

PLOTZ

A Novel by

Marshall Bruney

Chapter 1

*For Ross Millerton, a moment of truth was at hand: Either he or his alter ego lothario must die.
– “Escape from Realty” by Emerson B. Chadwick*

Emerson Chadwick had objected strenuously and futilely when his wife had the white carpet installed in the living room. Now, though, he thought it might have been a good idea – especially from the angle from which he was viewing the individual loops. It was softer than he'd expected. He would feel pretty good about lying on it except for the barrel of the Beretta 84FS 380 Cheetah in his mouth.

Emerson was about to squeeze the trigger when the telephone rang. He momentarily relaxed his finger. He was feeling slightly dreamy and ready to explore dimensions other than those found at 2123 Forestville Drive, Glamorgan, North Carolina, but the ring jolted him into a state of annoyance, jerking all his random thoughts into a knot and spinning them into outer space. He could pull the trigger now, but what if it was something important, like the Publishers Clearing House Prize Patrol? He had never believed they just pulled into your driveway and walked casually up to your door like an Avon saleswoman; the winner had to have some notice so he wouldn't answer the doorbell wearing boxers or, if a woman, nothing underneath the bathrobe.

He waited, hoping whoever it was would give up and call back later, maybe after Roz came home. He felt generous. Let her have the pleasure of winning the million dollars. But whoever was calling was nothing if not persistent. On the fourth ring, he slid the barrel of the Beretta out of his mouth, noting it was wet and slippery. He sat up, grunting at the effort. On the fifth ring, he switched on the safety lever. On the sixth, he rose and made his way across the room. On the seventh ring, he placed the pistol on the lamp table and picked up the telephone.

“Hello?” His voice sounded raspy, and he tried again. “Hello?”

“Where the devil were you?”

Emerson winced, comparing the voice from hell with the photograph of his wife and two daughters that rested next to the tele-phone. In the picture, Roz was a beautiful woman, tall and slender with auburn hair she wore in a loose chignon with artfully arranged tresses caressing her high cheekbones. Her eyes looked dangerously lazy and her wide mouth, just slightly open, seemed ready to blow a kiss.

The girls, unfortunately, looked like Emerson. Although he was considered a handsome man, his craggy features looked all wrong on their faces.

“I was in the shower,” he lied. She should be so lucky. When she came home, she'd wish he *had* been in the shower. Easier to clean up spattered blood and brains. He gazed mournfully at the white carpet, so soon to be dyed a bright and unforgiving crimson.

“Okay,” Roz said shortly. “Look, I have an unexpected double house showing this evening ...”

What else is new, Emerson wondered.

“... One is at seven o'clock and the other is at eight-thirty,” Roz continued, her contralto segueing into a singsong routine. “So I won't be home in time for supper. You'll have to eat without me.”

“I'll survive.” Emerson thought he had managed to put just the right amount of pathos in his voice by thinking of a Roz-cooked roast with boiled red potatoes and green string beans. Instead, his inner self chided him, “*It doesn't matter ... once you pull the trigger.*”

“Of course you will,” Roz said as sharply, ignoring his plea for sympathy. “See you around elevenish, then.”

Click. The phone went dead and Emerson replaced the receiver on its docket.

“Who does she think she's kidding?” he said aloud to Self. “All these showings and she's never sold a house. Not one since she got her Realtor's license. Either she's an unbelievably bad saleswoman or she's lying.”

Emerson chose to believe that the diminishing royalties from “Escape from Reality” were still supporting the household, becoming conveniently deaf whenever Roz told him of a sale. After a while, she had stopped telling him

although she was earning enough from her real estate sales percentage to manage the household budget, keep her husband on his medications and have spending money for her wardrobe.

Emerson retrieved the revolver from the ruffled white doily on the table and asked Self, “*Now, where were we?*”

Still irate with Roz, Emerson knelt in the plush carpet, sucked in his last breath, closed his eyes, crammed the barrel between his teeth with his left hand, turned it up slightly so the bullet would emerge from the top of his cranium and splatter his brains everywhere, and jerked the trigger.

Click!

Disappointed, he removed the barrel, mumbling to Self, “*Next time, remind me to put some damn cartridges in the cylinder, dumbass.*” Emerson cracked a thin smile as he dropped the revolver on the chair and watched it bounce a couple of times on the soft, blue-green fabric before coming to rest against the missing cartridge that was about to slip into the deep crevice where pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters once were a bountiful find for the children. He slowly, rhythmically shook his head in utter disgust with himself. “*You are such a frigging coward. A freaking milquetoast of astronomical magni-tude! A craven asshole! A recreant who has no spine! A ... a ... a –.*”

He had run out of adjectives to describe his cowardice. His face all red and ballooned from his angry rage at Self, Emerson headed to the kitchen to see what there was for supper, pausing briefly as his eye caught the smile from a younger Emerson with an auburn-haired woman in the framed photograph on the bookshelf. Roz wore a skimpy off-white bikini that showed off her natural attributes as well as her long, browned legs and wind-tousled tresses. He, Emerson, had a flat stomach, hairy chest and legs, a trimmed moustache and coal-black hair, neither showing the slightest trace of gray.

