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## Prologue

Angie stood motionless in the shadow of a misshapen cypress tree. The setting summer sun of Seattle didn't relieve the cold frisson of danger or the press of her revolver's cold metal against her skin. Although it had been months since her last reconnaissance mission, her body recognized the drill and tightened into high alert.

Splatters of fading sunlight danced across the sagging house. Official yellow tape was wrapped around the turn of the century beauty like a Christmas bow on a crushed, forgotten present. A "condemned" sign was nailed to the warped door. The crumbling front steps looked like their weight bearing days were a distant memory.

Not sure how to proceed, she waited and watched the abandoned house in the residential Ravenna neighborhood until it got dark. Should she take the squatters unaware? Surprise Maddy before she could run?

She moved from her hiding place to investigate the back of the house. The yard was littered with broken glass, smashed Styrofoam carryout containers, and plastic bags mired in mud from the wet Northwest summer. She stepped over the yellow tape that was haphazardly hung around the back steps, turned the handle, and pulled open the back door. It was unlocked. The rusting hinges screeched.

"Maddy, it's Angie from your VA group." She reverted to her forceful military command voice. "I'm coming in."

When the door was thrown wide open, small dark bodies— rats—scurried away. Dread raced down her spine into the tips of her toes. God, she hated rats. This rat hole was worse than anything she had seen during her tours of duty in Afghanistan.

She stepped gingerly over the bags of garbage strewn on the uneven linoleum floor. The smell of the years of neglect and black mold hit her sensitive nose. She tried not to breathe. All of her senses heightened in the darkness, an internal radar honed from door-to-door urban combat. She took another two steps, listening for sounds other than the resident rodents.

“It’s Angie from your VA group.” She wasn’t too worried about handling a high Maddy, but handling her companions might get tricky. After eight years as a Marine, she was used to tricky. And after everything Maddy had gone through in Afghanistan, Angie wasn’t about to let her friend descend into another hell.

She reached in the pocket of her jeans for her tiny penlight as she walked into the dark dining room. The light of her flashlight reflected back at her from a cracked mirror hanging over the fireplace, then a sudden, shiny motion. Before she could react, a bright burst of pain exploded in her head. She fought against overpowering blackness.

\* \* \*

Brandon knew his lair had been invaded. The back door was ajar. The yellow “condemned” tape had been disrupted. Trespassers!

He heard her before he saw her. She was shouting that she was “Angie from the VA.”

Another fucking bitch intruding. Women were always invading his space. Outrage surged through him.

“Keep it together...keep it together...” He repeated the words to himself. His therapist had taught him to use words to pace himself before he acted.

Taking the heavy flashlight from its hiding place behind the refrigerator, he stepped softly into the dining room. He edged around the bags to avoid alerting the intruder to his presence.

A tall woman in a camouflage jacket was bending over, inspecting something on the floor.

Why was a single soldier from the VA hospital searching his house? If the authorities had been alerted about the amount of RDX he had stored here, the entire King County Swat team would've been surrounding the house, with help from those ATF Keystone commandos. If you could call that help.

He had no choice. He needed time to clear out.

He cautiously took two steps to stand over her. He slowly raised the flashlight, and she gasped, seeing his reflection in the old mirror that Brandon knew hung over the fireplace. Using his advantage, he swung in a wide arc and bashed the back of her head with all his strength.

***Visit <http://www.jackidelecki.com/> to learn more about this author.***