

TAINED BADGE

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

DAVID DELEE

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TAINTED BADGE

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Published by Dark Road Publishing

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CONTENTS

[Copyright](#)

[Officer Down](#)

[The Last House on the Left](#)

[Serious Consequences](#)

[Family Matters](#)

[Cop Shot](#)

[Author's Notes](#)

[Except from Crystal White](#)

[Also by David DeLee](#)

[About the Author](#)

OFFICER DOWN

The Freeport Road 7-Eleven

SENIOR PATROL OFFICER Dave Powell holds his gun firmly in a two-handed grip. He's a lefty. His right hand supports his left: his arms form a triangle. The gun is aimed forward. Facing the perp. Exactly the way he was trained at the academy—fifteen years ago.

Most cops go their whole career without ever shooting someone. Dave Powell wanted to be one of those. But that wasn't in the cards for him.

Gil Halley puts out his hand, grasping the slide of Dave's Glock-nine service auto. He pushes the gun, gently, so it points to the grimy linoleum floor. "Dave, put the gun down."

Dave turns toward the voice in his ear.

"Dave. It's me, Gil," says detective sergeant Gil Halley. "Your best friend, Dave."

Dave blinks. He's in shock. He says, "He shot Kip."

Gil glances at the smashed aluminum-frame doors, at the shattered glass panel now a gummy pile, sparkling like diamonds. One door is angled open, wedged that way by the body of Freeport patrolman Kip Lawson. His legs splay outward: his back leans against the door frame. His head droops so his chiseled chin rests on his chest. Two splotches of blood soak his uniform shirt and blood spatter dots his pretty-boy square jaw. Bloody spittle has leaked from the corner of his mouth—drying now. He wore no vest. *Damn rookies, think they're invincible.*

In his hand is his gun. Unfired. He never even got off a shot.

Gil takes the gun from Dave, steers him away from the doors, away from the October gusts whistling through the broken glass. The wind cuts a swath through the 7-Eleven, carrying with it fumes from the gas pumps outside, stirring papers on the grimy tile floor.

Blue emergency lights flash through the store windows, sweep the aisles of canned, boxed and bagged foods, the filthy tile floor—and the blood. Kip’s cruiser sits dark at the far end of the driveway. His approach to the armed robbery had been silent: no sirens, no lights. Dave’s approach was silent too—until shots were fired. Then he flipped on the siren and full lights, running balls to the walls to aid his fellow officer, his subordinate.

The gunman lies a dozen feet from the front doors, one aisle away from the refrigerated drink case lining the back wall. He has on a brown hoodie and five-dollar sunglasses. His Saturday Night Special—a small, cheap .38 revolver—sits on the floor a few feet away, where it spun from his hand when Dave shot him twice: once in the gut, once in the chest.

“Like whoa, dudes.” The dark-haired clerk pops up from behind the counter, his eyes wide. “That was wicked intense.”

Dave leans against the front counter, needs it for support. The clerk stands, watching from the open register, staring at him and Gil through the open service window framed by little racks of candy and gum and hanging lottery tickets.

Gil pats Dave’s shoulder. “You okay?”

Dave stares at the floor, at the gunman he’s just killed. His first. Dave manages to nod. “Yeah.”

Gil follows his gaze to the dead perp. “Any idea who he is?”

Dave frowns. “Nope. Just some junkie, I guess.”

Five weeks earlier

DAVE POWELL PULLED his nine-year-old Nissan into the driveway of his house, a crappy little clapboard ranch with two bedrooms, a sun porch and a lawn that he had neither the time nor the inclination to take care of. The leaves on the two maples dominating the front yard had already started to turn a fiery red. Soon, they’d fall, and he’d be spending what precious little time he had off raking the damn things up.

