

MRS RAYBURN

John Boston

The plan was simple. All plans are simple. Sure, there was a chance something could go *life-altering type wrong*, but the chances of such an event were small, maybe even minute. That's what Corwin thought that day he followed the old bitch home. She reminded him of his grandmother. One of the few people in his miserable existence that had ever shown him any kindness. He almost felt guilty for doing it. Still wasn't going to stop him from doing it, he just felt a little remorseful about the whole thing. He would make sure she wasn't hurt. He wasn't some kind of animal. He would make sure Jose knew the ground rules also. No one gets hurt. They go in, grab her jewels, and split. The old bag probably had all of them insured anyway.

She might even make money on the robbery.

He followed her home one afternoon. She lived in a pretty run-down part of town. He wasn't even sure if the other houses around her were occupied. There were a few cars parked in the street, but no one was outside. No one was going to care if they robbed her or not. They would care if he killed her, but that was not going to happen. What the hell someone her age needed all those jewels for anyway was beyond him. It's not like she could take any of them with her or anything. She would be in the ground soon and her greedy family would just take them for themselves. He almost felt like he was doing her a favor.

Just a quick in and quick out. That was all.

So easy, even a dumb Mick and Puerto Rican could do it.

His girlfriend Iris worked as a salesgirl for a local jewelry store. She was the one who planted the idea in his head one night after they fucked. It certainly seemed like a good idea at the time. She had recently sold the old lady tens of thousands of dollars worth of jewelry over the past year. They had been planning it for months. She told him not to be impulsive or stupid, which for Corwin, was much easier said than done.

Baby, stupid is my middle name. he told her

"That's why this is my baby and not yours. I'm quarterbacking this entire operation," she told him.

He knew she was smart, but he didn't completely trust her. He had seen what happens when guys let their women be in charge. It might end well for them, but the guys were left holding the bag. The last guy he had done time with was ratted out by his ex. Told the cops everything, even where he had hidden the robbery money. Led them right to it, well half of it anyway. He got fifteen years and she got immunity. That was the genius of the American legal system. Pretty girls were innocent until proven guilty. The rest of us were guilty of something, the cops just had

to find it. He knew he shouldn't trust her, not with this. If things were to go south, he and Jose would be left holding the bag.

Still, though, the thought of an easy score like this was too good to pass up. Ten, maybe twenty thousand dollars in cash or jewelry, and he could almost retire on it. He had tried for months to get a job. No one really wants to hire an ex-con, unless you wanted to shovel shit ten hours a day. He was hired to work on a dairy farm. He did try to make it work, but at the end of the day, he just couldn't imagine himself milking cows for a living. Even a guy like Corwin had his standards. He left one morning and never went back. Being honest doesn't pay shit.

He knew if he was popped, he was looking at some serious time. This was not his first go at it with the law. So was Jose. Anything worth having was worth fighting for. He was going to fight for this old bag's money. He really didn't have much of a choice.

"You sure you want to go through with this man?" asked Jose one night at the bar.

"You got a better idea? I'm all ears."

"Shit man, I work at a car wash. I clean these fucker's cars for a living. Creativity is not my thing."

"How hard can it be? We know she has them in a safe. We just find the safe, make her open it and we're out of there. We aren't going to hurt her."

"I understand that, but you know how people are going to see it. They're going to see it like us, robbing a grandmother. That's bound to draw some serious heat. We might have to sit on the jewels for a while until things die down."

"You sure you have somebody who will buy them?"

"Getting a buyer ain't a problem. It's keeping the buyer quiet. We're an easy sell-out if he wants to make a deal."

"That's why only one of us deals with him."

"So who is that going to be?" asked Jose.

"You might not be creative, but you are a much better negotiator than I am," said Corwin.

They had both been casing the house for a week before the burglary. They knew her schedule. They knew where she went and how long it took. They knew she was back home every night by five. She made dinner, watched TV, read a book, then went to bed. That's pretty much what every old person did.

"How old do you think she is?" asked Jose.

"Iris said she is 82. She's practically dead anyway. You think she's going to put up much of a fight?"

"You trust Iris?" asked Jose

"No, do you?"

"No. I almost want to decline just cause she's involved."

"She's in this as much as we are. Even these idiot cops would be able to finger her as our inside person."

"So what happens when they do?"

"I guess that's her problem, now isn't it?"

"No man, that's our problem. Girls like Iris don't go to prison, guys like us do," said Jose.

"I'm going to go with you two idiots, so you don't screw this up," Iris said on the night of the robbery.

"Iris, are you nuts? We need you to be the driver," said Jose.

"Not to mention the fact that this old bird could recognize you. You said you helped her a few times."

"I'll wear a mask. I won't talk. I'll put in my contacts and make sure I'm not wearing my heels. I know she'll suspect me, that's why I have an alibi for tonight. I have yours too in case the pigs come knocking."

"What alibi?"

"Remember Guido?"

"Your ex-boyfriend?"

"Yes. I lied to the cops for him. So, he's doing me a favor. We were at his house, playing cards and drinking beer for his birthday. That's why I chose this night. We watched football, The Colts. They were playing New England. Make sure you know the final score."

"That's your alibi? What could possibly go wrong here?" said Corwin.

"Look, he owes me a big favor. He could go away for life if I talk, so I doubt he'll talk."

Corwin and Jose both looked at each other. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing. Guido was about as reliable as a condom with the top cut-off, but if faced with prison time, he might very well play along. He hated the cops more than they did.

