

CHAPTER 40

HER RIGHT HAND GRIPPING her automatic pistol, Kristen shined her flashlight with her left and tiptoed through the house. She could turn on the lights, but kept the place dark, so anyone returning wouldn't be alerted. Slivers of streetlight penetrated the half-open blinds and helped a bit.

In the family room, a Naugahyde sectional had been pushed apart. Newspapers lay scattered. The dining area had no place to hide anything. A quick look in the kitchen revealed a pot on the range caked with dried beans, and bowls piled up in the sink. Somebody had missed the trash with two crumpled beer cans. A den off the kitchen loomed empty.

In the first bedroom, her beam caught a kid's bed shaped like a sailboat, with teddy bears on the spread. The closet was cluttered with Legos and more stuffed animals. The room beside it had been converted to an office. Nothing there. Next, a smaller bedroom, all tidy, appeared ready for a guest. Zilch.

Reaching the master bedroom, she saw linens had been flung back onto the carpet. An oil landscape of prairie cows hung over the bed. Family photos cluttered the dresser. She started for the bathroom, but decided to check the walk-in first. Bright women's dresses, which looked to be at least size sixteens, draped over hangers on one side;

men's duds hung on the other. She dropped the beam of her light to the floor.

Rope and a roll of duct tape lay tangled in a pile.

She picked up a tangled chunk of used tape and held it to the beam. A long blond hair adhered to it. She smelled urine.

Her flashlight caught a big round object against the wall, partly covered by hanging clothes. She retreated to the closet door, closed it, and flipped the switch. An Oriental runner was rolled up, tied with string, and bulging with something inside.

Hail Mary.

Sticking the pistol and the flashlight in her windbreaker, her heart thundering, she hurried to the rug, knelt, and looked down the end.

My God!

Before she could unroll the carpet, the closet door flew open. She turned to see a huge black guy, then an enormous sneaker flying at her.

She twisted away, but the foot caught her in the ribs, knocking her against the rug.

She groped in her jacket for her pistol. Before she could grip the handle, another shoe pounded her chest, blasting the air from her lungs.

The giant leaned over and grabbed her wrists.

Gasping, her body slow to answer her commands, she tried to buck her hips and wedge her knee up to kick him off, but he wouldn't budge.

He grinned at her helplessness.

The monster slapped one cheek, spinning her face. He leered and backhanded the other. Her face felt on fire, but his blows freed one arm. Just as she reached the pistol, he pounded her temple. The closet light flickered.

The intruder jammed a cold steel barrel under her chin.

It took a second for her rattled brain to analyze her predicament. No options.

She let herself go limp and whispered, "Okay."

Accepting her surrender, he lowered his handgun and shoved her flat on the floor. He sat on her belly, and pinned her arms with his legs. The goon fished in her pocket and pulled out the Browning. Holding it at eye level, he beamed, short a front tooth. “N-nice.”

His breath, smelling of bacon grease and rotting teeth, made her gag.

He patted her other pocket and lifted the phone. Standing, pointing his gun, he motioned her to roll over.

She managed to flop onto her belly, praying to the Blessed Mother Tina had heard or seen something.

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