

**RUBY**

Carlos never told anyone about the terror he felt when alone in a dark space.

He was a large boy for his fourteen years, already shaving every day, barrel chested with sturdy broad shoulders and huge size fourteen feet. He had dark slow eyes, sand colored skin and a permanent frown on his face. He always looked a little cross as though he were worried about something. All of which belied his gentle disposition.

In the small town of Parkside, an old house sat alone on its sandy lot. It was full of dust, old newspapers, empty tin cans and abandoned wooden crates. Its cracked graying yellow walls smelled like some animals died there. From time to time, different people came to the house to stay a while. Carlos saw only shadows as he stood stiffly behind a crate in a room on the second floor of the house, waiting in the dark.

He felt a slight tremor in his legs as he remembered Ruby's words and repeated them to himself. "It's real simple, Carlitos." Right, he thought, "simple." Carlos knew that little turned out simple for him. "How long's it gonna be?" he'd asked.

"I told you, not long, chico. I'll get them there and then it's up to you," she said in almost a whisper as she smiled at him and moved closer. "We're going to make sure those boys never come near me again," she said in her soft voice as she moved still closer placing her large warm hands on his shoulders. "They must learn that."

"I don't understand and I don't like that house. It's trouble. And you know there could be others there too puffing on their ice." He turned away from her. "Come on Ruby," he said raising his voice. "You're not telling me shit."

"Carlitos, you worry too much," Ruby said removing her hands from his shoulders but drawing closer still. Her dark eyes became large as she touched his face so that he was again facing her as she moved his hair away from his eyes pressing herself against him.

Her real name was Esmiralda Maria Anita Rubio, but she insisted on being called Ruby. Carlos didn't care one way or another. All he cared about was being close to her. She was a small girl, but there was something about her that made him crave her. He knew he would do a lot for her.

Carlos first saw Ruby on the street near his house, shortly after he had come to live in the tiny town near the military base. She was standing by the small grocery store talking softly to another girl who was bigger than her and had a large belly--obviously pregnant. The other girl was crying and gesturing with her hands, her eyes swollen and face red. A tall skinny boy with red hair came out of the nearby store to join them. His long face was pock marked. He had a heavy jaw with a tiny mound of hair at his chin. He put his arm around Ruby's shoulder and Carlos could see her stiffen, her face empty and still as she tried to move away from him. But he kept her in his grip talking and laughing loudly before he finally letting her go and strutting away. Ruby's eyes never turned to follow him. Her face was without emotion. She acted as though she didn't notice anything including her friend's unhappiness. She lit a cigarette as she continued to stand near the other girl not looking at her. Eventually she turned and spotted him watching her. She hesitated, said something to her friend who was wiping her eyes, and began walking in his direction.

She was wearing jeans that pressed against her hips and tightly through the "v" of her crotch. She had a high waste that showed off her body in those jeans. When she turned slightly on her way to put her cigarette out with her foot, he continued to stare and realized she'd looked up and caught him. He didn't care. She wore a white blouse with winding vines of blue and red curling around each button and hugging her breasts which were nice, thought Carlos. As she moved, Carlos noticed how her dark hair hung in curves almost reaching her hips. When she drew close to him, he saw she was also wearing turquoise earrings in the shape of tiny birds almost lost in her hair. He had never seen any girl wearing earrings like those before. But the thing he loved most about her was her eyes. There was something thrilling about her eyes as they poured right into him that first day when she came right up to him.

When she started talking, it startled him. He was not used to girls acting so boldly. She asked him where he was from and how long he had lived in the town. Her parents were originally immigrants from Mexico, but she was born in California. Standing there in the sunshine, she stopped talking after a bit and began playing with her hair, fingering it round and round as she continued to smile at him not saying a word and tilting her head. She smelled like the sweet perfume his grandmother wore and like something else that he could not quite figure out— maybe red licorice.

Carlos had never met anyone like Ruby. After that day he noticed that she sometimes wore dresses or skirts that hugged her butt tightly or swayed gently as she walked. Although she was not a big girl, she had large hands. She was a little crazy sometimes too insisting on arm wrestling with some of the boys in their school. She almost never won, but she liked to do it over and over again. Most of the time she would not give up until the boy would finally lose or stop, refusing to play any more. She could run as fast as any *chico* he knew-- and yet she had the most beautiful long eye lashes, clear pale skin and flowing dark hair that always smelled so good.

