

ERIK THERME

MORTOM

 THOMAS & MERCER

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781477829394

ISBN-10: 1477829393

Cover design by David Drummond

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014957290

Printed in the United States of America

*To my wife, Shea,
for her endless support and patience*

SUNDAY

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At first glance, Andy Crowl thought they had the wrong house: The property at 21 Abel Avenue looked as if it had been vacant for weeks, not days. Two garbage cans lay overturned by the mailbox, a nest of rolled-up newspapers had collected by the front steps, and the lawn was easily overgrown by a foot. Something that resembled a station wagon was parked in the gravel beside the driveway. All four wheels were missing, and the front end had been stripped to the frame.

“This could be interesting,” said Kate.

Andy cut the engine. “We’re sure this is the place?”

“Directions were dead on. What time are we meeting the bank manager again?”

“Five o’clock on the *buttonhole*.”

Kate raised her eyebrows. “Buttonhole?”

“Trust me, if Thatcher is half as pompous in person as he was on the phone, it’s going to be a fun-filled hour. The little twit even instructed me to bring along three forms of identification.”

He unzipped his bag and thumbed through the papers inside. The

last two days were still a blur of e-mails and faxes, and it would be a miracle if he had remembered everything.

“Remind me to get copies of anything I sign—” he began, then realized Kate was gone. He opened his door and saw her standing on the front step.

“Door’s open,” she called down.

“Of course,” he said under his breath. “The locals probably have a meth lab inside already.”

He started up the driveway and cast a curious glance at the moped leaning against the garage. Ugly knots of rust had overtaken part of the metal frame, but it looked like it had been recently washed and waxed.

“Can I go inside?” Kate asked.

“I thought you said it was open.”

“Yeah, but do you think it’s okay to go in while we wait?”

“Go,” he said irritably. “It’s—”

The screen door slammed shut. He stared at the moped a moment longer, wondering if it had been abandoned on the property after Craig had died. Whatever the case, it was just more junk to deal with.

He was halfway up the steps when Kate burst back out. “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you.”

“Why?”

“Just don’t say you weren’t warned.”

He opened the door and winced. “What’s that lovely smell?”

“I don’t know, but it’s twice as bad upstairs.”

“What is it? Spoiled food or something?”

She only shrugged. He took a cautious step inside the foyer and sniffed. Whatever it was, he had smelled worse. Not by much.

“Divide and conquer?” he proposed.

“Meaning?”

“I’ll check the kitchen for stink bombs while you start opening windows.” He offered a dry smile. “Or we can stand here and discuss how you’re getting back home, since I’m the one here with the vehicle.”

She sighed. “I so hate you right now.”

“I know. And if we don’t make it back out, remember that Mom always loved me best.”

“You wish.”

He took the staircase in a jog and squared off at the kitchen entrance. There was no question the smell was coming from inside—it was strong enough to knot his stomach.

Kate clapped his shoulder as she passed. “Have fun.”

He ignored her and went to the fridge, almost afraid to look. To his surprise the power was on and the shelves were bare.

“Could it be a backed-up sewer?” Kate asked from the living room. “Didn’t that happen to you and Carol a few years ago?”

“Twice.” He tried the kitchen faucet and groaned when water ran out. “Utilities are on. Twenty bucks says they try and stick me with the bills.”

“At least you can afford it now.”

“Only if the place sells. The other option is to burn it all down and collect insurance money. I’ll give you half if you help.”

She appeared in the doorway. “Funny. What’s the plan after Mr. Thatcher leaves? We eating, or visiting Mary?”

“Count me out of the latter.”

“Andy, we have to pay our respects.”

He checked the oven with a frown. “You go if you want. She likes you.”

“She likes you, too,” Kate said without conviction.

“Uh-huh. Regardless, I’m not going anywhere until I figure out—”

“Did you check under the fridge?”

He followed her finger. Most refrigerators had a plastic grate running across the bottom, but this one had been removed. The gap was at least three inches high—plenty of room for God knew what.

“I was just about to look there,” he said matter-of-factly.

“*Uh-huh.*”

He bent on one knee and covered his mouth; the smell was almost unbearable. Kate thumped his shoulder with a flashlight.

“Where’d that come from?” he asked.

“It was on the counter by the microwave. You should really be more observant.”

He clicked it on. “Okay. I’m going in.”

“Be careful.”

“Careful,” he chuckled, flattening himself on the floor and flooding the underside of the fridge with light. “Why the hell would I need to be—”

That was when he saw it: a blob of a shape near the back corner.