He wore a pair of sweat pants and a sleeveless gray sweatshirt. A ‘V’ of sweat darkened the collar, and perspiration dotted his wide forehead. Dave got out and ran a hand through his thinning hair. Worn out from his workout and angry because of it, he grabbed his gym

bag from the back seat. Heading for the house, he stopped as the white Mustang following him pulled into the driveway behind his Nissan. Despite the early autumn bite in the air, Kip Lawson drove with the car top down, his surfer-dude blond hair windblown, and his high, tanned cheeks flushed red.

Dave groused inwardly: *If I were single and twenty-five, and thirty pounds lighter, I'd drive my fancy sports car around with the top down in late September too.*

He waxed nostalgic, thinking about his own 1970 Olds 442, red, with its aluminum intake manifold... It had been a hardtop—but still. Those were the days.

Kip leapt from the car with a youthful enthusiasm Dave both admired and despised. *Yeah, well, let's see what kinda shape you're in when you're my age, buddy-boy.*

"Who's this, honey?" Karin Powell stood on the front step wiping her hands on an apron coated in flour. Her blonde hair was tied back—the way she did whenever she baked—though corkscrews of bleached hair sprang loose to frame her face and curtain her forehead.

Fleshier now than when they'd married fourteen years ago, Karin had nevertheless managed to retain her shapely figure. Her rounder curves notwithstanding, she hadn't let herself go the way so many of the other cops' wives had. And there was a bonus to all that added weight, Dave thought lecherously. It gave his wife a bodacious rack. Boobs so large they could hardly be contained by the tight, scoop-necked tops she liked to wear. Like now.

"This is Kip Lawson," Dave said, giving her a peck on the cheek. "He's a new transfer into the squad."

"Nice to meet you, Kip." She shook his hand, leaving behind a residue of flour. "Sorry."

The young cop clapped the flour away with a smile. "No problem. Nice to meet you."

Karin latched flirtatiously onto the younger man's arm. "Come on inside, Kip, and tell me who you crossed so badly they stuck you on Dave's squad."

"Very funny," Dave said dryly, following them inside.

They gathered in the kitchen and once everyone had a cold beer, Dave leaned against the counter and waved his can as he spoke. "Kip's looking to buy a place here in town, and I told 'em I had an in with the best damned real estate agent in the area."

"Which you won't," Karin said, with an edge to her voice, "if you leave the trash for me to take out one more time."

Dave rolled his eyes at Kip.

Karin bent over and opened the oven door. The smell of fresh-baked, chocolate chip cookies wafted through the tiny kitchen. She extracted two cookie sheets and put them on a cooling rack, tugged her oven mitts off and set them down beside the cookies. Over her shoulder, she asked, "I'll be happy to help. Have you begun to look yet?"

When she spoke, Kip's eyes jumped up.

Dave cocked an eyebrow. *Was he checking out my wife's ass?* If he was, Karin didn't seem to notice. She simply picked up her beer and took a sip. *Was she smirking?*

Shit, she had noticed.

"Just started," Kip said. "I'm renting a condo over on Patriots Way now. It's a month-to-month so I can move any time, but I'm in no hurry either."

He drank his beer, his youthful muscles bunching up under the tight black tee shirt he wore. Dave cursed at how sore his own muscles were after only a twenty-minute workout at the gym. *I looked better than him at his age*, he thought bitterly, fighting down a burp.

"Well, Kip," Karin said. "Why don't you stop by the office tomorrow after your shift? You can sign some papers, and we'll get started by taking a look at the multiple listings. I can show you what's out there, and you can give me a better sense of what it is you're in the market for. Cookie?"

Kip smiled, taking the offered cookie and giving her the once-over again. "Thanks. I will."

The Freeport Road 7-Eleven

THE CALL CAME over the police radio at 11:37 p.m. "Silent alarm at the 7-Eleven on Freeport Road. Unit twelve, please respond."

