

The rain and wind made me shiver; it reached into my core and froze me from the inside out. There was no sun...none at all; it was suffocated by the clouds. Everywhere I looked, leaves fell; the trees were getting more bare. It was a nasty day; then again, it was a perfect day for a funeral.

I sat on the edge of my hard folding chair, glaring at the casket that now contained my mother's body. I thought about the rumors...she failed to stop at a red light, or that she was driving while intoxicated. Then there was my personal favorite...she was speeding. The police believed that theory and so did the big eyed, overweight guy who performed her autopsy. No one asked me, they simply didn't care. Who was I? Just her daughter; surely I wouldn't know anything about my own mother even though I'd known her for twenty-five years. I smiled to myself; oh the irony. My mother was a careful driver; some would say too careful. Going forty-five in the sixty-five mile per hour zone got quite a few honks and the occasional finger or two.

Someone planned this. I didn't know who, and I didn't know why, but I was going to find them and hurt them severely. The preacher muttered the last of his prayer, and the funeral had officially ended. Everyone got up and trudged to their cars. I didn't miss the sly glances they threw my way, or how they looked at me and whispered. Whatever. Let them whisper and stare at me and conjure up more rumors. Tomorrow, I'd probably hear that Godzilla came to pay her a visit and something went wrong. It was a small town, and everyone knew everyone and everything.

By the time I gathered the will to leave, the gravesite was empty. The old biddies were undoubtedly scared of missing the latest episode of Jeopardy. I told myself to get to the car, get home, and relax. Maybe in the morning I'd start to feel human again. I laughed at myself as I turned the key into the ignition, threw my car into drive, and sped away. Yeah right, that'll never happen.

The nighttime was excruciating; I barely got any sleep, and when my body finally gave out in exhaustion, my mind kept going. I dreamt a lot that night. No. Dreamt was the wrong word--I had flashbacks; my mind took me back to the night that the two burly police officers delivered me the most horrific news of my life. Was it really only two days ago? Seemed more like two weeks instead of two days. I awoke with a start. My body was trembling and covered in sweat. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand; it was only 4:37a.m. Still feeling groggy, I got up and grabbed some new clothes, then tiptoed to the bathroom. Maybe a nice warm bubble bath would help. My muscles seriously needed to relax. Trying to go back to sleep was out of the question.

Flicking on the light, I looked at myself in the mirror. I had to admit I looked like crap. My light brown hair was disheveled and was in need of a serious trim job. My usually near-perfect complexion was flushed and pale. Turning away in disgust, I quickly undressed and turned my attention to my bath. The water was steamy hot, just the way I liked it. I took my favorite bubble bath and poured some in the tub. The scent of lavender floated up to me and more flashbacks started. A childhood full of memories....my mother kissing my boo-boos better...holding my hand as I got a shot from the doctor...drawing me a nice warm lavender scented bath after a bad day. I climbed in the tub, and as my muscles began to loosen I made my decision. I was going to find the person responsible for my mother's death and make them pay. If they fought back, I wasn't going to go down without a fight.

There was frost on the ground when I struggled out the door the next morning. I had my plans set for the day. I was going to search my mother's house and look for any missing leads, and if I found any, I would follow them.

The drive to my mother's house was calming and familiar, but I didn't like the task that was approaching. Spending my Saturday sifting through my deceased mother's stuff wasn't very appealing, but it had to be done; I had to have some place to start. I parked my car in the drive way, and it felt normal. I could at least dream my mother was still around, that she'd greet me at the door like she always did with a smile on her face while she invited me to stay for supper. I reached the door and pulled out the key from my back pocket. That however did not feel normal. I let the door swing open, and took in my surroundings. Everything was just how my mother left it: clothes in the dryer, dirty pans on the stove. It wasn't nasty looking and my mother in no way was a slob, she just wasn't a neat freak, either.

I made my way to her bedroom. If I was going to blindly pick a spot to start snooping, it might as well be there. Upon entering the room, a deep sadness passed through me, and I couldn't stop myself from crying as I softly ran my hand up and down her cotton sheets. They were cool feeling and firmly pressed. Exhaustion racked my body. I let myself collapse on the bed and curl up into a tight ball, as if somehow I could hold myself together. Sleep was calling me, luring me into its deep, dark caress. I dragged her pillow over to me and buried my head into it; it was comforting, and still smelled like the musky perfume she enjoyed wearing so much. It took me a few moments to feel the rectangular shaped object pressing against my cheek. Confused, I pulled it out of the pillow case and stared down at its contents. It was my mother's diary; I took a deep breath and began to read.