"Speak now or forever hold your peace," said Iris.

Neither of them said anything.

"Okay then. Let me get my purse and we're out of here," she said and went into the kitchen.

"Corwin, for some reason, I just don't trust her. Anyone who banged Guido can't be trusted."

"I know. She's coming along. She'll be right there with us."

"I know man, that's why I got a bad feeling about this one."

"You want to pull out?"

"And do what? If I have to wash another car, I'm going to shoot someone." said Jose.

It was just after eight PM when they hopped the fence and entered her backyard. They all put on their masks. They both froze when they saw Iris was carrying a 9mm.

"I thought you said no guns!"

"Relax, it's not even loaded. We got to have something to scare the old bitch with!" she said.

They knew she kept the back door locked. Jose could open just about any lock and within a minute, he had the back door open and they all snuck inside. They knew she'd either be in the living room or upstairs in her bedroom. Corwin thought they should have waited until they knew exactly where the safe was. What if she wouldn't cooperate? Just how far was Iris willing to go?

Jose peeked out around the corner of the kitchen, while Iris and Corwin walked down the hallway. The old woman was nowhere to be found. She had to be upstairs.

"That's fine. I know that safe is in her bedroom someplace. We'll be in and out in two minutes. It's going to take the cops at least ten minutes to get here after she calls. We'll be home and sipping beers by then." said Iris.

The three of them crept up the stairs, trying not to make a sound. They heard the TV when they got to the top of the stairs. Iris motioned toward the second door.

"So what? We just walk in and say this is a robbery?" asked Corwin.

"Just be cool. Act like you've done this before," she said.

"I've never done this when someone was home, babe."

The three of them paused before her bedroom door. Jose let out a deep breath and slowly turned the knob to her bedroom. They opened the door and saw the old lady passed out in her bed with a book by her side. They looked at Iris. She just walked over to the old lady and shook her. The old woman sat straight up. Her eyes were now the size of quarters. The look on her face caught Iris off guard.

"Just be cool lady. We aren't here to hurt you. We just want what's in your safe."

"I beg your pardon?" said the old woman with a thick British accent.

"We want your jewels. Just give us the jewels and no one get's hurt," said Jose.

"Get out of my house this instant!" said the old lady with a look of mild hatred in her eyes.

"We aren't leaving till we have the jewels. You know what we want, so just give them to us," said Jose.

"You want my jewels, fine. I'd be happy to sell them to you. I'll give them to you at a discount price of a hundred thousand dollars. I don't take checks either." said the old woman defiantly.

"Cut the bullshit lady....just...." Iris was cut off by Corwin who lept into her bed and grabbed the small necklace she was wearing that activated her lifeline. All she had to do was press the button and the paramedics would be on their way. He grabbed it and nearly ripped it off her.

"Like we were saying. The jewels please," said Corwin.

"I told you my price. You don't steal priceless jewels like these, you earn them. Something you three would know nothing about."

The three of them looked at one another. Jose and Corwin stepped into the bathroom, while Iris stood watch over Mrs. Rayburn. This night was going to hell in a handbasket.

"What you want to do now?" asked Jose.

"I think we should just split. She could have activated that alarm. Someone could be on their way here right now."

"Yeah. Fuck man, we blew this one bad."

"We can't leave empty-handed man. We got to get something out of her."

"She ain't gonna give us shit."

"We'll just have to scare her a little bit. She'll cave. She thinks we're just screw-ups."

"Five minutes man, any more than that and I'm gone," said Jose.

They both walked back, Iris was waving a gun in her face. Corwin sat down on the bed next to her.

"This can go down one of two ways: you can give us what we want and we will just tie you up and leave or, you can continue to be a pain in the ass and you might not make it out of this alive," said Corwin.

"Look at the three of you.....wouldn't your mothers be proud," said Rayburn.

"I'm gonna beat this old cow, so help me," said Iris and she put the gun against her head.

"This is your last chance bitch, tell us where the jewels are or I'll squeeze the trigger."

"No you won't," said Rayburn trying to calm herself.

"Why not?"

"Well, if you kill me, how will you find the jewels?"

"Switch out with Iris, I want to talk to her," said Corwin.

"Don't use my name, you idiot!"

"Oh yeah, sorry."

Iris came to the doorway a moment later. She was nervous, excited, and terrified all at the same time. This was her first big score. So far, she had done pretty well for herself.

"Got any ideas gorgeous?"

"God, I can't believe I'm fucking you sometimes. Now she knows my name. I think you did that on purpose." she said angrily.

"We got to get her to open the safe. We have to get serious with her."

"What do you want to do?" asked Corwin

Iris ran out of the bedroom and returned a minute later with a large plastic bag. Corwin knew this was getting out of control. He knew they should just cut and run, but Iris was determined to see this thing through. One way or another, she was going to walk out of this house a rich woman. She walked over to Mrs. Rayburn and put the plastic bag over her head. The old woman tried to fight back, but Iris quickly overpowered her. They could see the old woman fighting for air. Jose ran over to her and pulled the bag off the woman's head. She fell out of the bed and was gasping for air. She pointed to the nightstand next to the bed. Jose opened the small drawer and saw a bottle of pills. He handed her the bottle, she downed two of them and sat against the side of the bed.

"You could have killed her." said Jose as he grabbed the plastic bag out of her hands."

"Lady, just tell us where the shit is. I don't want to hurt you, but you're not leaving me much of a choice."

