

C h a 3 p t e r

THE WIND MINSTREL

He slept all day Friday and woke up without an alarm at six, Friday evening. His skin was on fire. Glowing. He had transformed. He was The Wind Minstrel, glorious and alive. He dressed in silk pajamas, gathered his autopsy saw and scalpels. The last tool The Wind Minstrel packed in his large suitcase was The Rat's computer. He had left The Rat behind, but he was following the cunning rodent's careful plan. Every inch of his body was sore now, even the bottoms of his feet. It was as if his skin couldn't contain his glory and had been stretched, painfully, to accommodate him. He left the Marriott and approached his pickup. Earlier, he had stolen a Georgia license plate and now he attached it to the plate holder. He put on his CD headphones and played Baby Killer's new album, *Chant to the Dead*. He drove back across town toward Hoyt Tower while the music filled his head with its destructive beauty. He parked across from the building on Lee Street. Using his cellphone, attached to his laptop, he

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placed a call to the building security computer. On his screen, the computer answered his call:

hoyt login:

He typed "root" and pressed Enter. The system responded:

Password:

He typed in a password for root, which was GOD. The Rat had downloaded all of this from the building computer using the elevator phone the day before. Immediately he was logged in to the computer:

WELCOME TO HOYT TOWER.

You are logged in to host hoyt as root.

Good evening, root.

"Root" was the name a lot of computers used to identify the computer system's main user. GOD was often used as the root password because root was the "God" of the system. If you logged in and were accepted as root you could do anything you wanted. You could reprogram, delete, or change the entire system. Since the main function of the building's computer was to run the building, root controlled the brains of the building.

He accessed the building's security panel, and up on his laptop came a computer graphic of the ten-story structure. He scrolled his way down to the first-floor fire door on Center Street. Working carefully, he shut off the alarm on that door by deleting it from the program. He watched the building's "police telephone module," listed on the bottom of the

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screen, to see if the system sensed his tampering and if the automatic dialer would place a call to the Atlanta police. It didn't.

It was a sign. He knew that now he was completely transformed. Now he could possess.

SSS

She never saw him come through the glass door into the office. By the time she sensed his presence and began to turn, it was already too late. He grabbed her head from behind and brought a surgical knife down over her shoulder and plunged it deep into her chest. He felt the warm blood flow over his latex-gloved hand. He held his forearm tight against her Adam's apple. He had studied anatomy and could feel the cricoid cartilage break, collapsing the vocal ligament into her rima glottidis, rendering her mute.

He held her in a strangulation embrace, with the knife buried deep in her chest, until he felt a death shiver. Moments later she went limp. He laid her on the floor and moved quickly out into the hall, where he had left his large suitcase. He felt her dead eyes watching him. He returned with the suitcase, grabbed her sweater from the back of her chair, and put it across her staring dead eyes . . . eyes that mocked his ugliness.

He undressed her . . . removing her dress, her slip, bra, and panties. His nostrils flared as he smelled her blood. He put on his headset and punched a button on his CD player. As the music started, he pulled down his silk pajama pants and grabbed his semi-erection. Slowly, he worked himself to climax as he swayed over her. The music screamed in his ears:

I slaughtered the whore,
Skinned her alive.

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I did it for the thrill.
It was so nice to kill.

His erection was soft, but he ejaculated onto her body. . . . Anger flared. The bitch had scorned him with her stare, spoiling his erection. He grabbed the scissors off her desk and jammed them up her vagina. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," he grunted as he plunged them in repeatedly. Then he left them there. The song finished, and he removed the headset. He always possessed without music so he could hear the sounds of his work, the cutting, the rending of tissue. He picked up the saw and attached the round 10004 blade with the crosscut teeth. It was the best for medium and small bones.

He plugged the saw into a wall socket and tested it. The blade oscillated and vibrated in his hand. Then he switched it off and laid it next to the body.

"If, as you told me, fire cleanses," he said to the dead girl whose body he had just defiled, "then why does fire leave such a dirty ash?"

Using the scalpel, he started to sever the right arm, working with surgical precision. He made the incision below the shoulder, finding the brachial artery under the anterior humeral circumflex. He cut through it first. His gloved fingers pinched it off with surgical clamps; then he clamped the auxiliary artery and vein.

"If it's true that Satan is only the author of sin, then why, dear Shirley, in the fires of the last day, was he not reduced to a state of nonexistence?"

