

KISS ME KILL ME

J. S. Carol is the author of *The Killing Game*, which was short-listed for the CWA Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award. As James Carol, he has also written the bestselling Jefferson Winter series. *Broken Dolls*, the first of these, was published in 2014 to rave reviews and reached #1 on the Amazon fiction and thriller charts. In addition James is writing a series of eBooks set during Winter's FBI days. *Presumed Guilty* is the first of these.

James lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and two children. When he's not writing he can usually be found in a pair of headphones, recording and producing music.

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J.S. Carol

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Prologue

Everything looked perfect.

Zoe did another circuit of the kitchen table, just to be sure. Today was their third anniversary, so this was important. She straightened a spoon, just a fraction of an inch, but it made all the difference. The bowls were bone china, the glasses crystal, and each place setting was finished off with a neatly pressed white linen napkin. Small details, perhaps, but those small details showed how much you cared. The box of Raisin Bran was for Daniel, the cornflakes for her. Orange juice for Daniel, a jug of mineral water for her.

She did one more slow circuit, but couldn't see anything she wanted to change. Daniel was moving around upstairs, which meant he was out of the shower. He had a big meeting today, so he would be wearing his best suit, and probably the new red silk tie. Whichever tie he chose, it would definitely be red. He claimed that red was a power colour. On that basis, all his ties were red. Zoe wasn't sure if this was an actual fact or something he had read on the internet.

The bedroom door rattled opened. This was her cue to put on the toast and pour his coffee. The combination of smells was like heaven. Daniel appeared a short while later. Like she'd thought, he was wearing his best suit and the new tie. The combination





was impressive. He had been handsome when they first met; if anything, he was even more handsome now. Zoe suspected that Daniel was one of those men who would get better looking with age, like George Clooney. And there was a definite passing resemblance: both had brown eyes and dark hair, and that easy way of smiling that made you feel as though you were the only person in the room. Daniel stopped at the work island and looked at the table, eyes moving from his place setting to hers, then back again. Zoe walked over to join him.

‘Happy anniversary,’ she said.

‘It doesn’t seem like three years, does it? Where does the time go?’

Daniel wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into an embrace. A kiss for the top of her head; a long, lingering one for her lips. He broke away, then took her by the hand and led the way to the table. The chair gave a small screech when he pulled it out. She sat down and he guided it back into place with another screech. Then he walked around the table and took his own seat.

‘Carmichael’s is booked for eight. So we can celebrate. I think you should wear the blue dress. Do you know the one I mean?’

Zoe nodded.

‘The diamond earrings I bought for your birthday would go nicely with that, don’t you think?’

She nodded again. And they would. The earrings were from Tiffany’s, eighteen carats and inlaid in white gold; the dress was a Dolce and Gabbana. Carmichael’s was one of Portland’s most exclusive restaurants, a place for being seen. Appearances were important. Whenever there was something to celebrate, this was



Daniel's first choice of venue. The toast popped and Zoe went to get it. She put it in the rack and carried it over to him, then took her seat again, carefully because she hated the way it screeched against the tiles. The sound reminded her of fingernails on a blackboard, and had much the same effect; the disquieting itch that ran the length of her spine got right into her bones.

Daniel picked up the cornflakes box and carried it to her side of the table. He tipped some into her bowl, glanced at her stomach, then took some out. He placed the packet back beside the Raisin Bran and reached for the water jug. Zoe watched the water splash into her glass; she watched it splash on top of her cereal.

They ate in silence. Daniel finished the last of his toast, then wiped his hands on the napkin, rolled it into a ball and tossed it on top of his plate. He walked to Zoe's side of the table and glanced in her bowl to make sure she had eaten everything.

'I've left lunch in your refrigerator. And remember, dinner's at eight, so you'll need to be ready to leave by seven thirty.'

He kissed the top of her head and walked out of the kitchen. His footsteps echoed along the hallway, the front door opened and closed, then silence. Zoe did a slow count inside her head and stopped when she reached twenty-three. A second later, the Porsche Boxster roared three times in quick succession. The noise was loud and obnoxious. This happened whenever Daniel got behind the wheel. He turned the key and punched the gas pedal three times. Once, twice, then once more for luck. The behaviour had an OCD quality, like if he didn't do it he might crash.