"Just get out of my house. Leave now and I'll wait ten minutes before I call the police. I'm willing to give you that much." said Mrs. Rayburn who was still breathing heavily.

"You old bitch. What good are they going to do you anyway? You'll be dead soon." screamed Iris.

Mrs. Rayburn just started laughing.

"I think you have it backward dear.....*you're the one who will be dead soon,*" the old woman said coldly.

The three of them paused and looked at one another. They knew they should just get out of there and fast. Problem was, they would surely be hunted and there was no way they could go on the run with no cash or money. They had to get something out of her.

"Man, this is a nightmare. The hell are we going to do now?" asked Jose.

"We got to get tough with her. I put that bag over her head a few more times and she'll talk," said Iris.

"You could kill her, then what the hell do we do?"

"Nothing, we just leave," she said

"Jesus Iris, you are a real piece of work."

"You got a better idea?"

"Jose, let's try good cop bad cop with her," said Corwin.

"Man, let's just get out of here. Something ain't right about this."

"It's all I got man. It's either that or she gets the bag over her head again."

Jose walked back towards the old woman. He knelt down in front of her. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Lady, these guys are crazy. There's no telling what they will do to you. I don't want to see them hurt you. Just give us what we want and we'll leave."

Mrs. Rayburn smiled. She put her hand on his face.

"Are you a Christian my son?"

"I believe in God."

"Don't you worry about what you're going to say to God when you meet him? How are you going to explain all of this to him?"

"I guess I'll cross that bridge when I get there. Where's the safe?"

"Fine.....I'll tell you. First I need some water. Can we all please go downstairs?"

"Will you tell us where the safe is?"

"Yes, yes. Please don't let that horrible girl put that bag over my head again, please. I'm not sure I could go through that again."

"Just give us the jewels and she won't lay a finger on you, I promise."

"Thank you, child. What's your name?"

"You know I can't tell you my name."

"Okay. I'll just call you Pip then, how's that?"

"Pip is fine," he said and helped her to her feet.

"She wants us to go down to the kitchen. She says she will help us after she gets some water," he said as he carried her out of the room.

"Why does she want us to go down to the kitchen?" asked Corwin

Jose just shot him a dirty look and the four of them walked slowly down the stairs into the kitchen. Iris made certain there were no lights on and the curtains were drawn shut. She turned on the light over the stove and opened the refrigerator door.

"Water, please," said Rayburn.

Iris poured her a glass of water.

"Make sure you don't leave any prints honey bunny," said Corwin.

The old woman downed the entire glass of ice water. She pointed to the cabinet. Jose got out a bottle of brandy and poured her a glass. She quickly downed that one as well. When she had composed herself, she began talking.

"So, you want my stash, huh? Fair enough. I'll tell you. But, first, I want you all to listen to a little story. Humor and old woman if you will."

"You'll give us the jewels if we listen?" asked Iris.

"I will indeed. Five minutes, that's all I ask," said Rayburn

"If this is a trick, so help me God lady, I'll blow a hole right in your head," said Iris.

"No, no....there's no trick. I have to get this off my chest. It's so much easier to tell complete strangers. Please."

"You got five minutes, starting now," said Corwin as he looked at his watch.

"Well, you see. I am a woman of some years. I was born in England. My first and only true love. We lived in England and the states. That's why I have very little accent. My father wanted me to be a doctor. My two brothers were killed in the war. I had to pass on the family name, somehow. I guess I disappointed him. I went to work for the British Government. I became a spy for MI-6. British Military Intelligence. See, my commanders had discovered that one of my associates was passing highly sensitive materials over to the Soviet Union. Needless to say, they were not pleased. Now, I suppose they could have just arrested him and sent him to die in prison, but it would make us look very bad. So, he had to be killed. I was chosen to eliminate him. I followed

into a pub one night and struck up a conversation with him. Several drinks later, we were back at his place. I tore his clothes off and fucked his brains out. Now, right when he was about to finish, I pulled out a small surgical knife and lit his throat. Heavens, what a mess. Blood everywhere. Needless to say, I had to leave the country at once, before I was identified. An agreement was made between our two countries to keep me here until my passing. It seems like another lifetime ago. In many ways it was. I, Carla Rayburn killed a man in his own bed. I even got blood on the picture of him and his wife. Of course, he wasn't the first and I somehow doubt he'll be the last." she said smiling and sipping her brandy.

"Lady, what the hell does any of this have to do with giving us the jewels?" asked Iris.

"Well, my dear child.....if you only knew what I have done to other human beings in the name of the Queen, then you might have had second thoughts about entering this house.....and you would certainly have thought twice about putting that bag over my head you little bitch." said Rayburn tersely.

Before she could even draw her gun, Rayburn reached underneath the table and drew hers. She fired a shot hitting Iris right in the head, killing her instantly. She collapsed to the floor. Jose and Corwin just froze. Rayburn was still smiling as she drew the gun on them.

"Driver's licenses on the table boys.....unless you want to join the little slut here."

"I don't have a driver's....." Corwin stopped in mid-sentence as Rayburn fired a shot that grazed his ear.

"ALRIGHT!" said Corwin and pulled out his license from his wallet. Jose just had a state-issued ID card. They still had their hands up in the air as they laid them on the table.

"Back up. Move and I kill you both," she said.

She picked up the licenses and looked them over. She put them down and looked at the boys who were shaking.

