

## JASMINE

*John Danahy*

The flashing lights of an ambulance pierced the darkness in front of a small, ramshackle frame house in the Cuban section of North Miami. The front steps were cordoned off with yellow tape. Uniformed police officers loitered on the overgrown lawn, nodding to Detective Sergeant Jose Perez as he stooped under the tape and passed through the open front door. The unit photographer raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment to Perez on his way out.

Perez surveyed the disarrayed house. The few pieces of threadbare furniture had been toppled, their fabric slashed, and the innards spilled onto a cracked tile floor. The refrigerator door hung ajar and food littered the kitchen. Cupboard doors gaped, dishes and pans dumped helter-skelter around the room. In the back bedroom a single mattress torn from a wood-frame bedstead lay eviscerated on the floor, its foam stuffing bursting through long gashes.

The coroner's deputy, his back to Perez, knelt examining the body of a

gray-haired woman curled up on the floor. Perez first noticed her thick-heeled, black shoes, the same type his elderly mother wore. The woman's body rested on its side in an immense pool of blood that spread out from her head in a deep-red halo.

"Time of death?" Perez asked.

"Pretty unusual for me to beat you to the scene," the deputy coroner said.

Perez shrugged. "Time of death?"

"Touchy tonight, huh? Well, unofficially for now, I'd say between six and ten. When we do more tests in the shop, I should narrow that down."

While the deputy coroner shifted his attention back to his work, Perez turned to Detective Harry Belotti. "Who found her?"

"Neighbor," Belotti answered, flipping through his notebook. "A Mrs. Car-tina. Said she looks in on her every night. When her knock wasn't answered, she came in to see if anything was wrong. Says she didn't touch a thing. Ran back to her house and called nine-one-one."

"Do we have anything on the weapon?"

Belotti held up a plastic evidence bag containing a bloody, wooden-handled hammer. "This, likely, but we won't know for sure till the lab comes back."

“Did the victim have a family?”

“Widow,” answered Belotti. “One married daughter, with a big shot businessman for a husband. Mansion on Fischer Island. Son’s a junior at Florida Southern. Lived with his grandmother for a while.”

“Here?”

“Yup.”

“Hmm,” Perez said and paused a moment. “What do you suppose the perp was looking for in a place like this?”

“Neighbor says she had a bunch of jewelry,” Belotti answered. “Kept it hidden but showed it to her friends and bragged about how valuable it was to everyone in the neighborhood. Her grandmother brought it over from Spain. Dowry, the neighbor thinks.”

“Is the jewelry gone?”

“Must be. Nothing’s left intact.”

“Then why kill a harmless old woman?”

“Maybe she could ID him? Or maybe whoever’d do this didn’t need a reason. Could’ve been coked out of his mind.”

“What a world,” Perez whispered.

Belotti frowned. “A laugh a minute.”

“I’m done here, Sergeant,” the deputy coroner said. “This woman was beaten savagely, and many of the injuries appear to be postmortem. I’ll have a full report for you by noon tomorrow.”

Perez watched as the ambulance team pulled a black rubber body bag over the old woman’s feet, along her torso, and over her head. The large, irregular contusion above her right eye reminded him of a bloody carnation. Her flat, black eyes stared blankly at the cracked ceiling as they zipped the bag shut. He turned back to Belotti.

“The neighbor seems to know a lot about her,” he said. “Were they good friends?”

“Very good,” Belotti replied. “Neighbor’s got no use for the grandson, though.”

“Why?”

“Wouldn’t say.”

“Try to get a description of the jewelry. And have the uniforms canvass everyone within a few blocks. Someone may have seen or heard something.”

“In this neighborhood?” Belotti asked.

“Do it,” Perez ordered. “And ask about the grandson. I want to know more.” He turned to watch the victim being carried out the door.

As if to avoid a chill that wasn't present in the humid Florida night, Perez zipped up his jacket. He'd hated to leave his mother home alone tonight, but he'd had no choice. He hoped she'd remembered to go to the bathroom before she went to bed. He didn't mind cleaning her soiled body when necessary, but sadness gripped him when he saw the despair in her eyes.

Ashamed he hadn't inquired sooner, Perez asked Belotti, "What's the victim's name?"

"Maria Esperanza."

"Has her daughter been notified?"

"Not home. Maid said she was at a charity ball."

