

Mary, Mary

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PROLOGUE

THE STORYTELLER

Chapter One

A *ct One, Scene One*, the Storyteller thought to himself, and couldn't hold back a dizzying rush of anticipation. The truth was that ordinary people committed perfect crimes and perfect murders all the time. But you didn't hear about it for the simple reason that the killers never got caught.

And neither would he, of course. That was a given in the story he was about to tell.

Which didn't mean that today wasn't nerve-racking. Actually, this was the most intense moment in the past couple of insane years for him. He was ready to kill somebody, a complete stranger, and he had figured out that New York City was the right place for his first.

It *almost* happened just outside a basement restroom in Bloomingdale's department store, but he didn't feel right about the location.

Too crowded, even at half past ten in the morning.

Too noisy, and yet not noisy enough to provide the proper distraction.

Plus, he didn't like the idea of trying to escape out on to the unfamiliar territory of Lexington Avenue, or especially down into the claustrophobic IRT subway tunnels. When it felt right, he'd know it, and act accordingly.

So the Storyteller moved on and decided to catch a flick at the Sutton Theater on East 57th Street, a funky, rundown place that had obviously seen better days.

Maybe *this* was a good place for a murder. He liked the irony, even

if he was the only one who got it. Yes, maybe this was going to work out great, he thought as he sat in one of the two small auditoriums inside.

He began to watch *Kill Bill Volume 2* with seven other Tarantino aficionados.

Which one of these unsuspecting people would be his victim? *You? You? You there?* The Storyteller spun the tale inside his head.

There were two loudmouths in identical New York Yankees baseball caps, worn backwards of course. The irritating morons didn't shut up once through the interminable ads and trailers. They both deserved to die.

So did an atrociously dressed elderly couple, who didn't talk to each other at all, not once in fifteen minutes before the house lights went down. Killing them would be a good deed, almost a public service.

A fragile-looking woman, early forties, seemed to be having the shakes two rows in front of the moldy oldies. Bothering no one – except him.

And then a big black dude with his sneakered feet up on the seat in front of him. Rude, inconsiderate bastard in his old school Converse that must have been at least size fourteens.

Next, a black-bearded movie nerd who probably had seen the movie a dozen times already and worshipped Quentin Tarantino, of course.

Turned out it was the bearded wonder who got up about halfway through the movie, just after Uma Thurman was buried alive. Jesus, who could walk out on that classic scene?

Duty-bound, he followed, a couple of seconds behind. Out into the dingy hall, then into the men's room, which was located near Theater Two.

He was actually shaking now. Was this it? His moment? His first murder? The beginning of everything he'd dreamed about for months? Make that *years*.

He was pretty much on auto-pilot, trying not to think about anything except doing this right, then getting out of the movie theater without anybody noticing his face or too much else about him.

The bearded guy was standing at the urinal, which was kind of good news actually. The shot was nicely framed and art-directed.

Wrinkled, grungy black T-shirt that said NYU FILM SCHOOL with a clapsticks logo on the back. Reminded him of a character out of a Daniel Clowes comic book, and that graphic shit was *hot* right now.

‘And . . . *action!*’ he said.

Then he shot the poor bearded loser in the back of the head, watched him drop like a heavy sack to the bathroom floor. Lie there – nothing moving. The blast roared through his head in the tiled room, louder than he’d dreamed it would be.

‘Hey – what the? What happened? *Hey!*’ he heard, and the Storyteller whirled around as if there was an audience watching him in the men’s room.

Two guys from the Sutton Theater crew had entered behind him. What were the odds of that happening? And how much had they seen?

‘Heart attack,’ he said, blurted it out, tried to sound convincing. ‘Man just fell over at the urinal. Help me get him up. Poor guy. He’s bleeding!’

No panic, no emotion, no second thoughts whatsoever. Everything was pure instinct now, right, wrong or indifferent.

He raised his gun and shot both theater workers as they stood wall-eyed and dorky at the door. He shot them again when they were down on the floor. Just to be careful. Professional.

And now he was really shaking, legs like Jell-o, but trying to walk very calmly out of the men’s room.