"Corwin and Jose. A pleasure to meet you. Forgive an old lady whose manners have grown rusty. Well, what are we going to do here?"

"Lady, just put the gun down. You don't want to kill anyone else."

"Killing people doesn't bother me, Corwin, I used to do it for a living," she said as she poured herself another glass of brandy.

"Lady, you made your point. Iris is fucking dead. You won, just don't kill us." said Jose.

"Ah yes, Iris. Where do I know that name from? I'm sure it will come to me, have a seat boys. Humor and old woman."

"Lady, you're crazy. We weren't going to hurt you. We just wanted your jewels."

"Oh, I see. Yes, you're the polite type of robbers then, correct?"

"You didn't have to shoot her."

"I believe I most certainly did. We don't want that little whore polluting the Earth with her offspring."

"Just let us go, lady. You won. You want to call the cops, go head. Do you want me to do it?" asked Corwin.

"Yes, the cops.....what are we going to do about them?"

"You killed her lady, not us," said Jose.

"Oh, yes, Jose, that's brilliant. I'm certain that will spare you two any prison time. Three degenerates break into an 82-year-old's house to rob her of her family jewels and one of them is killed. Yes, I'm very worried. You're the ones who should be worried. In the eyes of Indiana.....*you killed her, not me.*"

"What are you talking about? The fuck are you talking about?" screamed Jose.

"Jesus, she's right."

"What are you talking about Cory?"

"Indiana has this new law. This stupid, stupid new law that says if any one is killed in the commission of a crime then everyone else involved in that crime is guilty of their murder, not just the one who killed them."

"Right as rain, you are Corwin. You will be tried for her murder."

"This is crazy man, just crazy. I didn't kill nobody," said Jose, starting to sob.

"Tell you what boys. I have no use for the authorities either. The last thing I want is them asking questions about me or my past. You said you wanted my jewels, correct?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to do something much better than that. I'm going to give you my most prized possession ever. It really is priceless."

"You would? Why?" asked Corwin.

"Well, as dumb as you are, I do have to admire your fortitude. Takes some mighty big balls to do what you tried to do here tonight. I wouldn't feel right about leaving you empty-handed. Just doesn't seem right, so I'm going to give it to you. I just need you to do a little something for me, first."

"What?"

"I need you both to cut off your pinky finger for me."

"Huh?"

"Yes, just your pinky."

"Lady, you are the worst old woman I've ever met," said Jose.

"Yes, but I'm the one with the gun Jose. I could just kill you both," she said and aimed her pistol at Jose.

"I am not cutting my finger off you psycho bitch!"

Rayburn fired a shot into his shoulder. Corwin fell to the floor. She aimed the gun at Jose.

"Please lady, I'm sorry, I really am. We are bad people, but this is so wrong," said Jose as he sobbed.

"The cleaver behind you. Do it!"

Jose picked up the cleaver. He stepped over Iris's dead body. He put his pinky down on the table.

"Please, ma'am.....please!" he sobbed

"I'm going to count to three. If your pinky isn't off, I'm going to kill you."

Jose raised the cleaver. He was sobbing as he looked at Mrs. Rayburn who just sat back and smiled.

He brought it down as hard as he could. He severed it on the first blow and screamed. He dropped the cleaver and held his bloodied hand.

"Your turn Mr. Corwin."

Corwin was pale from the loss of blood. He looked at Jose who was just holding his mess of a hand. There was blood everywhere in the room, including the table.

"This better be some treasure," he said.

"Oh, it is my child, I assure you of that. Just a little something to remember me by."

Corwin closed his eyes.

"Do it, Jose."

"Come on man, I can't."

"DO IT!" he said and exposed his pinky finger on the table.

"I'm sorry man," he said and brought the cleaver down in one hard chop.

Corwin's pinky flew off and hit the back of the chair. He screamed so loud, Jose had to cover his ears.

"Well done boys. Now, pick up the pinkys. Back to the bedroom." she said.

"Lady if you're going to kill us, just fucking do it," said Corwin as he gritted his teeth. His entire body was going numb.

"Boys, we're just getting started," said Rayburn.

Corwin and Jose hobbled up the stairs. Rayburn was close but kept her distance. She was quick, but she knew one slip up and she was dead. She wasn't taking any chances.

"What are we going to do man, this woman is nuts!" asked Jose.

"We only got one choice. We have to kill her, Jose. We have no choice, it's her or us."

"Now boys, let's mind our manners. I might be old, but my ears work just fine. Into the bedroom.

Corwin knew he was in trouble.....*big trouble* he was weak. He had to force himself up the stairs. Jose was a quivering mess. He wasn't going to be much help. He knew in half an hour unless he got help, he was a dead man. He had to kill the old woman. He just needed her to drop her guard for just a second.....*one goddamn second was all he needed.*

"Well, I am a woman of my word. Behind the bookcase. Just pull it out, there's no secret lever." she said.

Jose moved the bookcase. It slid out of the way and exposed two small safes in the wall.

"Just push it in, then pull the lever. No combination needed," she said. Corwin had his eyes on her and the gun. He was just waiting for the right moment to strike. He was still holding onto the two severed pinky fingers.

Jose opened the safe.

"Now, reach inside and pull out the jar," she said.

Jose did as ordered. He grabbed the jar and pulled it out. Only then did they realize what he was holding. It was a jar full of severed pinky fingers.....*old ones, white ones, black ones, and even tiny ones.*

"Jesus, Mary, mother of God," said Jose.

