

Broken Things

Crack!

Ava sat up and glanced at her boss. Astonishingly, she hadn't stirred. What was that sound? What was—

Crack!

Ava crept towards the entryway. She'd been enjoying her bit of respite while the lady of the house, Miranda Forecroft, had drifted away on the classic gold leaf sofa. A rare occasion to be sure and one that Miranda would vehemently deny having occurred should one call her out on it. Yes, you're right. Your ears haven't deceived you. *The* Miranda Forecroft, granddaughter of the late, great business tycoon and billionaire. Women of her caliber did not nap.

Ava had taken the liberty of ordering dinner from Tully's, the nearby catering service they frequently used since neither of them knew how to cook. *Is it possible that the delivery car is backfiring?* Ava wondered as she inched her way forward.

The emerald Waldorf doorknob jiggled. Someone was trying to break into the estate. Quickly, Ava tiptoed past the double stairway back to Miranda. She winced at the thought of having to wake her. Miranda looked so peaceful, arms relaxed and mouth slightly ajar. Ava tried to imagine a scenario in which she didn't lose her job for this, but she couldn't think of a single one. Somehow, Miranda would find a way to turn armed robbery into Ava's fault like she did with everything else. Surely, if anything called for touching Miranda, let alone waking her, this would be it. She reached out and shook Miranda's shoulder. Miranda let out a loud snort but slept hard as ever. Ava took a deep breath and shook Miranda up like bottle of Yoo-hoo. Finally, Miranda's piercing green eyes flew open and aimed fire at Ava.

Ava slammed her hand onto Miranda's mouth before she was able to yell obscenities at her. Shaking her head, Ava whispered, "Someone's trying to break in!"

Miranda's right hand instinctively rose to the pearl necklace draped on her finely aged bosom. She really just clutched her pearls. Ava reminded herself to laugh about that later when she wasn't in mortal danger. Although, let's be honest. If the robbers didn't kill Ava, Miranda would.

Miranda unlatched the pearls, net worth at least a hundred grand, and thrust them at Ava. "Quick, hide those!"

"What, me?"

The sound of wood shattering erupted in the entryway. It reminded Ava of the time her brother, Edmund, whipped a baseball so hard that the bat fractured into smithereens. She wished Edmund was here to protect them, or anyone for that matter, but they were alone.

Miranda's hot gaze amplified to lava level as heavy boots made their way through the debris. Ava's eyes darted around the room searching for a quick hiding spot. Desperately, she stuffed the pearls under the golden sofa cushion and plopped down beside Miranda just as a black-clad figure entered the room. He wore a balaclava face mask, but it was cut off below the nose so that his mouth and eyes were exposed. Brilliant, bright blue eyes like the cerulean sea.

Pulling a transformation like a Criss Angel mind trick on the Vegas strip, Miranda was the epitome of composure. She gazed at the intruder with as much interest as one would a fingernail. Ava tried to mimic Miranda's coolness, but she appeared more like she was worried her turkey was going to burn in the oven any second.

"The cops will be here soon, you know. I'm sure you tripped the alarm," Miranda said.

“Oh, come now. Please, don’t mistake me for a common criminal,” the intruder said. He smiled and held up a gaggle of wires, frayed and cut at the ends.

“And the cameras?”

“Shot them out.” With his other hand, he waved his firearm in the air.

That must have been the cracks that Ava heard.

“Security detail?”

“That fat man that watches the gate? He’ll be nursing that bump on his head for a while. Best for him to avoid sunlight and screentime.”

Miranda’s lips hardened into a thin line. “What do you expect to find here? I don’t keep anything of value on the property.”

“Please don’t pee. Please don’t pee,” Ava mumbled.

Miranda and the intruder stared at her.

“Sorry, did I say that out loud?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” the intruder said.