"A charity ball." Perez shook his head as he took a last look around the dilapidated rooms.

## §

Perez parked in his driveway and sat in the car. He couldn't get the image of Mrs. Esperanza's blank, abandoned eyes out of his mind. After a few minutes he pushed the memory away and went into the house.

"No, *Mami*, it's not the church bell," he called as he closed the door behind him. "It's Jose. You're home with me."

His mother drifted into her past often lately, a past she remembered more

clearly than her only son's name or where she kept the spices in her kitchen. She'd say she could smell the sugarcane burning on her grandfather's farm in the central mountains of Cuba or could hear the bells that signaled the family ritual of finery and prayer at the old church by the river.

"Can I get you something?" Jose asked.

She remained motionless in front of the television, her eyes almost as blank as Mrs. Esperanza's. He wasn't sure she'd heard him or if she could hear at all anymore. He wondered how long it would be before she'd need round-the-clock care.

"Watch the rest of your movie, and go to bed," he said. As he kissed her good-night, the familiar scent of garlic clinging to her skin brought back childhood memories of abundant family dinners. The sharp flavor of spiced ground beef—his favorite—rose warm on his tongue. He wondered if, as he became older, he also would let go of his present in favor of the past.

His mother stared at the flickering image of a graceful bullfighter moving around a fallen bull. Jose couldn't understand her fascination with the slaughter. The needless killing seemed cruel to him. Perhaps the movie evoked memories of her grandfather's stories of Spain. He locked his revolver in a heavy metal box and checked the alarm system before turning in.

## §

The strain of sharing the house and caring for his mother had been more than Jose's marriage could withstand. His wife had left him with a terrible loneliness he tried to fill with devotion to his mother. Before leaving for the precinct the following morning, he arranged the embroidered pillow behind her back, walked to the counter, then handed Manuela Garcia her pay.

When his mother had begun wandering off and forgetting where she lived, he knew he had to have someone stay with her. To aid his assimilation to America, she had insisted he speak only English, yet she and *Papi* spoke only Spanish. Jose supposed the sound of her native tongue made her feel less homesick. Mrs. Garcia, trained as a nurse in Bolivia but unable to speak English, had answered his advertisement in a local Spanish-language newspaper. Although the 75 dollars he paid her each week stretched his budget, he appreciated her help.

"Thank you, Mrs. Garcia," he said in Spanish. "I am grateful my mother is in such good hands."

## §

"So, what have we learned?" Perez sat on the edge of the cluttered desk in his tiny, sweltering office.

“Lab came up blank,” Detective Belotti answered. “No latents, no hair or skin particles, no physical evidence of any kind.” Belotti frowned as he leaned his chair back on two legs. “Coroner’s hunch was right. Hammer blow killed her, but she was punched and kicked repeatedly, before and after she died. Looks like the perp couldn’t get enough. One funny thing, though. Coroner says the hammer struck from the front, but there were no defensive marks on her hands or arms. Given the position of the contusions and the angle of the blow on her scalp, she must have been looking right at the perp when he split her skull.”

*“Madre de Dios,”* Perez said. “For a few pieces of jewelry?”

“Ain’t life grand?” Belotti said, arching his thick eyebrows.

Perez shuddered, remembering the look on Mrs. Esperanza’s face as they zipped the bag shut. “Did the canvass of the neighborhood turn up anything?” he asked.

Belotti related they had found no further evidence, nor could they locate Mrs. Esperanza’s grandson. Perez asked him to start a complete background check on the grandson, as well as issue a “Be on the lookout” bulletin.

“An eighty-three-year-old woman gets beaten to death with a hammer in her own home by someone she very likely knew, and we have nothing solid.”



“That about sums it up,” Belotti said.

The desk sergeant knocked on the glass door and opened it without pausing. “Mrs. Garcia on line four, Sergeant.”

Perez nodded to the desk sergeant and said to Belotti, “Turn up your charm on the neighbor. She seems to be the only one who knows anything. I’ll go to Fischer Island and talk to the daughter.”

Holding his hand over the receiver, he waited until the detective shut the door.

“Is there something wrong, Mrs. Garcia?” he said into the phone.

“She’s soiled the bed,” Mrs. Garcia said.

“I’m sorry.”

“This is the second time this week. She’s like a baby.”

“Will you clean her and help her change?”

