

Ramton Gallow Stories

The Four Thieves

By
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‘Bloody cats,’ moaned Archie as he unsteadily got up out of his tatty armchair.

He had been asleep, dreaming of the days now long gone, when the pretty girls would smile at him as he walked down the street on a warm summer’s day, with flowers in their hair and their thin dresses waving in the inviting breeze. Though, of course, none of them could hold a candle to his late wife, Mary. He had been enjoying the images floating in his dream world until a clanking noise outside the back door in the kitchen startled him awake.

Deciding to use the broom that had been leaning up against the sink, so he could use it to shoe the cat, or whatever it was, that had knocked his bins over; Archie turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

As he stepped outside and peered into the darkness, he didn’t see the large strong hand grip his throat and force him back into the kitchen, and then, as the broom slipped from Archie’s grip, down onto the floor.

The face of the man the hand belong to was twisted in anger, and as Archie’s mind tried to register what was happening to him, three more faces appeared before the shroud of unconsciousness closed off all of Archie’s senses.

When he opened his eyes again, it took Archie a while for everything to come into focus and he was able to recognise where he was. He was still in his kitchen, tied to one of his dining chairs.

Four people were crowded around the small dining table, three men and a woman, taking shiny things out of a couple of large black bags and placing them in a pile. It took a few seconds, but Archie realised what the things were – jewellery. Thousands of pounds worth of necklaces, broaches and rings adorned the place where he ate his boiled eggs, or dry toast, or even baked beans, sometimes cold and straight out of the tin, as he could hardly afford much else.

‘Slider, there’s a fortune here,’ said the man who had grabbed Archie when he had opened the back door. He was the largest one of the four, almost as wide as he was tall, the kitchen light reflecting off the top of his shaved head.

‘I told you so, Mason,’ said Slider, ‘that’s why you lot do as I say. I always see you right.’

Slider was almost a head shorter than the man he called Mason, and a lot thinner too. His leather jacket didn’t hang right on his shoulders, and the arms of which looked as if they longed to be filled more completely. Archie would have wondered why a man the size of Mason would listen to this skeletal leader, if it hadn’t been for Slider’s eyes as he glanced over at him. If the eyes were the windows to the soul, Archie could tell that Slider’s soul would have devoured even the light of the Sun.

The other man in the group was sitting on the far side of the table, his head down, not looking at the jewellery or helping to take it out of the bag. He was scared, Archie could tell that, like an abused dog knowing that at any moment its master would hit him again just for the fun of it. He was older than the other two men as well, with a pointy face and grey patches in his hair. He also looked grimy, as if he hadn’t had a wash for a few days.

‘Cheer up, Jack,’ said Slider to the scared man. ‘You deserve your share, the way you lost those pigs. Fancy bit of driving that.’

The man called Jack looked up and gave a weak smile and nod.

‘Even though we did end up in the back end of beyond,’ said Mason, which made Jack lose his smile completely. ‘Where the hell are we, anyway?’

Archie hoped that they weren’t going to ask him that question, and he was glad when the woman answered.

‘I saw a sign saying “*Welcome to Ramton Gallow*” shortly after we got rid of the police.’

Archie wondered why a young woman as beautiful as she, with china-white skin and long raven hair, would be with such odious men as these. She could have done a lot better with the company she kept, and the lifestyle she seemed to be pursuing.

‘Never heard of the place,’ said Slider, taking a map book out of his pocket and looking at it. ‘It’s not even on the map.’

‘Maybe that’s a good thing,’ said the woman. ‘The police might not come here to look for us.’

‘Well, I don’t think we should wait too long here to find out if you are right, Lisa,’ said Mason.

Slider snapped his head towards Mason, and gave a look that made the large man recoil as if he had been slapped hard in the face.

‘We’ll leave when I say we leave,’ barked Slider. ‘I think Lisa’s right. If the police thought we were here then they would have found us by now. We’ll divide up the stuff, find another car, and then leave.’

‘What about the old man?’ asked Mason.

Slider looked over at Archie and gave him a wry smile.

‘Don’t kill him,’ said Lisa, knowing what Slider was about to say.

‘Why not?’ asked Mason.

‘I’m no killer, Mason, that’s why. We can just leave him there, by the time someone finds him we’ll be long gone.’

