

# Mom's Money, Dad's Gun

By Hugh Lessig

The adult book store wants night help behind the counter. The shift is four to midnight with a ten percent discount on used tapes and novelty items, plus cleanup in the viewing booths to check for stains and whatnot.

"You got rubber gloves for that?" I ask.

The man behind the counter has pulled a hard forty years, his face full of unsanded edges, earrings that could double for pop rivets. He arranges a row of black dildoes that are big enough to dig post holes.

"Why you need gloves, bitch? Ain't cold in there. Shrink your tippy." His laugh sinks into a coughing jag. A silver tongue stud catches the light just so.

Above his left shoulder, a 12-inch monitor loops out a sweaty trailer for *Rubber Cops from Reno*.

My cell phone buzzes just then. I'm down to one and a half bars. "Dude... here at the house...mother...stairs...called the meat wagon...the fuck are you, man?"

Two things here.

The caller is Chester, the next-door neighbor who pushed me through the ice when we were kids. Now he manages the FoodCo and does my mother's banking. Mom will no longer accept my help because I am 'halfway to being a convict'.

Which brings me to Thing Two. It sucks to say this, but a dead mother down the stairs would be the least of my worries.

Two months ago, the FBI pulled me over while I was delivering pizzas. I don't have a prejudicial bone in my body, but my boss is Sicilian and I should've known. Every night, he gave me bags of cash to deposit at different banks and I'd drive around in my battered Camry with six, seven thousand bucks and an expired inspection sticker. It turns out he was laundering money for some Philly drug connections. That same night, the feds hop-marched him from the pizzeria under the virginal eyes of a girls soccer team that just made sectionals. I escaped charges, but my name got plastered all over court documents and I've been described in newspaper accounts as an 'unwitting bag man'. The G-men missed the inspection sticker, but that's not really their gig.

When I pull up at the house, Chester stands under the porch light, his calloused hands cupping a cig. "I suppose you want to know how it happened," he says as I approach.

"Where were you?"

"None of your business."

He looks down at my bag. I bought that Reno tape to impress the clerk, who promised to call if the job was mine. I would've bought a dildo but you probably need a portable generator and some coaxial cable to run one. Chester snatches the tape and holds it to the light as the moths flee.

"I didn't know you were into this stuff."

"I'm not."

"How come you bought it then?"

I want that job because no one will see me there. The adult book store gets out-of-town truckers and local pervs. The parking spot is hidden from the road. Townies shun the place like good Mennonites. I want to disappear so bad, just curl up and have people forget they ever saw me. I can't even cry, that's how much it hurts.

Chester leans forward. A hard whiff of nicotine almost knocks me over. "You want porn, I got porn. A new G4, man. Fastest thing on the planet. But shut up about it for now, right? The sheriff's in there."

My mother is at the bottom of the stairs, her mottled legs stretched across the first two steps, the rest of her on the floor. Blood seeped from one nostril before her heart stopped pumping. She looks like she fell asleep, except for the blood.

The sheriff hooks both thumbs in his belt and says she probably didn't fall very far, probably had a heart attack or stroke, probably didn't feel any pain at all.

His confidence is a mystery to me.

Chester shakes his head and says, "It's too bad she had to climb those stairs every day."

Here he goes. Mom had refused my offer to build a bathroom on the first floor because she considered my money tainted after the FBI thing. That, and I hated dealing with tradesmen.

Chester reads my mind like a cat. "She thought the plumber might take you for a ride on that first-floor bathroom deal, seeing's how you never handled something like that."

"I suppose you could've done better?" I ask.

"I've dealt with plumbers, David. Put in a hot tub. More than you ever did."

"Chester, so help me..."

The sheriff puts a hand on my shoulder. "Now, now. This is a bad time for all us. I think we can assume this was just a tragic accident. There's no sign of forced entry, no sign of a struggle, no robbery. I'm just glad you called me, Chet. How's life down at the FoodCo?"

Chester smiles and makes a satisfied noise, the good neighbor who can rise above it all.

Mom appears in an open casket with a string of pearls and a flouncy dress of North Carolina blue. My cousins line up as pallbearers, and the funeral director starts leading me away. He says I don't have to see what happens next - how they fold up the blanket and roll down the lid for the last time. I guess that's where people go ballistic.

I take it pretty well, but as the final shadow descends over her cold, clay face, my cell phone buzzes and I damn near piss my pants. The number on the lighted face of the phone is familiar. There's this newspaper reporter - she's been trying to get the inside story of the pizza place and she's called before. We've talked a couple of times, but I haven't said much.

Later, I check the message she left.

"I read your mother's obit, David. Sorry about that. I know she had problems with your involvement in Drug Money Delivered. But the FBI doesn't

want to arrest you. So why not go public? I think you've seen more than you're letting on."