Zoe sometimes wondered if he loved that car more than he had ever loved her.

Sometimes she wondered what would happen if he did crash and die.



PART I

ROSE-TINTED SPECTACLES

*Those who are faithful know only the trivial side of love;
it is the faithless who know love's tragedies.*

Oscar Wilde





Chapter 1

THEN

‘Are you sure you haven’t been smoking grass, Zoe? You know it makes you paranoid.’

Lizzy was talking behind her hand like they were back in high school. The whispering was for the benefit of the customers. It was a slow Tuesday at the end of the month and there were only two, a woman and her grown-up daughter, who were currently occupying a table in the middle of the dining area. The scene being played out there smacked of obligation rather than enjoyment. Zoe hated shifts like this. Waiting tables was no one’s idea of fun, but at least when you were busy the time passed more quickly.

‘Waiting for an answer,’ Lizzy prompted. She might have been whispering, but she was still too loud. Everything she did was too loud; that was just who she was. Her hair was currently dyed bright red, there were piercings in her tongue, nose and ears, and last week she had gotten yet another tattoo. Zoe wished she could be so reckless, but that wasn’t going to happen, not in this lifetime. Instead of red hair, hers was a boring preppy brown, and the only thing she had pierced were her ears. They were opposites in so many ways, yet somehow they fit. Lizzy Slater

was the loud to her quiet, the confident to her crippling viper's nest of insecurities.

'I have not been smoking grass,' Zoe whispered back.

Lizzy shot her a cynical look.

'I have not. Because you're right, it does make me paranoid. That's why I don't smoke it any more. So, if we take grass out of the equation, where does that leave us?'

Lizzy sighed and shook her head. 'We've already had this conversation. Popeye has not been sneaking around our apartment.'

'And I'm telling you he has. Who ate those Pop Tarts?'

'Ah yes, the Pop Tart conspiracy.'

'I didn't eat them, and you didn't eat them. Unless you were lying about that.'

'Which I wasn't. I told you, Mike probably ate them.'

'He said he didn't.'

'And men never, ever lie.'

They stared at each other for a moment.

'Then there's the fact that he's been in my room going through my stuff,' Zoe said.

'No, you *suspect* that, which is a totally different thing.'

Zoe kept staring and Lizzy let out a long sigh.

'Okay, so what has he done this time? No, don't tell me. You got home and discovered the front door had been broken down?'

'He doesn't need to break it down. He's the building superintendent. He has a key.'

'I'm still waiting for the piece of evidence that's going to put him away for life.'

Zoe hesitated, then whispered, 'The toilet seat was up.'
'Seriously?'

The mocking smile made Zoe feel as though she might actually be crazy after all. But she knew she wasn't. Popeye had been in their apartment. Again.

'Maybe I left it up,' Lizzy said.

'That would be a first.'

'Maybe you left it up.'

'Not going to happen.'

'Mike stayed over last night, and he's always leaving it up.'

'It was down when I went to my lecture this morning, and that was after you guys had left. When I got back from my lecture, that's when I found it up. Popeye has been in our apartment, I'm telling you.'

Before they could get any deeper into this, chef called over to tell them the meals were ready to go. Lizzy gave Zoe a look then shooed her towards the plates. Giovanni's was one of those places where the kitchen opened into the dining area. Some people liked that; Zoe didn't. She preferred life to have a little mystery.

Lizzy was winding her up, but this was nothing new. Zoe had figured she would react like this and almost hadn't said anything. Now she was wishing she hadn't. It would be a different story if Lizzy suspected Popeye was going through her room. If that happened she would probably punch him out first and ask questions later. She wouldn't just let it go, that was for damn sure.

As infuriating as Lizzy could be, Zoe found it impossible to stay mad at her for long. They had shared a dorm room in their

first year, and it had been a blast. They were both new to Portland so they got to discover the city together. Lizzy was currently in the final year of a fashion degree, while Zoe was on the home stretch of her creative writing course. One of these days Lizzy would be ruling over a New York fashion house like it was her own personal kingdom. That was inevitable. And while she was out there making things happen, Zoe reckoned that she'd probably be shivering in an attic, starving for her art.

'Okay,' Lizzy whispered when Zoe got back. 'Judging by the fact the seat was up, are we to assume that he actually used the toilet?'

'That's what I'm figuring.'

'That's crazy.'

