

MR. MAYHEM
A Brinker Novel

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1.

BRINKER STOOD BESIDE the body with its red flannel shirt and black ski pants and two-tone duck boots and smiled. “Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

From the end of the road, police lights flashed as two cops directed traffic. At this hour, there was next to none.

“I’d be careful,” the Colonel said. “People might think you had a hand in this.”

“You should talk,” Brinker said. “Word is, our pal Red diddles with the bodies.”

The eyes of Col. Frank Mabry, U.S. Air Force retired, darkened to the color of his three-piece suit. “No wonder you got fired for libel.” He motioned for the redheaded intern in black to help hoist the body onto the gurney. Red was nineteen going on twelve. He had more acne than a porn star’s ass.

They shoved the gurney into the back of the hearse and slammed the door with the little white curtain and Red drove the hearse into the night, its tailfins glowing like hot coals from hell, which was where the publisher of the *Free Press* was headed . . . after a brief layover at Mabry & Sons Funeral Home.

Brinker's feet stuck to the ground. If he stayed here much longer he'd be next in the meat wagon. He looked around the yard. The porch lamp lit an axe, a pile of split wood, a felt Stetson and a dent in the snow bank where the publisher had fallen headfirst.

Brinker asked, "What killed him?"

"Heart attack, most like."

"How do you know?"

"What do you mean, how do I know? I'm the coroner. If I say he died of mustard gas poisoning, that's what killed him."

The Colonel usually showed more patience. Maybe he needed a drink. Brinker did, and his meds. He lit an unfiltered Camel and let the warm smoke trickle through his nose.

"Those things will kill you." The Colonel had the spine of a floorboard. He'd retired from some base in the South and returned to Pennsylvania to manage the family business and had gotten trapped here like everybody else. Coroner and undertaker. Add animal-control officer and you'd have a trifecta.

"You should know," Brinker said and coughed up half a lung. He'd have to see Dr. Jolley tomorrow. The doc had reduced his prescription of Vicodin and Percocet for lower back pain but he'd pony up a month's worth of Xanax or Ativan, since the meds he prescribed didn't seem to work anymore. It didn't matter that benzos were addictive. The doc didn't like to see people suffer. Neither did Brinker.

The Colonel stared into the dark, as if it would part like a curtain to reveal the secret of the afterlife. The dark stared back. "I don't need to tell you, business is bad."

"Then don't," Brinker said.

“Traffic’s down at the museum and most of the seats on the ghost tour are empty.”

“Murder tour,” Brinker corrected. The cigarette bobbed in his mouth. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Did you talk to your mother that way?”

Brinker smiled. “Why do you think she kicked me out?”

The Colonel pointed to the dent in the snowbank. In this cold, it wouldn’t lose its shape until July. “What can we do with this?”

Brinker looked at the yard. The snow sparkled like broken glass. The axe hadn’t moved. Neither had the hat. “You said he died of natural causes. No one’s flying up from Florida in the dead of winter to watch this guy make snow angels.”

In the brittle light, Mabry’s nose looked like it could hook rugs.

“Unless,” Brinker said, “you tell the cops you have doubts.”

“That would be official misconduct.”

“It’s a living,” Brinker said.

“You’re supposed to be the PR guy. What are you going to do about this?”

Going to, not *gonna*. As an elected official, the Colonel took care with his speech. Brinker picked a piece of tobacco from his tongue. “I’ll think of something.”

“You had better think fast. Get on the radio. Send out a release.”

“The paper won’t print our shit anymore.”

“Why is that?” Mabry asked in his I’m-struggling-for-patience voice.

“Too self-promotional.”

“For God’s sake.” Mabry abandoning the pretense.

“Then get us on social media—or didn’t they teach you that before they canned your ass?”

Brinker tried to blow a smoke ring but the wind took it.

“The murder tour’s getting old.”

“Of course it’s old. The crimes are old. History’s old. That’s pretty much the definition.”

Brinker stamped his feet to drive out the cold. The cold didn’t budge. “The tourists are looking for sensation, the big hit. They want blood, guts, scandal, like they get from TV, or Congress.”

“They want their heads examined,” the Colonel said.

“We offer them something they can’t get anywhere else.”

“Time travel?”