"Go ahead, put yours in. You're part of the family now as well," said Rayburn.

"You're an evil lady. I mean you are one seriously fucked up old woman," said Jose. He threw the jar at Rayburn. She fired a shot, which struck him in the face. She dropped the gun as the jar hit

her right in the chest. Corwin didn't even flinch. He jumped through the bedroom window and fell onto the small porch roof below. He rolled off the roof and onto the grass below. He quickly got up and ran along the side of the house. He ran into her backyard, over the fence, and into the alley outback. He ran and ran as fast and as hard as he could. He was starting to blackout. He had been running for over ten minutes when he saw the gas station and ran over. He burst through the door and collapsed on the counter. The kid working behind the counter looked like he just saw a ghost.

"The hell happened to you?"

"Call 911...please.....she's coming for me....hurry."

"Whatever dude." said the kid. He got on his cell and was talking to the 911 operator. He gave them his location.

"They're on their way man." said the kid.

"Don't ever steal from old ladies.....you just never know who what they really are until it's too late," he said, gasping for air.

"You want a band-aid or something?"

Corwin managed to stay conscious until the cops arrived. Within minutes, there were several officers on the scene. The EMTs put an oxygen mask on him and wheeled him into the ambulance.

"Follow me to the hospital. She might seem like a nice old lady, but she's evil.....*pure evil*. He said and passed out on the stretcher.

Corwin had never been in a hospital before, not even to visit. He opened his eyes and the pain and sunlight suddenly enveloped his entire existence.

I got shot. I got shot by a grandma, who also made me chop off my finger. Yeah, a hell of a day in the neighborhood.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there in bed, trying to figure out how he was going to get out of this one. He figured if the cops were involved, he would probably be handcuffed or something. He wasn't. Maybe they figured he was too weak to go anywhere, which wasn't too far from the truth. He could barely move his left arm. He looked at his right hand, which was now bandaged. He had survived. Barely, but he had survived. Right now, he wasn't too focused on himself. He wanted revenge. He was going to put that sweet-looking grandma in the ground, or he would die trying. He knew he had to think of something before the cops started questioning him. He had to be very careful what he said to the nurses and doctors. He had to know if Jose made it out alive. A nurse and a doctor came in. She brought his meds. The doctor didn't even look old enough to shave.

"Hello there," said Doctor Goldman.

"Hi."

He wasted no time in explaining things to Corwin. He gave them his full name, which they already had from his blood-stained wallet in his pants. They just wanted to see if he was going to play ball with them or not. They had saved his life. He owed them at least that much.

"Corwin, you lost a lot of blood. You had a bullet wound to the left shoulder. State law mandates that we notify the police if shooting is even suspected. I'm sure they'll be here to talk to you at some point. You also seemed to have lost your pinky finger. Do you remember what happened to you?"

"Vividly," he replied.

"Well, at this point, there isn't much else we can do. You're on some very powerful antibiotics, but your best chance to escape serious infection is to get out of this hospital as soon as possible. Your shoulder will heal, though you may lose some range of motion. Doesn't look like there was any nerve damage, but it's still too soon to tell."

"How long have I been here?"

"Four days."

"Well, thank you for saving me. I guess I'll just be on my way then."

No sooner had he said that than a suit and tie knocked on the door and entered the room. He immediately recognized him as Detective Hansen. The guy was a major prick. He had arrested him years ago. Corwin's heart quickly sank. He had to be very careful about what he said.

"Hi there, hey Cory? How ya doing?"

"I feel like shit."

"Yeah, hey guys, could I have a few minutes with Cory here?" asked Hansen.

Goldman and the nurse stepped out of the room. Hansen was holding two coffee cups. He put one down on the small table next to Corwin's bed. He pulled up a chair and sat down next to him.

"How's my favorite little screw-up doing?"

"I've been better."

"I knew this was going to be good, so I stopped and got us some coffees. I read the report from the hospital. Man, those look serious. Do you want to tell me what the hell happened?"

"Not particularly."

"Cory, even an imbecile like you, has got to realize you're in some serious shit here. I think it might be a whole lot better for you if I got your side of the story first before we find the drugs or

dead bodies. Come on Cory, you know this is the end for you. Sooner or later, we'll figure it out, it's just a matter of time."

"It's not what you think Hansen. If anything, I'm the victim in this case," said Corwin.

"Really, how's that?"

"Let's just say I crossed paths with a real monster. A very sweet, innocent-looking monster. Like Jeffery Dahmer, only worse."

"Really? Now, here I was thinking this was just a drug deal gone south."

"Drugs had nothing to do with it. Let's just say things did not quite go according to plan."

"I can see that. You think you're just going to walk out of here and all of this will magically disappear?"

"No, this isn't over. Not by a long shot."

"Cory, I'm trying to help you here, really I am. I'd hate to see you go away for thirty years. That's for bad people. You didn't kill anyone did you?"

"I'm a thief Hansen, not a killer."

"You didn't answer my question?"

"No, I did not kill anyone, though I can't say for certain that I won't."

"Cory, you're just digging yourself in deeper here. Once the cuffs are on you, you're done. It's either going to be life in prison or lethal injection. You really want to stare down that rabbit hole?"

"Hansen, I may not be perfect. Not by a long shot, but let me assure you, there are people much worse than I am, much worse than you could ever imagine. They never get caught because they seem like nice, innocent people. Not the type of people you would ever suspect of doing horrible things. Trust me, I'd be doing the world a giant favor by killing this bitch."