Then out of the Sutton Theater on to 57th, heading east on foot. Everything outside feeling completely unreal and otherworldly, everything so *bright* and *brassy*.

He’d done it, though. He’d killed three people instead of just one. His first *three* murders. It was just practice, but he’d done it, and you know what – he could do it again.

‘Practice makes perfect,’ the Storyteller whispered under his breath as he hurried toward his car – *his getaway car, right?* God, this was the best feeling of his life. Of course, that didn’t say much for his life up to now, did it?

But watch out from here on, just watch out.

For Mary, Mary, quite contrary.

Of course, he was the only one who got *that*. So far, anyway.

Chapter Two

You think you can kill again in cold blood? he asked himself many times after the New York murders.

You think you can stop this now that you've started? You think?

The Storyteller waited – almost five months of self-torture, also known as discipline, or professionalism, or maybe cowardice – until it was his time.

Then he arrived in the kill zone again, and this time it wasn't going to be practice. This was the real deal, and it wasn't a stranger who was going to die.

He was just a face in the crowd at the 3:10 showing of *The Village* at the Westwood Village Theater in Los Angeles. There were a number of patrons, which was good news for him, and, he supposed, for the film's star director, M. Night Shyamalan. What kind of name was that? M. Night? Self-conscious phony.

Apparently Patrice Bennett was among the last people in town to see the horror film. Also, Patrice actually deigned to sit in a real movie theater, with real ticket-buyers, for her movie fix. How quaint was that? Well, she was famous for it, wasn't she? It was Patrice's schtick. She'd even bought her ticket ahead of time, which was how he knew she'd be there. The Storyteller had gotten the info out of Patrice's executive assistant, Marjorie Seger. *Loose lips sink ships, Marjorie. But thank you, Marjorie.*

So this wasn't target practice any more, and everything had to be just right, and it would be. Never a doubt. The story was already written in his head.

For one thing, he couldn't be spotted by anyone in the theater. So he went to the twelve o'clock; then, when the show let out, he waited around in a bathroom stall until the 3:10. Nail-biting, nerve-thwacking ordeal, but not that bad really. Especially since if he was spotted, he'd simply abort the mission.

But the Storyteller wasn't seen – at least he didn't think so – and he didn't see anyone he knew.

Now, the theater had more than a hundred viewers – or rather, *suspects*, right? At least a dozen of them were perfect for his purposes.

Most important – his gun had a silencer on it. Something he'd learned from the thrill-packed run-through in New York City.

Patrice sat in the balcony. *Works for me, Patsy*, he thought. *You're being way too thoughtful, especially for you, you über-bitch.*

He was watching her from across the aisle and a few rows behind. This was so delicious – he wanted the luxurious anticipation of revenge to go on and on. Except that he also wanted to pull the trigger and get the hell out of the Westwood Theater before something went wrong. But what could go wrong, right?

When Joaquin Phoenix got stabbed by Adrien Brody, he calmly rose from his seat and went directly to Patrice's aisle. He never hesitated for an instant.

'Excuse me. Sorry,' he said, and started to make his way past her, actually *over* her bare, skinny legs, which weren't very impressive for such an important woman in Hollywood.

'Jesus Christ, will you watch it,' she complained, which was just like her, so unnecessarily nasty and imperial-sounding.

'Not exactly who *you* can expect to see next. Not *Jesus*,' he quipped, and wondered if Patrice got his little joke. Probably not. Studio heads didn't get subtlety.

He shot her twice – once in the heart and once right between her totally shocked, blown-away eyes. There was no such thing as too dead when it came to this kind of power-mad psycho. Patrice could probably come back at you from the grave, like that reverse trapdoor ending in the original *Carrie*, Stephen King's first story to reach the silver screen.

Then he made his perfect escape.

Just like in the movies, hey.

The story had begun.