A lot of the diary entries talked about me, some mentioned dreams she had, but what really mattered to me were the real life descriptions: *Cruz saw me today, he looked mad. I still couldn't give him what he wanted. I shouldn't have dealt with him he's a horrid man, and he's only concerned with himself. I fear that if I can't give him the thing he wants, he'll kill me. That's what he does to everyone who disobeys him.* A siren went off in my head. Cruz, who was that? How did my mother know him? What was this "thing" he wanted? Was it worth killing my mother over? Did I actually possess the name of my mother's killer? Only one way to find out. I quickly dashed out of the house and climbed into my car. I had heard the name Cruz before. A lot of people didn't like to talk about him because anyone who did usually ended up beaten or dead, but if there were people out there that had the guts to talk about this man it wasn't here. It was at old B's place; the local bar on the far side of town.

The bar was dirty; I'd only ever been there once in my life and let's just say, I wasn't in the right state of mind. It reeked of beer and smoke, and with it being a little after 5:00 in the evening, the only people here were the usuals, the goons with no teeth and no life, but I guess toothless people and beer go together. I tried talking to the better looking ones first. No one was willing to utter a word, but I wasn't about to give up in defeat. There were still plenty of men to pick from....just had to find the loose-lipped one.

"I heard you was looking for Cruz." A guy came up from behind me and made me jump. I nodded, as I stood my ground. He smiled, and it took every ounce of self-control I had not to shrink back in disgust. The man motioned with his two fingers for me to lean closer to him, and against my better judgment, I did.

"You can find a buddy of Cruz's down at the old bus station. If anyone knows how to get ahold of Cruz, he'll be your guy. Oh, and don't mention I said anything. I just thought I'd help out a gorgeous lady like yourself."

I thanked the man and practically dived out of the bar and into my car. The old bus station was four blocks away. It wouldn't take me long to get there. By the time I was back on the road again I was praying that this wasn't some wild goose chase and I wasn't being an idiot for taking advice from a drunken man.

The bus station had been closed for years, and I didn't think anyone occupied the building anymore. Then again, if you would have asked me three weeks ago if I would be taking directions from a

man that probably spent all his money in a bar, I would have told you...no. Once I reached the door I really didn't know what to do. Did I have to knock? This seemed silly; I was standing out in the cold knocking on an abandoned bus station's doors. Laughing at myself, I headed back to my car until a figure standing in the window made me stop. He saw me, he definitely had to see me, but why wouldn't he have answered the door if he knew I was there? I sauntered back to the door and knocked. A minute passed, five minutes passed, and then finally the door creaked open.

He didn't invite me in like a normal person would; he just poked his head out and stared at me.

"Do you know where I can find Cruz?" I practically tripped over my own words.

"Yes, I do. Pray tell dearie, why should I tell you?"

I racked my brain for answers. None seemed logical.

"Please, I really need to see him."

"Are you willing to pay, love?"

I nodded.

"Oright dearie! It'll cost you fifty bucks."

My eyes practically bulged out of my head. What a scam artist. Luckily, I carried cash in my glove compartment in the car. I had no choice but to pay. I needed this information just as badly as I needed the oxygen that I was breathing. Scrambling to the car, I grabbed the money, and rushed back to the waiting man. He held out his hand waiting to receive his prize.

"Directions first, then you can have your money."

"Do I look like I was born yesterday?" He smirked. I gave him half the money, and he understood perfectly... half the money, then the directions, then the other half.

"Cruz lives on the other side of town, he doesn't like to be bothered, and he doesn't like to meet at his house dearie. He'll most likely pick a random place to meet you. If you want to meet him bad enough you'll go." He scribbled something down on a piece of paper and handed it to me. I barely had enough time to read the words on the page before he snatched the rest of the money from my hand and slammed the door shut. My money was well spent. In my hand I had Cruz's number and on the way back to my car I dialed his number, he picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?" His voice was raspy, and not what I expected.

"Cruz, I need to meet with you." I bit my lip waiting for his response.

"Why should I meet with you?"

"I need you to take care of someone for me..."

"Oh?" He sounded interested, and I knew I had him hooked.

Cruz scheduled the meeting for 8:30 that night; on a road no....actually in an alley I never knew existed. I parked my car a block away and started to walk. This was the bad side of town, the part of town that the drug dealers and prostitutes owned. People like me didn't belong here, and I was already questioning my sanity. As I started walking down the dark alley, the fog hung low; almost smothering me. It was pitch black out; the only sounds around were my faltering footsteps. The brick walls on either side of me were blanketed with moss. I was scared out of my wits. This was the place where I had been told to meet him, and now I had to follow through with the plan. I wish you would hurry up, I thought, and glanced up, struggling to see. Was that him? I really hoped it was, he was already fifteen minutes late. The silhouette slithered closer.