"Her? The plot thickens. This isn't over some piece of ass I hope."

"No."

"Well, bud. When you're ready to talk, I'm here. I just hope I don't have you put you in a body bag. Strange thing is, there haven't been any crimes, I mean serious ones committed on the night you came in. There was a house fire and there were a few shootings in Indianapolis, but I doubt you had anything to do with those. No, it's been pretty quiet around here. I mean, then you come in, all shot up, on death's doorstep and it really made me wonder, what we missed."

"Don't jerk me around Hansen, what the hell do you mean there haven't been any crimes reported?"

"I'm not jerking you around. If we could link you to anything, there would be another detective here with me. No, right now, you're a free man."

"No one reported anything? Nothing?"

"Nope, been pretty quiet. Almost too quiet, you know."

Corwin sat up in his bed and sipped his coffee. The old bitch might be psycho, but she wasn't stupid. She was in this just as deep as he was. He was relieved, but nervous also. How long could he keep it a secret? What was her next move?

"Oh, there was one little thing. I got a call from a very upset parent. Seems that a local girl, Iris Rodriguez went missing four nights ago. The same night you came into the hospital. Aren't you banging her?"

"Lots of people are banging her."

"Yeah, so I hear. Strange, she never came home from work. Told her mom she was going to a party. That's the last anyone heard from her. Well, if you hear something, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know."

"Will do."

"Cory, I'm going to figure this out. You know I will. Just a matter of time."

"You won't figure this one out Hansen. Could you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Make damn sure the hospital staff knows I am not to have any visitors. No one is to see me, especially some old lady claiming to be my grandmother."

"Um, ok, I'll let them know. You got my number. Call anytime, except during the Colts games." he said.

Cory sipped on his coffee. The caffeine just made him want a smoke. Can't have a coffee without a smoke. He knew sooner or later they would link Iris's disappearance to him. If Jose had any family, they would be calling on him also. He wasn't sure who they told about the plan. Jose was always cool, he would have kept his mouth shut, but Iris, who the hell knows? She might have even posted the plans online. Corwin knew he was on borrowed time. He knew he had to get revenge, but he also had to stay out of jail. Going back to the house was too risky. He knew where she lived, but she had his name and his license. *That meant she knew where he lived as well.*

So did Hansen. He needed help in the worst way. There was only one person he could turn to and he didn't trust Guido at all. Not a bit. He was a snitch. The worst kind of criminal. But, he was all he had at this point. Maybe Guido knew a way out of this.

Guido's mom told him he was playing darts at the watering hole. Corwin found him in the back. He saw Corwin and put the darts down.

"Corwin! Man, I heard you got shot. You look like shit. Man, what happened?"

He and Corwin sat down in a booth. He knew better than to tell Guido everything, just enough to perk his interest. He needed a car and some money. He didn't trust Guido at all, but he remembered what Iris told him about lying to the cops. It was his ace card. Not that he had any idea what Guido had done, but Guido didn't know that. He might be a punk, but he had connections all over the city. If you needed anything, Guido was the guy to go to.

"I ran into a boogeyman, only it was a she, not a he. More like a boogey woman."

"What happened to your hand?"

"She made me cut off one of my fingers."

"Damn.....that's cold bro. What you gonna do?"

"I want to just go back there and kill her, but that's exactly what she's expecting me to do. No, I've got to play chess here, not checkers. I've got to think my way through this one. Problem is, I'm not really a thinker."

"You heard Iris and Jose are missing, right?"

"Yeah, I heard. Look, I need you to cover for me if the pigs start poking around. I was at your house the night I got shot. We were playing cards, poker. I got pissed cause I lost all my money and left. I'm going to need about three hours. I also need a car and about a thousand bucks."

"Bro, I can give you a car, but I ain't got that kind of bread."

"You better find it."

"Or what man? You gonna call the cops on me?"

"Iris stopped by the bar on the night she went missing. She told me what she did for you. Man, she really covered your ass. It would be a real shame if the cops knew she lied for you."

"Damn.....no honor among thieves, huh? So, that's how it is between us."

Corwin moved closer to him and put his good hand on Guido's.

"That bitch shot me. She made me cut off my finger and then she shot me..... so yeah, that's how it is. I don't know how much longer I'll be a free man. So, your help would greatly be appreciated."

Guido said nothing and just looked at Corwin. He reached into his pocket and gave him his car keys. He then took out his wallet and gave him five one hundred dollar bills.

"That's all I got man. You let a chick do this to you?"

Corwin took the keys and the money and stuffed them in his shirt pocket.

"Remember when we were at New Castle in D Wing?" asked Corwin

"Yeah."

"Remember that shot-caller in the pod. That big, ex-Marine who terrorized all of us. I remember thinking that is the scariest dude I have ever met."

"Yeah, that guy was a nightmare."

"I ran into somebody that would make that guy look like a choir boy."

Corwin hated the thought of going back to his apartment. He had been crashing at a run-down motel for the past few days, just popping pain pills and watching TV. He was hoping she would just show up at his motel room, but that would be too easy. There were just too many unknowns.

He was out of money within a few days and would have to go back to his apartment. It was a different address than the one listed on his license, but he wouldn't be too hard to track down. He was taking a big chance going home, but he had nowhere else to go. The pain pills and antibiotics were tearing him up. He needed to lie down. He was still far from being back to normal.