Dave sat parked behind the McDonalds a half-mile away, drinking a large chocolate milkshake. He leaned forward. The seat squeaked as he shifted his weight; the thick gun belt around his waist creaked. Light from a lamp pole shined a ghostly hue through the windshield, filling the dashboard and front seat with a stomach-turning piss-yellow haze. Dave keyed the radio mike, his heart thumping hard. He squeezed his hand tight to keep it from shaking. "Dispatch, this is patrol supervisor Powell. Cancel that call out for unit twelve. Four is closer. Kip, you copy?"

A burst of static. "Copy, Dave. Rolling." All full of youthful enthusiasm.

“Roger.” Dave gave it a minute, then keyed the mike again. “It’s probably a false alarm. We’ve had a few from that location lately. I’ll roll backup. I’m a few miles away, up on 107. That puts me three minutes out.”

“Roger,” Kip said.

“You got all that, dispatch?” Dave released the transmit button.

“Unit four is responding. Unit supervisor to roll backup with an ETA of three minutes.”

Dave sat back and waited. From his position behind the McDonald’s he watched as unit four sped by, barreling down the two-lane road at top speed. Dave began a countdown in his head, even as he beat away the doubt knocking at his brain, trying to ignore the taste of bile burning in the back of his throat.

Three weeks earlier

“I’M TELLING YOU, Gil. She’s having an affair.”

He and Dave sat at the mahogany bar running the length of the Canyon Inn Bar & Grill, their hands clutching the handles of warm beers in heavy glass mugs. The Canyon Inn was neither an inn nor did it have a grill. It did have a bar. A large one, and behind it stood a carpeted stage and a mirrored wall: two dancing poles: loud, pounding music and two naked women, dancing. At least that’s what they called it.

This wasn’t the first time Gil Halley and Dave found themselves here nursing warm beers and having this same conversation. Gil sighed, doubting it would be the last time either. He took a slug of his beer and grimaced, hating warm beer.

“What makes you say so?” Gil asked.

“I don’t know. I can just tell.”

“Hey, sweetie,” Gil called out to the barmaid. “You got anything cold under there? This is like drinking pee.” To Dave, he said, “Tell how?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t know. Not married, remember.” Gil took a sip from his new beer then hoisted the mug toward the barmaid. “Much better, thanks.”

She was already back to drying bar glasses, her mind elsewhere.

“She’s all moody, you know.”

“The bartender?”

“No,” Dave said. “Karin.”

Gil shrugged. “Maybe it’s PMS. She still gets her period, right?”

Dave ignored the poke at their ages. Gil was a year older than Dave himself. “She doesn’t answer her cell phone when I call. She’s not where she says she’ll be when I check up on her.”

“You’re paranoid.”

Dave considered that, and every other thing in his unremarkable life.

Once upon a time he was going to be an engineer—design stuff—build things: skyscrapers or bridges, maybe. He dreamed of making a ton of money and living in a big house, with lots of kids. He’d had big plans. And even though he’d achieved only so-so grades in high school, he managed to get into a decent college, one that had a good reputation for its engineering program. But the first year in, he was forced to drop two classes so he wouldn’t flunk. Even after that, his GPA came up at a dismal two-point nothing. Discouraged, Dave dropped out.

Nineteen and a college dropout, he had no idea what to do after that. When he returned home, he worked construction for a while, hated it and got himself laid off. A few months later, while at the unemployment office, he saw a flyer announcing the upcoming civil service police exam. With nothing to lose, he took the test, passed it and found himself at the police academy almost before he knew what he’d done. It was there that he met Gil.

Gil Halley was everything Dave was not: smart, ambitious, eager, athletic. A go-getter.

Over the next fifteen years, Dave’s waist expanded three belt sizes; he developed high blood pressure, and had cholesterol and triglyceride levels off the chart. Then, of course, there was his growing fondness for anything with alcohol in it. His safety net over all those years was that civil service employees couldn’t get fired for anything less than gross misconduct, like if they killed someone. And as a cop, maybe not even then.

Gil on the other hand, had studied and passed the sergeant’s test the first time out, gained his stripes after only four years on the force, made detective two years after that and had more arrests than almost anyone else in department history. Now, he ran the detective squad and was fast-tracking his way to the coveted chief’s post.

