

# Mary

Mary Lee pushed open the shop door. A wave of humid heat rolled in. Another hot Atlanta night, refusing to give way to cooler fall weather.

Her gaze swept the darkened street, lingering enough to be cautious but not enough to look nervous. Beyond a dozen feet, she could see little more than blurred shapes. At Christmas, her children had presented her with a check for a cataract operation, but she'd handed it back. Keep it for something important, she'd said. For the grandchildren, for college or a wedding. So long as she could still read her morning paper and recognize her customers across the store counter, such an operation was a waste of good money.

As for the rest of the world, she'd seen it often enough. It didn't change. Like the view outside her shop door tonight. Though she couldn't make out the faces of the teenagers standing at the corner, she knew their shapes, knew their names, knew the names of their parents should they make trouble. They wouldn't, though; like dogs, they didn't soil their own territory.

As she laid her small trash bag at the curb, one of the blurry shapes lifted a hand. Mary waved back.

Before she could duck back into her store, Mr. Emery stepped from his coffee shop. His wide face split in a Santa Claus grin, a smile that kept many a customer from complaining about stale bread or cream a few days past its "best before" date.

"Going home early tonight, Miz Lee?" Emery asked.

“No, no.”

His big stomach shuddered in a deep sigh. “You gotta start taking it easy, Miz Lee. We’re not kids anymore. When’s the last time you locked up and went home at closing time?”

She smiled and shrugged . . . and reminded herself to take out the garbage earlier tomorrow, so she could be spared this timeworn speech. She murmured a “good night” to Mr. Emery, and escaped back into her shop.

Now it was her time. The customers gone, the shop door locked, and she could relax and get some real work done. She flipped on her radio, and turned up the volume.

Mary took the broom from behind the counter as “Johnny B Goode” gave way to “Love Me Tender.” Crooning along with Elvis, she swept a path through the faint pattern of dusty footprints.

Something flickered to her left, zipping around the side of her head like a diving mosquito. As her hand went up to swat it, she felt the prick at her throat, but it was cool, almost cold. A sharp pain, followed by a rush of heat. At first, she felt only a twinge of annoyance, her brain telling her it was yet another hiccup of age to add to her body’s growing repertoire. Then she couldn’t breathe.

Gasping, her hands flew to her throat. Sticky wet heat streamed over them. Blood? Why would her neck be—? As she bent forward, she noticed a reflection in the glass lid of the ice cream freezer. A man’s face above hers. His expression blank. No, not blank. Patient.

Mary opened her mouth to scream.

Darkness.

He lowered the old woman's body to the floor. To an onlooker, the gesture would seem gentle, loving, but it was just habit, putting her down carefully so she didn't fall with a thud. Not that anyone was around to hear it. Habit, again. Like unplugging the security camera even though, when he'd been surveying the shop, he'd noticed there was no tape in the recorder.

He left the wire embedded in the old woman's throat. Standard wire, available at every hardware store in the country, cut with equally standard wire cutters. He double- and triple-checked the paper overshoes on his boots, making sure he hadn't stepped in the puddle of blood and left a footprint. Not that it mattered. The boots would be gone by morning, but he looked anyway. Habit.

It took all of thirty seconds to run through the dozens of checks in his head, and reassure himself that he'd left nothing behind. Then he reached his gloved hand into his pocket and withdrew a square of plastic. He tore open the plastic wrapper and pulled out a folded sheet of paper within. Then he bent down, lifted the old woman's shirttail and tucked the paper inside her waistband.

After one final look around the scene, he walked past the cash register, past the bulging night-deposit bag, past the cartons of cigarettes and liquor, and headed out the back door.