On the first day they met, Ruby came right out and said they should be friends and do things together. “Why not?” she had said. He smiled sheepishly, tried to suck in his stomach, looked down at his shoes and rubbed his sweaty hands on his jeans. She had told him to come with her into the small nearby grocery store because she needed him to talk to the owner while she did something. She had a way of getting him to do things that were both exciting and scary. At first he wasn't sure what she had in mind. After leaving, when they were a block from the store and she offered him a cigarette, he saw that she had several packs of Marlboros in her purse. She had paid for a bag of chips. He could not forget how she watched his face and suddenly laughed at his reaction so playfully. Her laugh was deep and loud for such a girl, he thought.

In the airless room, Carlos stood still, forcing himself to hold his breath as he listened for any sound that might give away someone entering the house. There were plenty of noises to hear there.

“When they come in, no problem, Carlitos; you are staying real quiet and waiting for me. That’s all,” she had said looking directly into his eyes. “We’re gonna be ok. Don’t think about nothin. Right?” He could hear her confidence again so plainly even as the heat of the little space moved in on him. Already, he was drenched in sweat with his thin shirt stuck against his broad back.

It was almost black in the small room. Little light could get past its heavy wooden door. His eyes had barely adjusted to the darkness there. Despite it all, he shivered. He couldn’t believe he was in that house alone with his father’s gun from the Army, the Baretta-- even with no bullets, it scared him. He could never bring the gun with bullets.

Damn Ruby, he sighed. Damn her crazy ideas. “Why that house? I don’t like that house and I don’t like guns,” he had told her when she first mentioned it. She just looked at him, her face cool, eyes set, probably sensing the desperation he could not hide. He remembered how quickly her eyes had turned cold. “Carlitos, those assholes will love to take me to their house. I know this. What the hell are you biting your ass about anyway? I told you I need to get even. You’re the only one who can help.”

“I know. I know what you say. But what did they do to you?”he asked sounding miserable. “You gotta tell me. I know that redheaded kid. I seen him on the street. I’m not afraid of him, but.” Carlos’ voice trailed off a bit.

“But what?” she said, her face suddenly without any expression. Then her mouth opened slowly as she smiled and took his hand in hers coming so close he could feel her breath on his neck. “You are going to surprise them, and they’ll never come back,” she whispered, eyes gleaming. He loved her touch, the aroma of her hair, her hands on his bare skin so close. He craved the warmth of her whenever she would offer it. There was no use trying to change her mind.

A sharp scuttling sound broke the silence of the room. It startled Carlos. There was a pattering noise coming from somewhere above. "Gotta be some animal," he said out loud. He felt his body stiffen as he tried hard to make out all the other noises that now surrounded him in the dark room. "I can't take this shit," he thought. "I gotta get outa here now." He grabbed the large crate and shoved it aside, but tripped over something on the floor and found himself falling. His arm shot out automatically to break the fall and he fell hard on his left hand. Pain soared through his hand and wrist as he lay on the floor doubled up holding his wrist trying not to scream. Damn you Ruby, he thought as he continued lying on the floor in agony. Finally, as the pain eased a little, Carlos got up slowly using his right arm to balance himself. He opened the door and pushed out into the hall. Everything was as deserted as before, but there was light coming from the street lights outside the gray windows. He turned and stared at the door. He did not want to return to the room, but he also knew he could not face Ruby if he left the house. He looked down at his left hand and saw that an egg shaped bulge had popped up near his thumb. When he tried to move the hand, the pain started up at full force all over again. He stood there waiting for the pain to stop. After some time passed, he stepped back in the room reluctantly and closed the door. He could barely move his left hand.

The room felt warmer. It had the stink of old cigarette butts and a musty smell of something moldy and wet growing. His heart was beating fast as he tried to take deep breaths to stay in control. "Fuck this," he muttered, but did not move. "Just a little longer."

Ruby had said she picked the room on the second floor because there were a few wooden crates for cover. Shit, were there ever fuck'n wooden crates, thought Carlos. They ate up almost the whole room. Two of the crates were tall and shaped like those porta potties he used to see near the ball park. He was still, listening as he stood behind one of the tall crates, waiting.