“Peeing? No, I’m sure it isn’t, but I have a tricky bladder, you see, and—”

“I was referring to Forecroft’s lies, not your need to relieve yourself,” he said matter-of-factly. He dropped the wires on the hardwood and leaned against the end table a few feet away from them. The lamp, a prized antique Ava secured for Miranda after seeing a similar one on *Fixer Upper*, wobbled dangerously. If that thing fell to the floor, Miranda would erupt. He wouldn’t have anything to steal because the entire estate would look like the city of Pompeii.

Ava closed her mouth and tried her best to fade into the background. Maybe, they would forget she was there, and she could slowly make her way out of the room. No one could blame her for making a run for it.

“Who are you, anyways?” he asked Ava.

So much for that.

“She doesn’t matter,” Miranda scoffed. “Tell me what it is you want.”

“At the moment, I’d love to know who this young woman is. I’ll deal with you after.” He twirled the gun in a circle like a kid with a fidget spinner.

Miranda’s mask was slipping. She stared daggers at the intruder but said nothing.

“I’m Mrs. Forecroft’s personal assistant,” Ava squeaked. “I handle her affairs.”

“I do love a woman who specializes in affairs,” he said and winked at Ava. “You might be very useful.”

“I don’t know the combination to the safe or anything.”

“Oh!” he stood and came closer. Ava could see a drop of sweat make its way out of the balaclava and trickle down the side of his tanned cheek. Breaking and entering must be hard work. He had a delightful curve in the corner of his lip that reminded Ava of Peter Pan. Like he was hiding a kiss there so no one could steal it. “So, there is a safe, then?”

Well, there was that. If she made it out of this alive, she’d have to update her LinkedIn account. She tried to lie her way back to safety. “No, I mean, metaphorically speaking. She wouldn’t entrust me with that kind of information. I’m not important. I don’t know things. I just make sure she eats dinner and attends functions and, and, and has table lamps!”

Miranda rose from the couch and came nose to nose with the intruder. His attention was focused entirely on her face, and he failed to notice the cell phone Miranda left on the cushion when she stood. Ava slowly reached for it, hoping he wouldn’t track her movements.

“You need to leave,” Miranda growled.

Ava slipped the phone into her sleeve.

“No, thank you,” he smiled. “I’m the one with the demands, remember?” He wiggled the gun in the air.

Ava crossed her arms putting one hand on top of the other. With her covered hand, she was trying to call for help. She didn’t know Miranda’s passcode, but she was certain you could still use a locked phone to call 911. She fumbled with the screen as she tried to move her fingers slowly without looking. She didn’t want to give herself away.

Miranda continued. “You might have disabled the alarms and the cameras and poor Wayne, but you didn’t disable the service company that remotely monitors the camera footage every twenty minutes. By my count, you’ve got about ten more minutes before... before... Stop, Ava.”

Ava wasn’t sure if she had called Timbuktu or disabled the phone for the next two minutes. The screen was showing white with alarmingly red text through the fabric of her sweater. It took her a moment to register that Miranda had spoken to her.

“Stop? I’m not doing anything,” Ava said. Was this part of Miranda’s bluff?

“Don’t call the police.”

The intruder cast confused glances from Miranda to Ava. Ava shook her head and raised her arms into the air. The clunky rectangle of white light slid down her sleeve towards her elbow on full display. Sighing, he pointed his gun at her and gestured with the other hand for her to give the phone to him. She acquiesced.

“Why did you stop her?” the intruder asked Miranda.

“Because,” Miranda said. She reached out and pulled the balaclava off the man’s head before he had time to react. “You’re my grandson.”

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“I knew you were old, but I didn’t know you were senile,” the intruder said. His thick, brown hair was a sweaty mess.

Ava looked back and forth between the intruder, face exposed, cheeks red, brows creased, and no longer spinning the gun, and Miranda with her hands on her hips. “I’m lost,” Ava said.

“You are Geoff’s son.”

“Don’t think so. We’re losing tracks of things here. Don’t you want to know my demands?” he asked.

“I want to know your name,” Miranda replied.

“No, thank you,” he said.

Without turning, Miranda addressed Ava. “Ava, go to the library. Open the cabinet in the far-left corner and bring back the red photo album.”