'Is it? Popeye's a total creep. You've seen the way he looks at us, right? Don't tell me you haven't noticed.'

'He looks at everyone that way. There's something wrong with his eyes. That's why we call him Popeye.'

'He's a psycho.'

'And you're qualified to make that diagnosis, Dr Chapel?'

'You don't need a degree to work that out.'

'Well, my psycho detector isn't going off, and it's usually pretty accurate.'

'We need to move to a new apartment.'

Lizzy shook her head and let loose with another sigh. 'You know why we live there, right?'

'Because it's cheap.'

'No, Zoe, because it's the *cheapest*. We can't afford to live anywhere else, so before I even start to think about moving I'm going to need something more than your paranoia.'



‘I am not being paranoid.’

Lizzy put a hand up, stopping Zoe in her tracks. ‘Popeye is strange, no arguments there. He’s from eastern Europe, and he doesn’t speak English so well, and he has this weird way of looking at you where it’s like his eyes are going in different directions, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to murder us in our beds. Vive la difference, that’s what I say. Okay, changing the subject. What are you up to this weekend?’

Zoe hesitated. She wanted to push further, but what was the point? ‘Working. I’ve got an overdue assignment, and a couple of shifts here. What about you? What are you up to?’

‘I’m back in Chicago dealing with the human zoo that’s my family. It’s my parents’ silver anniversary so everyone will be there. All the mad old folks. And of course, my mom is organising everything so she’s going to be an absolute stress-head, which means she’ll be the maddest one of all.’

Zoe laughed and Lizzy’s face suddenly fell.

‘Jesus, Zo, I’m sorry. Here I am bitching about my family. I completely forgot.’

‘Are you kidding? I love hearing about your messed-up family. I get to live the fun stuff vicariously, and I don’t have to deal with the stress. It works for me.’

‘Even so.’

‘There’s no “even so”. Tell me more.’

Before Lizzy could respond, the door swung open and two businessmen walked in. Zoe barely noticed the guy on the left because something about the guy on the right made her do a double take. He was in his early thirties, and handsome. Not



quite model-handsome, but not far off it. That wasn't what made her look twice, though. After all, this wasn't the first guy who looked like they should be on the cover of GQ who'd walked in here. He was wearing a suit that was so neat it must have been tailored to fit; his shirt was dazzlingly white, his black leather shoes were shone to a high gloss, and the tie was made from red silk. And that wasn't it, either. Again, well-dressed businessmen weren't exactly font-page news around here.

No, the thing that made her look again was the way he seemed to own the room the second he stepped through the door. Some people could do that. Presidents, movie stars, pop stars. It wasn't as though they were trying to draw attention, they just did. Part of it was confidence, but a bigger part was an absolute certainty about where they fitted into the universe. Zoe reckoned she stood at the opposite end of the spectrum. When she walked into a room she doubted anyone noticed.

'Close your mouth,' Lizzy whispered into her ear. 'You're going to catch a fly.'

Zoe turned to face her. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't you? So why have you gone bright red?'

'I have not,' Zoe replied, even though she knew she had. Her cheeks felt as though they were on fire and her stomach had that freefall sensation you got when you were caught in a lie. Lizzy started pushing her towards the two men.

'Stop it, Lizzy! What the hell are you doing?'

'I'm playing Cupid. What does it look like?'

Zoe dug her heels in and came to a halt. 'I said quit it. And anyway, why would he be interested in someone like me?'

‘No, the question is why *wouldn’t* he be interested?’ Lizzy looked at her. ‘Tell you what, I’ll go and get them seated. It’ll give me a chance to check him out. You know, make sure he’s not a psycho.’

Before Zoe could say anything else, Lizzy was off.

Chapter 2

NOW

Zoe watched the second hand ticking slowly around the face of her Rolex and wished it would move faster. It had just turned twenty after one, so there was still another forty minutes to go. The last twenty would be like torture; the last five would be the worst of all. They always were. Those were the minutes where the hunger was so pronounced it seemed to eclipse everything else; the minutes where all she could think about were the plastic containers waiting in the refrigerator.

Experience had taught her to wait until two. It was all about pacing herself. Daniel had told her to be ready for seven thirty, but he might call just before that to tell her their dinner reservation had been moved to nine. It wouldn't be the first time. That extra hour and a half of hunger would be hard, but she could manage it. Usually she was ready for lunch by ten, but if she had eaten it then that extra hour and a half later would be more than unbearable.