Drug Money Delivered is what the newspapers have called the case. Is that supposed to be funny?

I drive to the lawyer's office for the reading of the will. The waiting room has fake paneling that warps around the window frames, and the lawyer looks startled when he walks out and sees me. "Oh hello, David. I didn't hear you come in. The three of us can start now."

"The three of us?"

Chester is already here. He wears pressed blue jeans, cowboy boots and a denim shirt, and the smell of cigarettes is all over him. The lawyer waits for someone to say hello or shake hands, but when nothing happens, he catches the drift and goes right ahead.

"Your mother was a good woman," he says. "She came from good stock. She had a lot of love to spread around."

Fuck me. I know what to expect now.

Mom splits her savings account between Chester and myself. We each get fifteen large. Chester will handle selling the house and the two of us will split the proceeds from the sale. The contents of the house will be auctioned off except for whatever we want to keep, and we split that money, too.

The will refers to Chester as 'a second son'. As the lawyer drones on, my mother's words rise around me like water spun from a hurricane.

After the lawyer finishes, Chester hunkers forward and speaks to me in soft, brotherly tones. "I want to take inventory at the house. It may take a day or two. I'll probably make a lot of noise. Why don't you go up to my cabin and wait it out? The place isn't even locked. Just let yourself in."

Chester keeps a hunting cabin just south of the New York state line. God knows what he does up there, but it sure as hell isn't hunting. As he writes down directions to the cabin, I bite on my back teeth to keep from screaming. The lawyer, who did not know my mother from Eve, steeples his pudgy hands and smiles at our little act.

Out in the parking lot, I put hands on Chester and spin him around. "Just tell me one thing," I ask. "When did she change the will to include you?"

He shrugs. "I have no idea. That was her business and I didn't interfere."

"You interfered all the time. You made a career of it."

"Look, it happened, OK? I was trying to be civil in front of that lawyer. At least you could have said something."

My breath comes in short spurts. "I'll say something now. You take one stick from that house without my permission and it'll be your ass."

Chester lights a cigarette, blows smoke sideways, straightens his shirt. "I was going to put this off until everything calmed down, but we might as well discuss a few things now."

"Fine. Let's discuss."

"Regarding the contents of the house, your mother and I had a verbal understanding about certain items your dad brought home from the war."

"Certain items? He fought the Nazis, Chester. He didn't go to Wal-Mart."

"Also, there's an old mini-fridge leaking coolant. It needs to be removed ASAP. You can't put that stuff in the garbage. I'll have to interface with the county."

"My fist will interface with your head."

Chester smiles. "That mini-fridge is an environmental hazard." There is a dull edge to this man. Things don't roll off him as much as they are absorbed. I slam my hands against his chest as he backs away. He raises his hands in mock surrender before driving off.

This interest in my father puts a new spin on things. Dad served in some famous Army unit, the name of which escapes me, and he froze his ass off in The Battle of the Bulge. He came home, worked construction, and fought off cold, black nightmares during the Pennsylvania winters. Sometimes he went down to the cellar to pray on his knees at four in the morning. He always made noise going down the stairs, and I was little then. I could follow him without making a sound.

I'd watch him pray and listen to his strangled sobs and wonder what made strong men cry.

He died two years ago of bone cancer, which my mother attributed to a lifetime of being jostled in the hard seat of a bulldozer.

He had one prize possession from the war: a .45 caliber pistol in mint condition. He traded for it after finding a German Luger in some bunker in Belgium, and he mailed it home in pieces, because you weren't supposed to pull that shit. He kept it locked in his bedroom dresser, but the key was always in the roll-top desk in the front room.

So I go home and get the key and open the dresser drawer. Nothing is where it should be. Someone has shoved the gun into a corner and pried open the box of cartridges.

Fucking Chester.

I hide the gun and the ammo in my bedroom, put on some sweatpants and head into the attic. If Chester found his way into locked drawers, his fingerprints must be everywhere.

Searching our attic isn't easy. It's a half-story affair, just tall enough for me to crawl around and knock my head against the rafters.

Dad put his war memorabilia in a wooden chest and Chester has gone through it all: the uniform cut from green wool, the sharpshooter's pin, a knife crusted with German mud. The sad remnants of my dad's surviving dreams have been moved, touched, examined, rearranged, defiled.

My Dad didn't talk much about the war, but he confessed to killing at least one German. He had been out on patrol, lost his bearings in the Belgian snow and came upon a German soldier cresting a hill, probably lost himself. They both yelled and screamed and Dad popped off several shots from his Garand. He saw the puff of pink mist and the German started to run. Dad ran the other way.

Some patrol found the German the next day, frozen stiff, not twenty yards from where he had been shot. He looked like a piece of wood or a hunk of discarded metal, just part of the landscape, my dad said.

He just fit in.

Now, as I'm sorting through the chest, a strange voice comes from downstairs.