“Yes,” the Colonel said, “it is like time travel. They can relive history. They can stand in the exact spot where the murder took place and use their imaginations for a change.”

“Soak up the vibes.” Brinker dropped the butt and listened to it hiss. “So what do we do?”

“Drum up business, fill the trolley. That’s why I hired you.”

“We’re fresh out of stiffs.” Brinker nodded toward the road. “Not counting this one.”

The Colonel turned on a polished boot and waded through a foot of new snow. He popped open the door to a black Escalade the size of a dinosaur and said, “I don’t care how you do it . . . just make it happen.”

Brinker watched the car fade to black. He hated winter almost as much as he hated the job.

2.

BRINKER HAD BEEN fired more times than he could count, and he was good at math. Good enough to know that if he didn't keep this one with Col. Mabry, he'd wind up selling meth to preschoolers. It wasn't his fault he'd gotten canned from his job as police reporter, even though he'd tried to twist the pantyhose off the publisher's wife at the annual holiday party. It was an open bar, his only excuse, but it didn't go very far with Nicholas Metropoulos. Nor did the story he broke on the publisher's attempt to evade arrest for DUI. Now Mr. Metro was on his way to the great inkwell in the sky and Brinker was forced to work as a flak for the most anal-retentive man this side of Pyongyang. At least as a death merchant, Mabry had a tolerance for the weird.

The Colonel could afford it. The man could do no wrong in this armpit of Eastern Pennsylvania, and he had the votes to prove it. He'd won every election for coroner in the past twenty years, received every award given by Kiwanis and the chamber of commerce and achieved some high holy degree in the local Masonic lodge. Monroe County worshipped his ass. He also had, and this was the

part Brinker liked, a morbid interest in criminal history. So when the Colonel first created the Seen of the Crime tour—yes, Mabry actually called it that—hundreds of people lined up to glimpse the sights and tools of murder. They gradually stopped coming as the Colonel ran out of new material.

“Why don’t we do street theater,” Brinker had said one morning during a rare fit of optimism that he hoped would pass. “Let people reenact the murders.”

“And when a wife takes out her husband’s eye with an ice pick?” the Colonel asked.

“Tell ’em it’s like watching Fox.”

The Colonel shook his head. “You should run for office.”

The waiting room at Family Practice Associates looked like a Third World fruit market, with mothers and babies and workers and suits and the elderly with their wheelchairs and walkers and canes rimming the walls like tarpon on a line. The patients hacked and whined and stared with dead eyes at the wall-mounted TV, where young couples argued about a third job to afford their first house.

When Brinker checked in he said hi to Jinx the receptionist, a twentysomething beauty with rich brown hair and a chest like Mount Rushmore. Every time she moved, the loose parts of his anatomy did jumping jacks. He wondered if she’d wait for him after her shift. They hadn’t had sex in so long he’d forgotten where things went. He tried to catch her attention but aside from trilling her fingers, Jinx preferred to answer the phone and register patients. Her loss.

Brinker collapsed in a chair under a row of Norman Rockwell prints of kindly doctors and family dinners with kids with dogs and a turkey the size of a horse.

“Work,” he said to the guy next to him with a see-through beard and a sprig of hair across his forehead.

“Tell me about it.”

The man wore a yellow vest with fluorescent silver tape, black pants and boots and a yellow helmet that kept sliding off his knee. When the man leaned forward to retrieve the helmet, Brinker spotted the square PennDOT logo on the back of the vest.

“Plow crew?”

The man put two fingers to his forehead and leaned on the arm of the chair. “We’ve been up all night.”

Brinker’s phone dinged and he pulled up the text message. “You’ll love this.”

The highway worker looked up.

“The National Weather Service in Mount Holly has issued a winter weather advisory in effect from 7 p.m. this evening to 7 a.m. EST tomorrow. Snow, heavy at times, is expected to overspread the area this evening and continue into early morning. Snow accumulations of 4 to 6 inches. Northwest winds 25 to 35 mph with gusts up to 55 mph. Visibility of one quarter mile or less.”

The man leaned back and closed his eyes. “Welcome to paradise.”

The wall heater behind Brinker’s legs whirred and he started to sweat. Unbuttoning his pea coat, he popped two tranquilizers and tried to read an article on shotgun shell reloaders in a year-old copy of *Field & Stream*. The device looked like an IV drip for ammunition. The gun lobby must love it. As he stared at the copy, the type seemed to bend sideways. He tossed the magazine onto an end table and stared at the TV.