To start with she had kept the cravings at bay by shoplifting food. Candy bars, bags of chips, anything to fill the empty space in her stomach. The way she looked had worked to her advantage. Who would suspect someone so well dressed of stealing a



Hershey bar? Her overconfidence had been her downfall. The store owner hadn't called the police, but Daniel was a regular customer and he'd had a quiet word. Her punishment had been two days without food, just so she could understand what real hunger felt like.

After that she had stopped shoplifting food. What was the point? Somewhere along the line she would get caught again, and this time she might not get off so lightly. Maybe this time the police would be called. If that happened, she hated to think what her punishment would be. Instead, she had been forced to get creative. Eating toothpaste, but not so much that Daniel might notice; stealing sugar and ketchup sachets from fast food restaurants; keeping a small Ziploc bag hidden at the bottom of the trash can for scraping Daniel's leftovers into. On one occasion she had been so desperate she had eaten dirt from the backyard, but that made her throw up. Some of the things she had been forced to do left her feeling ashamed, but the short respite she got from her hunger made up for the humiliation. You did what you had to in order to survive. When you got down to it that was all she was doing here, just trying to survive.

Cooking Daniel's dinner was its own kind of hell. Standing at the stove, all those mouth-watering smells wafting around her, it was too much. On the few occasions where she dared to steal some, the guilt and paranoia had almost killed her. She had sat there at dinner slowly driving herself crazy, because he must have known what she had done. How could he not have? But he hadn't said a word, and she had breathed a silent sigh of relief and promised herself it would never happen again. Except that





was a lie, because eventually it would reach the point where she couldn't help herself and the cycle would start all over again, need battling guilt like she was a junkie.

The big hand moved slowly past the nine, and the ten, and then the eleven. She wanted to eat, wanted to eat now, but she made herself wait. Five minutes today would be ten tomorrow; by this time next week it would be an hour. It just wasn't worth it.

Zoe counted the second hand through the last thirty seconds then got up from the table. *Her* refrigerator was the small under-counter one. On the top shelf were two plastic containers containing her lunch. Usually everything she needed to prepare Daniel's dinner would be on the middle one, but because they were eating out tonight this was empty today. This was the smallest of mercies, but when hope was in such short supply you took what you could get. Seeing the ingredients sitting on the shelf, being able to look but knowing that was all she could do, was a whole other circle of hell.

Lunch was the same every day, just like breakfast was always cornflakes and water, so, even without looking, she knew what she would find. In the first container there would be five sticks of cucumber, a two-inch square of chicken and ninety-nine grains of brown rice. The soup was in the second container, although to call it soup was a stretch. It was thin and watery, and totally tasteless. Daniel made a new batch every Sunday evening and split it into seven containers, each marked with a day of the week. The Monday one was left in her refrigerator; the rest were locked in the freezer.





She put the food onto a plate and there was more white china than food, like nouvelle cuisine, albeit a twisted version. The temptation was to hurry, but she made herself take it slowly, chewing each mouthful properly before moving on to the next. She ate the two-inch square of chicken first. It had been boiled, and it was as though the process had leached all the flavour away. Next she moved on to the sticks of cucumber, eating them one at a time to make the meal last as long as possible.

Before eating the rice, she counted the grains. She had watched Daniel put them out onto the kitchen island yesterday evening. He did it the same way each time. When he was finished there would be nine neat piles containing ten grains each arranged in three rows of three. Off to the right there would be a single lone pile of nine. She had considered asking him why he did this, but she wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

Zoe heated the soup in the microwave, poured it into a bowl, then sat back at the table. She ate a spoonful and it was like eating boiled water. Even though it was disgusting, she knew that she would finish every last drop. It might not be filling, but it warmed her stomach, and that was something at least.

As she ate her soup, she wondered how she had ended up here. It was a question she must have asked a thousand times, usually during those long hours when sleep seemed to have deserted her altogether. Like all the really tough questions there was no simple answer. In hindsight she could see how her path had been set back in Montana when she was still a kid. She had never been one of the popular girls at school. She would try to fit in, but then it got to the point where it just wasn't worth the





effort. It didn't matter what clothes she wore, they were never going to be cool enough; it didn't matter what she said or did, it was never quite going to be the right thing. Her parents would tell her she was amazing, that she could be anything she wanted, that she could do anything, and for a while she believed them. She had this whole future mapped out for herself, one where she would escape from Great Falls and become rich and famous, and that would show everyone.

