

Chapter One

The robbery happens fast. We never even see it coming.

Gramps and I are sitting on his old green couch. We are watching TV. Taking turns answering the questions that the game-show host asks. I am almost always right. Particularly anything to do with sports or geography. When the show finishes, Gramps turns to me.

“When did you get so smart?” he says. “You act like some dumb tough guy around your friends, Mikey. I swear that big brain of yours is going to take you—”

There is a crash of glass from the back door near the kitchen. I stand up, my plate clattering to the floor.

Then the burglar is right in front of us. His face is completely hidden. A red bandanna over his mouth. Mirrored sunglasses across his eyes. A black Yankees ball cap pulled down low on his head.

He holds a dull gray pistol in one hand and levels it at my chest. Then jerks it toward Gramps. Then back to me. I slowly put up my hands and ease back down onto the couch.

My heartbeat thuds in my ears. I can feel my chest tighten. This kind of stuff happens in our neighborhood occasionally. It never ends well.

Gramps has a heart condition too. Something like this could trigger an attack. My mom told me that I have to give him pills if that happens. But I’ve never actually done it.

The burglar shouts something through the red bandanna covering his mouth. I can’t tell what he is saying. Neither can Gramps.

“I’m sorry,” says Gramps politely. “You’ll have to repeat that.”

I tear my eyes away from the gun to look at Gramps. How can he be so calm? Gramps

blinks slowly behind his thick glasses. He coughs softly.

The burglar turns his head a little to the side. He's a skinny guy. For a second he looks like a weird bird with his head like that. Gramps clears his throat and tries again.

"I can't understand you. Look, I guess it's my fault. I'm not wearing my hearing aids. But that rag over your mouth? It isn't helping. Maybe if you take it off?"

The burglar pauses. Thinks about it. Frustrated, he rips off the bandanna.

"This is a robbery!" he shouts again. Louder. Angrier. "Do not move a freakin' muscle!" He points with his gun for emphasis.

"That I understand," says Gramps. "And I won't move. It takes me half an hour to get

up from this couch. You've got nothing to worry about."

Still, the burglar pulls out a couple of thick black plastic zip ties. Using them, he ties up Gramps and then me. The little plastic zip ties aren't enough to stop us. But they are enough to slow us down long enough for him to shoot us. If we are dumb enough to move. While he's tying us up, I study his face. He has a little cold sore on the edge of his lip. His breath smells like garlic.

Satisfied, the burglar stuffs the gun into the waistband of his jeans. Then he starts to search the one-room apartment. It won't

take him long. The place is tiny. A single bed with a dresser next to it. A mini-kitchen with a mini-fridge. A desk. And a green couch, where we sit. All tied up.

The burglar pulls out a drawer from my grandpa's desk. He shakes it upside down. Papers and pens fall to the floor.

"You want some pencils?" says Gramps. "I've even got pens, if that's what you're looking for."

"Don't make him mad," I hiss at Gramps. The burglar ignores us and keeps on making a mess. He dumps a bunch of files out, papers flying everywhere. Then sweeps a stack of hardcover books from their shelves. He empties kitchen cabinets. Pots and pans clatter across the linoleum.

"He's not very good at this," says Gramps.

"Shut it!" roars the burglar, not looking at us. He's busy tossing clothes out of the dresser onto the floor.

Gramps lowers his voice and leans toward me. "Seriously, this guy is an amateur. And I should know."

Gramps has lived, as he puts it, an "adventurous life." He doesn't talk much about it, and neither do my parents. But I know he had a criminal career that ended with a couple of years in prison.

"How about I save us all some time?" says Gramps to the burglar. "There's twenty bucks in a pickle jar by the door. It's for the cleaning lady. Aside from that, you're not going to find anything here. I've got nothing to hide."

The burglar slowly stands up and turns around. He pulls an old wool sock out of the dresser. There is clearly something hidden inside the sock. Reaching in, he pulls it out. A small wooden box. The burglar sneers.

“Nothing to hide, huh?” he says and tilts open the lid. Gramps swears softly. The burglar lifts up a necklace. It’s a thin silver chain with a teardrop-shaped pendant dangling at the end. It catches the light and sparkles like a drop of water.

“That’s no good to you,” says Gramps. “Seriously, take the money. Take the TV. Whatever. But leave that, all right?”

The burglar takes several steps toward us. “Naw. I’m taking it.”

“Back off!” I yell. I spring from the couch, but the burglar gives me a sharp shove in the chest, sending me to the floor.

Suddenly my grandfather’s watery blue eyes turn hard and focused. His voice rattles like a rake over gravel.

“You are making a mistake, son. Leave my grandson alone. Leave the necklace where you found it. Walk away. Take the money by the door. I won’t call the cops. Final offer.”

The burglar leans down over Gramps. He dangles the necklace in front of the old man.

“You really trying to scare me?” He lunges at Gramps suddenly. Expecting him to flinch. Trying to frighten him. But Gramps doesn’t even blink.

“No,” says Gramps. “I’m just giving you fair warning. Steal that necklace, hurt my family, and you’ll pay.” For a moment the burglar hesitates. Then his lips curl into a sneer, and he shakes his head. Then he walks toward the front door. As he passes me lying on the floor, he swings a boot at my chest. The air whooshes out of my lungs, and I gasp for air. The burglar grabs the pickle jar by the door and then slips out the door.

It doesn’t take long for me to cut the zip ties off my wrists and free Gramps. I reach for my cell phone.

“Don’t do that,” says Gramps. He hasn’t moved from the couch since the burglar left. He’s just sitting there. Rubbing his wrists. Thinking.

“Don’t tell the cops,” he adds. “And don’t tell your parents. Don’t tell anyone. We’re going to handle this. You and me.”

That’s when Mom walks in.