

**1** The Mastermind enjoyed his double life. It wasn't just the makeshift lab and the privacy to do his experiments, the spotless row of dorm fridges holding endless liters of stolen blood, or even the shiny gadgets whose sharp edges and sharper angles often kept him enthralled for hours at a time.

It was the little things that thrilled him the most.

A coffeemaker all to himself, sizzling throughout the afternoon with an expensive blend of imported beans he'd never even think of bringing into the office. It was the tidy row of snack cakes his wife would never allow into the house, generic versions of his childhood favorites: Twinkies, Ho-Ho's, cream-filled cupcakes, glazed donuts.

It was the CD player cranking tunes from his high school days, popular hits from the late 70s featuring endless guitar solos and self-indulgent lyrics about drugs and sex and hotels and God. It was the baggy gym shorts and T-shirts from the local university shop across town. Thick, cotton tees featuring tongue-in-cheek, and occasionally even ribald sayings so popular with today's young punks: "Pinch My Bass." "I See Dumb People." "Beer Delivery Guy."

So deliciously obvious and innocent, all at the same time. They rested, neatly stacked, in matching piles along the floor in the unfurnished second bedroom. Black shorts with the yellow shirt. Red with the blue. A cardboard dresser from Office Depot held six pairs of brand new skivvies above a drawer of six brand new pairs of socks. Beside them sat a pair of size-12 sneakers from Target.

None of the items in his hideout, his fort, ever crossed the barriers of his normal life. The shoes had never been home, the

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coffee had never been to the office. No one knew the address, no mail came there; it was a shell in the world where he could hide and work and eat and listen without responsibility, care, or bills.

The little things.

It was the horror movie posters on the walls. B-flicks from a bygone era, ordered from Overstock.com through an untraceable and disposable gift certificate he bought himself with cash. *The Blob. G-Men from Mars. Biker Babes from Hell.*

It was the dorm room he never had, the bachelor pad he always wanted, the private space his super-powered life no longer afforded him. It was the stolen hours—three here, two there, one more before work, another on the way into the gym come Sunday. It was the deliciously occupied minutes, toiling over the K-Mart tool bench with the latest high-tech gadgets he and he alone could pilfer from his work station.

Now, with the Eagles blaring from his portable boom box, his Fruit Loop orange “FBI: Federal Breast Inspector” T-shirt hugging his solid pecs even as his baggy blue gym shorts rested loosely on his still-firm abs, he was at peace.

Perfect, killing peace.

It had been a week since his first “live” experiment had gone awry, and little had changed except his work ethic. He’d worked double-time since watching the middle-aged woman boil, instead of explode, from between the slats of a handicapped fitting room. (How helpful a simple handwritten “Out of Order” sign could be in avoiding capture.)

After waiting out the cops, the janitorial staff, the assistant managers, the branch managers, and even the meddling middle managers, he had made a quick escape and laid low, eagerly snatching up the first copy of the local rag and scouring for news of the parboiled parent. He’d been thinking bottom of the fold on page one, or perhaps even the lead on page 2, but he’d found it buried on page 6 of the local section, wedged between the engagement notice of a prominent banker’s daughter and an obituary for a retired longshoreman.

Now the news item—there was no follow-up—was framed and hung in front of him, a daily reminder of how miserably his first attempt had failed and a visual motivator to not repeat the same mistake twice.

It didn't bother him that he'd wasted a human life in the cause of science. He thought nothing of her daughter, sisters, parents, co-workers, friends, and loved ones. He thought even less of the witnesses who were terrified, the doctors who were puzzled, the mortuary workers who would be scarred for life by simply trying to reconstruct what was left of her body for burial. It bothered him only that years of hard, laborious work had gone for naught, and that he'd been sent right back to the drawing board. Now, on that very same drawing board, rested a Petri dish half full of fresh, human blood.

In his hand was a syringe containing his latest creation, a protein base hiding the government's latest microscopic explosive fused right into the batch's DNA. Into the dish went the contents of the syringe, absorbed perfectly by the red gelatinous mass as cells fed cannibalized cells and digested one another, fusing within microseconds as nary a ripple crossed the plastic circle.

From a pair of tweezers small enough to make those "ship in a bottle" geeks drool, the Mastermind deposited the missing link in this explosive trinity: a detonator barely the size of a piece of presidential confetti. Its silvery sheen masked the trigger that would make his ticking time bomb complete. It needed no special placement. He positioned it in the middle of the Petri dish as carelessly as he wiped his chin after downing two packs of dollar store Twinkies in a row. All it needed was proximity to the blood and the protein base, which it accomplished merely by touching one or the other once the two rapidly mixed.

Sighing loudly, allowing himself a full thirty seconds of air guitar for a particularly ballsy 70s riff on "Hotel California," he crossed the room with a detonator no larger than a cell phone. From a corner beneath a blacked out window, his nimble fingers flew across the remote control keypad, efficiently dialing in a

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five-digit code pre-programmed into the flake-like chip resting atop the Petri dish. His finger trembled on the "SEND" button. The CD had stopped playing but he barely noticed. Somewhere down the street a dog barked. He blinked, licked his upper lip, pictured a man's face, savored the moment, then pressed down on the small green button.

Across the room, the blood exploded in a gelatinous red bubble that expanded, then contracted, then disappeared into a fuming hot plate of shattered plastic. Though it looked quite violent, had the CD still been playing he wouldn't have heard a sound. As it was, the sound the explosion emitted was little more than a quick, flat "pop," like the burst of a single kernel in a bag of microwave popcorn.

The smell was pungent: roasted flesh, not entirely unpleasant, he was glad to note.

He approached the dish without hesitation, admiring his handiwork. *No more mistakes here*, he thought with a smile.. No more mothers melting in heaps on dressing room floors, making the newspapers on page 2, page 6, or page 62.

No more mistakes, period. The time had come, the hour was at hand. The plan he'd worked so hard on, the people he had targeted, the places he would need to go, the hours he would need to spend. The time was now.

*It was just perfect*, he thought. Not an ounce of blood remained. The dish was fractured, bent, sharp edges melting into droopy corners, but not a smidgen of blood was anywhere to be seen.

No blood.

No detonator.

No wires.

No chords.

No explosives.

No evidence.

No more witnesses.