“Of course. But I cannot cope with this much longer.”

“You’re doing very well,” he said, hoping to placate her. “We couldn’t manage without you.”

“When will you be home?”

“Six-thirty?” he said tentatively.

“No later,” she said and hung up.

## §

Sergeant Perez could see the reflection of his car in the polished brass door handles of Mr. and Mrs. William Landover's imposing home. The loud chimes that sounded when he pushed the ornate doorbell startled him.

"Wait in the foyer," the maid said, "while I tell the señora."

Mrs. Landover looked to be in her mid-40s, slim, light-skinned, and attractive in a way that suggested she had to work to achieve the effect. She wore an expensive, cream-colored silk suit with a ruffled chiffon blouse. Her short, straight hair was frosted with streaks of ash-blond, and her contact lenses made her eyes look robin's-egg blue. A gold necklace with a heart-shaped locket hung around her neck. Her perfume smelled of jasmine, reminding Perez of the wildflowers of his boyhood in Cuba. Her detached, emotionless greeting jarred him back to the present.

Perez asked several questions and Mrs. Landover's condescending, matter-of-fact replies widened the distance between them. He continued.

"Why did your son move in with your mother?"

"My son is an adult, Sergeant. You'd have to ask him."

"Do you know where we can find him?"

Mrs. Landover sighed impatiently but spoke evenly. "He is in the Bahamas

with a college friend.”

Changing tack, Jose said, “Forgive me, but I must ask. Your life seems so different from your mother’s.”

“She chose to live there.”

“In spite of your offers of help?”

Mrs. Landover’s face remained smooth and placid, like the pond in the high meadow on Jose’s great-grandfather’s farm, but her eyes betrayed that, like the pond, much was happening beneath the surface.

“How and where my mother chose to live is no concern of yours,” she said.

“I’m investigating the brutal murder of your mother, señora. Her circumstances may be relevant.” He paused to meet Mrs. Landover’s icy stare. “One more thing. Your necklace reminds me of one my mother wore when I was a boy in Cuba. Was it part of your mother’s jewelry?”

As Perez held her eyes, a gust of uncertainty rippled the pond. Her face softened, as if with a sweet memory.

“The locket was my great-grandmother’s.”

The memory lingered on her face a moment, and Jose ventured a slight smile. The hardness abruptly returned and she said, “Now, if there are no more

questions, I have arrangements to make.” As she walked away her heels clacked loudly on the marble floor.

### §

On the drive back to the precinct, Jose thought of the night he had escaped from Cuba, just two days before his 16th birthday. To flee conscription in Castro’s army, Jose was to go alone to his *Papi’s* cousin in the United States, where his family would later join him. *Mami* and *Papi* had driven him to the coast, concealed in the back of an old farm truck hauling chickens. He coughed repeatedly from the heat and dust. Chickens crowded all around him. The sharp odor of dung enveloped him, and he tasted the bitter sting of bile. He’d felt empty and afraid, convinced he’d never see his family again.

The necklace Mrs. Landover had been wearing was similar to the one the Customs officer had ripped from his mother’s neck that night. His mother had pursed her lips so tightly her chin quivered. Passed down for generations, his great-grandmother’s necklace had been lost to a corrupt official to save him. Would he ever redeem himself for leaving his family behind?

When Perez arrived at the precinct, he motioned for Detective Belotti to join him and strode into his office. “What’ve you got?” he asked as Belotti slumped in the chair in front of his desk.

“A real all-American boy, Mr. William Landover III,” Belotti said with a sneer. “Seems our college boy’s been high-strung since grade school.”

“Any history of physical violence?”

“I’m getting there,” Belotti said, opening his notebook. “A few of the high points. In fourth grade he was put in a special education class—for kids with problems, that is. Billy liked to play with matches. Set a girl’s books on fire. Second-degree burns on her hands.” He turned another page in his notebook. “Seventh grade, he accidentally blinded a boy four years older in a fight. And in the ninth grade, he was asked to leave a snooty prep school for fracturing a classmate’s skull.”

“Any convictions, criminal or civil?”

“There’s more, but no. Father’s got a good lawyer. Each time, case was dropped when the victim’s family decided not to press charges.”

“Hmm,” said Jose, “you have been busy.” He stood behind his desk and stretched his tired back. “We can’t use his juvenile record in a criminal case, but it may be useful background. What about the neighbor, Mrs. Cartina? Did you learn anything more from her?”