He kept a snub nose .38 hidden under his porch. He made sure it was loaded, then opened the back door. He checked the rooms and closets. For all he knew, that old woman could have planted a bomb in there and he would have no idea. He tucked the gun under his pillow and passed out in the bed.

He had been asleep for a few hours when he heard the doorbell ring. He quickly came to his feet and stuffed the gun in his pants. He looked through the peephole. He was relieved to see it was Hansen. He opened the door.

"Cory, hi, got a minute."

"Come on in," he said. When his back was turned, he put the gun behind a lamp. The last thing he needed was to be caught with a loaded gun. He was an ex-felon. That would be reason enough right there to have him arrested.

"What's up?"

"Cory, a very strange fire occurred last week on South Main Street. Way out on the south end of town. I didn't even know main street went out that far. When I saw you in the hospital, they were still working on it."

"Okay, so?"

"Well, the house belonged to this elderly woman, I think her name was Rayburn.....ring a bell?"

"No, should it." said Corwin using his best poker face

"I don't know. Well, the fire was obviously arson. Whoever started it, used some kind of accelerant the fire department had never seen. Fire got so hot, the crews had to be kept away until it cooled. Well, when they started excavating they found three bodies in the basement. One was obviously the old woman, but the other two were weird. Young people. One boy, one girl. The girl was wearing a class ring. Remember I told you that Iris went missing?"

"Yeah."

"That class ring was from 2011. Her graduating class. She had some dental work done a few months ago and the medical examiner was able to positively ID her through those. Her mom gave a DNA sample, but that will take a few weeks to get back for a match. The other body was burned beyond recognition, but I'd be willing to bet that other body is your boy Jose Mercado. See, I know you haven't been out of the hospital for long, but I would have thought you would have at least called her mom to ask her if she had any info on Iris, when you didn't, I don't know, it just kind of sparked my curiosity. Her mom says she called you her boyfriend. She had a picture of you on her phone. I'd say that was pretty serious."

"She was just a piece of ass, she wasn't anything special," said Corwin.

"You know, the real kicker, the thing that brought me here, is when the examiner was looking at the other body, he noticed a very unusual wound to his left hand. He was missing a pinky finger. When I heard that, I thought: hey, I know someone else who is missing a pinky finger as well. Kind of odd, two of my frequent flyers are both missing pinky fingers."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Well, if two shit bags like Iris and Jose were in that old woman's house, it was for one reason only and that was to rob her. Why else would they be there? Maybe it was a robbery gone wrong. It's just weird. Iris had a golf ball size hole in her head, so somebody killed her, put her body downstairs, along with Jose. No, something definitively went wrong that night. Then, you show up at that gas station two minutes from the house, shot also. You don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure this one out. The hospital saved your clothes from the night you were admitted. If we find any trace of a fire starter on them, you're going to go down for murder. Is that really what you want? You aren't even thirty. Do you want to spend the best years of your life on death row? Cause that's where you're headed."

"I didn't kill anyone in that house. Definitely not Iris or Jose."

"You know, for some reason, I believe you. You're a thief, not a killer. Not your style. But, you know who did. Why are you protecting them?"

"Well, I'm just guessing here, I mean hypothetically, if I was in the house that night."

"Sure, go ahead."

"Maybe Iris and Jose did mean to rob her. Seemed like an easy score. Only, the nice, old grandma, wasn't a nice old grandma after all. Maybe she was something else. Maybe she was a monster that liked to knit and bake cookies. Maybe she worked for MI-6 a long time ago and killed people. Maybe she was a super spy or something. Maybe everyone just looked at her and assumed she was a nice old grandma. Only she wasn't. She fucked her victims then killed them. Who does that? Maybe Iris and Jose just picked the wrong house that night. They picked the wrong house. But, there's no way that third body was the old woman's, no way."

"How could you be sure?"

"Cause nothing that evil would just lay down and die. No, she doesn't want to die and has to stand in front of God and defend herself. She knows where she's going when she dies and it ain't heaven."

"Cory, do you even know what MI-6 is?"

"I was just giving you a hypothetical, Hansen. Just one possibility."

"How do the missing fingers fit into all of this? That's right out of left field," said Hansen.

"Like I said, perhaps this woman was a real-life psychopath."

Hansen was now genuinely intrigued. He thought about just arresting him, right then and there, but he still needed more evidence. He just needed to be able to place him in the house that night. There had to be a connection somewhere.

"You know that day in the hospital, you told me to keep everyone away, especially a woman who claimed to be your grandmother. What was up with that?"

"Old ladies scare the hell out of me. I just keep thinking if the grim reaper comes for them and I'm around them, maybe he'll want me too."

"Man, this is a weird one. Well, I just thought you should know about Iris. Good looking girl. it's a shame she got barbecued like that." he said as he headed towards the door.

"Well, I wouldn't go too far if I were you. I'll keep in touch," he said as he headed towards the front door.

Corwin watched him leave. He took out a smoke and lit it up. He was running out of time. He had to settle the score before they picked him up. He could die in prison and would be fine with that as long as he killed Rayburn. He wasn't just doing this for Iris and Jose anymore, he had to stop her from killing anyone else.

He figured he would spend the last few remaining days of his life getting as drunk and high as possible. He went down to a corner bar and got some weed and pills from one of the local dealers. He popped one and ordered a beer. Things were rapidly going to hell in a handbasket. There was a giant avalanche of shit about to come roaring down the mountain and he was at the bottom. He sipped his beer and waited for the pills to kick in. He lit up a cigarette and watched the game. He never even saw her come in.

