital, going into the rooms where kids lived, either waiting to get better or waiting for their terribly short lives to spin out. There were kids that weighed hardly anything at all and had no hair, kids who'd been burned and beaten, kids who'd been goofing off outside and had broken a leg. At first, they'd been sure Seever was a pervert, a *kiddie-diddler* on top of everything else, but he wasn't. The kids liked him, he did a good job. Seever was a weirdo, a fuck-up in most every way, but he was good with kids, he seemed almost normal when he was in costume, bouncing around and squeezing his nose and twisting balloon animals.

"Why a clown, Seever?" Loren had asked, dumping a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. He seemed genuinely puzzled by this. "Most kids are scared shitless by those things."

"That's not true," Seever said. The top button on his shirt was undone, and Hoskins could see the gold crucifix nestled in the hollow of his throat. "Kids love clowns."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

“Oh, everyone loves a clown,” Seever said, winking. “They’re everyone’s friend. You know, I think a clown could get away with murder.”

It takes four hours for the water to drain, and the moment the soft dirt floor is visible they send a technician down. He’s wearing a plastic suit with a mask, yellow gloves. He has a small shovel in his hand, the kind you might use to plant flowers in a garden.

But he’s not planting flowers. And he’s not looking for marijuana either.

He’s down there less than ten minutes when he calls up, frantically, and it’s Hoskins who drops down the hole this time. He pulls up the legs of his trousers and duck-waddles to the tech, who’s squatting in the farthest corner.

“It stinks over here,” the tech says. “Don’t toss your cookies. Not down here.”

And it does stink, bad. It makes Hoskins think of the time his ex-wife threw raw pork in the garbage, saying the meat had turned and they couldn’t eat it, and the bin had sat out in the summer sun for days, the meat slowly rotting in the heat, filling the neighborhood with a smell that turned stomachs and made dogs go apeshit.

“What is it?” Hoskins asks.

The tech points to the ground at his feet, a shallow divot where he’s pulled back the dirt. There’s a piece of fabric there. Flannel, blue and white. A T-shirt, probably. Most of it still tucked in the ground, out of sight. And beside the fabric, and partially wrapped inside it, is an arm. It’s rotted enough that Hoskins can see all the way down to the bone in places, but there’s still flesh there, the torn skin blackened and curled around the edges, like paper that’s been singed by fire.

“It’s here,” Hoskins shouts, moving back, away. The smell is so strong, too strong. He’s going to be sick. “We found it.”

He hears a scuffle above his head, feet thumping on the floorboards. There’s a shriek of pain, and then Loren is speaking. Hoskins can’t hear the words, but he recognizes the tone, the familiar sounds of his partner. And then, louder, bleeding over the sound of Loren’s voice, is Seever. He is crying.