“Description of some of the jewelry. Should be able to ID it if we get the chance. That old lady doesn’t miss a trick.”

“And?”

“Our boy goes to the Bahamas every year for spring break,” Belotti said.

“The airline verified he arrived there two days before the murder.”

“Getting back to Miami from the Bahamas is a simple matter. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Cartina says he’s a real Jekyll and Hyde. Used to love his grandmother, treated her with respect. But then he went to live with her because the old man kicked him out. Daddy caught him with his fingers in the cookie jar once too often.”

“Drugs?”

“*Coca*, Mrs. Cartina thinks, and it turned him mean.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Perez said. “Mrs. Esperanza’s daughter is a cold, confused woman who’s trying to be an Anglo, and her only grandson is a cokehead. A lovely family.”

“It gets better. According to Mrs. Cartina, Mrs. Esperanza gave her grandson money all the time. Three months ago she finally said no. He beat her up and moved out the same day.”

Jose squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his brows. His own grandmother had had a wide, happy smile that displayed her large, gleaming teeth. In her

90s one of her front teeth had turned a dull yellow, but her smile never dimmed. “Are we sure she had money, living in a place like that?”

“Neighbor says the family was loaded in Cuba and managed to smuggle most of it out.”

“Then why live there?”

“Lived there almost thirty years with her husband,” the detective said. “Told Mrs. Cartina she’d stay there until she joined him.”

Perez sighed. “I guess she was right about that.”

“What’s our next move?” Belotti asked.

“Find out the details on the funeral. The grandson may show up.”

“And interrupt his vacation?”

“You’re probably right, but I’ll cover it just in case. In the meantime, talk to Narcotics. They may have something on him.”

“Check.”

“By the way, Mrs. Cartina left out a lot of details last night. How’d you get all this?”

“My winning personality,” Belotti said as he walked out of Jose’s office.

Jose surveyed the small group around the grave, unsurprised by the grandson's absence. The minister's face was pale as chalk, and his hair blew in his eyes as he mumbled the words in English. Jose felt the old woman wouldn't want to be buried here in an Anglo cemetery, with Anglo words being spoken over her. Even the stones were a bland, washed-out white. He studied Mrs. Landover, elegant as always in a black designer suit. *Her grief is real*, Jose thought, *but perhaps this final ceremony made her transformation to Anglo complete*. He didn't want to believe it.

The service ended. Mrs. Landover's eyes caught and held Jose's as her husband led her away. He couldn't quite read her expression—solemnity, a polite nod. And was that a flash of fear? Then she turned slightly and he saw it—a glimmering tear. He felt a tear in his eye too and wondered if she'd noticed.

The last funeral Jose had attended was his father's. The people from the neighborhood had crowded among the gravestones on a warm, windy day in April in the small Latino cemetery, along with his grieving family. Jose sat at his mother's right and held her firm hand. She had always been the strong one, the one who kept the family together. The priest's words, his aunt's mournful sobbing, and the wind whistling through the funeral awning echoed in his mind as he watched Mrs. Esperanza's daughter disappear into the long, black



limousine.

§

“What have you learned from Narcotics?” Jose asked as Belotti flopped into a chair.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Belotti said.

Jose winced and rubbed his temples. “Perhaps. So, what did they tell you?”

“Haven’t been able to make a case for either possession or dealing, but our boy’s pegged as a heavy user of coke, with a rep on the street for lots of dough and a mean, quick temper.”

“How about the pawn shops?”

“Zilch. Nada. None of the jewelry has surfaced. Even the usual fences and CIs came up empty.”

§

Three days later Jose and Belotti waited at the gate as William Landover III stepped off the plane from the Bahamas. Tall, with blond hair hanging below his ears and across his forehead to his brows, the kid looked younger than his 20 years, except for a red nose lined with tiny veins. His eyes darted from side to side, and he rubbed his nose repeatedly, then wiped his manicured hand on designer khaki trousers. Jose identified himself and informed Landover of

his grandmother's death. Landover didn't seem surprised, but Jose thought he saw a brief flicker of sadness in his eyes.

"Like you to come down to the station to answer a few questions," Belotti added.

"Look, my grandmother and I were very close."

"Still need you to come with us."

Landover bristled. "Do you know who my father is?"