He entered the alley calmly, like he didn't notice he was fifteen minutes late. Cruz was his name, or maybe it wasn't, but that's all I knew about him. He loomed over me... a big, sturdy man with dark hair and deep green serpent-like eyes. Cruz smiled as if he knew his presence made my skin crawl. He could make someone disappear with the snap of his fingers or a blow from his fist. One would simply go to meet with him and if Cruz didn't like the issue that was discussed the person never came home and was never heard from again. It was as simple as that.

"What do you want?"

"I need to discuss something with you." I willed my voice not to crack.

Cruz opened his arms in an I'm-here-so-lets-talk gesture and took a step towards me.

"I believe you may know my mother."

"Young lady, I know a lot of people's mothers. What makes yours so unique?"

I handed him a picture and he drooled over it for a second.

"Yeah, I know her. What a babe. This your mother?"

I nodded.

"She got killed, three days ago, it was a car crash. Do you know anything about that?"

He chuckled. "What if I do?"

"I want to know if you do." He sauntered toward me with a grin. Slowly, I backed up in time with his steps towards me. My back pressed up against the moss-covered wall, I hadn't thought this through; it was stupid of me to even have come here. Cruz pressed his hand to my face and I flinched, "Don't

scream.” He muttered as he reached behind himself and pulled out a knife. Thinking fast, I shoved him away, willing my legs to move, to run fast and hard; but they wouldn’t. I was rooted in place.

Cruz quickly got back on his feet and lunged at me. He cackled, like a hyena in the dark. I couldn’t stop him; he was quicker, stronger, and more experienced. Cruz flew on top of me trying to drive his knife deep into my heart. I grabbed at it, trying to fight him off, but it was useless, and I knew eventually he’d overpower me, but I felt I had to try. I screamed and kicked him right where it counted. He howled and doubled over.

I sprang to my feet. Red, white, and blue lights flashed across the alley. I saw the look on Cruz’s face. He was scared, sweat gleamed on his forehead. He turned and tried to run; I grabbed his legs, and threw him off balance, and brought him down. The policeman stepped out of his car and shined his flashlight at us.

“What’s going on here?” He surveyed the scene.

“H-he tackled m-me and, he has a knife!”

The police officer wasted no time taking my place, and clasped hand cuffs to secure Cruz’s hands behind his back. He gave Cruz a hard look.

“Hey buddy you look familiar. What’s your name?”

Cruz thought about it for a second. I could feel myself shaking and my pulse raced.

“Conner, my name’s Conner Marsked.” He looked down at the ground and the police officer grunted.

“You know you’re the most wanted man in Desperation, Nevada?”

The police officer started reading Cruz, or rather Conner, his rights. Conner didn’t fight like I expected him to, but then again what could he do in handcuffs? He bent over and retrieved the knife that I had knocked out of Conner’s grasp. He turned to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Thanks for the call; we’ve been looking for him for a long time.”

I looked up at him and nodded.

“Let’s go” was all he said as he herded Conner away. He secured him in the car and walked back to me.

“Are you alright? Do you need an ambulance?”

“No.” I shook my head. He smiled and started walking away, “We’ll need a statement from you. Do you have a car?”

“Yes, it’s around the block.” I fished my keys out of my pocket. “I’ll go get it and follow you back into town.”

The officer tipped his hat “Sounds like a plan.” He headed back to his car and slid in.

At the police station, I was only asked for a single statement, but I leaked all of my opinions about his involvement in my mother’s death. They were reluctant to believe me, but I offered them the diary as evidence. Which if I had read further into it the diary it described getting threatening phone calls from Cruz’s number. They found that he even wrote a letter about ending my mother’s life. It pointed out that he wanted to get his hands on her will to ensure he got her house, money, and car. It was enough evidence to put him away.

His trial came and went; he was convicted of first degree murder, and for his attack on me. He got fifty years in jail. It wasn’t the death penalty or even life, but for me, justice had been served. It turned out the police officer that saved me that night in the alley was named Tony. After Cruz’s trial, he and I hit it off; in spite of my mother’s death, my life had become better. I missed my mother and thought of her a lot, but I could sleep better at night knowing her murderer wasn’t prowling around the streets, preying on innocent people and my mother’s death didn’t go unpunished.

I claimed ownership of my mother’s house; she left it to me in her will. Once I remodeled it and gave most of her clothing articles and other various household items to Salvation Army, it didn’t hurt to stay there.

I was weary by the time I crawled into my mother’s bed three weeks later. I had kept her bed, feeling that in some way it helped me feel more connected to her, like she was watching over me as I slept. Lying there in the dark with only the moonlight shining in the windows, I remembered that night with Cruz, and the events leading up to that point. It may have only been one day, but it was the longest day of my life. Cruz may have won the battle, but in the end I won the war. As I drifted off to sleep I smiled.

Tomorrow was going to be a new day.