"What can I get you?" asked the bartender.

"Vodka tonic please," said Rayburn.

He looked over and saw her sitting at the end of the bar. He had his .38 in his pocket. He took it out and held it up. She reached into her purse and took out her 9mm.

"Have a drink with an old lady, would you?" she asked

He figured she wouldn't be crazy enough to kill him in here. He picked up his beer and sat down next to her. The bartender put her drink down in front of her. She sipped it and he sipped his beer.

"You never called the cops. You're smarter than you look," she said.

"Lady, I'm going to cut your fucking heart out of your chest," he said.

"No, you're not."

"Just as soon as I can get you alone. I'm going down for three murders, what's one more?"

"That's why I'm here. To help you."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"If I had known what a quick thinker you were, I wouldn't have had to burn down my house. I've been in there for almost thirty years. I loved that house."

"It was a dump."

"Home is where the heart is and my heart was in that house. If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. I do feel some regret for doing what I did. I'd like to make it up to you." she said.

"Is this another one of your sick games? I'd rather not play."

"Corwin, you and your associates opened up a can of worms. What's done is done. I'm going to make you an offer. You can take it or leave it, but I need to know, right now."

"What offer?"

"It won't be too much longer before Detective Hansen pins the murders on you. I'm surprised he hasn't done so already. You will die in prison, is that what you want? Do you want to spend the rest of your days in prison? Trading blowjobs in the shower room for candy?"

"The hell do you know about prison?" he asked

"I spent some time in a prison in the Soviet Union in 1959. A Gulag is what they called them. Horrible place, full of horrible people. I'm sure you can imagine what the guards did to a pretty young thing like me. I know exactly what prison is like. I had to eat rats to survive. You are a loose end Corwin, a very dangerous loose end. I should have just killed you when I had the chance, maybe I'm getting soft in my old age."

"No, you're still a psycho, don't worry." he said and held up his bandaged hand."

"Point is, you shouldn't have to clean up my mess. I made it, I should clean it up. You only have one real option at this point and that is to go with me." said Rayburn.

"The hell are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere with you?"

She reached into her purse and handed him the passport. He opened it up. He was astonished to see that it was his picture, but everything else was different. The name on the passport was Christopher P. Ruddick. He put them down on the table.

"Why are you doing this? We just wanted your jewels. All of this happened because you wouldn't give us your jewels."

"No son, all of this happened because you broke into my house." she corrected him.

"You killed two of my friends. They may not have been much, but they deserved better than that," said Corwin.

"You live by the sword, you'll die by the sword," she said.

"So what, I just follow you and you kill me and dump my body in the ocean."

"If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. I've killed more people than I can count. Everyone has their own special talent. Mine is ending someone's life. I've killed some very important people in my time. I once killed a member of the Royal Family who was having an affair with a Soviet Agent. That one really hurt. I almost felt bad for him."

"Why would you tell me this and expect me to go anywhere with you?"

"Because, Corwin.....when an old school killer like me who has killed over twenty people spares your life, you ought to know it's not something she does every day. I'm giving you a second chance. That's more than anyone ever gave me."

Corwin put his beer down and looked at her. It was hard to believe she was a cold-blooded killer. She looked like a grandma. She looked like someone who would go to church or plant flowers, not someone who takes human life because she is ordered to do so.

"You don't have any choice, Corwin. It's this or a nine by nine cell for the rest of your life."

"I always have a choice.....or maybe not. Where are we going?"

"The group I belong to has a villa in Argentina. That's where we are going. You better learn Spanish.

He knew he didn't have any choice. He knew Hansen was only a week or so away from pinning this whole thing on him. He was done either way. He finished his beer and dropped some money on the table.

"Hey, Cory.....you want some change?" asked the bartender.

"Keep it bud. Won't need it where I'm going," he said and walked out with Mrs. Rayburn.

The two of them got in a taxi and drove to a small, private airport. They boarded a private jet that flew them to Texas, where they got on another private jet and flew to Mexico City. Corwin was popping pain pills and mixing them with alcohol. He was in and out of consciousness. He remembers waking up and seeing two men sitting across from him. Carla was chatting with them and smoking a cigarette.

"Carla, I realize he's your grandson and all, but we're breaking all kinds of rules by taking him there. What if he talks? You know what will happen to him."

"He won't. He's a good boy. *Grandma's Boy*." she said as she sipped her tea.

"I must say, it is quite an honor to meet someone like you. I've read your casework. You could be a teacher at Langley." said one of the suits.

They had to go through Mexico customs at the airport. Corwin was a mess. He was so high he could barely stand up. His shoulder still hurt and he felt like puking.

"Next in line, please step forward." said the Mexican Customs Agent.

He took both their passports. What is the nature of your stay in Mexico?

"Just passing through. My grandson and I."

"Is that correct sir, are you and your grandmother just passing through on your way to somewhere else?" he asked

"Yes sir, me and grandma here.....she's the best damn grandma in the world." he said and held her hand.

"Okay, next please." said the agent as he stamped their passports and moved through.

"I always wanted a grandson." she whispered.

"I just want to be happy.....just for a minute. I want to know what that feels like." he said as they walked through the airport.

Corwin wasn't just high, this was something else. For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged. He had been an orphan for most of his life. He had finally found a home.....with the

scariest grandmother in the world. She was now all his to enjoy. They had so much catching up to do.