Except it hadn't worked out the way she imagined. Life never did. First her mom died, and then her dad, and somewhere between those two events her dreams shrank to the point where she lost sight of them. And then Daniel Barton had entered her life and encouraged her to dare dream again, and for a short time her dreams had burnt brighter than ever, like fireworks. The trouble with fireworks, however, was that they always burned out too quickly. If she had been a stronger person she would have found some way to leave him, but who was she trying to kid? There was no way to get away from someone like Daniel, not when they'd gotten their hooks into you.

Zoe shut her eyes and ate another spoonful of soup. With them closed, she could almost imagine she was in a restaurant, maybe even Giovanni's, eating a late lunch with Lizzy after the last customers had left. When she opened them again her life was the same as ever; the same as it would always be from now until the day she died. The kitchen really was beautiful, like something you might see in an interior design magazine. Until you looked a little closer. How many of those perfect kitchens had a padlock on the pantry door? Or the refrigerator? There might not be any





bars on the windows, but this was still a prison. She finished eating and for a while just sat there staring into space. Three years of marriage. How had that happened? It felt like three hundred.

She tidied away her lunch things then went upstairs to change. Daniel had left her gym clothes on the bed. Today he had chosen the black leggings with the pink waistband, and a black Nike top. She got dressed and went downstairs. Her car key was on the board that hung above the ornamental table at the front door; her cell phone was in the dish. The bright red Mercedes SLK on the driveway was a guilt present, one of many. She put her gym bag in the trunk, then climbed into the driver's seat and started the car. This was the sort of day her mom would have called a Goldilocks day. Not too hot; not too cold. The sun was shining and, aside from the occasional wisp of cloud, the sky was an endless blue. They were halfway through April. This had once been Zoe's favourite time of year. She had loved the colours, and the way everything felt so optimistic. These days she felt so distanced from that person; it was as though she had no concept of what optimism was any more.

Their house was on Fairfield Boulevard, one of Portland's more exclusive streets. The neighbourhood was made up with large clapboard houses that had spacious, well-kept yards front and back. The street was wide, the trees tall, the air clean and fresh. Today it was as quiet as ever. The soccer moms had already dropped their kids at school and gone off to the gym or a coffee house; their husbands had gone out to work. In some respects she wasn't that different from those women; in others, her life was about as different as it was possible to get.





Driving past Carmichael's, the reality of her situation suddenly caught up with her. Here she was driving an expensive sports car, and living in a beautiful home, and tonight she would be eating here, and for a short while the ache of hunger deep in her belly would abate. But what about now? Because the reality was that for most of the day that ache would constantly be there.

Any other person would go to a store or a diner and buy something to eat, but she couldn't do that because she had no money or bank cards. Daniel controlled the finances, just like he controlled every other aspect of her life. A homeless person could beg a few dollars for a McDonald's, but she couldn't even do that. Why would anyone give her money? She clearly had plenty.

Daniel had taken her to Carmichael's on their first date. It had been a complete disaster. The second she sat down, she knew she shouldn't be there. Her clothes were all wrong, and it felt as though everyone was staring. She had been totally overwhelmed and out of her depth, and Daniel had been so understanding. He had noticed her discomfort and offered to take her somewhere else, anywhere, she just had to say the word. They ended up at the Marrakesh, which was her favourite coffee house in Portland. This was her secret place, somewhere she went when she needed to get off the merry-go-round. It was also a place she had never shared with anyone. That was how sure she had been about Daniel back then. They might only have just met, but she had known that he was the one.

She pressed the gas pedal and drove on. Carmichael's shrank in the rear-view mirror, and that seemed like an appropriate metaphor for her life, because that too had shrunk and



disappeared to nothing. As she drove, she wondered what had happened to the man she had fallen in love with, the one who had laughed and joked over lattes and muffins, the one who, for a short while at least, had made her feel as though she was the bright star at the centre of the universe.

And then she wondered what had happened to that naive young girl who had once believed that a happy-ever-after might actually have been possible.