Ava jumped from the sofa, used to executing Miranda’s demands swiftly. She wanted to ask if Miranda meant Chad, because she was certain that was her son’s name, but she didn’t dare correct her. She hurried from the room.

“Stop,” the intruder said. “Please?”

“What?” Ava asked, stopping mid-stride.

“Please. Miranda should say please before you complete her request.”

Ava glanced at Miranda who scowled. Miranda opened her mouth to respond, but the intruder wiggled his gun in the air. She reddened and turned to Ava, mumbling a slow, deeply articulated “Please.”

“Now, you may retrieve the album. Although I’m not sure what you expect to prove with some old pictures. *Do not* try any funny business while you’re in there. You’re too beautiful to waste, and I’m not fond of cleaning up blood splatter in multiple rooms.”

With that, Ava scurried out of the room. She would rather her blood stay inside of her beautiful body, thank you very much. As she passed the main entryway, she considered making a run for it. She could sprint across the lawn, through the gates where Wayne was supposedly nursing a concussion, and down to a neighbor’s house to call for help. But the closest neighbor was at least half a mile away. If she made it that far, Miranda would either be angry at her for contacting the police on her newfound grandson, or she’d be dead as a doornail. Either way, Ava would be tragically unemployed.

She shrugged her shoulders, sighed, and continued to the library. She wondered if there really was someone scanning the security footage every twenty minutes and how long it would take for them to detect a break in. Was that just something Miranda made up to intimidate the intruder?

The library was still dim after Ava turned on the desk lamp. She traced her finger along the shelves, and it came back spotless. Ava had never seen Miranda set foot in here, but she knew it was cleaned twice a week by the maid. Miranda could sniff out dust like a bloodhound. The room had mostly been used by the late Mr. Forecroft. The books seemed to whisper to Ava as she strode past, eager to release their wisdom into the world one last time.

She found the photo album without incident and returned to Miranda and the intruder. Miranda sat upright on the sofa like a queen in her throne room while the intruder leaned on the end table, leg bouncing and foot tapping on the hardwood floor. When Ava entered the room, it was as if she pressed play on a paused film.

Miranda flicked her wrist to beckon Ava forward. Ava handed over the photo album and shuffled out of the way. Miranda slapped through the pages.

“Thank you, Ava,” the man said.

Ava didn’t know whether to say, “You’re welcome,” or “Please don’t murder me,” so she nodded and said nothing.

“There,” Miranda said. She flipped the album around to face the others. The intruder stepped forward, and Ava, curiosity outweighing her fears, inched closer to peak around the man and see the image herself.

Two young men stood shirtless with their arms around each other. Ava guessed they were in their early twenties. Sunlight beamed around the palm trees onto their reddened shoulders.

“That one,” Miranda said, pointing to the younger of the two, “is my youngest son, Chad.” Chad was beaming. He eyed the camera with cool, arrogant certainty. “And that one is Geoff. Geoffrey Forecroft, my oldest.” Geoffrey’s eyes were shifted away from the camera, yet the radiance of his blue eyes mimicked those of the intruder. There were more similarities. Geoff’s stature, his slight build, his brown, untidy hair, his bronzed skin. The men were virtually identical.

“Geoff doesn’t seem as if he likes his brother very much,” the intruder said. He was attempting a casual tone, but his voice faltered.

It was true, Ava observed. Geoff looked uncomfortable in the picture. As if he wished he were somewhere, anywhere else.

“There is no way two people could look so much alike and not be related. What is your name?” Miranda asked, ignoring the intruder’s statement.

“Don’t you think that if your son had a child, he would have told you?” the intruder countered.

“I haven’t seen Geoff in twenty-eight years.”

“Where the hell has he been?” Ava screamed.

Miranda and the intruder had been staring intensely at one another. They turned to Ava, startled, as if they’d forgotten she was in the room.

“I said that out loud again, didn’t I?” Ava squeaked. “Miranda, you never told me you had another son. I thought Chad was an only child.”