"Don't want to question your father."

"Unless you're arresting me, I don't have to go anywhere with you."

"As you wish, Mr. Landover," Jose said.

"Yeah," Belotti interjected. "We'll have a warrant before you unpack your expensive luggage."

"Skip the threats," Landover said. "If you were doing your job, you'd know I was in the Bahamas when my grandmother died. Besides, you can't touch me. My father's lawyer would eat you up and spit you out."

"Better for you to come with us now," Jose said.

Landover scoffed. "What's the harm? But let's make it quick. I've got important things to attend to."

At the station house Perez and Belotti questioned the grandson for two

hours. As the interrogation wore on, Landover's eyes watered and his nose ran. His hands shook and sweat ran from his forehead onto his neck as he came down from whatever high he was on. For a moment Jose sensed a hint of remorse, but his arrogance returned and never waned. Circumstantial evidence and Jose's instincts told him that Landover, probably out of control on crack or meth, had beaten his grandmother to death. For now, though, Jose knew he'd have to turn him loose.

"Keep a tail on him," Perez said after they'd let Landover go. "Maybe he'll make a mistake."

Belotti rolled his eyes. "Optimist."

"Talk to his friends, classmates, bookies, pushers—anyone and everyone. Sooner or later, he'll try to sell some of her jewelry. I want him."

"You and me both. For a second or two at the airport, and again during questioning, I actually thought the kid was sorry about his grandmother. Give me five minutes alone with him, and he'll make the mistake we need."

"You know better. We touch him and he walks for sure."

"Yeah," Belotti frowned.

"Start a check of small airports and private air charter companies. If he slipped back into the country, he likely came through one of them."

“Could take awhile. How long will Division let us work this case?”

“A few weeks if we’re lucky. Dead Cubans don’t vote and they don’t make the papers.”

Even as he said it, Jose knew he could not give up seeking justice for Mrs. Esperanza.

§

Mrs. Garcia left a note that night for Jose, saying she needed to see him. Perhaps she wanted more money. Jose wondered if he was taking advantage of her or if he was using her because he had no choice. He met her the next morning.

“Money is not the problem,” Mrs. Garcia said in Spanish. “I just can’t do it anymore.”

“Please,” Jose pleaded. “We need you. You’re all we’ve got.”

“She doesn’t remember to eat or turn off the stove or go to the bathroom. I’m not a strong woman. I can no longer lift her, wash her, dress her. I just can’t.”

“What will we do without you? What will *she* do?”

“You’ll manage. I’ll give you a month to find someone.”

That night, as Jose's mother sat in her favorite chair, staring at the television, the stool he had arranged for her feet tipped over.

"Let me make your feet comfortable," he said, straightening the stool. She smiled at him with a gleam in her eyes he had almost forgotten. He returned the smile and could have sworn she said "*Gracias*, Jose," but her lips never moved. "*Mami?*" he asked.

His mother's smile faded, and the light went out of her eyes. She moved her gaze to the matador prancing on the flickering screen. With no further trace of acknowledgment, she stared, trancelike, at the movie she watched every night. Her vacant eyes reminded him of Mrs. Esperanza's solitary stare.

After a time she fell asleep. When Jose carried his mother to her room, she remained asleep. She felt light as a bird. Her body, like her mind, was drifting away. He put her gently in bed and pulled the sheet over her. No matter how hot and humid, she always insisted on being covered.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Jose said aloud, back in the living room. He dropped onto the couch. Memories swirled in his mind, and his stomach knotted with loneliness. He sipped a glass of rum, considering his choices. Before, when his mother was still lucid and loving and full of life, he'd promised her he would never put her in one of those homes. Now, he felt racked with

guilt and worry that he would not be able to keep his hasty promise. He poured another rum. The agencies he'd called had all been the same. Full-time, in-home care was financially out of his reach. He had to find another Mrs. Garcia. The bottle was nearly empty when he fell asleep on the couch.

In his fitful dreams the siren of a distant ambulance wailed. Waking abruptly, he picked up the ringing phone. "Sergeant Perez?" a voice asked.

His hands shook. "Yes," he said, struggling to keep his voice calm. An unreasoned fear for his mother gripped him like a fist squeezing his viscera.