PART ONE

THE 'MARY SMITH' MURDERS

Chapter Three

To: agriner@latimes.com

From: Mary Smith

Arnold Griner squeezed his small, squinty eyes shut, put his hands over his practically hairless skull, and scrubbed his scalp hard. *Oh God save me, not another one*, he was thinking. *Life is too short for this shit. I can't take it. I really can't take this Mary Smith deal.*

The *LA Times* newsroom buzzed around him as if it were any other morning: phones jangling; people coming and going like indoor race walkers; someone nearby pontificating about the new fall TV lineup – as if anybody cared about the TV lineup these days.

How could Griner feel so vulnerable sitting at his own desk, in his cubicle office, in the middle of all *this*? But he did.

The Xanax he'd been popping since the first Mary Smith email a week ago did absolutely nothing to hold back the spike of panic that shot through him like the needle used in a spinal tap.

Panic – but also morbid curiosity.

Maybe he was just an entertainment editor, but Arnold Griner knew a huge news story when he saw one. A blockbuster that would dominate the front page for weeks. Someone rich and famous had just been murdered in LA. He didn't even have to read the email to know that much. 'Mary Smith' had already proved herself to be one sick lady, and true to her word.

The questions attacking his brain were: Who had been killed this

time? And what the hell was he, Griner, doing in the middle of this awful mess?

Why me of all people? There has to be a good reason, and if I knew it, then I'd really be freaking, wouldn't I?

As he dialed 911 with a badly shaking hand, he clicked open Mary Smith's message with the other. *Please God, no one I know. No one I like.*

He began to read, even though everything inside told him not to. He really couldn't help himself. *Oh God! Antonia Schifman! Oh, poor Antonia. Why her?* Antonia was one of the good people, and there weren't too many of those.

To: Antonia Schifman

I guess you could call this anti-fan mail – although I *used* to be a fan.

Anyhow, 4:30 in the morning is awfully early for a brilliant three-time Academy Award winner and mother of four to leave the house and her children, don't you think? I suppose it's the price we pay for being who we are. Or at least it's one of them.

I was there this morning to show you *another* down side of fame and fortune in Beverly Hills.

It was pitch-black dark when the driver came to take you to 'the set'. There's a sacrifice you make that your fans don't begin to appreciate.

I walked right in the front gates behind the car and followed him up the driveway.

Suddenly, I had the feeling that your driver had to die if I wanted to get to you, but still, there wasn't any pleasure in killing him. I was too nervous for that, shaking like a sapling in a fierce storm.

The gun was actually trembling in my hand when I knocked on his window. I kept it hidden behind my back and told him you'd be down in a few minutes.

'No problem,' he said. And you know what? He barely even looked at me. Why should he? You are the star of stars, fifteen

million a picture, I've read. I was just the maid as far as he was concerned.

It felt like I was playing a bit part in one of your movies, but trust me, I was planning to steal this scene.

I knew I had to do something pretty dramatic soon. He was going to wonder why I was still standing there. I didn't know if I'd be too scared to do it if he actually looked at me. But then he did – and everything just happened.

I shoved the gun into his face and pulled the trigger. Such a tiny action, almost a reflex. A second later, he was dead, just blown away. I could do pretty much whatever I wanted to now.

So I walked around to the passenger side, climbed inside the car and waited for you. Nice, nice car. So plush and comfortable, with leather, soft lighting, a bar and small refrigerator stocked with all your favorites. *Twix bars, Antonia? Shame, shame.*

In a way, it was too bad you came out of the house so soon. I liked being in your limo. The quiet time, the luxury. In those few minutes, I could see why you would want to be who you are. Or at least, who you were.

My heart is beating faster just writing this, remembering the moment.

You stood outside the car for a second before you opened the door for yourself. Dressed down, without make-up, yet still breathtaking. You couldn't see me or the dead driver through the one-way glass. But I could see you. That's how it's been all week, Antonia. I've been right there and you've never noticed me.

What an incredible moment this was for me! Me, inside your car. You, outside, in a tweed jacket that made you look very Irish and down-to-earth.

When you got in, I immediately locked the doors and put down the partition. You got this amazing look on your face the second you saw me. I'd seen that same look before – *in your movies, when you pretended to be afraid.*

What you probably didn't realize was that I was just as scared as you. My whole body was quivering. My teeth were hitting together. That's why I shot you before either of us could say anything.