‘Fine,’ said Slider, ‘we’ll leave him alive. First though Mason, you and Jack have a look around, see if there’s anything here worth stealing.’

‘Why me and Jack?’

‘I don’t trust Jack to go and look on his own. He’s less likely to pocket something if you’re there to keep an eye on him.’

Mason went over to Jack, picked him up by the scruff of the neck and led him out of the kitchen into the hallway, and then up the stairs.

‘You won’t find anything worth taking here,’ said Archie. ‘Do I look like I’m living in the lap of luxury?’

‘No,’ Slider laughed, ‘I don’t suppose you do. But at least it will keep those two out of my hair for a little while.’

The noise that Mason and Jack were making upstairs as they went through Archie’s things made the old man’s anger rise. He had worked all his life, not asked for much in return, never hurt another living soul if he could help it, and to have his house invaded by degenerate thieves, who had so much already but still wanted more, would have broken his Mary’s heart if she could see what was happening now.

Archie tried to struggle against the ropes that bound him to the chair, but they just cut tighter into him. He kept his efforts up for a few seconds before the pain was too much and blood began to drip from his wrists.

Noticing a small pool of blood begin to form on the kitchen floor, Lisa, with a look of concern, went over to see what damage Archie had done.

‘It’s ok,’ she whispered, inspecting where the blood was coming from. ‘Don’t struggle; you’ll just make it worse.’

‘What’s the matter,’ demanded Slider, who had been too busy looking at the pile of jewellery to notice Archie struggling or the blood.

‘The rope is too tight,’ said Lisa, ‘we need to untie him a little.’

‘No way, I didn’t kill him because you asked me not to, don’t try and push your luck any further. Besides...’

Slider didn’t have the opportunity to finish his sentence, as a scream and crash from the hallway drew everyone’s attention.

Lisa couldn’t move out of the way fast enough, and Slider knocked her over in his charge out of the kitchen to see what had happened.

‘Wonderful man you’ve got there’ said Archie sarcastically.

Lisa looked up at the old man, but did not reply.

‘What happened?’ demanded Slider, as Mason stomped down the stairs.

‘I’ve no idea,’ said the big man. ‘Jack suddenly left the bedroom, and by the time I got to the top of the stairs, he must have slipped, and... Oh my God, look at his neck!’

Leaning back on the chair, Archie could just about see down the hall to the body of Jack now lying at the foot of his stairs. Though his view wasn’t the best, Archie could tell that no one’s head should be facing that way in relation to their body.

‘I wouldn’t look, dear,’ he said to Lisa as she peered round the door.

‘Oh my God,’ she gasped, her hands almost involuntarily cupping her face.

Slider bent down over the body, and put his hand in the pocket of Jack’s coat. Taking something out of it, he began walking back to the kitchen, examining the item in his hands. Mason followed.

‘Well, well, well, where did Jack get this,’ said Slider placing the rather expensive looking emerald necklace on the table next to the rest of the jewellery, which the large man instinctively picked back up.

‘He must have pocketed it when my back was turned,’ explained Mason, looking at the green jewel that hung from the gold chain.

Giving Mason a slap across the face, Slider snatched the necklace out of his accomplice’s palm with his other hand.

‘That’s my wife’s,’ said Archie, ‘I don’t think she’ll like you taking that.’

‘Where is she then?’ asked Slider, ‘maybe I could persuade her to like it.’

‘She... she’s passed away,’ the pain of the loss of his wife, as Archie’s mind turned to her at that moment, was far worse than anything he had felt at the hands of these people. He was glad that she was not here to see this; however, the pain of it all for her would have been too much for him to take.

‘Well, what she don’t know won’t hurt it will it,’ laughed Slider, this time stuffing the necklace in his jacket pocket. ‘Did you find anything else?’ he addressed this question to Mason.

‘No, all the other stuff was just costume crap. No money stashed away, no antiques, nothing.’

‘Fine,’ said Slider, though with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

‘Though now with Jack dead there’s more for us to share.’

Slider smiled at Mason and patted him on the shoulder as if in agreement, but this lasted only for a second as a woman’s voice echoed in the thin man’s ear.

‘There would be even more to share if he was dead too.’

‘What did you say?’ he asked Lisa, thinking that the voice he heard was hers.

‘Nothing,’ she replied, looking at him a little puzzled.