“Jesus,” he cried, scrambling to his feet. “There is a rat the size of a *squirrel* under there.”

Kate drew back a step. “Don’t joke.”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” He wiped a shaky hand across his mouth. “Not cool. Not cool at all.”

“Is it dead?”

He glared at her. “I didn’t check for a pulse, but I’m pretty sure they don’t make that smell when they’re alive.”

“What do we do?” she asked. “Call an exterminator?”

“Fifty bucks for fifteen minutes of work? No thanks.”

“We can’t just leave it there.”

“*Obviously*,” he replied curtly. “We just need to find a way to get it out. Maybe if we—”

“No way,” she said, taking another step back. “There’s no *we*. I’m not going near that thing.”

“Fine. Then at least help me find something long. Something like . . .”

He looked out the sliding glass door at the charcoal grill on the deck. A set of cooking tongs hung from one side, and he went out and retrieved them.

“That’s so wrong,” said Kate.

“You got a better idea?”

He lowered himself back to the floor. Nothing about this was going to be pleasant, but he couldn't leave it there, and he wasn't going to pay someone to remove it. He doubted Mortom even had an exterminator.

"Piece of cake," he reassured himself.

The tongs were stiff and awkward in his hands, and the moment they touched the rat his whole body recoiled.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Gloves," he said, covering his mouth with the back of his forearm. "Find me some dishwashing gloves or something."

Kate randomly began opening cupboards. He told himself he could do this; it was just a dead animal. At the age of ten he had buried his cat in the backyard and even kissed its head before placing it in the ground.

But a rat wasn't a cat—not by a long shot. A rat was a disease-carrying, germ-infested, vicious animal with beady eyes.

"There's nothing," she said. "Do you want me to look in the bathroom?"

The gloves were just a stall and he knew it. And the longer he sat there, the harder it was going to be.

"Andy?"

"No," he huffed. His heart was pounding now. "I got this."

He reached underneath with the tongs and closed them around the rat's tail. He gave a tug; nothing happened. He pulled with more force, feeling the coarse, rubbery skin through the wooden handles. The rat shifted and he caught a glimpse of its head. Something was inside its mouth. He pushed himself up from the floor, leaving the tongs where they lay.

"Well?" she asked.

He waited until he was in the dining room before opening his mouth for air. "Stuck. It's wedged tight."

"How could it be stuck? It had to get in there in the first place."

"I saw something in its mouth." He wiped his forehead, removing a few drops of sweat. "I'm guessing it choked to death and bloated."

“So now what?” she asked. “Exterminator again?”

“Kate, I already told you—”

“What’s a few bucks? You just inherited a whole house.”

“Can you help me pull?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“The rat’s pretty far in there. Maybe if we pull out the refrigerator we can get to it from the back side.”

Kate was shaking her head before he finished. “I can’t.”

“Look,” he said, “all I’m asking is for you to help me move the refrigerator a few feet. Then you can run out of the room shrieking like a girl, okay?”

He expected her to blow up, but she only stared at him with wounded eyes. All the color was gone from her face.

He pushed out a sigh. The only way this rat was coming out was from the front, and if it truly was wedged in there, grilling tongs weren’t going to get the job done.

“Is there a kitchen mitt?” he asked.

“Let me look . . .”

He rubbed the sweat from his palms, knowing he wasn’t going to be able to do it but knowing he had no choice.

“Here,” she said, shoving one at him. It was frayed and burnt in several places, but it was also thick with padding. He wrestled it over his hand and kicked away the tongs.

She said, “I still think we should wait—”

“And I said I got this, okay?”

He lay on his side, reached under the refrigerator, and gripped the tail as tightly as the mitt would allow. The smell was immediately inside his mouth, invading his lungs with each breath.

“Come on,” he said through clenched teeth, pulling and praying the tail wasn’t going to break off—

And then it was done.

He scrambled to his feet as Kate fled down the hallway. The rat was sideways by the oven, peppered with dried blood and dirt. Inside its mouth was a triangle of folded paper.

“What the hell?”

He knelt beside it. The paper was white with no markings, maybe four inches point to point. There was no question it had been forced into place—the question was why.

There was only one way to find out.

The rat watched with flat, marbled eyes as he worked the triangle free. Something heavy shifted inside the folds.

Slowly, methodically, he began peeling back layers of paper. The object inside dropped to the floor with an audible clink.

It was a locker key.

He stared at it without blinking, trying to make sense of what he was seeing . . . then realized the answer was already in his hands.

He finished unfolding the paper. Written inside were two words:

FOLLOW ME