The only good thing to ever happen to Dave Powell in the last fifteen years was Karin Stetler, fourteen years now as Karin Powell, and going strong. Or so he hoped.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m paranoid,” Dave said, but not convinced. “Can you blame me?”

Gil signaled for another round. “Blame you? No. Karin’s a hell of a woman. Best thing ever happened to an asshole like you.”

They drank their beers and watched the dancers—a different one had come on stage. The new girl was African-American. She had a decent rack and a flat stomach that undulated in time with the music, if you could call it that.

Then, from left field, Gil asked Dave, “So you know who she’s bumping ugly with?”

“No,” Dave said, “but, I’ve got a damned good idea.”

“Really?” Gil took his eyes off the dancers for a moment and stared at Dave. “What’cha gonna do?”

“Follow her, I guess.”

Two weeks earlier

A FEW NIGHTS later, after his heart-to-heart with Gil, Dave Powell came through the garage door of his house. He’d worked a double-shift—midnight-to-eight and an eight-to-four—followed by a few more hours at the Canyon, downing some brews. He came home tired and hungry. On the refrigerator, while going for another beer, he found a note. Written in Karin’s sweeping, precise handwriting, it read;

D –

Showing a house. Leftover lasagna in fridge.

Heat oven to 350°--20-25 min.

K

Thirty minutes later, Dave drove past a small cape on Logan Avenue. The lights inside were on though Dave knew the owners had moved out six weeks before. Karin’s assistant, Janet, had told him she had it on Karin’s calendar to show that evening.

Dave pulled under an elm tree two houses down. Dry leaves crinkled beneath his feet as he walked toward the cape. At the little picket fence, he stopped to survey the modest quiet neighborhood. All was quiet. He wiped his sweaty palms on the thighs of his pants. His service auto, concealed under his jacket, felt heavy in its holster.

Karin’s car was parked out front. So was Kip’s.

What would he find them doing? Afraid, but unable to stop...he had to know.

Resolved, he brushed past a weeping willow, plunged into the deep shadows between the cape and the neighboring house and trotted along a twelve-foot-high privacy hedge. The

neighbor's house was dark. The owners were probably out for the evening—at dinner, or the movies, having fun, enjoying life. Not sneaking through someone else's backyard.

Dave stopped where several trashcans were set out beside the back door porch. The house had a bow window overlooking the backyard. White sheers covered the glass panes. Dave crouched below the sill and tried to see in by the haze of light from the windows that cast out over the slate patio. Inside, he detected movement, shadows crossing the ambient glow of light behind the sheers.

The sliding back door was opened a crack. From inside, Dave heard familiar voices. Kip. And Karin. Exchanging laughs. Karin giggled.

Dave felt as if he was going to throw up. Angry, and sick to his stomach, he slipped over to the door, eased himself close to the jamb. Careful not to make a sound, he looked inside. And saw.

In the kitchen, Karin stood on the far side of a granite-topped island. Bright florescent lights glowed from underneath pine-wood cabinets. A hand on his arm, Karin faced Kip. She leaned in, brushed a kiss across his cheek. She drew him into her arms, hugged him tightly.

Dave rolled back away from the door, trying to breathe. He swallowed hard. His mind raced as he tried to think, tried to decide just what to do. He found his hand on the butt of his gun. It had moved there as if on its own. He cleared leather, held the gun up in front of his face, the dark metal gleaming in the soft amber light from the house. He rubbed the pad of his index finger over the textured trigger and cupped his gun hand with his support hand.

Two pounds of pull was all it would take. Two pounds.

Do it! His brain screamed. *Do it!*

The Freeport Road 7-Eleven

A FAST FOOD cup popped under the cruiser's tires as Dave rolled toward the combination gas station/convenience store. He was running silent. Lights off, no siren. No cars sat in the parking slots facing the store, none at the pumps. Not surprising, considering the time of night.