"Trust me Carlitos," she had said. "It will be just like hide and seek."

"I don't care about 'hide and seek' bull shit, he'd said.

She'd hesitated for a second, still searching his eyes. Then her expression changed as her voice rose. "You scared of that house? Are you kidding? What difference does the house make?" And, believe me, those boys are half your size. You don't even realize what you look like to shits like that. Trust me. And they'll probably be high anyway. Big guy like you comes up on em, outa the blue, and with a gun -- they will get the picture. There will be two of the little bastards pee'n in their pants. We'll get rid of em. Can't you trust me?"

She looked at him straight on with her green eyes open wide as though they would pierce right through him while her delicate girlish face slowly turned into a big grin. He looked down no longer listening as she continued talking.

A banging sound startled Carlos. He could not tell immediately where it was coming from and turned quickly squinting as if he could see anything in the darkness. It was the back screen door slamming against the house in the wind. He was almost sure. Maybe it came loose, he thought.

He realized that he had to pee badly. "Oh fuck," he said out loud. His hands were like ice despite the heat of the room. He took a deep breath. How long had he been standing in that roo? It felt like a long time, but when he checked the small watch Ruby had given him, the green digits aglow in the dark told him that it had only been fifteen minutes. How much longer am I going to stand here? he wondered. The throbbing in his wrist had started up again.

Outside, the wind was picking up causing a hollow sound of rolling empty tin cans. Carlos was having trouble breathing and kept shivering despite the closeness of the room.

He tried to think of Ruby to keep his mind on something else. A few weeks before, in the heart of the summer, when Carlos was sitting on an old bench in a nearby playground, Ruby had appeared unexpectedly and slid down next to him. He remembered how sat up as straight as he could, holding in his stomach. He felt the touch of her thigh pressed up against him. "What's up?" she asked.

“Oh not much, I guess,” he said shading his eyes trying to see her through the glare of the hot sunshine. “Where’d you come from?” he asked. He noticed that she had dragged a beat up old grocery cart to the bench.

“We need to get some money, Carlitos.”

Carlos hesitated trying to gather his thoughts. She was always surprising him this way. “What do you mean--what for?”

“You like those roller coaster rides at Lake Park?” she asked, her eyes gleaming.

“I don’t know,” he said, trying to hide his surprise.

“Whadya mean you don’t know? Listen, there’s a great ride at that park now. You know, near Indio. It’s a new ride I just heard about. All we need is enough to get in the park and all the rides are free. And later, Joan Jett is gonna be singing too. I love her.” Ruby’s voice was filled with excitement.

Carlos had not been on a roller coaster since he was seven and it scared the shit out of him. He had no idea who the singer was, Joan Jett? “I mean--I ain’t been over to Lake Park in a long time is all. But sure, that sounds good,” he’d said.

“We’ll get the money grabbing empty bottles. You know, everyone around here just leaves em outside somewhere. All we got to do is grab em, put them in this grocery cart and bring them into the store to collect our money. It’s easy.”

Carlos used to take a few bottles once in a while when he ran out of money, but that was a while ago and he never thought about filling a cart with them. “Come on Carlitos, follow me. I know just the place to start.” Before he could say anything else, she jumped off the bench, grabbed the old cart and began strutting down the street pushing the it just as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world. Carlos followed.

After going a couple of blocks in the direction of the baseball field, they came to a house that looked safe until they found a dog in the back yard near some nice quart sized bottles on a concrete slab. It was some kind of mutt barking crazily. They stared at it for a while not knowing what to do. Finally Ruby said: “Hey Carlos, we need those bottles, you know?”

“But, what about the dog?” he asked.

“What you think that dog is gonna do, eat you, boyo?”

Carlos told her to forget that house, but she refused and told him what to do. There was a baseball bat lying in the dust nearby and Ruby grabbed it and swung at the dog as hard as she could. She missed the animal by no more than an inch as Carlos went in to grab the bottles.

Later as they returned to their part of town, Carlos was happy and relieved that they had filled up the cart with bottles, but Ruby was quiet. “What’s up with you,” he asked. She did not reply right away. After a while, she began looking at him carefully with her beautiful green eyes and said without emotion: “I really wanted to hit that miserable damn dog, but I missed.”