"My name's Sergeant Blum. I ride the night desk at the two-one-seven. We picked up your mother walking the streets in her nightgown. The translator says she keeps repeating 'I can smell the jasmine' over and over. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes," Jose answered. "Is she okay?"

"If you mean physically, yes. I guess you know she's, um, not all there."

"I'll come for her now."

Jasmine grew wild on their land in Cuba. The vines climbed the trellis beneath his window and, in spring, covered the back of the house in a delicate, white blanket. Many nights he had fallen asleep with the fragrant scent in his nostrils and the sound of his mother's soft, reassuring voice reading to him

from his favorite book of fables. Now, as he sat trembling on the edge of his bed, Jose could almost smell the sweet perfume carried on the night breeze.

The next day, his mother safe with Mrs. Garcia, he visited several nursing homes. The cold and distant voices of the staff gave him a shiver. The patients' faces seemed haunted by loneliness and depression, and the smell of death and disinfectant hung in the corridors. As he drove from facility to facility, he recalled how Mrs. Esperanza had wanted to live at home until her death. He despaired that he'd never find a place suitable for his mother. When he returned home she was watching her movie.

"Enrique, is that you?" his mother asked in Spanish. She turned and looked at Jose.

Jose answered in his native tongue. "No, *Mami. Papi* isn't here with us. He's with the angels."

"Shush. Jose will hear you. We've got to get him out of Cuba. He must have this chance." She reached for his hands and held them. "We must be strong, for our child."

Jose felt the strength in her grip and looked into her determined, brown eyes. The thought of what he must do was too much to bear. *Not yet*, he told himself. *We'll manage.*

## §

Over the next two weeks, Perez and Belotti interviewed and re-interviewed everyone involved, followed up on each shred of evidence, chased each rumor, went down every blind alley. They had a strong circumstantial case, but no concrete proof. Jose was convinced William Landover III had bludgeoned his grandmother to death, but the hammer had been wiped clean of prints, and the Assistant District Attorney refused to go to the grand jury without something more solid. As he expected, Division ordered Perez to reassign the manpower to other cases. Nonetheless, Jose kept the case file on his desk, open and waiting for the break he hoped for.

Sixty minutes away from home, Jose had finally found a nursing home suitable for his mother but could not bring himself to admit her. Late at night, awake with worry and guilt, his mother's vacant eyes and Mrs. Esperanza's last, lonely look haunted him.

## §

"Mrs. Landover on two," the sergeant said.

Jose wrinkled his brow and cocked his head to one side. He waited a moment before picking up the phone.

"Sergeant Perez, I need to talk to you. Can we meet in Oceanside Park?"



He could hear the urgency in her voice. "Is this about your mother's death?"

"Yes," she said. "Oceanside Park in an hour, in the west parking lot near the pavilion. I'll be driving a white Mercedes."

Jose hesitated. "Do you have new information?"

Her voice cracked. "Please, Sergeant. For her."

An hour later Jose pulled into a nearly deserted parking lot beside an empty, white convertible. He spotted a mottled dog rummaging through garbage strewn around a tipped barrel. Mrs. Landover sat nearby on a bench, under a badly weathered umbrella made of palm branches. As he approached he saw she was expensively dressed, like the last time he had seen her, but her once stately posture had deteriorated. Her shoulders rolled forward, as though burdened by a weight too heavy to bear.

"Mrs. Landover," Jose said as he stepped beside the bench.

The woman jerked her head in his direction. Dark glasses hid her eyes, but Jose had the impression she'd been crying. The haughtiness around her mouth was gone, replaced by a look that reminded Jose of her mother. The heart-shaped locket hung around her neck.

"You startled me," Mrs. Landover said.

“You said one hour,” Jose replied, tapping his watch.

“Thank you for being punctual.”

“What is it you have to tell me?”

“Please, Sergeant. Sit.” She patted the bench next to her and took in a sharp breath. “You don’t approve of me, do you?”

“What I think doesn’t matter. I’m just doing my job.”

“I’ve tried to do my job too,” she said. “Being a good wife and a good mother.”

“And a good daughter?” Jose asked.

The skin on her forehead tightened and her lips pursed.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I had no right to say that.”

Her shoulders sagged. “No?”

He moved closer to her and could feel her body trembling. “Why did you call me?” he asked gently.

“I believe my son had something to do with my mother’s death.”

“What makes you think so?”