He angled his approach so he could see through the 7-Eleven's solicitation-filled windows. The circus was in town. Powerball was up to 12 million dollars. Milk was on sale for \$1.79.

A clerk stood behind the counter, his hands high in the air. He had shaggy brown hair and pimply skin, and his face shined oily and pale with fear.

On the customer side of the counter stood a nervous, stick figure of a guy. Wearing a dark hoodie and stained blue jeans, he had on dark sunglasses and waved a small, dark revolver, first at the clerk, then at Kip Lawson facing him down at the front doors.

The perp shouted. For Dave, it was like being at a drive-in, though the movie was silent.

Kip stood with his gun in a two-handed stance, pointed at the perp. He yelled an order. Dave could lip-read the words—commands they were taught at the academy for situations like this.

The clerk's head swiveled back and forth, as if he were watching a tennis match.

In the car, Dave sat and ran the back of his hand nervously across his wet mouth. Waiting to act.

Kip took a step closer to the perp.

The perp backed up, shouting, increasingly agitated. Dave read his lips. It wasn't hard: **GET BACK! STAY BACK!**

The small Saturday night special swung as if on a swivel between the clerk and Kip.

BAM! BAM!

The gun went off. Two shots—so loud Dave heard it through the cruiser's closed windows. He'd expected it. Still, he jumped.

Kip's body convulsed with each shot, absorbing the bullets' kinetic impact. He fell back, his arms pin-wheeling, and hit the glass door behind him. The top panel shattered in an explosion of gummy white safety glass.

The door crashed open. Kip's body hung up on the aluminum push handle. A minute passed, then gravity forced him to the ground. Kip sat, as if to rest, a stunned look on his face. Another minute and he keeled to one side, his body propping the door open about a foot.

After the sharp crack of gunfire, the explosion of glass, the thump of Kip hitting the ground, an eerie silence followed. Dave listened, afraid to move, afraid to disturb the calm after the sudden violence, the split-second ending of a young man's life.

But he did.

Then he forced the cruiser door open, shouting and remembering to key the mike. “Officer down! Unit four officer is down! Send backup! The 7-Eleven on Freeport Road! Hurry!”

Dave ran across the oil-stained concrete, his shoes slapping the pavement, his pulse pounding in his ears. Clearing leather, his Glock was heavy in his hand. At the glass doors, he stepped over Kip’s body, quickly and smoothly.

“Police! Freeze!”

The perp, his eyes concealed behind sunglasses, swung his attention, and his gun, at Dave. Scraggily hairs sprouted along hallow cheeks, too thin to ever grow into a real beard no matter how hard he might try. His teeth were stained and his lips chapped.

“Drop the gun!”

“Wha—” the gunman stammered. “But...”

“I said drop it!”

A second passed, then the gun in Dave’s hand went off. That’s how he thought of it. He didn’t fire. It just went off. Twice. The perp fell back, crashing into a rack of packaged pastries. Then he tumbled to the floor in an avalanche of cellophane-wrapped cakes and candy and bags of chips. The Saturday Night Special bounced out of his hand and skidded across the tile floor.

“Sorry, Stevie,” Dave whispered.

One week prior

AFTER CATCHING KARIN and Kip during their tryst, Dave Powell sat bleakly nursing a beer at the Canyon surrounded by a few other degenerates—some of whom he knew. They lined the bar, their hungry eyes staring at the naked girls on stage: a skanky redhead and a dumpy little Hispanic tart. Neither one could dance a lick, but that was hardly the point.

A hand landed suddenly on Dave’s shoulder. He twisted as a skinny guy wearing a soiled army field jacket threw a leg over the stool beside him and sat. The man, with hollow cheeks, scraggily facial hair and almost no teeth had the wretched look of a habitual meth addict. “Hey, long time, no see.”

Dave knotted his eyebrows. Something seemed familiar about the guy, but Dave couldn’t place him. Maybe one of the regulars from one or another of the dives Dave haunted with great frequency these days.