The woman, whose desk plate read CANDICE WILCOX, lay silent before him. The Wind Minstrel was lost in ritual fantasy. "You told me he would perish, but he hasn't. Would you explain that, please?" he demanded.

He turned on the saw and cut the humerus bone just below the

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pectoralis minor muscles on the shoulder. He worked for twenty minutes. When he was through, he carefully loaded what he had removed into garbage bags—turned the twisties and packed everything into the large suitcase he had brought with him. He arranged the body, putting some books beneath her torso so that the head was lower. This, he knew, would allow the blood to drain from the body and eliminate lividity—discoloration from the collection of blood in the lower extremities. It turned the skin a deep purple and took almost nine hours to occur. He knew the police used lividity to fix time of death.

The Wind Minstrel needed to claim the whore as his divine work. He pulled out his branding iron with the special head. He had made it from a woman's electric curling iron. He plugged it in, waited for a minute till it got hot, and pressed it to Candice Wilcox's left breast. When he could smell flesh burning, he removed it and looked at the brand:

S

R. 13-15

The Wind Minstrel put his branding iron away, pulled out The Rat's notebook PC, disconnected the incoming phone line from the fax machine on Candice Wilcox's desk, and hooked it into The Rat's PC.

Once again, he typed in the system username, root, and the password, GOD. After a few seconds, the system logon welcome message came on the screen. Then he typed in:

EnviroLog

The environmental log was in the building's computer under the Enviro-Log program. In a few seconds, up on his screen came the building's forty zone listings. He was on the west side of the building in Zone 4-W. He

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had already prepared a program on his own computer and stored it for this moment. He had named the program WindLog. He uploaded the program into the building computer. WindLog would override the climate control for Zone 4-W. This new program would first drive the heat in that sector as high as it would go, approximately 110 degrees. The Wind Minstrel knew that this would keep the dead body's temperature high while he was on his way back to Tampa. Since the police also used cooling body temperature to fix time of death, the heat would throw them off. But he also knew that if he left the heat on, the police would be alert to his deception, so he had instructed WindLog to shut off the heat in 4-W at 6:30 A.M. and turn the air-conditioning on full, driving the room temperature back down to approximately 70 degrees by 7:30. Then his program would reset the environmental control to the normal temperature of 72. But The Rat was clever, and he knew that there would be a record of this wild temperature fluctuation, so he had written another program, which he had named BogusLog. It would quietly replace a section of the building's environmental log and show a normal temperature record for 4-W. As its last act, WindLog would erase itself and leave BogusLog to reflect the incorrect time and temperature information, leaving no trace of The Wind Minstrel's magic.

He waited until he felt the heat come on, then unplugged the small computer and packed it in with his other treasures. He left the office by the fire stairs, never bothering to look back at the mutilated body of Candice Wilcox.

He went down the stairs and exited through the first-floor door on Center Street, never coming close to the security guard. He was careful to leave that door slightly ajar. He walked to his truck and put the large suitcase into the front seat. He would have to drive quickly

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to get back to Tampa by dawn. He stopped only once in Thomasville, near the Florida border, to get gas.

It was 7:28 A.M. when he got to the computer store where he worked in Tampa. Sitting in the parking lot, he made the last call to the building's computer. Again, he used the root password, GOD. Once in, he accessed the security module of the computer. He added the Center Street door back into the system and erased his original deletion. He watched as the perimeter-breach alarm flashed on the computer graphic, indicating a break-in through the Center Street fire door. He then watched as the automatic dialer notified building security and the Atlanta PD.

The Rat knew that when the body was found by the Atlanta police, the liver temperature would still be close to its normal 102 degrees. He knew that all homicide units measure liver temperature for time-of-death estimates, because it is the hottest organ in the body. The police would find no lividity and no loss of liver temperature, even though almost nine hours had past since the murder. The Rat knew they would place the TOD at approximately 7:30 A.M., when the alarm triggered. He had a perfect alibi: He was at work more than four hundred miles away. The Rat was cunning and shrewd. His skin didn't hurt him now. His nipples didn't ache or sting, but he was again wretched and foul. He hurried into Tampa ComputerLand, where Leonard was a part-time PC repair tech. He punched in. His time card said 7:36. All he had left to do was call and tell Satan that he had possessed the arms.