Slider dismissed it as his own imagination and began dividing the jewellery into three piles, but as the other two started to help the voice came back.

‘You deserve more. It was your plan to rob the jewellery shop. They wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.’

Slider thought he recognised the voice now, it sounded like his mother’s, or at least the voice of the woman who raised him. He had never known his real mother. The voice was old and common, a strict voice of a woman who could break you with one look, or a strict word, no matter how big you were.

‘You convinced them that all this was possible. They didn’t believe you could do it, you know that they didn’t, even though they said they did. Why should either of them have as much as you?’

‘Yes,’ he whispered, ‘why should they?’

Slider backed away from the table, the other two not noticing, they were too busy gleaming over the jewellery they were piling up.

Backing into the kitchen worktop, Slider saw the shine of the fruit knife’s blade, glistening on the draining board next to the sink. He could feel it call to him, or was it the voice in his head, ‘*pick it up,*’ it said, ‘*pick it up and claim what should be yours.*’

Slider ran his finger down the side of the blade then grabbed the handle tight, and before Mason, who had just turned, could ask him what the matter was, he lunged at the large man, the steel penetrating the left side of his chest.

That first strike had missed Mason’s lung, giving him a change to grab Slider by the throat as hard as he could. The second and third strikes did not miss, and as Lisa screamed, blood began to pump out of Mason’s wounds and mouth. This didn’t do anything to weaken his grip on Slider, however, but instead made him squeeze tighter.

Slider’s face was turning a shallow magenta, and his eyes began to fill with blood. When he delivered his final blow, and though weaker than his others, this one pierced Mason’s heart.

There was a crack from Slider’s neck as Mason’s hand constricted around it, and the thin man sank to the floor dead. Mason managed to get one last glance over at Lisa, whose eyes were swollen with tears, before he too breathed his last.

Archie and Lisa were silent for longer than either of them knew, Lisa’s eyes never leaving the bodies, believing that if they did then it would mean that this was not a horrible dream, but a reality she would have to face.

‘What are you going to do now, young lady?’ Archie finally asked which seemed to snap Lisa to her senses, then into almost a blind panic.

‘I’ve got to get out of here,’ she said, instead hurriedly filling the bags back up with the jewellery.

Zipping them closed again, Lisa saw the green sparkle of the emerald necklace as it lay, hanging out of Slider’s pocket, in the

pool of blood. Feeling compelled to, she left the bags on the table, and picked up the necklace.

As she cleaned it under the cold tap of the sink to wash away the stain of her dead companions, she felt the sudden urge to wear it come over her.

‘Please,’ said Archie as Lisa put the necklace on, ‘can I keep that. It was my wife’s.’

Lisa thought for a second, then grabbed one of the bags of jewellery and threw it at Archie’s feet.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘There’s probably more money in the value of the stuff in that bag than you’ve ever seen in your life. Take it for the necklace.’

Lisa picked up the other bag and looked at herself in the small mirror hanging on the wall. As she admired her reflection, and how the necklace look lying across the top her of chest, Lisa felt a strain on her neck.

She thought for a second that it might have been just a feeling of stress that had been brought on by the last few hours, but as it hit her again a sense of panic flooded her body.

In the mirror she could see that the necklace was getting tighter around her throat. Dropping the bag, she started to claw at the necklace, trying to pull it off, but her fingers just scratched into her skin as she fought to get some air into her oxygen depleted lungs. Blood began to pour onto her chest from the deep scratches, and as she felt her life slip away she sank to her knees, and then like a rag-doll, slumped lifeless across the floor.

‘Oh, Mary, what have you done?’ asked Archie out loud at the sight of the horror his kitchen had become.

The ropes that held him bound loosened, and after a few seconds he was back on his feet. He picked up the bags, put them on the table and unzipped them, looking at their contents, and knowing that he would no longer have to worry about money for the rest of his life.

Though before he could even think about what he would spend the money on, he knew that there was something else he needed to do. Something he would have to do on his own, and he wasn’t looking forward to it,

Sighing, he zipped the bags closed again, and ventured out into his shed at the bottom of the garden. Retrieving a spade, he found a

soft patch of ground and began to dig, cursing under his breath with each mound of earth brought up. What Archie really wanted was to get back to his dream, but getting rid of four bodies was going to take all night.

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