The guy ordered a beer and when it came he pointed to Dave. "It's on him."

The barmaid snatched a wet twenty off the bar before Dave could protest.

After a deep pull on his beer, the guy said, "You really don't recognize me, do you?"

Dave started to reply, shook his head.

"Dave, it's me. Steve Fletcher. Stevie."

"Stevie?" Dave sat back while it slowly came to him. But, still, he had trouble imagining that this wreck was Stevie Fletcher. The Steve Fletcher he knew had been the starting quarterback in high school a year ahead of Dave. They'd hung out a few times, got high together at a couple of parties.

Stevie Fletcher had been like Gil. He'd had it all: good looks, good grades, all the best girls. And he came from an affluent family. Dave remembered that Stevie's dad had owned a string of mom-and-pop hardware stores back in the day. Stores Stevie worked at on weekends and over the summers. Stores he was supposed to take over one day. He was set, Dave remembered. Had the world by the *you-know-whats*.

Dave wanted to ask—

And Stevie Fletcher anticipated the question. "What happened to me? Life happened, man." He hoisted his beer mug. "To life. And she can bite me too."

Dave clinked beer mugs. "That bad, huh?"

Stevie waved his hands over himself, as if to say: *You tell me*.

In a nutshell, he said that he'd gotten his ass handed to him playing collage ball. "I sucked at that level and there went my dreams of a football career. Out the window. Then my parents went through a nasty divorce. Dad lost everything, all the stores, except the one over in Epping. Not too much later, Home Depot and Lowes did a number on him, he was forced to close it down. I ended up bouncing around for a while, but other than football, I had nothing and couldn't do anything. Then I got this great idea. Why not join the Army?"

Two stints in Iraq had finished the job of messing up Stevie's life. He drained his beer, toasting Dave. "But, all's not a total loss. I excel at my current vocation of homeless war vet."

Dave ordered the two of them more beers. And he told Stevie all about Karin's affair. He hadn't meant to, didn't know why he did, but he did.

"The thing of it is," he said, wrapping up his alcohol-soaked tale of woe, "she's still the best damn thing ever happened to me. Ever."

“She betrayed you, man.” Stevie slapped Dave’s shoulder and shook it, as if he was trying to shake some sense into him.

Dave refused to see it that way. “No, you’re not getting it. It’s not her. It’s him, that damn Kip Lawson. Kip, with his big muscles, and his twenty-five-year-old good looks, his youthful enthusiasm and his damn sports car. Kip’s got all the things I don’t have, all the things I’ve lost.”

Stevie nodded like a bobble-head doll, nodded and agreed, with watery eyes. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s the rat-bastard cop’s fault. Usually is,” he added with a drunken grunt.

“Yeah,” Dave said. And the idea struck him like a thunder clap. It was all Kip’s fault. If Kip Lawson were only out of the picture...

The thought lingered for longer than it ever should have, then Dave smiled. “Hey, Stevie,” he said. “When was the last time you made two thousand dollars, cash?”

“Two grand? All at once? How about never.” Stevie wiped his hand across his mouth, like a starving man who’d just been offered a T-bone steak.

Dave told him what he had in mind. When he finished, he asked Stevie if he was interested.

Stevie mulled it over, washing the idea down with another beer. Finally, he said, “What the hell. Sure.”

They shook on it, agreeing. One thousand up front, the rest when the deal was done.

“Funny how life works.”

“How so, Stevie?”

Stevie tossed back the last of his beer. “If I hadn’t run into Gil last week—”

“Gil? Gil Halley?”

“Yeah, your cop friend.”

Like Dave wasn’t a cop. Maybe after this he wasn’t, not anymore.

“Yeah. Ran into him downtown. A chance encounter, you know? Anyway, we got to talking and he told me how you hang out here at the Canyon a lot. Said you’d be glad to see an old friend. And now look at us, doing business together. Lucky, huh?”

“Yeah,” Dave said, wondering. “Lucky.”