At first, he did not believe her. “You didn’t really want to brain the little dog, no way,” he said giggling as they sat on a park bench.

“Why not?” she said laughing. He had never known a girl with a laugh like that--so deep and full. She sounded like an older woman. She pushed him so hard he fell off the bench on his butt in the gravel. “Hey, what’s that for?” he asked pulling himself up.

“Listen Carlitos, don’t go walk’n around act’n like you’re perfect and all,” Ruby shouted. then she lowered her voice as she continued: “Why you always star’n at skanky Angela’s titties when I’m right next to you, eh? You think I don’t see?”

Angela was the Puerto Rican woman who owned the nearby mercado. Carlos thought she looked sexy with her large tits always showing in the loose fitting blouses she wore every day. Although Carlos tried to ignore Ruby, she kept right on. “She is letting the boys in her house, you know.”

“Come on Ruby. You don’t know nothing like that.”

She just shrugged.

The girl could cut into him like that.

Suddenly he heard the clear sound of the front door opening and slamming shut. He was sure it was not just the screen door. Then, nothing until an explosion of sound erupted in the

house making Carlos jump. He heard foot steps and some male voices shouting something and then, laughter. Carlos did not move. His breathing was shallow. "Ok, they are in the house," he said to himself. He took a breath and another as he listened for their next move. Right then, he felt as though he might throw up, but he forced himself to breathe through his mouth more slowly. He waited feeling the pull of the Baretta in his jean pocket and pulled it out.

Carlos remained perfectly still behind the large crate, sweat dripping down into his eyes, burning. The sound of feet running up the stairs of the old house made a thud thump, thud thump as though going two steps at a time. Again he felt as though he was going to be sick, but did not give in and all was quiet. Where were they? He heard loud voices in the hallway laughing. He did not hear Ruby. "Oh shit," he muttered.

Abruptly, the darkness split as the door at the front of the room swung open and banged against the side wall filling the room with light coming from somewhere in the hall. Carlos stayed low at the base of the huge crate, holding the gun, watching through the slats trying to adjust his eyes to the light that flooded the space. He found himself holding his breath trying to stay perfectly still.

The first to enter was the skinny red headed kid Carlos had seen on the street the day he first met Ruby. He was scanning the room with his tiny slit eyes. Carlos couldn't remember his name. He shuddered still holding his breath. The door banged open again as two more came into the room. There was a bigger boy, fairly fat with dark skin. He had his arm around Ruby. That kid was a stranger. Carlos had never seen him before. He was holding Ruby close in a kind of squeeze, his arm around her shoulder. She was not smiling, looked tense. Her face was white. Ruby had her school book bag slung over her left shoulder. Carlos took a deep breath and wished he hadn't brought the gun. It scared him. Even without bullets, thought Carlos, guns have a life of their own. He decided to put the gun in his pocket and, instead grabbed a large piece of wood as big as a baseball bat.

"Ok, I don't see nothin in here," said the red headed boy. He laughed--a high pitched shrill sound almost like a yell. "This is a good spot," he said finally. He was standing no more

than six feet in front of the large crate hiding Carlos. Ruby and the other boy were standing a few feet behind him and all three were searching the room facing the crate. The fat kid's expression changed as he began squinting, his eyes looking in Carlos' direction. At first he dragged Ruby with him, but then pushed her aside as he moved up so that he was standing next to his friend. Carlos stayed perfectly still watching Ruby.

Slowly, Ruby moved to the back of the room and raised her bag off her shoulder. "Oh shit, what's this?" said the fat kid pointing. Carlos had moved out slowly, holding the wood and standing as tall as he could. Ruby immediately caught his eye in the back of the room, her arm extended as she began screaming his name: Carlitos, Carlitos, move now," she yelled in her deep voice.

"Ruby, no, no," yelled Carlos.

The two boys watched Carlos bug eyed for a split second as he moved back behind the crate. There was a flash followed by several explosions that filled the night shaking the small room and causing debris to drop from the ceiling on Carlos who stood stiffly his hands over his head trying to protect himself from the falling rubble. Then all was quiet and the two boys were gone.

"Ruby, what did you do?" said Carlos as he moved out again, barely able to control his voice.

"I missed," she said in a whisper.