

Letters to the Editor

by

Paul Michael Garrison

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I'm coming for you.

It would be the last letter. He had decided at the plan's inception what it would say: *I'm coming for you*. Simple, direct, with an air of imminence. By now he had the timing down; the sixth letter would arrive tomorrow. This one would follow fast after, closer than the others had, but the timing would be according to plan. Everything was according to plan.

Only the snipping of the scissors and the muted passage of occasional traffic disturbed the stillness of the night. He worked meticulously by the yellow light of a single desk lamp, cutting out the letters from a magazine. He unscrewed the cap of the rubber cement, releasing its acrid vapor. Painstakingly, he pasted each slick little rectangle onto the white construction paper, positioning each piece, not in a straight line, but in a ragged one to replicate the look of the letters he'd seen in thriller movies and on television. One had to take artistic satisfaction where one could find it.

In the beginning, he hadn't been sure whether the latex gloves were necessary; he had felt silly purchasing them, but he refused to ignore any possible precaution. He always worked with several sheets of paper under the letter so that nothing from the desk would come into contact

with his work. They hadn't gone to the police yet, but he knew they would and he'd come too far to risk identification now.

A plastic bag to his left contained the butchered magazines from previous nights' work. He placed everything but the letter and envelope into that bag and stowed it in the lower left-hand drawer. He locked the drawer and pocketed the key. He would need to get rid of all that soon. He had a plan for that as well, but the time wasn't right. Not yet.

A soft thud fell overhead. He froze, his heart beating wildly. Silently he rose and strode to the doorway, listening. When he heard nothing more, he returned to the desk, folded the paper, put it in the envelope, and sealed it. The name and address were already printed on the outside.

Nathanael Carver

199 Adams Road

Fulton Springs, IL 60188

He would mail it tomorrow. And in less than a week, it would all be over.

“Nate?”

Nathanael Carver turned abruptly from where he sat at his desk to see his wife, Amelie, standing in the study doorway.

“What?”

“Lunch is ready. I’ve been calling for you. What are you doing in here?” She moved toward the desk.

“Nothing really.” He shoved the paper he’d been studying underneath a stack of manila folders. By now, she was standing at his shoulder.

“It’s another letter, isn’t it?” It was more statement than question. Nathanael sighed and slumped back in his chair. Amelie leaned forward and gently pulled the paper from under the folders. The glossy, clipped letters pasted to the page threatened, *It won’t be much longer now.*

She released the page and placed a hand on Nathanael’s shoulder. “Will you go to the police now?” Her voice was slightly husky.

He sighed again. “Yeah, let’s go.”

* * *

The sound of gunfire filled the room as Kate Baxter squeezed off another round. She paused for a moment to inspect the target at the end of the shooting gallery. The bullet holes ranged from two to four inches away from the center, all to the right.

“Well, at least if you aim for his sternum,” shouted Sergeant Polanski, who had been shooting in the next stall, “you should get him in the heart.”

Kate glanced over her shoulder at him and then looked back at the target. She squared her shoulders, raised her gun, narrowed her eyes, and fired one more shot. It hit dead center. She pulled off her ear and eye protection and looked at the sergeant.

“I’ll hit him wherever I aim for. I just have to focus a little harder.”

Polanski laughed. “I believe it.”

Kate felt her phone vibrate. She prayed it wasn’t her parents. Their conversation that morning was what had driven her down to the range. Today, Saturday, was supposed to be her day off, and normally she would have preferred to stay away from the station, but the need to vent had been greater. She suspected a correlation was developing between the time she spent on the phone with her parents and the time she logged at the shooting gallery and was a little concerned at which way that ratio was tipping. She checked her phone; it was the station.

“Looks like I’m needed upstairs.”

Polanski smiled. “Duty calls.”

If they had paged her on her day off, it was probably something or someone important. As she walked up the stairs, she tried to make herself look as presentable as possible. She pulled back her hair and fixed her ponytail, which had come loose when she yanked off her headgear. She was almost to the lobby entrance when she decided to tuck her T-shirt in.

“Need any help with that, Baxter?” offered a passing patrolman named Nash. Kate turned around to face him as he arched an eyebrow in what he must have thought was a sexy leer. He waggled his fingers at her. “I’m pretty good with my hands.”

“Drop dead, Nash.”

Nash gave a token snort of laughter. “I think you’re hot too,” he said as he sauntered down the hall.

Kate silently berated herself for not stepping into the restroom to fix her shirt.

In the lobby, an attractive middle-aged couple stood at the high front desk. They looked as if they'd stepped out of an advertisement for Viagra or Aleve.

The man had full, black hair veined and specked with silver. His face was clean-shaven and, though lined, still handsome with a strong jaw and a roman nose. Small silver-framed spectacles did nothing to hide the dark, brooding eyes. Although a little thick around the middle, he appeared to be in fairly good shape. He wore khakis, a button-up, and a suede blazer. In his left hand he held a manila folder. His other arm was wrapped protectively around the narrow waist of the woman.

The wife, at least that was Kate's assumption for the moment, was a stunner. Her shoulder-length hair was a light, brilliant blonde, a color that would easily camouflage encroaching white or silver, not that it appeared she had any. Understated makeup complemented the natural beauty of her pink complexion and symmetrical features: warm brown eyes, thin nose, and small mouth. The drape of her pink cashmere sweater and tan pants showed off a figure many younger women would envy. She clutched a leather bag at her side with a hand that sported two diamond-encrusted rings.

"Good afternoon," said Kate.

"Detective Baxter," said Parkman, the officer behind the desk, by way of introduction. "This is Nathanael Carver and his wife. They'd like to file a report." Kate shot Parkman a look; they'd paged her for this? He just smiled back.

She shook hands with Mrs. Carver and then Mr. Carver, whose hand was quite moist.

"If you'll follow me, we'll go to my desk," said Kate. Turning away, she unobtrusively wiped her hand on her jeans. Kate led the couple into the back of the station, through the maze of

messy desks, past officers and petty criminals. An occasional phone rang, keyboards clattered, and a woman with a bruised cheek and split lip sobbed convulsively while Sanchez cajoled her into requesting a restraining order. I should not be here, Kate thought. Potter should be here; he's on duty today, not me. I should be cleaning out the refrigerator. I should be cleaning the bathroom. I should *not* be here. She pulled two chairs with cracked green leather seats over to her desk and looked at the Carvers. She resented them already. She inhaled and smiled.

“Have a seat. You'll have to forgive my dress.” The three of them sat. “I was down in the shooting gallery and wasn't expecting to be called in.” Kate pulled out a pencil and legal pad to make record of their interview.

Mr. Carver simply nodded and placed a protective hand on his wife's arm.

“What's the trouble?” Kate asked, trying to make her voice sound reasonably concerned.

The husband handed her the folder. “For some time, I've been getting these in the mail.”

Inside it, Kate found a creased page of white construction paper with letters clipped from a magazine. They spelled out the message, *You need to die, Carver*. Using a letter opener, she flipped it over; the next one read, *Death comes to everyone, Natty*. The third said, *Carving you up will be a pleasure*, and the last, *It won't be much longer now*. Underneath the last letter was a white business envelope with Nathanael Carver's name and address printed on it. A patriotic stamp marked the corner next to a partial postal mark, of which she could just make out the word *Olivet*, a small city that bled into Fulton Springs.

“When did these start coming?” Kate asked.

Mr. Carver swallowed before answering. “About a year ago, I think. I didn't take it seriously at first. Amelie,” he gestured to his wife, “has been trying to get me to come speak with

you guys for the last couple of months, but I didn't think there was any real danger. Not until this last letter."