The moment went by way too fast, but I had planned on that. That's what the knife was for. I just hope it isn't your children who find you. I wouldn't want them to see you that way. All they need to know is that Mommy is gone and she's not coming back.

Those poor children – Andi, Tia, Petra, Elizabeth.

They're the ones I feel so sorry for. Poor, poor babies without their mommy. Could anything be sadder?

I know something that is – but that's *my* secret, and no one will ever know.

Chapter Four

Mary Smith's alarm clock went off at 5:30 a.m., but she was already awake. Wide awake, thinking about, of all things, how to make a porcupine costume for her daughter Ashley's school play. What could she possibly use for porcupine needles?

It had been quite a late night but she never seemed to be able to shut off the mental ticker tape that was her 'to do' list.

They needed more peanut butter, Kid's Crest, Zyrtec syrup, and one of those little bulbs for the bathroom night light. Brendan had soccer practice at three, which started at the same time as – and fifteen miles away from – Ashley's tap class. Figure that one out. Adam's sniffles could have gone either way in the night, and Mary *could not* afford another sick day. Speaking of which, she needed to put in for some second shifts at her job.

And this was the *quiet* part of the day. It wasn't long before she was at the stove, calling out orders and fielding the usual spate of breakfast-time needs.

'Brendan, help your sister tie her shoes, please. Brendan, I'm talking to you.'

'Mommy, my socks feel weird.'

'Turn them inside out.'

'Can I take Cleo to school? Can I please? Please, Mommy? Oh, please?'

'Yes, but you'll have to get her out of the dryer. Brendan, what did I ask you to do?'

Mary expertly flipped a portion of perfectly fluffed scrambled eggs

on to each of their plates just as the bread in the four-slice toaster popped up.

'Breakfast!'

While the two older ones dug in, she took Adam to his room and dressed him in his red overalls and a sailor shirt. She cooed to him as she carried him back out to his high chair.

'Who's the handsomest sailor in town? Who's my little man?' she asked, and tickled him under his chinny-chin-chin.

'I'm your little man,' Brendan said with a smile. *'I am, Mommy!'*

'You're my big little man,' Mary returned, chucking him lightly under the chin. She squeezed his shoulders. *'And getting bigger every day.'*

'That's 'cause I clean my plate,' he said, chasing the last bit of egg on to his fork with the flat of his thumb.

'You're a good cook, Mommy,' Ashley said.

'Thank you, sweetheart. Now come on, let's go. BBWW.'

While she cleared the dishes, Brendan and Ashley marched back down the hallway in a singsong chant. *'Brush, brush, wash, wash. Teeth and hair, hands and face. Brush, brush, wash, wash . . .'*

While the older two washed up, she put the dishes into the sink for later, gave Adam's face a quick once over with a wet paper towel, took the kids' lunches, packed the night before, out of the fridge, and dropped each one into the appropriate knapsack.

'I'm going to put Adam into his car seat,' she called out. *'Last one outside is a googly worm.'*

Mary hated the rotten egg thing, but she knew the value of a little innocent competition for keeping the kids in gear. She could hear them squealing in their rooms, half laughing, half scared they'd be the last one out the door and into her old jalopy. *Gawd, who said 'jalopy' any more? Only Mary, Mary. And who said 'Gawd'?*

As she strapped Adam in, she tried to remember what it was that had kept her up so late the night before. The days – and now the nights as well – seemed to blur together in a jumble of cooking, cleaning, driving, list-making, nose-wiping, and more driving. LA definitely had its major league disadvantages. It seemed as if they spent half their lives in the car, stalled in traffic.

She should really get something more fuel-efficient than the big old Suburban she had brought west.

She looked at her watch. Somehow, ten minutes had gone by. Ten precious minutes. How did that always happen? How did she seem to *lose* time?

She ran back to the front door and ushered Brendan and Ashley outside. 'What is taking you two so long? We're going to be late again. Jeezum crow, just look at the time,' said Mary Smith.