"Hey? Anyone home? Davey buddy?"

Great.

I slide noiselessly down the ladder and leave the attic trap door wide open, the light on. I tiptoe into the bedroom and close the door behind me. Peering between the blinds, I spy a black SUV parked at an angle in the driveway, as if the driver was in a hurry to get out. An Italian flag decal is on the windshield.

The man calls again from downstairs. "Dave? You here buddy?"

His voice rings a bell somewhere. My former boss, whose name is Vincente, had 'associates' who came by the shop, but I could never keep them straight. This sounds like one of them.

Floorboards creak in the living room. Closet doors open and close softly. I crack open my bedroom door as he comes up the stairs. He is olive-skinned, long black hair streaked with gray. I've seen him before - name of Tony, Torino, something like that. He would come by the pizza shop on Saturday nights like he had nothing to do.

My feeling was Vincente never liked him.

He sees the ladder and climbs into the attic, making all kinds of noise. By the time I steel myself to climb up and meet him, he's moved to the far corner, facing away from me, looking through some boxes of old clothes and Christmas decorations, laughing softly to himself.

"Looking for something?"

He turns suddenly.

"Dave! Geez, you scared the shit out of me. Where you been?"

"I been right here."

He repositions himself in the small space, sitting cross-legged. Blue track pants complement the shirt. It is a baggy outfit that could hide anything.

The forty-five has found its way into my hand.

"Whoa, Davey. What's the deal here?"

"I thought you might be a prowler."

"Hey, I understand. Don't go waving that thing around, though. You'll give me a heart attack. You remember me, right? Torribi? I'm a friend of Vince?"

"Torribi. Yes. Now I remember."

He breathes a sigh of relief, but his eyes are alert and he's not the least bit scared. He reaches up to fix his hair while the other hand stays at his side. "Listen. I drove out here because I was wondering about you - what with this thing hanging over our heads. I was wondering if anyone was, um, trying to talk to you."

"I didn't do anything."

"I know that. I know that. But people start grasping for straws in these situations. I've always liked you, Davey. You worked hard and you didn't say much, despite what you've seen. You never tried to be more than you were. But sometimes it's not the big fish who get in trouble. People circle the pond trying to pick off the little fish. I mean no offense."

"None taken."

"Myself, just because Vincente is my second cousin by marriage and I done some work on his house, I got a TV reporter wanting my life's story. You gotta watch that shit. You say the wrong thing and boom, there it is in black and white."

"In black and white. Like in the newspaper."

Torribi clears his throat. "Yeah, now that you bring it up, this TV reporter told me that one of his friends has been looking into this whole thing. Some newspaper bitch."

"Probably the Slate Belt Daily Digger. It's our local paper."

"They been bothering you?"

"One of their reporters has called me, sure."

"You met with this scum?"

"We talked on the phone a couple of times, that's all. The last time, I didn't call her back."

Torribi's hand snakes into his pocket. "Did you ever think of talking to anyone else? Besides the media, I mean."

"I haven't talked to the FBI. They questioned me that first time, but that's it. They call once a week to make sure I don't leave town."

"I'm not going through proper channels here, but..."

"But what, Torribi? What?"

"You may be surprised what they're interested in. If you talk to them, you just might disappear."

"I might disappear?"

"Yeah. you just might." His smile shows teeth.

My Dad's war things are scattered all around, symbols of a life that once stretched before him. He died with a morphine patch on his chest, wheezing in a hospital bed that Mom had put in the spare room.

He weighed less than one hundred pounds, his once sturdy frame sunk into the bed so you hardly knew he was there.

Now I guess I could disappear, too. Me and Dad and the German in the snow.

"Dave. No. Wait."

The .45 kicks hard. The slug hits Torribi in the shoulder and throws him backward. He screams in the manner of big men. "Wait!"

I am more prepared for the second and third shots - the center of the chest, the pit of the stomach, pieces of his track suit falling away. Torribi leans gently against the wall, his chest heaving, his eyes wide and full of secrets.

The final slug smokes a furrow through his blacksilver coiffure.

Later, I'm sitting in the front room when a knock comes at the door. I open it partway and see a blonde woman in her early thirties.

"Is David Martin home?"

"Yes. That's me." The chain is still fixed. We eye each other through six inches of open space.

"Kara Slaughter. Daily Digger."

"The newspaper reporter?"

"That would be me. Nice to finally meet you in person."

"What do you want?"

She cocks her head. "You called me. Half an hour ago. You gave me directions here. Don't you remember?"

The .45 is still in my right hand, hidden by the door.

Slaughter rubs the back of her neck.

"You look a bit out of sorts, David."

The observation almost makes me laugh. "I've had an unwelcome visitor. Someone who never should have been here. That's all."

"Your neighbor again?"

"No - I mean - you know about Chester?"