When Jinx called Brinker’s name, he spread a thumb and little finger in a “call me” sign and let a nurse the size

of a linebacker walk him over the scale and down the hall to an examination room. She told him to sit in a plastic chair and took his blood pressure and said the doctor would be with him shortly. She left the door open a crack, enough to let in the sound of voices and a stream of cold air. Brinker wondered if anyone would recognize him, an avid reader or somebody who used to work at the newspaper. He got up and pushed the door shut and started to pace. An examination table covered with crinkly paper filled the room. A stand with a sink, notebook computer and jar of cotton balls leaned against one wall. A poster of the Delaware Water Gap Jazz Festival circa 1987 covered another. Piles of sample drug boxes lined a third.

A minute later the door opened and Timothy B. Jolley, MD, shuffled in with his head in a chart. They didn't shake hands. The doctor sat on a small round stool and glanced at the computer and thought better of it and went back to his file folder with the bent edges and dayglow index tab. In his white coat and clear half-frames, Jolley resembled an older version of the mad scientist in *Back to the Future*. He had a face like the surface of the moon and a nose to match, dusty and pitted, the result of ancient, volcanic eruptions of acne that had hardened into a porous crust. His jowls sagged, his white hair spun out of control and his eyebrows flared in the middle, as if he were surprised to find a patient sitting before him.

His insides quivering as if from intense cold, Brinker slouched in the plastic chair and listed his withdrawal symptoms. "It feels like my eyeballs are clanging together."

The doctor nodded and recommended a higher dosage of benzodiazepines. He scribbled on a pad and tore off the top sheet and handed the prescription to Brinker. "I understand you used to work for the newspaper."

Brinker held up his hand. He knew what was coming. "I read your letters to the editor. Oregon and Washington State legalized physician-assisted suicide, why can't Pennsylvania. Oregon lets physicians prescribe medication as long as the patient administers it but you can't do that here in the commonwealth without earning a ride to Graterford."

Jolley looked over his half-frames. "We need to change the law."

"Talk to your state rep."

"Like everyone in Harrisburg, he's concerned about public opinion and the public is not yet ready to face end-of-life decisions."

Brinker leaned into the chair, a bucket with chrome legs like the kind you'd see in kindergarten, or at a Polish social hall. "So talk to the media . . . the ones who still have jobs."

"You could put your talents to good use by raising awareness."

"It's called advocating, and I only advocate for myself."

The doctor cupped his chin, the pen in his hand looking as if he'd pierced his nose. "You'd be alleviating the suffering of hundreds of people."

"You mean, put 'em out of their misery."

"A colorful expression, but yes, that's the concept."

"It's still illegal, doc."

Jolley's eyes got big and moist, like a cow Brinker had met during an ag-extension tour. "They've being denied their most basic rights."

"Happens all the time." Brinker folded the prescription.

The doctor leaned against the tan wall with the border of balloons and took a deep breath through nostrils clogged with hair and let it out with a whistle. "You don't want to make a difference."

“What I want is enough money to afford this shit.”

Brinker waved the script.

The doctor smiled. “You think all doctors are wealthy.”

“You guys do pretty well.”

“What if I hired you to espouse the cause?”

“As long as I don’t have to use words like *espouse*.”

“You’re very flippant,” Jolley said. “I suppose that comes with the job.”

“I’m very broke,” Brinker said. “What’s on your mind?”

“I hear Colonel Mabry’s enterprise isn’t doing very well.”

“You mean the Magical Murder Tour.”

“As it were.”

“Got it in one.” Brinker cocked his finger like a gun.

“We’ve had fires and explosions and a couple of murders in the last twenty years but nothing that gets us on the national news.”

The doc cocked his head. “Nothing like Columbine or Sandy Hook.”

“Doc, I think you’ve discovered sarcasm.”

“I’m sorry. I realize that was in poor taste.”

“That stuff’s madness,” Brinker said. “Just freaks people out. What we need is a good serial killer, somebody who’d scare the shit out of them without wiping out half the town.”

The doctor pawed his jaw, the pen pointing to an ear a Basset Hound might envy.

Brinker shifted in his seat and wondered when the good doctor would get to the point. “You don’t approve.”

