

EXCERPT FROM BUD & MAGGIE'S SECRETS, by Tom Kranz

"Anyone with business before this Council may approach the podium," said Remmick.

The man in the back row stood and made his way to the podium against the left wall of the chamber. He had on a heavy coat and looked down at the floor as he shuffled.

Remmick and the Council watched as he approached the podium. He took his place there, standing with his back to a wall that held a framed photograph of Armitage's current mayor. The photo of Mayor Bordon "Bud" Remmick hung directly behind the man's head. He stood at the podium and finally looked up.

"My name is Lowell Branch, 1780 Myrtle Street," he said. He seemed unsure whether to look at the camera, which had panned in his direction, or the Council dais.

"Good evening, Mr. Branch," said Remmick. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"I know. Um--" Branch's eyes darted around the room. Remmick and the Council stared at him. Branch turned his head to see what was behind him. "That's a good picture of you, Mayor."

"Thank you, Mr. Branch. What brings you here tonight?"

Branch's eyes stopped moving and fixed on Remmick. "I'm pissed off about what you did to my driveway."

The Council members turned their heads towards Remmick.

"We explained that last month, Mr. Branch," replied Remmick. "The bottom eight feet of your driveway is part of the Myrtle Street right-of-way. It's the same for everyone on your street. Residents don't actually own that last eight feet of property. When we repaved, we widened the street and put in the curbing."

"Fuck that," spat Branch. "That's MY driveway."

"If you curse again, I'm going to ask you to leave," scolded Remmick.

"Fuck that," Branch repeated. Remmick could only wonder who might be watching on live TV. "You and your little buddies up there fucked up my driveway."

"That'll do," Remmick shouted. "Don't make me call the police, Lowell."

Branch suddenly turned quiet and a strange look of peace drew down his eyelids. He backed up one step until his head rested firmly against Remmick's photograph. He tilted his head forward, then snapped it back into the framed photo, hard enough to make a cracking sound. Remmick and the Council twitched in their seats upon impact. Brows furrowed and several mouths opened as Branch repeated this sequence, this time snapping his head backward with enough force to crack the glass in the frame. Shards fell to the floor.

"Alright, Lowell, time to leave," announced Remmick.

All in the chamber had their eyes locked on Branch who now eased his right hand into the right pocket of his coat. He withdrew a pistol.

"Put it down, Lowell" shouted Remmick. Lenore Creighton screamed a scream that rattled the lid of her water pitcher. The councilmen to the right of Remmick ducked under their desks.

Branch held the pistol frozen at mid-torso for several seconds, then smiled a toothy smile. He stepped out from behind the podium, took two steps away, turned his body towards the photo of Remmick and pulled the trigger.

"Stop, Lowell!" shouted Remmick once more.

The wet snap of a gunshot sent all in the room ducking down in one, unified motion. The live television picture jerked. The gun stayed aimed at the photograph as Lowell fired nine more shots in less than nine seconds, then continued pulling the trigger after the magazine emptied with a click, click, click. The noise stopped with jarring finality. The smell of black powder permeated. Lowell

stood looking at his work, a photo of Mayor Remmick peppered with bullet holes. All those in the room remained comically frozen in various avoidance positions.

A guttural chuckle crept through the room. Branch's body swayed back and forth. His smile was broad and he turned his head slowly to look around. He still held the gun upright, pointing it at Remmick's portrait.

"Bang!" he shouted, then lowered the gun and placed it on the podium. He stood staring at Remmick's portrait, laughing.

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Bud shuffled into the visitor's room with a sheriff's deputy right behind him. He saw Maggie sitting at the same table as before and made his way towards her. The deputy stopped a few feet short, giving Bud some space to pull out the chair and get settled. Maggie greeted him with a forced smile. Again, the wooden ledge acted as a barrier between their tables. The two sat looking at each other, no words, as the din of the visitor's room clamored around them.

Bud began. "I heard you resigned." She turned her head up to look at him. Bud looked deep into her eyes. "I'm so sorry you had to do that."

Maggie shrugged and said nothing.

"They were better off with you than without you."

She shrugged again.

"What are you going to do now?"

Staring at the table, she said, barely above a whisper, "I have no idea."

Bud looked away, searching for words.

"You know, every job I've had," Maggie began, then stopped. She looked up at Bud and continued. "Every job I've had has been derailed, or almost derailed, by you. Your past. Your present." Her voice had no edge, conveyed no judgement. "It's been a hell of a decade, you know? The killing, jail the first time, the former governor trying to fuck me over, now jail a second time."

Bud saw exhaustion, more than anything else, in her face.

"I have no career left. I might as well work at a Starbucks."

Bud's eyes filled with tears. His tears triggered hers. The two of them sat crying as quietly as they could.

"I'll make it up to you somehow," Bud managed in a broken voice. "I know it's bad now, but I'll--"

"Stop," she interrupted, sniffing. She wiped her eyes with her hands and tried to continue. "I have something to tell you."

Bud wiped his own eyes with his hands. Maggie took a tissue out of her pocket and wiped her nose.

"It's about you and Marjorie, isn't it?" he offered in a weak voice.

Maggie froze and had to catch her breath. The look on her face told Bud everything he needed to know. She finished with a quick nose-blow, then stuffed the tissue back into her pocket. "Yes." She looked at him with bloodshot eyes. "How did you know?"

He sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. "There were clues," he said. "I saw a text message. The constant phone calls. That conversation the other day when she answered your phone by mistake."

Maggie said nothing.

"Sideways glances at women in various places. And, I dunno, I never thought you were that into, you know--"

Maggie leaned in to hear the rest of the sentence.

"Sex." He paused to see her reaction adding, "Not that I have any complaints."

"Bud, I'm--I can't believe, all this time--"

"That I never said anything? It was only this last year that it all came together. I figured you'd tell me if and when you were ready. The fact is--" He paused to make sure he had her full attention. "I love you. And if that's what you need--"

"Stop, Bud, OK? You're gonna make me cry again."

He so much wanted to take her in his arms.

"It's all true," she continued. "I've been living a lie for years, Bud. Years. Back before I even met you. I just never acted on it. I wasn't sure, or I was scared of it. I didn't want to hurt you. I love you too, but not in the same way."

That one hurt. She could see it.

"If not now, then when, Bud? When do I get to be a real adult? When do I get to be the person I should have been all this time? I'm 48-years old."

She could see the air hiss out of his ego before her eyes. He looked resigned. He snapped out of it and nodded.

"Now," he replied. "Now's the time." He reached over the wooden ledge, searching for her hand. She gave it and they held on to each other for a few moments before the deputy cleared his throat. They withdrew.

She leaned in again. "You don't hate me?"

For the first time in days, Bud Remmick smiled. "You're the most amazing woman I've ever known. How could I hate you?"

Maggie lit up and offered her own tentative smile. "Better than Alexandra and Crystal?"

Embarrassed, Bud replied, "You are the love of my life."

Both smiles remained for a short while before the deputy reminded them time was up.

"If you need the house to post bond, go ahead," she said.

"Thank you, I appreciate that. I mean it's been a hoot, being back in jail and all, but--"

Maggie's eyes widened in mock horror.

"I need some real food."

Her face relaxed and she said, "When you get out, we'll talk some more."

The deputy walked the few steps towards Bud's chair, his cue to leave. Bud blew Maggie a kiss. She pursed her lips to form an air kiss, watching as he walked out of the room with the deputy in tow.

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