Miranda cast a derisive glance at Ava before turning her attention back to the intruder. “Well?”

“I hate to break your heart. I’d much rather break into your house, get what I came for, and leave with a five-star review on my thievery. You can fill out a review on Yelp, by the way. There’s an entire section for criminals.” He winked at Ava, but she didn’t respond. She was busy holding her breath in an attempt to not have any more outbursts. “Tough crowd, aren’t you? If you must know, I never knew my father. I have my mother’s last name, so that won’t help you. But I’m not even from this state, so I don’t see how I could have any possible connection to this family. It’s just a coincidence. Now, Ava, you mentioned a safe?”

She shook her head furiously as her cheeks reddened.

“That means nothing. Geoff was a locom tenens physician. A travel doctor who filled temporary positions anywhere he was needed. He traveled all across the country.”

“I’m getting tired of this. I’ve tried to comply, but I’m running out of time and patience.” The intruder aimed the gun at Ava. Though he had fidgeted throughout the encounter, his hand was steady, the gun unwavering.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked. She backed away slowly, trembling with each step.

“You’re coming with me to Miranda’s bedroom.”

“The bedroom? Are you going to—”

“As much as I would love to, my dear, I’m afraid there’s no time for that now. For the jewels.”

Ava felt strange breathing a sigh of relief while still held at gunpoint. He pushed the nozzle of the gun into her back to make her start walking down the hall.

“Don’t move,” he said to Miranda, “or her blood is on your hands.”

Miranda remained upright on the sofa with a hardened expression.

The intruder shoved the gun into Ava to move her forward. They shifted in tandem towards the bedroom.

“This is the worst waltz ever,” Ava mumbled.

As they reached the door to Miranda’s bedroom, they heard someone creeping up behind them.

“I thought I told you—” the intruder began as he turned around expecting to see Miranda. Instead, he saw a large, burly man with a long beard and a shotgun aimed right at him. He was wearing security overalls with a nametag that read, “Dutch.”

“Come on back now,” Dutch said.

“I don’t think so—” the intruder began. His words were cut off by the loud crack of Dutch’s shotgun and drywall confetti falling from the ceiling. A large chunk the size of Ava’s worst nightmare fell on the intruder’s head and he dropped the gun. She scurried like a rat in the rubble to grab it before he regained his senses.

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“There are more chandeliers in here than in the royal palace in Madrid,” Dutch grunted as they gathered at the dining table. He leaned against the wall and aimed the shotgun at the intruder, picking his nose with the pinky finger on his free hand. The intruder’s gun rested in the sweaty crevice on the small of Dutch’s back.

Ava stared. “Have you been to Madrid?”

Dutch flicked. The booger landed somewhere near the china cabinet. “History channel,” he mumbled.

The table was built to sit twelve, but it could be extended to fit more should the event necessitate. Miranda reigned from the head while Ava and the intruder took their places across from each other.

“Why does your security system send gargantuars instead of the police?” the intruder asked. An ice pack sat on his crown like a blooming bluebell.

“Nothing happens in the Forecroft home that requires police,” Miranda stated. Her eyes dared the congregation to disagree. “Now, your name. *Please.*”

“If I’ve been successful at nothing else today, at least I’ve taught you some manners,” the intruder said. He attempted a smile. The red egg on his head pulsed with its own throbbing heartbeat.

Ava snickered.

“You may be my grandson, but I’m not above having a family member shot.” Miranda nodded at Dutch who took a step closer.

“Down, Sparky. My name is Robert.”

“Robert...?”

“De Niro.”

Another nod from Miranda and the nozzle of the gun pressed into the intruder’s temple. “Should I crack another egg?” Dutch asked. He turned crimson trying to hold in the laughter from his own joke.

“Robert Wilson. But as I said before, the last name is from my mother, not my father. I never knew him.”

“Where are you from? Where did your mother and father meet?”

“Seattle.”

“How did you end up here?” Ava asked.