“Murder as spectacle? It’s anathema to my profession, and my generation. But I can see where it might serve a purpose.”

Brinker felt his insides roll like jelly. He sat up. “What purpose?”

“What would you say to a partnership?”

“What are you talking about, doc?”

“I have patients with Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, inoperable tumors, MS. . . . Those diseases rob them of whatever joy they have left in life. They are dying a slow and cruel death and there’s very little I can do to help, other than offer palliative care.”

Brinker shook his head. “And you, what, want a discount on cremation?”

“You did say a serial killer would be good for business.”

“And you know one.” Brinker laughed. “You?”

Jolley raised his hands, the gaping sleeves of his lab coat showing skin that dangled in accordion folds. “You worked as a police reporter. You must have some contact with the criminal class.”

Brinker blew out a lungful of air. “The fuck, doc. Anyone so much as overhears this conversation and I’m indicted for conspiracy. If the guy I hire is undercover, or even if he’s not and he blows it, either way, I’m dead.”

The doctor tapped his prescription pad with the pen. “Will you be any better off if you keep taking these?”

Brinker stood and tried to look out the window but the blinds blocked his view. He settled for pacing beside the examination table. “So, what, you’d ID these patients and some guy would knock them off out of the goodness of his heart?” The benzos had started to work. Brinker could feel his shoulders drop an inch. He examined the doctor’s face for signs of entrapment and saw in the withered mouth and wasted eyes a man too tired for deceit.

“You don’t believe I’m serious.” Jolley reached into his back pocket and retrieved a thick brown wallet whose edges drooped like a week-old grilled cheese. He removed a wad of hundred dollar bills and fanned them on his knee. Against the white of the lab coat, the bills looked sharp enough to cut glass. “How much would it cost? Per patient?”

Brinker ran a hand over day-old stubble and paced. “Christ, I don’t know. Four, five thousand a pop, if you get some guy fresh out of jail. You want someone who can shoot straight . . . a lot more.”

“How much would it cost to terminate four patients?”

Brinker tried to calculate the man’s breaking point, the amount at which he’d drop this hairball idea and get back to writing prescriptions. But if he could clear enough to get out of debt. . . . He named a figure.

Like two spiny caterpillars, the doctor’s eyebrows crawled up his forehead.

“Consider it an investment.”

Jolley took a deep breath and in a flat voice said, “All right. When can you start?”

Brinker watched a liver spot dance across the doctor’s temple and blinked. The whole scenario felt like a job interview with Satan. “You’re serious.”

“I am deadly serious.”

“Good joke,” Brinker said.

“It’s no joke.”

Brinker did a quick calculation. He could take most of the money and split the rest with the killer and a middleman who’d know how to find these guys. The money would buy a lot of anonymity, if he could minimize the risk, which right now didn’t look possible. He thought

of something absurd but said it anyway. “The Colonel would never buy it.”

“Would you have to tell him?”

“It’s his business.”

“How you promote the tour to the public . . . isn’t that your business?”

Brinker stopped pacing. “What, we knock off a bunch of old ladies, let their heirs collect the insurance money and sell the area as murder central?”

“You can market it anyway you like.”

“Sounds like reality TV.”

“Only if you’re foolish enough to get caught.”

Brinker’s mouth felt like grout. “So, you’re hiring me as your agent.”

“I’m not issuing a 1099.”

“And you’ll supply the means.”

The doctor shook his head. “Nothing can be traced back here.”

“Do no harm?”

“Hardly.” He scooped the money into the wallet and stood and shoved the wallet into his back pocket. The gray pants bagged at the thighs and hung in the waist and crotch. “I can’t help anyone if I’m implicated in a crime.”

“These patients,” Brinker said. “The ones that are dying. They’ll go along with this?”

“The ones who have expressed an interest in terminating their lives, with or without my help . . . yes, they’d welcome the relief. They might be afraid at first, that’s a natural reaction to any perceived threat, but they wouldn’t have to know the details—shouldn’t, in my opinion. Just that they won’t have to suffer needlessly for much longer.”

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“So they pay you to escort them to an untimely end and wait patiently at home for someone to kill them. What does that make me?”

The doctor grinned like a snake on a hot rock. “It makes you, my young friend, an angel of mercy.