She removed the dark glasses and looked into Jose’s eyes. Without contacts, her eyes were a soft brown, the right one swollen and bruised.

“Last night we had a terrible fight.” She hesitated, then continued. “Billy

and William, my husband, were screaming at each other, saying things they'll never be able to take back."

Jose handed her a handkerchief, and she wiped her cheeks and upper lip.

"They both lost control and I tried to stop them."

"What caused the argument?" Jose asked in a soft voice.

"Billy has been using drugs—for months. Perhaps longer. We closed our eyes to it, didn't want to believe it. I made excuses, covered up for him. Now, he refuses to stop, refuses to go to a clinic. I'm afraid the drugs will...kill him."

Jose waited a moment, then said, "Please, go on."

"Yesterday, I found drugs in his room. After so many promises and so many warnings, William was at the end of his rope. We confronted Billy. He went crazy. crazier than I have ever seen him."

"What did your husband do?"

"He ordered Billy out of the house—this time for good. He said he never wanted to see him again."

Mrs. Landover put on her glasses and turned away from Jose. She spoke so softly he had to strain to hear. "Later I found my mother's jewelry in the lining of his suitcase," she said. "I...I told my husband what it must mean, that our son killed my mother, and we had to tell the police."

Jose nodded but remained silent.

“William was furious with me,” Mrs. Landover said. “He shouted at me that no son of his would go to prison, no matter what he did. When I insisted we tell the police, he slapped my face and stormed out. He wears a heavy ring that caught me in the eye.” She dabbed at the bruise with Jose’s handkerchief.

“What have we become?” she sobbed. “Sergeant, please tell me. For God’s sake, what have I become?” She hung her head and gave a low, long moan.

Jose let a few moments pass, then asked, “Where is the jewelry now?”

She looked up, took a deep breath, and answered, “Here, in my bag.” She withdrew a zippered, red-cloth case, then pressed it to her chest.

“Who knows you have it?” Jose asked.

“Only William.”

He felt concerned for her safety as he wondered how long it would be before her son surmised she had the jewels. “Did anyone touch the jewelry?”

She shrugged and said, “I looked closely at a few pieces to be sure it was my mother’s, but I haven’t touched most of it.”

Mrs. Landover presented the jewelry case to Jose like a penitent making an offering to a priest, her eyes asking for understanding. Jose’s unspoken re-

sponse melted the distance between them. He held her hands for a long moment and shuddered as he tried to imagine what she was going through.

“You are very brave,” he said. “I know how hard this must be. You are doing the right thing.”

“I’ve lost my mother. I can never get her back. Now, I must help my son find salvation,” Mrs. Landover said with quiet resolve. “My husband doesn’t understand. He’s already called his lawyer about Billy.”

As Jose stood to leave, a whiff of her jasmine perfume, more faint than before, came to him. She was staring at the ocean as he drove away.

## §

Knowing that William Landover III would likely return for the jewelry he believed was still hidden in his suitcase, Perez ordered a stakeout of the Landover home. Two days later Landover was taken in for questioning but refused to say anything until his father’s lawyer arrived at the precinct. After a brief conference the lawyer said they would cooperate fully.

Jose sat at the small table opposite Landover and the lawyer, and Belotti stood behind him. In the confined space the aroma of the lawyer’s cologne mixed with what Jose thought was the smell of sweat and fear from Landover.

“You’ve got nothing on me,” Landover said. He sniffled and wiped his nose

on his bare forearm.

“We’ll see,” answered Belotti with an uncharacteristic smile. “We’ve got a pilot who says he flew you in and out of a small strip north of Miami the night of the murder. A cabby ID’d you as the fare he took from that strip to your grandmother’s neighborhood, and your mother says she found your grandmother’s jewelry in your suitcase.”

“She’s lying,” Landover said and smiled at Jose.

“We have your prints on several pieces of the jewelry,” Jose said.

“Why not? She gave them to me.”

“Billy,” the lawyer admonished.

“I’m telling the truth,” Landover said.

“A neighbor will testify your grandmother had the jewelry the day she was murdered,” Belotti said.

“She gave it to me the same day,” Landover said.

“That’s enough,” the lawyer said. “I’m advising my client not to answer any more questions.”

“No matter,” Jose said. “The cabby places him in the vicinity around the time of death, and we have a clean set of his prints on the jewelry, along with traces of her blood and hair.”

