

# THE MORE WE GET TOGETHER

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## Chapter 1

October 22nd, 1995

There's whispering out there. Someone is inside my apartment.

I'm awake now, in the middle of the night, and I can tell the window in my living room—a window I knowingly shut and locked before settling in for the night—is open. From my bedroom, I can feel the cool, deft fingers of the draft at the back of my spine. My stomach drops to the bottom of my ass. I lurch up in bed, my eyes adjusting to the darkness.

Within seconds, my bedroom turns from pitch black to a weathered, dry purple. The breeze has put a crick in my neck. My limbs are stiff and chilly. In the hallway, the floorboards creak with heavy footsteps. My bladder is full. My breathing quickens, becomes audible. I grab the aluminum bat at the foot of my bed, the bed coils underneath me twisting, begging me to keep still.

My apartment was broken into three years ago. I wasn't home when it happened, and the burglars didn't get away with much—the "vacation" cash I stored in the ass of a naked lady statuette, my mother's war-time jewelry I kept around to hock in a pinch—but I felt the niggles of paranoia in my chest for months afterward. That's why my old high-school Easton sits bedside. It's a metal whopper at 34 inches long, thick barreled with plenty of dings, layers of pine tar.

Arlene, my girlfriend at the time, thought keeping the bat bedside was a foolish gesture.

What if the burglars got guns? she said one night when we weren't on the outs, one of those nights we played house and pretended we cared, one of those nights we ate dinner without wine and did the dishes without throwing them all over the place, one of those

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nights we had nothing else to do but deconstruct each other's habits; good, bad and indifferent.

Maybe I scoffed her off at the time. Or maybe I stripped Arlene down, made rough love to her out of spite. Or maybe I rolled over to the other side of the bed and pretended to sleep but stayed awake through the night fidgeting and staring at the wall, fighting the need for a drink.

Which is exactly what I did.

Arlene's point wasn't missed, but I'd like to see her here in this moment, weaponless, naked, with prowlers in the living room, stealing your most prized, perhaps even plotting your death. She'd be scared shitless, just like I am now. Besides, I always believed the bat would give me a fighting chance. The illusion of safety is sometimes all you need.

Kicking off the blankets, I scramble to my bedroom door and flip on the light, the beams from the overhead lamp thundering my eyes shut. My feet are bare. The floorboards are sticky from some sort of dried fluid, seminal perhaps, or another form of my own sickness.

With the bedroom light on, the footsteps and whispering in the living room halt. I was hoping to hear the mission aborted; a vase broken, the front door opening in haste, a car running idle at the front curb, ready to burn rubber down the street to a safe haven.

But I don't have a fucking vase.

I stand there dreading the worst. Murderers, or serial rapists with swollen, protruding members dangling in front. There's more whispering now, louder, animated. They're waiting me out. Flanking my bedroom. My legs cramp and weaken. I can't gage my grip on the bat.

"Hey Cole?" The voice is shrill, a touch feminine, but definitely a man, and definitely unrecognizable. "Don't do anything stupid, ok?"

This casualness drops my guard. The living room lights spring to life and now, at 3:30 in the morning, my apartment is lit up like a carnival. I remain silent, my lungs dry with salty breath. There's more movement in the living room. I shrink back against the opposite wall, take stance.

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“Say something, Cole.” The same feminine voice again, a bit deeper this time.

“What do you want me to say?”

There’s a hoarse giggle, as if these guys are awfully comfortable in such a scenario. “Say something like ‘I don’t have a gun,’” the voice says. “Or say ‘I don’t plan on shooting a couple of guys who’re just here to talk.’”

I’m about to repeat the lines verbatim. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“We just want to talk to you, Cole.”

“So pick up the phone. Send an email. Why break into my house?”

“We’re obviously not here to burglarize the place,” the voice says. “Are you armed?”

“No, I’m not armed.”

“We’re not playing games here, Cole.”

“Not armed,” I say.

I hear guns cock and imagine the two men. Scruffy beards with bad coffee breath. Slick-backed grease-ball hair. Perhaps ski masks. Pros, lifers, albeit small-time. I imagine their anticipation, the grip of the gun pressing into their leather gloves, hands sweaty, sour. There’s a body now bracing the doorframe of the bedroom. I can almost feel the man’s warmth pressing up against the drywall.

“Why don’t you drop that bat and come out slowly with your hands up.”

“You can see through walls?” I say. “Who are you guys?”

“Come on out here, Cole, and we’ll discuss everything.”

I lay the bat down on the hardwood floor with a sad ‘tink.’ I poise myself, but my body is drained, adrenaline receding out of me like the tide at full moon.

“You coming?”

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I take one last look at the bat. Perhaps if I stormed the living room I'd have a chance? Whap the man closest to the door, whirl and hurl the bat at the other. Might distract him enough as I make the dash to freedom. Would I feel the hot metal sear my spine before I made it to the front door?

"I'm coming."

My first steps are wobbly. Hands in the air, I pass the bedroom door frame and see the two men aren't situated as I'd imagined. The one bracing the door is crouching awkwardly, his distended belly flopping out of his black leather jacket. Tight black pants. Terrible posture. Just terrible.

The other one is skinny-ass, standing in the middle of the living room like a potted bamboo plant. Ruddy face, slightly crooked eyes, and a black trench coat he must've used to hide that monstrous Colt .45 he's pointing at me.

Out of the corner of my eye, back near my bedroom door, I see the man with the distended belly is pointing a black 9mm at the back of my head. "I'm good and covered," I say.

"Come out here, nice and easy." The man in the living room is doing all the talking. He looks unstable—mealy little mouth, boxed-in face, puny ears—but he's in charge here.

I want him to be in charge.

I step into the middle of the room. On the coffee table is a half glass of apple juice sitting on a month's worth of unopened mail. There's also a copy of Fangoria, a pump bottle of generic hand cream, empty pistachio shells, and a butter knife with a hunk of toe cheese fixed to the tip of the blade. I know what you're thinking: What kind of swank, single, middle-aged alcoholic's life have I gotten into? But the answer is long and unwieldy, and we can get into that later.

The man near the bedroom door now stands like an arthritic POW soldier that's been shackled to a wall for the last thirty years. He grunts in pain, then drops out of my periphery. Vomit curdles at the back of my throat. I do my best to choke the chunks back down.

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“You guys getting a little old for this?” I say. “Because I sure am.”

“Turn around,” the man in the middle of the room says, twirling his Colt in circles. I can hear the bullets clacking around the chamber with each rotation. I’m afraid the gun might go off accidentally more than his pulling the trigger. “Turn around. Mickey’s got something to say to ya.”

And I turn around in just enough time to see Mickey pistol whip me into blackness.