Miranda, Ava thought, is a master of communicating with her eyes. The glare she received said *How dare you interrupt my interrogation with your own questions? You are not in charge here. Now shut up.* Ava gulped and followed the eyes’ command. Maybe she could just leave. She wasn’t needed for any more of this, right? She thought about asking to be excused like a child leaving the table while mommy and daddy were fighting. Except mommy had a hired assassin on hand. She giggled. Miranda’s eyes did not deign to respond. They had returned to the egghead.

“Well?” Miranda asked. “Answer the girl. How did you end up here?”

“I’m a connoisseur of fine things. I was in the area, I spotted this house, and I did some research on the dark web. There’s a forum for people like me. It told me everything, even showed a floorplan of the estate and possible safe locations. It showed where the cameras were located and where I could find Wayne.”

“And you thought you could handle the job alone?”

“He’s not alone.” Light from the chandeliers shimmered off the three knives that the person entering the room casually juggled. They did a twist, tossed the knives high into the air, and caught two by the handle. The third one landed blade down into the center of the table with a loud crack.

They were tall and skinny, a flag pole with black clothes like the Jolly Roger. Their hair appeared to have been sawn off with one of their own knives, short and jagged with an assortment of colors like a bowl of miso soup. A scar ran through their eye, fleshy and pink against the pale surface.

“You can find lots of things on the dark web,” Robert smirked. “What took you so long?”

“I was taking my time looking for the goods while you had everyone distracted.”

“Did you find anything?” Ava asked. She didn’t dare look at Miranda to see what her eyes were saying.

“My surveillance was interrupted when the floor exploded underneath me.”

“I already told you. There’s nothing here,” Miranda snapped. “Dutch, get rid of...him.”

Dutch had let the shotgun slip as he watched the scene unfold with a pinky in his nose and a gleam in his eye. He snapped back to attention and aimed the shotgun at the knife-wielder.

“Did you ever see *Knife or Death*?” Dutch asked. “Is that a hand-forged falcata?”

“Good eye, mate,” the knife-wielder said. “I’d hate to take it from you.” They tossed the knife, caught it by the blade, and aimed it at Dutch.

“Mother, where are you?” a voice called from the foyer. “What the hell happened to your door?”

Everyone froze, the voice pushing the pause button.

Chad entered and guffawed at the scene before him. “Mother... why is a Podunk moonshiner aiming a shotgun at a Circus performer? If you wanted a show, I could have found something better.” He peered around Dutch and the knife-wielder to see Ava. “Call me next time, and I’ll connect you with my secretary.” He winked at her, strode between the barrel of the shotgun and the falcata, pressed his finger into the tip of the knife, winced and shook his head, and took a seat beside Ava. “That’s a real knife!” He looked to Ava in wide-eyed amazement. She had been working hard to blend into the background and wished he would stop drawing her back into things. She slid down into her chair and refused to meet his gaze any longer.

Chad looked to Miranda, his mother, whose expression was stern and unrelenting. His smile wavered, but he turned to the third person at the table in hopes of some comradery, like a lost puppy looking for a pet, Ava thought. Chad’s smile fell as his jaw went slack. He stared at the intruder who set the ice pack on the table and met Chad’s gaze. Robert leaned forward and moved his head around as if letting Chad take him in from every angle.

“Bro,” Chad said.

“Bro? Really?” the intruder responded.

“Geoff, is that you?”

“No, you idiot,” Miranda interjected. “That’s his son, Robert.”

“Bro?” Chad questioned, his eyebrows raised.

“Bro,” Robert responded, his eyebrows sunk.

Ava was tired. She felt like she’d slipped into an alternate universe where the only method of communication was eyebrow wiggles and the word bro.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on?” Chad asked.

“Why are you here, Chad?” Miranda asked. “You don’t ever stop by unannounced unless you need something.”

“Can’t a guy check on his mother?”

Dutch and the knife-wielder, tired of holding their paused poses, shrugged their shoulders at one another and sat at the table. Dutch stuck his pinky back in his nose like a security blanket.