“You’re bluffing,” Landover yelled.

Sweat ran down Jose’s back, soaking his shirt. The kid was right—the prints were smudged and inconclusive. But he went on with his bluff and slid the fingerprint card across the table. “Where is the smile now, Mr. Landover?” he asked.

Landover blinked rapidly and he wiped his nose again. “I don’t have to listen to this from some spic cop and his dago helper,” he said, rising out of the chair.

Belotti shoved the table into Landover’s stomach, pushing him back into his seat. “I’m going to smile when I watch you sniff the cyanide, college boy.”

“Billy, calm down,” the lawyer snapped, then turned to Jose and Belotti. “Any more physical violence, and I’ll have you both up on brutality charges. And stop baiting my client. I need a moment alone with him. Now.”

Five minutes later Jose and Belotti returned to the interrogation room. The lawyer said, “We’re willing to give you certain things in return for a deal.”

“Your client beat his grandmother to death,” Jose said. “No deal.”

“I’m sure the District Attorney’s office won’t be so hasty,” the lawyer said. “My client is ready to give up his cocaine source and throw in a few outlets for

stolen property in return for a plea to involuntary manslaughter, with a recommendation for minimum sentence.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to see that he does not get a deal,” Jose said. “He’s going to pay for what he did to his grandmother.”

Even as he said it, Jose knew the Assistant D.A. would probably bargain with Landover. The son of an influential businessman, no prior convictions, and a chance to grab a headline by busting a drug source would be more than enough. Besides, they couldn’t be sure Mrs. Landover would go through with her testimony. The A.D.A. would be all too ready to make a deal in the murder of an old Cuban woman who had no one to speak for her. Still, the kid would do some hard time. He would answer for Mrs. Esperanza.

### §

Jose slept poorly. The message from the nursing home played over and over in his head. He rose early the next morning to pack his mother’s things. As they ate breakfast she glanced at the suitcase by the kitchen door.

“Are we going to the mountains, *Papi?*” she asked in Spanish.

“I’m Jose, *Mami*. We’re taking you where the doctors and nurses can care for you.”

“In the mountains? Near the river? I love swimming in the pools.”



“Eat your breakfast. We have to be going soon.”

Turning to Jose, a look of recognition passed across her face. She started to say something, but her eyes moved back to the suitcase.

At the nursing home, in the room she would share with another patient, Jose lifted his mother’s suitcase onto the bed by the window. An old woman with silky, white hair sat by the other window, her teeth clenched, the muscles of her neck tightened, humming a song he couldn’t recognize. His mother looked small and frightened as an orderly wheeled her from the nurses’ station and helped her into a chair by her bed.

Jose carefully arranged her clothes in the dresser the way she had them at home. The closet was small but he had brought just enough to fill it. To be sure that she could reach them easily, he placed her hairbrush, mirror, and toiletries on the table by the bed. He put her favorite family picture, taken on his 15th birthday, on her nightstand. Last, he left the videotape of the bullfight by the portable TV-VCR he’d brought.

“I’ve got to go now,” he said. “I’ll be back tonight.” He kissed her on the cheek and turned to leave.

“Jose,” his mother said.

Hearing his name in her clear, reassuring voice startled him. He knelt at

her side.

“*Sí, Mami.* I’m here.”

“*Papi* and I will join you as soon as we can. We won’t be long. You will see. Remember, Jose, you must be brave. Make your *Mami* proud.”

“I will. I promise. I love you, *Mami.*”

He kissed her on the mouth, as he had his last night in Cuba, then left quickly. In the crowded elevator an empty feeling came to his stomach. The roof of his mouth and his tongue went dry, and his throat felt thick. To calm himself, he took deep, regular breaths.

As he walked toward his car, Jose looked up at his mother’s window and saw her face. Along the front of the building, under the window, the jasmine he’d seen on his first visit to the nursing home was in full bloom. The breeze carried its familiar, sweet scent to his nostrils. He hoped that she could smell it too.

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**John Danahy's** work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Aim Magazine*, *The Alembic*, *Amarillo Bay*, *Art Times*, *Desert Voices*, *Forge*, *The Griffin*, *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *The MacGuffin*, *North Atlantic Review*, *The Penmen Review*, *riverSedge*, *Salt River Review*, *Sanskrit*, and *Valparaiso Fiction Review*.