The reporter smiles wanly. "You mentioned him the last time we talked - more than mentioned him, really. I take it you two don't get along."

"This wasn't Chester. This was someone else. But now that you mention it, my mom left Chester half of her money. She's letting him sell the house. In her will, she referred to him as a second son. She just died, you know."

"I know," Slaughter said. "I left you a message about it." She shifts her feet on the porch, bad shoes and all. "David, you should come forward and talk about your role in the case. The police said Vincente Garibelli gave you paper bags of cash every night to deposit at different banks. The pizzeria didn't take in that much money. You had to know something was wrong. You had to have seen people, heard things. You could give the public an insider's view."

"Maybe."

"Those paper bags didn't hold cash, David. They held ruined lives, broken relationships and shattered dreams."

"It just seemed like money to me."

"It wasn't. Did you see anything else that went on there? Besides the money, I mean."

"I don't know. Look, I'll call you sometime."

"You already called me. Just now. You sounded upset, like you wanted to talk. So let's talk."

"I said I'll call you."

"Fine. Here's my business card. It's got my cell."

As she drives off in her little car, I remember what happened now. After shooting Torribi, I climbed down from the attic and moved his SUV behind the garage. A knapsack was in the shotgun seat with all kinds of papers. They were from the U.S. Marshal's Service and something called the Office of Enforcement Operations in the U.S. Justice Department. The folder was labeled WSP.

Witness Security Protection.

Torribi just wanted to disappear, too. I guess he wanted to recruit me.

Then I called the newspaper. I must have invited Kara Slaughter for a chat, but I have no idea why.

Chester's front door is unlocked. I find him at his kitchen table, slumped over his laptop. Papers and business cards are scattered everywhere.

"Hey Chester."

He is drunk or stoned, I can't tell which. He can't even move his head.

"Chester? I brought my Dad's gun. This is what you want, right? It's even loaded. Want me to test it?"

The business cards on the table have no rhyme or reason. They come from sales people, air conditioner repair companies, real estate offices, entertainers, even a couple of county officials whose names are familiar.

The computer screen tells me what they have in common.

There is a photo of a girl, hopelessly skinny. She might be eighteen, but it would be a stretch. She looks Cambodian or Vietnamese. She wears leopard print bikini underwear and nothing else, and she sits on the lap of another man, fully clothed, whose face is blurred out.

These people - the repairmen and the real estate guys, the invisibles who you pass on the street every day - all must be part of Chester's porn network.

I place the forty-five on the table next to Chester's limp hand after wiping it down. I fix his hand around the gun, pressing his fingers into the cool metal.

Back at the house, I pack a couple of suitcases and raid the refrigerator for lunch meat and sodas. Next to the fridge is the old mini-fridge that Chester wants to ditch. It sits there with a padlock on it, unused.

Funny thing, though.

Chester said it was leaking coolant, and it isn't leaking anything.

He wanted to get rid of it so bad.

The key is missing, so I go down to the cellar and get Dad's drill.

Five minutes later, I'm opening the fridge.

It is full of money.

There are loose bills stuffed in a shoe box, plus a few in the lettuce crisper, brand new twenties, the kind you'd get from an ATM if you did someone's banking every week for few months, taking out a little extra for yourself along the way.

Foolproof, really. Unless the cash machine takes a tumble down the stairs.

I stuff the money in my suitcase and load my luggage in the car. It's probably a good three hours from here to Chester's hunting cabin. But that's where I'm supposed to be, right? The lawyer even heard us talk about it.

And Chester? He's supposed to be here, going through the house, being the responsible second son.

Look what he found in the attic.

Before starting out, I flip open my cell and dial that reporter girl.

Her tiny voice comes through the speaker. "Who is this? What's going on?"

I try to talk, but the words won't come. My gut tightens into a fist and I think I'm going to throw up, it hurts so much. But the pain melts some of the hardness inside me and that's when the tears start to come.

Odd, this.

I didn't cry at Mom's funeral and I didn't cry when Dad was in the final throes of death, his stomach pumping air.

I didn't cry when I saw Vincente burn that poor man's hand in the oven, or when he took a knife to him, made him scream until he admitted to skimming some of the drug money. A few days later, the man's photo was all over the TV news because he had gone missing.

The poor, poor man. Vincente kept his ear.

"Hello?" Kara Slaughter yells. "Who is this?"

"I'm no longer alone," I mumble.

"What? You're alone? Who is this? I don't understand."

I'll make her understand. I'll tell her everything. Because I have Mom and Dad with me now. I'm remembering things I had shut out for years - Dad teaching me to mow the lawn. Mom coming to my high school play, the times we took rides on summer Sundays and got steak sandwiches afterwards.

They're looking down on me with quiet nods of approval, and I am so thankful for their gifts, for Mom's money and Dad's gun.

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