A lovely couple – back in ninety-three, he mused. The photo had been taken by their oldest daughter, Beth, sixteen at the time, as they were standing in the surf behind the Pavilion and Boardwalk in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Ah, Myrtle Beach. He and Roz had honeymooned there in March 1976, after a shotgun wedding in Bennettsville, South Carolina, that had been attended by his irate father and understanding mother and Roz’s equally irate father and not-so-understanding mother. Six months later he was an eighteen-year-old father with a wife and baby to care for, no prospect of a well-paying job under the Carter Administration in the White House and his dream of becoming a published author derailed. The parents did the math to figure out when he and Roz had made the baby – the day after Christmas at her house while her parents were having Christmas with friends in Charlotte.

Now, some thirty years later, he wanted to exit a life that had become unbearable. End his stay on Earth before he turned fifty in two months. He didn’t think he was facing a mid-life crisis, unlike his long-time boss who had sold out the insurance business from underneath Emerson and five other devoted employees late in ought-two, took the net from the sale and deserted his wife, heading to the Gulf Coast of Florida for a life of leisure as a beachcomber, fisherman, sea captain ... Then a glimmer of hope, not at escaping his depression and self-loathing but at completing the cowardly act of suicide, popped into his head. Why not do it in Myrtle Beach, where he and Roz had spent so many fun-filled summer vacations with the kids, and sexually active, and kidless, three-day weekends. “That would fix her sorry ass!” he told Self. “*Ruin any tete-a-tete love-making on the Grand Strand!*”

Foraging in the wilderness of the refrigerator, Emerson found the turkey sandwich that Roz had placed in a baggie – apparently his dinner. “So much for her ‘unexpected’ clients,” Self whispered over his shoulder. Emerson shrugged, knowing Self was right. He sat at the breakfast table, eating the sandwich, which he had topped with yellow mustard and a mushy tomato he had found in the fridge’s crisper drawer, and began plotting his next move on his end-of-life chessboard.

Roz slid her Verizon cell phone cover closed, the deadened click resounding in her ear. She smiled a seductive smile her husband hadn’t been gifted with in years and turned to Lyle Couick, the hunk of a man she had met two weeks earlier at a chamber of commerce new business ribbon-cutting and grand opening. They had struck up a light conversation over a Styrofoam cup of coffee and a freshly-baked chocolate chip cookie. The conversation had led to an impromptu sexual encounter in the store’s freshly-painted men’s room. Lyle was an athletic young man in his early-thirties, with short, well-groomed blond locks that curled atop his head like miniature Slinkies. After their sordid plummet into carnality, it did not take long for Lyle to further seduce Roz into his ritzy fourth floor apartment in the revitalized uptown historic district.

“We’re all set,” she said, slipping her phone into a side pocket of her purse. “We can eat lasagna at Luigi’s, then go up to your loft and play for an hour or two.” Roz eyed her young lover as he grinned that sly grin that meant sensual pleasure for her later.

He was nattily dressed in a Carolina blue golf shirt and khaki pants. He was well-tanned, thanks to his afternoons on the golf course at Eagle Pines Country Club where he wooed his clients into lucrative contracts to purchase his company’s paper products, ranging from bathroom tissue to copy paper.

Lyle repeatedly professed his obsession with her mature beauty and sexual experience in the boudoir. This evening's bedroom romp would be their second planned escapade atop his waterbed, where she felt like she was on an inner tube, floating gently and then wildly, on an ocean wave ... up and down ... up and down.

Roz's face became flushed with her pre-dinner reverie.

"What's the matter, sweetie" Lyle cooed in her ear. "Thinking about Luigi's special garlic bread or a ride on the HMS Lyle's Loveboat?" His sultry voice tantalized Roz to the point of her becoming slightly weak-kneed. Lyle took her arm and guided her across the street to the Italian restaurant.

Emerson scooted his highback chair away from the table, the screech on the kitchen linoleum reverberating off the egg-white, hand-crafted cabinets that lined the wall behind him. He cleaned up his mess, wiping away the droplets of mustard and tomato juice and seeds that had escaped his mouth and walked slowly to the trash can, placing his left foot on the silver lever to open the lid. As he looked back at his distorted image on the inside of the lid, he dropped the soiled paper towel atop the rest of the garbage he had accumulated during the day and eased his foot off the lever to allow the lid to thud closed. He imagined that his image had dropped on the garbage, too, a melancholy statement on how his life had become trash for the city workers to pick up on a Wednesday morning and haul off to the landfill.

He considered turning off all the lights and sitting in his easy chair in the living room to wait for Roz to come home from her alleged showings. As an afterthought, he wondered how much their brick, ranch-style home would sell for – perhaps as much as two hundred grand. One hundred thousand dollars for himself and a hundred thousand for Roz – if they would divorce first. Of course, he knew she would never divorce him for fear that he would seek monthly palimony checks. A good divorce attorney would see to it that she would pay through the nose – or ass, since he felt that was what she was giving away to some lucky guy while he wrestled with his sanity in a quiet, lonely house in suburbia.

He shuffled into the living room, turning off the kitchen and hall lights on his route. He plopped his overweight frame into the easy chair, pulling on the side handle to flip out the footrest. He kept the lamp's light on the stand burning while he relaxed the back of his neck on the soft fabric and permitted his troubled mind to wander.

How did I wind up in this mess? he asked Self.



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