Miranda waited.

“Dammit, Mother, I need to borrow the yacht for a week. You weren’t answering your phone. Now, what the hell is happening here? Geoff had a son?”

“Yes,” Miranda said, at the same time Robert said, “No.”

Chad roared.

Ava took a deep breath. “Your mother and I were waiting for dinner to be delivered. She was taking a na—nice break from all the hard work she’s done today, when I heard a loud crack. Robert broke in to the estate and held us hostage. Miranda claimed he was her grandson which he vehemently denied. Then, he demanded that I take him to the safe...which there isn’t one. Dutch showed up because he works for some truly awful security company that doesn’t even notify police and only sends one man with no backup. He exploded the ceiling and then we all came in here for a little sit down. That’s when Knife Man over there showed up and said he’s working with Robert.”

“Sax.”

“Huh?”

“My name is Sax,” the knife-wielder said. “They/them.”

“Sax came in,” Ava continued. “They and Dutch were about to fight it out. Did I say that right? They and Dutch?”

Sax nodded.

“And then you showed up. There, now you’re all caught up.”

“How about you let me borrow that yacht of yours and we’ll call it a night?” Robert asked.

“Get me a beer,” Chad said to Ava.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused. Anything in a bottle will do.”

Ava sighed and stood up to do her bidding.

“Sit back down, please,” Robert said.

Ava sat.

“I need a beer, bro,” Chad protested.

Ava stood.

“She will not be getting it for you.”

Ava sat.

“Call your mother,” Miranda directed. “Ask her who your father is.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Well, your robbery has gone awry. You will not be leaving the premises with so much as a table lamp. Geoff, however, is my eldest son. He is set to inherit millions. If he cannot be located, or if something terrible has befallen him, then his son would inherit.”

“Wait a minute. After all this time, Geoff still inherits and not me? Mother!”

“Shut up, Chad,” Miranda said.

“You could use this time to get yourself a beer,” Ava whispered, patting Chad on the shoulder.

“I still need to get paid,” Sax commented.

Robert fished his phone out of his pocket, found Mom in his contacts, and placed the phone on speaker in the center of the table beside the gleaming knife.

Chad melted, folding his arms over his head on the table.

It’s ring resounded in the silence. Chandelier crystals shivered in expectation. One ring. Two. Three rings. “Hello, Robert, dear. Sorry, I was out in the garden. I had to take off my gloves. What do you need, love? I thought you were across the country. It’d be really late there I suppose.”

Chad leaned back and looked around.

“Mom, I need to know my father’s name. Don’t ask questions. I’ll fill you in later. It’s imperative that you tell me now.”

Chad stretched his arms out wide.

“I don’t understand. What’s this about?”

Chad grabbed the gun from Dutch’s back, momentarily losing his grip on the sweat-covered handle, roared, and shot the phone. The table exploded, and the knife center-piece blasted into Sax’s foot. Sax threw the falcata, piercing Chad’s chest.

“Bro,” Chad wailed as he sank to the ground.

Dutch fired the shotgun at Sax. He was a much redder confetti than the ceiling had been. He reloaded and aimed at Robert.

“Put it down,” Miranda said without so much as a tremor. Dutch sat down. “Robert, you still have my phone. Call her back.”

“Shouldn’t we call the police now?” Ava asked. She was once again reminded of Edmund and the bat that blasted to smithereens. Fragments of table and people everywhere. Being jobless didn’t sound so bad anymore.

“If this is how you act when your son is on the ground dying, I don’t want to be your grandson. I don’t want to know,” Robert said. His legs shook.

“You’d throw away millions?”

“It’s not worth it.”

“If millions of dollars aren’t worth it, then why would you come on to my estate and try to rob me? No one messes with Miranda Forecroft and gets away with it. Dutch, you can shoot him now,” Miranda said with the casual wave of a hand.

Dutch raised the gun. Ava screamed. Chad wailed. Robert trembled and squeezed his eyes shut. The doorbell rang.

“Tully’s Catering!”